

The Faiths of Others: A History of Interreligious Dialogue.

By Thomas Albert Howard. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021. xii + 360 pp. \$38.00 cloth.

In the concluding chapter of *The Faiths of Others*, Thomas Albert Howard lists over two dozen “governmental, academic, and grassroots organizations,” which, “alongside religious bodies,” are part of the “global institutional architecture of interreligious dialogue” (239). This wide array of groups provides ample proof for Howard’s foundational claim that “we live in a booming heyday for interreligious dialogue” (2). Yet Howard notes, for all that is new about it, “contemporary interfaith dialogue is. . . not altogether discontinuous with the past” (3). This bold, ambitious book successfully situates the contemporary interreligious project in a longer history—a history that Howard correctly notes has been overlooked for far too long.

Howard’s study contains four main chapters that examine key moments on the path to modern interfaith dialogue, and he provides insightful close readings of the dynamics of each instance. The first chapter, “Harbingers,” is the most sweeping. It examines approaches to Judaism and Greek philosophy in the early Christian church, considers dialogues between Christians and Muslims in the Middle Ages, and concludes with a study of the religious outlook of Akbar, who ruled the Mughal Empire at the end of the sixteenth century. Howard builds a persuasive case that the efforts of the deeply curious emperor—who invited representatives of various religions to his court and eventually “formulated his own religious system” drawing on what he had learned from “Muslim, Christian, Jain, Hindu, and Zoroastrian influences”—offer “the clearest harbingers of interreligious dialogue in the premodern world, whether in the East or West” (73–76). From there, Howard moves closer to the present. Successive chapters consider the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago, the Conference on Living Religions Within the Empire held in London in 1924 and several follow-up meetings, and, finally, the Second Vatican Council and resulting interreligious work of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II.

The combination of chronological breadth and close analysis is chief among the commending features of *The Faiths of Others*. Howard is careful, both in the introductory chapter and throughout the book, to note the extent to which western Christians have all too often dictated the terms of interfaith interaction and the frameworks for understanding religious pluralism. He astutely observes that “proponents of interreligious dialogue have. . . even with the noblest of intentions, shoe-horned different world cultures into the Western paradigm” (17). Yet Howard’s examples also complicate attempts to dismiss such dialogue simply as a manifestation of western imperialism. The chapters highlight moments that de-centered the West, or, at least, revealed a desire (however imperfectly realized) to do so. The discussion of Akbar’s court is a crucial addition to the narrative of interreligious dialogue. So too, for more complicated reasons, is the 1924 London conference. The event excluded presentations by representatives of “Christianity and Judaism because of their presumed familiarity” to British audiences (138). Though the event’s celebration of the British Empire belies its inclusiveness, its organizers nevertheless invited representatives of major traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, as well as smaller movements and granted these “native expositors” considerable leeway to speak about their beliefs without rebuttal from Christian commentators (142).

Beyond its chronological scope, *The Faith of Others* makes other important contributions. Howard is attentive to the “inclusivist” approach to religious diversity, which is

“the belief that other religious traditions have much to offer, but they are only partial measures” when judged against another religion, usually Christianity (24). The inclusivist approach is easily dismissed both as a slightly more tolerant form of religious exclusivism and an imperfect form of pluralism. But, as Howard notes, the inclusivist outlook has guided key participants in important moments of interreligious dialogue, including many Protestant organizers of the Parliament of Religions and much of the post-Vatican II Catholic hierarchy. It is a position that warrants serious study, which Howard has afforded it. Finally, Howard notes repeated instances when “efforts to achieve interreligious unity often result in internecine divisions among Christians” (178). This is perhaps a less novel claim, but it is nonetheless an important byproduct of interreligious dialogue that this book rightly acknowledges.

As is perhaps inevitable in such an expansive study, some elements of the book work less well than others. Howard credits key events—especially the Parliament of Religions and the Second Vatican Council—with a singular influence that at times obscures broader context. Organized interreligious dialogue in the United States predated the Chicago gathering by several decades. This is not to diminish the Parliament’s significance but rather to suggest it might better be understood as a manifestation of wider interest that guided it and subsequent instances of dialogue. Likewise, the Catholic Church’s dialogue partners seem to be relegated to the background for much of chapter 4, seemingly existing only to react to decisions made at the Vatican. This is a loss because Howard’s discussions of representatives of other traditions lobbying Catholic leaders are some of the most intriguing instances of interreligious dialogue discussed in the book. Having a deeper sense of their motives and reactions would have made the chapter all the richer.

Finally, given the ambitious goals of the book, Howard might have wrestled more fully with the elite nature of interreligious dialogue and the extent to which these historical episodes resonated with people who did not participate in them. Howard raises the question of whether these discussions “exert any actual influence among the rank and file of various faiths” (178). It is a valid question, given that much of this book centers on a sixteenth-century emperor, an early twentieth-century British aristocrat, and members of the Catholic hierarchy, including several pontiffs. Yet with discussions of the press coverage of interreligious gatherings, Howard provides hints that such events captured the imaginations of a far wider audience. Finding ways to broaden the lens of this study beyond elites might have revealed an even deeper, more robust lineage of modern interreligious dialogue.

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***Water the Willow Tree: Memoirs of a Bethlehem Boyhood.* By George Anton Kiraz. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgia Press, 2022. xvi + 315 pp. \$48.00 cloth.**

Anyone familiar with the field of Syriac studies knows the contribution of George Kiraz as publisher, pioneer of Syriac digital humanities, scholar, teacher, and founder of Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute. Kiraz has given most of his adult life to the promotion