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Book Review

Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community, by Deanna Ferree Womack. Westminster John Knox Press, 2020. 180 pp., Pb., $17USD. ISBN: 978-0664266172

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A major question that Christians face today is how to be open to and appreciative of religious others without watering down their own tradition. Given the influence of Christianity in the West, another challenge is cultivating genuine interreligious dialogue that aims to listen to and learn from religious others, rather than simply pointing out their similarities to Christianity.

The feelings of most Christians toward other religions fit into three paradigms: exclusivism (there is no truth or salvation outside of Christianity), inclusivism (there is wisdom in non-Christian religions and salvation can reach them, but this salvation is always through Jesus Christ), and pluralism (all religions are equal and paths to salvation in their own right). These paradigms are not without their fair share of critique. Inclusivism, although certainly a step above exclusivism, is criticized for not going quite far enough. While there is truth and wisdom in other traditions, Christianity remains the most true and most complete. Many see pluralism as a solution. Yet, pluralism often results in reducing religions to a "least common denominator" and failing to recognize their unique differences, many of which come into direct contradiction with one another. Pluralist theologians have offered alternative visions of Jesus that take away his definitive status and/or his universality, but a large portion of Christians are not able to accept these. Therefore, besides the diversity of religions, we also must contend with a diversity of ways that people explain and understand such religious diversity.

Deanna Ferree Womack's *Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community* offers practical recommendations for Christian-Muslim dialogue that do not assume or require adoption of the same framework, and that recognize that meaningful engagement can occur in many different types of communities. Her work focuses on Islam since post-9/11, American Muslims have been the target of violence and discrimination due to misunderstandings about their religion. Womack emphasizes that clearing up these misconceptions about Islam requires more than the attainment of book knowledge, although

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this is a worthy goal. Rather, such interreligious learning requires the use of the mind (changing one's patterns of thought), the heart (consideration of one's attitude), and the hands (taking action).

Chapter 1, "Religious Diversity Starts at Home," outlines the multireligious growth that the United States is experiencing today and provides a list of reasons as to why we often lack interfaith engagement. These not only include a shortage of opportunity, but also fear of difference, a sense of threat to one's own deeply held convictions, and the mistaken sense that interfaith engagement is solely the prerogative theologians or clergy.

Chapter 2, "God Calls Us to Engage with Our Muslim Neighbors," discusses how Muslim-Christian dialogue is a specifically Christian calling in the twenty-first century United States. Christians are called upon to reflect on what it means to follow Christ in a multifaith society, and a concern for justice should spur us into action when Muslims experience violence, harassment, and profiling.

Chapter 3, "Changing Our Minds about Other Religions," challenges Christian hegemonic thinking that interferes with fruitful interreligious engagement. Womack identifies three basic models. The Old Confrontation model represents the Christendom mentality that characterized actions like the Crusades. The Collaboration model describes much of the 20th century. The two major world wars and the Second Vatican Council fostered a desire to be open to religious others and focus on our commonalities. Today's climate is marked by the Emerging Model which strives to demonstrate that we are not all just "climbing the same mountain" and that religious differences need not be a barrier to mutual appreciation.

Chapter 4, "Christian Life in the Islamic Middle East," challenges the common belief that Islam and Christianity are and always have been antithetical to one another by providing historical examples of Muslim-Christian collaboration.

Chapter 5, "The Deep Roots in America," talks about the racialization of Islam in the United States and challenges the labeling of Islam as an immigrant faith. For many African Americans, being Muslim represents a return to their African roots which was severed by Christian slaveholders, and Islam provides an alternative to a Christianity that justifies white power.

Chapter 6, "American Muslims Today," outlines six ways of being Muslim in America to emphasize that there is more to the diversity of Islam than just Sunni and Shia. Womack also draws on the story

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of the Marvel Comic's character Kamala Khan to help us understand American Muslim life by evoking interfaith sympathy.

Chapter 7, "Opening our Ears to Muslim Neighbors," discusses Womack's survey of twelve Muslims living in Atlanta. Nearly all of them identified negative media representations of Islam and mistaken assumptions about gender as impediments to Christian-Muslim relations.

Chapter 8, "Cultivating Interfaith Awareness," draws a distinction between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy assumes sameness, whereas empathy recognizes difference. The latter is necessary for fruitful interreligious dialogue. To demonstrate this, Womack introduces her Model for Interreligious Awareness to promote positive engagement between Christians and Muslims in America. This model is flexible. While integration is the highest level of interreligious awareness, it cannot be imposed a goal for everyone. Moving from denial to minimization (sympathy), or from acceptance (exploring differences) to adaptation (empathy) are positive changes that may be more realistic for some communities.

Chapter 9, "Resources for Building Community," provides resources for further learning, and navigates the questions and concerns that might come up when one is taking the next steps toward fostering positive engagement with their Muslim neighbors, including how to handle a congregation resistant to interfaith dialogue or what to do if conversation becomes too political.

An aspect of the text that I greatly appreciated was the way in which Womack has provided a series of questions for reflection. These allow the reader to consider their previous knowledge and experiences. The need for self-knowledge and self-reflection in interreligious dialogue, especially among younger populations, cannot be understated. The number of people who identify as "religious nones" is on the rise, and more and more people are questioning the authority of traditional religious communities. Religion is often considered a taboo topic because people fear offending someone or being stereotyped for their religious identity. With few places to really talk about their beliefs, many people have trouble expressing what they believe and why. Yet, such self-knowledge is crucial for interreligious work, since it may help one uncover biases and fears that impede dialogue, as well as thoughts and experiences that may serve to foster empathy and concern. I would be excited to use Womack's text in the classroom as a way to foster conversation among students who may initially be reticent to talk about religion with their peers.

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Oftentimes, in the field of interreligious studies, one model/mode is upheld as being the best or the only path toward positive interreligious engagement, as can be seen in debates over the inclusivist and pluralist paradigms mentioned above. I appreciate Womack's insistence that not every community will work toward the same goal, and that this does not preclude the building of fruitful Christian-Muslim relationships. Teaching courses on interreligious studies can be difficult, especially when students not only do not all share the same religion, but also vary in their observance, some being religiously conservative and others holding more progressive views. I think that Womack's text would be well-received in a religiously diverse classroom.

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