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Ephraim Meir, *Becoming Interreligious: Towards a Dialogical Theology from a Jewish Vantage Point*,
Münster: Waxmann Publishing, 2017

In *Becoming Interreligious: Towards a Dialogical Theology from a Jewish Vantage Point*, Professor Ephraim Meir (Bar-Ilan University) has set out an ambitious project: to expand on the theoretical work in his previous two volumes on interreligious exchange and to make its practice understandable through examples from his own experience. This new book wonderfully succeeds, adding much rich work to the field by creating not a polemic for interreligious exchange, but a weave of grounds for it and vivid examples of it, both from Meir's Jewish starting point.

Becoming Interreligious offers a good deal in both scholarship and praxis. Its genial style and concise, to-the-point interpretations of an impressive range of writers will be accessible to a wide audience, yet will provoke and benefit experts in the field. Though this book aims primarily at Jewish readers, a non-Jew reading the volume will learn much about interreligious practice among Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. In short, such a reading would itself be what Meir hopes for: interreligious exchange.

The field of interreligious exchange relies on a number of methodologies to achieve several aims. Methods include the more theological: engagement of other faiths to enrich one's own theology (one's views of God, world, humanity, messiah/salvation, their inter-connections, etc.). Methods may also be pragmatic: engagement of one's own faith tradition as support for engagement with others. Aims also include the pragmatic: employing interreligious work to reduce prejudice and strife among religious groups. And aims may be more theological: to enrich one's understanding of God, world, human relations, salvation/afterlife, their inter-connection, etc.

Meir's method and aims are mostly pragmatic in several laudable ways. Methodologically, he plumbs his own Jewish tradition as pragmatic support for the interreligious endeavor. His primary aim, too, is this-worldly: interreligious exchange as a way to lessen cross-faith strife. One way of achieving such strife-reduction is by exploring how other theologies enrich one's own faith. In this, Meir is at his most theological. But he returns to the pragmatic in seeing interreligious exchange as a path to justice "and solidarity and mercy for all" (p. 17). Meir's project is thus a two-fold *tikkun olam*: inter-faith strife reduction and support for greater justice and generosity worldwide.

When one puts Meir's books in one's interreligious library with those of Teilhard de Chardin, Bede Griffiths, John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Dion Forster, among others, one notes that many of these writers are more theologically focused and are engaged in interreligious exchange to enrich their spiritual lives. Meir, while deeply appreciating this orientation, is more societally and ethically directed.

Meir's project relies on three philosophical sources, the first being the Enlightenment assumption that increasing knowledge reduces irrational prejudice and aggression, here applied between religious groups. He relies, too, on religious assumptions in seeing faith as a resource for peace and mutual aid. And he relies on a *non*-relativist post-modernism in holding that there are many (religious) paths to truth. While each distinct faith tradition is one possible path among others, the object towards which the many paths lead is *the truth*. One cannot say just anything about God or declare just any ethics.

I find Meir's aims most valuable with one caveat: social science has shown that merely putting people from antagonistic groups together may increase rather than decrease animus. What is needed for prejudice reduction is joint projects among the parties, working together towards common goals. Such joint projects could be any community, environmental, artistic, political, or economic effort, but Meir proposes a redoubling, with the joint project being mutual religious understanding itself. I suspect that would work splendidly, and Meir demonstrates both the hard work and epiphanies of this sort of interreligious teaching through his experience at the Academy for World Religions at Hamburg University. These sections are especially useful for practitioners eager for concrete examples of how interreligious programming can be organized and how it works in both senses of the word: how it proceeds and how it succeeds.

Meir's first interreligious volume, *Dialogical Thought and Identity*:

Trans-Different Religiosity in Present Day Societies (De Gruyter and Magnes, 2013), holds that the self develops dialogically, in exchange first with those nearby, then with members of one's own group, and finally with those outside it. Here, Meir is in good company. Not only have the psychologists since Freud, and the sociologists since Durkheim, traced our dialogical development, but more recent evolutionary biologists and neuroscientists, such as Darcia Narvaez, Sarah Hrdy, and Robert Sapolsky, explain that everything about ourselves, from gene expression to morals, emerges interactively. Meir is interested specifically in the inter-active development of the "religious self," and coins the term "trans-difference" to describe exchange where one retains one's primary religious identity, and yet, as a matter of ethics, engages and respects the (different) religious identity of the other. In so doing, one becomes oneself.

In this formulation, one immediately hears Emmanuel Levinas's mandate to respect and regard the "face" of every other as a prime human responsibility. And indeed, Levinas is one of Meir's longstanding sources for interreligious work. He relies also on Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and on Franz Rosenzweig's engagement with Christianity (though Meir is critical of Rosenzweig's view of other non-Christian faiths such as Islam, holding Rosenzweig's work there to be thin and prejudicial). In the second book of his interreligious trilogy, *Interreligious Theology: Its Value and Mooring in Modern Jewish Philosophy* (De Gruyter and Magnes, 2015), Meir studies the works of these authors to claim a Jewish ground for the dialogical, "trans-difference" approach to other faiths, and for interreligious engagement under conditions of openness, "deep listening," translation, and learning.

In this third work, *Becoming Interreligious*, Meir reviews his reading of Levinas, Buber, Heschel, and Rosenzweig and goes on to engage a substantial range of writers from philosophy, biblical and rabbinic studies, and interreligious theology—that is, from Hans-Georg Gadamer to Irving Greenberg, from Sarah Lubarsky to Tracy Sayuki Tiermeir and Katajun Amirpur. I know of no better overview of this material from the perspective of the Jewish tradition *and* reaching from Judaism to serious study of other faiths. The surprise here is Meir's chapter on Hassidism, which might not be the first Jewish tradition to come to mind as a font of interreligiousity.

Building on this, Meir describes recent Jewish approaches to interreligious engagement, risking discussion of the Israel-Palestine struggle. One can learn a good deal from Meir: first, about holding one's own while doing as much as possible for one's neighbor, and second,

about the effort to transcend this self-other binary towards something like the big picture. Like all other chapters, this is not meant as a definitive solution, but as a step on a path.

Meir then moves to his Jewish engagement with the Hindu, Buddhist, and Alevite faiths, bringing extensive examples from his teaching experience in Hamburg. It is this chapter, grounded in interviews and anecdotes, that will so help practitioners. Meir ends this section with a look at Jewish-Christian relations following the Second Vatican Council, the *Nostra Aetate*, and the *Dabru Emet* response from Jewish leaders. Here, he also looks at the intra-Jewish debate on appropriate Jewish-Christian relations today.

Finally, Meir closes the book with a compendium of resources, tools, and ethics one would do well to have in embarking on interreligious work. This includes, for instance: the challenging mandate to not only respect the other but promote her; the readiness to re-interpret religious categories in radical ways; and the practice of “translating” one’s own theology to others and the theology of others for oneself without assimilating the differences. One of Meir’s suggestions most provocative for the believer is the idea not only of a covenant with God but of a “covenant of covenants,” an overarching covenant between God and all peoples.

Radical re-interpretation of religious categories and a “covenant of covenants” are where Meir most relies on his non-relativist, post-modern notion of multiplicity in our search for truth. It will ruffle feathers in some religious camps, which is what Meir expects as part of the process. In this book, he makes a robust, wide-ranging argument for the process being worth it.