
BOOK REVIEW

Barnett, John. 2021. *Christian and Sikh: A Practical Theology of Multiple Religious Participation*. Durham: Sacristy Press. viii + 196 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78959-145-3. £19.99 (pbk).

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Keywords: autoethnography; practical theology; multiple religious participation; Christian; Sikh.

Following the inclusion of a question on religious identity for the first time in the 2001 census for England and Wales, the Church of England was able to analyse the distribution across the population of those who self-identified as belonging to different faiths. Consequently, it established a programme, under the title *Presence and Engagement*, which sought to find ways of engaging with people of other faiths, particularly in parishes where it was estimated that more than ten per cent of the population lay in this category. This involved the appointment of a series of Diocesan Inter Faith Advisers (DIFAs), often (though not always) members of the clergy who combined this post with their main work as parish priests. It is from John Barnett's hands-on experience as just such an adviser that this book arises. His target audience is anyone who is involved in inter-faith relations, but he clearly has his fellow DIFAs in mind. The presentation is clear and accessible, with a useful set of bullet points at the end of each chapter, which could be used as stimulus for discussion.

The book is largely based on doctoral research using fieldwork carried out over two years towards the end of Barnett's period of office. Whilst he is interested in institutional aspects, his research goes further in its nature than the public aspect of his DIFA role. He examines what he calls Multiple Religious Participation and its effect on his own spirituality. His main fieldwork exercise involved regular weekly attendance at both a Christian and a Sikh place of worship, gauging the level of his participation in the services, their effect on him as well as his developing relationships with members of the respective congregations. He was willing to take risks with his own religious identity and allow the experience to change him.

Following the principles of autoethnography his fieldwork involved careful recording. He indicates various research techniques that he used: journaling; interviews; focus groups; together with checking the accuracy of his understanding and progress with collocutors. He is acutely aware of the importance of ethical practice in research and is at pains to be honest in describing the problems he faced due to his lack of understanding of *Sikhi* and his reactions. For instance, at the outset, he was surprised that his first choice of gurdwara turned down his request, but then it was through a personal friendship that he found entry to another.

The various chapters of the book tell his story. There is skilful interweaving of a narrative account of his experiences together with reflection on a number of themes and questions that arose during his research. Although he came to describe his spirituality as Sikh as well as Christian, and even found that his Sikh collocutor also accepted him as such, he was unable to take the formal step of taking *Amrit*. This was partly because those who saw themselves as *Amritdhari* were expected to self-identify solely as Sikhs and also because there were aspects of Sikh culture where he continued to feel an outsider. Thus, he chose not to apply the term “dual belonging” to himself, preferring the term “participation”. Eventually he came to see himself as a follower of both Jesus and Guru Nanak, using the appellation *Nanak panthi* for the latter, implying a personal commitment to Guru Nanak (p. 100). He went on to consider the relative appropriateness of the terms Christian-Sikh and Sikh-Christian where the first term is seen as an adjective and the second as noun, coming down on the side of Sikh-Christian. He saw this as preserving the primary loyalty to Jesus and an indicator that despite everything he is more of an insider to the Christian way of life (p. 103). I would have liked the significance of the noun/adjective distinction to be teased out a little more. It would have been interesting to have considered W. C. Smith’s preference for the use of adjectives when considering identity. “A man [*sic*] cannot be both a Christian and a Muslim at the same time. The nouns keep us apart. On the other hand... it is not as ridiculous or fanciful as might be supposed, to ask whether in the realm of adjectives it may not be possible for a man to be both Christian and Muslim at the same time” (Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, 1967: 107). Could Barnett have stretched to an adjectival use for both terms? Would this fit his dynamic approach better?

Barnett sees the self-reflexive aspect of autoethnography as lending itself to the development of practical theology, both using narrative. Thus, the book straddles the fields of religious studies and theology. Depending on the reader’s own approach to the relationship between these two disciplines his or her reaction to this book may be positive or negative.

By choosing to travel the road of practical theology in considering inter-religious encounter Barnett neatly avoids others more theoretical and well-trodden, such as the soteriological, though it would be difficult to imagine an exclusivist writing this book. Where, then, does the road of practical theology lead for Barnett?

Towards the end of the book, he presents what he calls an imaginative interlude in which, drawing on the method of Ignatian spiritual exercises, he offers fourteen short scenes based on traditional stories about his two protagonists, but in which he imagines the two figures of Jesus and Nanak meeting and he himself being drawn into the narrative. The abiding quality he finds in these scenarios is that of friendliness and he goes on to advocate this quality as a model for inter-religious encounter. “Friendliness”, which he prefers to “friendship”, reflects equality between the two figures, and concomitantly between their followers. Whereas friendship is of necessity limited, friendliness is a divine quality marked by openness and hope. By choosing the quality of friendliness Barnett avoids some of the difficulties which arise from the model of hospitality which has been much used in Christian circles, such as the potential inequalities of the host/guest dichotomy.

Barnett calls his model based on the friendliness of God, “amicism”. It refers to an openness both to the world and to the other based on the cosmic relationship of God to the world. The culmination of the book in advocating this friendliness, divine and human, together with the fact that Barnett did not end his exploration of friendliness with those he encountered in the Sikh community as he finished his formal period of fieldwork, is indicative of the dynamic nature of his exploration. I do wonder, however, if the noun “amicism” with its echoing of other “-isms” is the best term to reflect that dynamic attitude.

This is a book that will appeal to those, particularly with a Christian background, who are at the example of a thoughtful exponent of Multiple Religious Participation, an exponent who carried out, as his doctoral supervisor indicates in the Foreword, “a practical experiment in encountering otherness which is much talked about but seldom risked” (p. vi).