

*Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field*, edited by Hans Gustafson. Baylor University Press, 2020. 295 pp., Hb., £35. ISBN 978-1481312547

Reviewed by Younus Mirza, Georgetown University,  
yym2@georgetown.edu

The book under review is an excellent array of short essays on the emerging field of “Interreligious Studies” (IRS). The volume rises from a recent boom in interest in Interreligious/Interfaith Studies, most notably the edited volume *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* by Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah Silverman. The current volume is published less than two years later but is successfully able to engage the edited volume and previous work on the subject, such as Eboo Patel’s pioneering article “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies” (2013) and Oddbjorn Leirvik’s essential book *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (2014). Gustafson explains that his volume is meant to complement works like *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, but focuses more on “research and scholarship” rather than pedagogy and curricular development (XIV). The book is published by an academic press (Baylor University) and many of the essays have extensive footnotes and academic references.

The editor Hans Gustafson is a recognized figure in the field as he directs a center for interreligious studies and has written extensively on the theoretical underpinnings and future direction of IRS (see for e.g., Gustafson 2020, 2017, 2016). Gustafson explains in the preface and introduction that the volume is not an edited volume in the traditional sense but rather “dispatches,” or more of a roundtable approach, where scholars speak to a particular question, theme, or issue. This approach allows for more participation and dialogue among contributors and hopefully signals that the emerging field is more inclusive and open to discussion and debate. In his introduction, Gustafson presents a table detailing how “interfaith” versus “interreligious” studies is perceived, with the former more confessional and practical and the later more critical and scholarly. Gustafson rejects such binaries and explains that he did not impose a particular term on the contributors as they were free to use the one they found most useful. Nonetheless, it is clear that Gustafson prefers the term “Interreligious Studies” (IRS) since it encompasses “Interfaith Studies” and has a more academic approach.

In this review, I will not be able to engage all of the essays (36 in

total) but will rather focus on those that allude to tensions or debates within each section and how they speak to the future direction of IRS. Interreligious or Interfaith Studies?

The first section, “Sketching the Field,” discusses how IRS will define itself and whether it will be more theoretical or grassroots. Oddbjorn Leirvik pushes the reader to think more deeply about how IRS can be an academic discipline rather than simply an area of study. For this to happen, Leirvik argues that IRS needs to practice both “self-implication and self-critique” and that it is “more fruitful to see interreligious studies as a multi- or cross-disciplinary field.” Leirvik contends that IRS needs to be associated with “methods and theories” for it to become truly an “academic discipline.” Similarly, Jeanine Diller adds the concept of “interreligion and interdisciplinarity” and provides the example of Spinoza’s “infinite attributes,” or how one object could be interpreted in multiple ways. Diller believes that the Spinoza-inspired theory “shows that we have a pressing need for interreligious studies to be interdisciplinary.” To make her point, Diller gives the example of multiple religious participation (MRP) or practicing a variety of religions in one life. Diller contends that one “cannot understand MRP without using multi disciplines.” Like Leirvik, Diller understands interreligious studies as interdisciplinary and not only housed in religious studies.

However, others have a more “interfaith studies” minded approach to IRS, one that is more grassroots and practical. In his essay, Eboo Patel shares the inspiring story of Abubakar Khan who was able to mobilize his Muslim community as well as churches, synagogues, and Sikh temples to help provide shelter to the homeless population in Vancouver. Patel vouches for “civic interfaith leadership” and suggests degree programs that produce figures like Khan or assist in developing their work.<sup>1</sup> Patel uses the term “interfaith studies” throughout his essay suggesting a more theological and practical approach rather than the theoretical provided in other essays within the volume.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Mark Hanshaw finds the terms “interfaith studies” helpful in

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1. For more on the curriculum to produce interfaith leaders see Eboo Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies.”
  2. For another inspirational interfaith and interreligious story, see Or N. Rose “Howard Thurman’s Mentorship of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi” later in the volume. As he states in the beginning of the essay, “I view this chapter as a kind of historical ‘case study’ in interreligious leadership formation, with the practice of hospitality emerging as a central virtue and practice in this episode” (229).

his case study of the shrine of Maximon which blends both Catholic and Mayan practices. “Religious studies” may analyze the shrine through a certain orthodoxy but the interfaith student “is interested in present situations where individual faith practitioners or communities come into contact or conflict with one another.” For Hanshaw, “interfaith studies” is essential in a future where “religious communities become more deeply engaged with one another.” Similar to Patel, Hanshaw is interested in the grassroots and how individuals and communities enact faith and spirituality.

Nonetheless, there are those like Anne Hege Grung who advocate for neither interreligious studies nor interfaith studies but rather “transreligious.” For Grung, the term “transreligious” allows for the incorporation of feminist and post-colonial critiques as “religion” is often defined by men and understood within the legacy of colonialism. Second, “transreligious” challenges the concept of religion as a fixed category and allows for an incorporation of a variety of rituals.<sup>3</sup> Taken as a whole, the section demonstrates a wide range of perspectives on the future of the field, from those who take a more theoretical approach to one that is more grassroots and rooted in community organizations and practices. The debate between those who advocate for “interreligious studies” or “interfaith studies” is not resolved but the discussion has advanced considerably.

### A lived religion approach

The next section, “History and Methods,” deals with how these two approaches are used in IRS, generally focusing on lived reality. In his essay “Historical Precedents,” Thomas Howard argues that interreligious dialogue “is heavily theologized and scantily historicized.” Howard demonstrates that interreligious dialogue is not simply something found in the Western world, starting with the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions, but is found in the medieval Islamic world, Mongolia, Western Europe, and South Asia. Howard concludes acknowledging that “modernity has ushered in distinctive forms of pluralism and dialogue...but rarely in history is something entirely unprecedented.” IRS must ground itself in the historical experience

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3. For another essay within the volume that looks at the complexity of religious identity, see Russell C. D. Arnold’s “Complicating Religious Identity.” As he argues, “It is incumbent upon us as interfaith studies scholars, in our practice and scholarship, to break free from the overly representational religious identity paradigm and adopt an intersectional approach that invites all of us to engage our whole lives with integrity and authenticity” (186).

and seek precedents in different times and places. In “Comparison to Conversation,” Frans Wijsen notes that in East Africa the paradigm of religious studies hit its limits, compelling him to switch “from religious studies to interreligious studies.” Soon this interreligious framework became “interdisciplinary” and led to the founding of the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS) in 2005. As Wijsen’s work evolved, he moved to “practical religious studies” and “Dialogical Self Theory” which blurs the boundary between self and society and conceptualizes the self as a “mini society.” Similarly, Nelly van Doorn-Harder, in her “Ethnographic Approaches and Limitations,” takes on a journey of how her field work in Egypt led her to question certain Religious Studies paradigms, especially when she encountered the world of Coptic saints and mystical experience. As she asks, “How can our Western mindset, which tends to privilege empirical science, process mystical experiences without reducing them to nonsensical babble?” If we are unable to capture these deep religious experiences, we may misunderstand the “way narratives and world-views interconnect, and thus we miss what matters most.”

In a related matter, the editor of the volume, Hans Gustafson, promotes the “Vitality of Lived Religion Approaches.” As he observes, “An appeal to the heart, to the person, to the lived experience, can often go much further and deeper than reliance on appealing to the concept on a theoretical level.” He goes on to explain that IRS is more about “understanding religious people and relations, while understanding religious traditions as such remains perhaps secondary.” Instead of focusing on elites and their intellectual production, IRS is about the lived experience and everyday human relations. Timothy Parker builds on the lived religion approach in his “Places and Spaces of Encounter.” Parker brings in the element of architecture and interreligious studies and how the two shape one another. As he states, “Architecture is the fertile middle ground of an enormous range of venues for interreligious encounter.” Architecture may allow us to “see” interreligious encounter in ways that may not necessarily be apparent in texts and scripture. In summary, the section demonstrates the disillusionment of many scholars with the current theories and methods found within Religious Studies. This disillusionment led them to embrace IRS with its emphasis on human relations, lived religions, and interdisciplinarity.<sup>4</sup> While IRS seeks to develop new frameworks

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4. For the tool of empathy in IRS see Catherine Cornille’s essay “Interreligious Empathy” later in the volume. As she states, “this chapter examines empathy in the context of interreligious encounter and makes the case

and methods, it is also cognizant of the importance of history and how it can ground and inform future actions.

### **IRS influencing new understandings of faith**

The next section, “Theological and Philosophical Considerations,” demonstrates that IRS is not only invested in the academic study of religion but also constructs new understandings of religion, faith and ethics. “In Grist for Theological Mills,” J. R. Hustwit describes how IRS can “support, give rise to, and provide valuable data” to theology whether that be transreligious, comparative, or missiology. For Hustwit, the knowledge produced by religious studies and theology is “symbiotic, even while their methods differ.” Hustwit proceeds to discuss how IRS could influence the various theologies and concludes that the emerging discipline could produce “theological creativity”. In “Dialogical Theology and Praxis,” Wolfram Weisse contends that “dialogically oriented theology with reference to lived religions is necessary at the university,” a discussion which engages the participant rather than simply lecturing them. “Dialogical Theology” incorporates a “lived religion” approach as it seeks to engage the everyday believer but could still stimulate academic debate.

In “Interreligious Theology and Truth Seeking,” Perry Schmidt-Leukel submits that, in the future, “Theology in every religious tradition will increasingly become interreligious.” Schmidt-Leukel then outlines a methodology of engagement which includes a “hermeneutic of trust” and a “unity of reality.” Schmidt-Leukel concludes by explaining that IRS is essential in the study of religion since “religions resemble each other in their internal diversity.” Jeffery D. Long concludes the section by profiling the Hindu spiritual teacher Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda is famously known for giving the welcome address at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of the World’s Religions, where he spoke about how he was proud to be part of a religion “which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance.” After giving various quotes from his writings, Long ends explaining that Vivekananda believed that “each of the world’s religions captures some portion of the truth” and that he was an influential figure to Gandhi and shaped the scholar Houston Smith’s views on religion. Long’s article once again demonstrates the importance of history, non-Western voices

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for not only why interfaith studies might play an important role in cultivating interreligious empathy but also why the field of interfaith and interreligious studies ought to critically reflect on variables that enhance or impede empathy” (223).

and antecedents to modern interfaith movements. In summary, the section reveals that many theologians and philosophers are actively engaged in the developments of IRS and hope to influence its future.

### **The activist imperative**

The section entitled “Contemporary Challenges” makes a strong push for IRS to be committed to social justice and activism rather than simply interreligious education and literacy. The section begins with two essays that use the term “decolonizing.” The first, “Decolonizing the Study of Religion” by Kevin Minister, argues against the World Religions paradigm and advocates for the study of religion being “interactive, intersectional and interpersonal.” Minister then gives examples of each approach such as the fact that religions interact with their environment and are “shaped by the particular ecological contexts in which they are lived out and shape the environmental context.” For Minister, interacting with those we study and being aware of larger structural power dynamics is essential in determining how “liberatory” interreligious studies can be. Paul Hedges makes a similar point in his “Decolonizing Interreligious Studies,” where he contends that “Academia as a whole, including especially the academic study of religion, has been embroiled – if not complicit – in shaping of the world from a Western perspective.” For Hedges, “decolonial” is different from “post-colonial” with the former more focused on “strategic moves to change the mode of study” rather than speaking about a particular era. For Hedges, the emerging field must be “decolonial” in its nature and thus aware of the foundational paradigms and concepts that originate from a particular Western and Protestant point of view.

Similarly, Brian Pennington’s essay “(Neo)liberal Challenges” insists that critique should be a “central concern” of IRS and that the discipline must be connected to “social change.” Pennington’s major concern is that critique and social justice may be silenced in favor of the interfaith collective or loyalty to the nation-state. Correspondingly, Rachel Mikva also highlights the “politicization of religious difference and racialization of religion” that are intimately connected to questions related to IRS. She highlights the post 9/11 special registration program for Muslim men over the age 16, where they were registered in a national database after they were fingerprinted, photographed and asked questions under oath. Mikva links the Islamophobia industry to America’s history of racism and to anti-Judaism, in which Jews were seen as not only holding incorrect or false beliefs but as intrinsically evil.

Moreover, Caryn D. Riswold and Guenevere Black Ford write that IRS must confront “Xenoglossophobia” or the fear of foreign languages. Riswold and Ford give the example of a passenger in 2016 being removed from a plane because he was speaking Arabic and uttered the word “Allah.” Riswold and Ford connect the incident to America’s fear of the other and to racial and religious profiling based on language and accent. Peter A. Pettit examines the Kairos Palestine document which “advocates for ending the Israeli occupation and achieving a just solution to the conflict.” Pettit explains that the document is relevant to IRS because it demonstrates how context affects religious expressions and complicates our view of singular religious expression since Jews and Christians were involved in the composition of the document. Taken as a whole, the section reveals that IRS is not content with teaching about the interaction between various religions, but is also interested in the structural, practical and ethical implications of the scholarship.<sup>5</sup> As the IRS scholar begins their research, they are compelled to act on the structural and systemic injustices that they encounter.

### **IRS contributions to related fields**

In the last section, “Praxis and Possibility,” a theme emerges regarding the various subfields that IRS is connected to and could help develop. In her “Cross-Cultural Leadership as Interfaith Leadership,” Barbara A. McGraw argues that “meaningful and practical knowledge for effective cross-cultural leadership ought to have interreligious understanding and interfaith competence at heart.” While universities have stressed the importance of understanding different cultures as essential for general education, interfaith studies has not always been included even though religion has historically played an essential role in defining identity and society. McGraw hopes that an intellectual foundation will be built between scholars of cultural diversity and religion to create well-rounded and competent interfaith leaders.

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5. For more on the activist dimension of IRS, please see Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s essay “Scholarship as Activism” later in the volume. As she aspirationally concludes, “When historians look back at the emergence of interreligious studies in our moment, I hope they will see courageous scholar-activists who embraced the task of expanding religious literacy and deepening the human engagement with systems of religion as work done in solidarity with one another, in solidarity with those under threat and in commitment to a more just and humane world” (252). Similarly, Marianne Moyaert explores the various roles of those involved in IRS in her essay “The Scholar, the Theologian and the Activist” earlier in the volume. In the end, Moyaert believes that “interreligious studies programs” should include all approaches with both a respectful and critical gaze.

Additionally, two essays in the section deal with peacebuilding or peace studies. Navras J. Aafreedi believes IRS can help reduce intolerance and promote peacebuilding through education. Aafreedi discusses how she created an undergraduate course, “Reading Interfaith Relations in World History,” as a response to the frequent communal clashes in India which often include mass violence. While religious intolerance may be initially confined to a particular area, it will eventually spread to all of society. Likewise, Asfa Widiyanto discusses the role of IRS within religious education in state and public school curriculums. In many parts of the world, religious education works to develop personal piety but pays little attention to interfaith literacy and civic values. Furthermore, minority faiths are not always represented within these curriculums, leading to misunderstandings of what their beliefs really are.

Another essential subfield is Christian-Muslim relations, which attracts the attention of two essays in the section. In his essay, Douglas Pratt surveys various modern interfaith initiatives such as the Building Bridges Seminar started by the archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey. The Seminar contains both “religious conviction and academic rigor” while also focusing on religious texts. Pratt ends his essay observing that the development of IRS in general could influence the trajectory of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Deanna Ferree Womack also addresses Christian-Muslim relations but with attention to gender. Womack notes that studies on Christian-Muslim relations focus on questions of history, doctrine, and scripture while feminist studies consist of only a handful of cases on Christians and Muslim women. Moreover, feminist Christian and Muslim women are frequently more interested in changing their own traditions rather than working on how their issues and struggles intersect with one another. For Womack, IRS could build the bridge between the various disciplines which could help improve Christian-Muslim relations on a more practical level.

The book ends with a helpful conclusion by Gustafson where he asks important questions regarding the field, such as where it will be housed on campuses and how it will interact with the interfaith community. A key question is whether IRS will maintain an activist agenda and commitment to social transformation or if it will focus on normative and academic expressions of truth. Gustafson observes that the field is composed of “activist-practitioners,” so he envisions a healthy synergy between the academic and confessional communities.



### **Conclusions and reflections for further scholarship**

In conclusion, the volume represents a significant advancement in IRS both in terms of structure, methodology, and content. First, the “dispatches” format was successful and demonstrates that IRS is interested in debate and discussion between a range of actors from scholars to activists. At first, I was skeptical of the format as I was concerned that the various contributors would not have enough space to make their arguments and points. However, I was pleasantly surprised that the authors were able to be succinct and concise while being academic and erudite. I have found myself sharing the various essays with IRS colleagues and those outside the field because of their brief nature, something I may have not been inclined to do if they were substantially longer. Future scholarship should build on the dispatches model by holding roundtables on topics of interest and discussion such as using the term religious versus transreligious, the activist imperative, the lived religion approach, and so forth.

Nonetheless, even though the book does an excellent job of engaging previous scholarship, it could have had more interaction between the various scholars as they touch on related themes and issues. For instance, it is clear that some of the contributors favor the term “interreligious studies” while others prefer “interfaith studies.” Could there be a specific roundtable between the two in order to discuss their differences and similarities? Moreover, Gustafson provides a strong introduction to the book explaining nicely the genesis of the work and gives an overview of the various essays and their different arguments. Nevertheless, it could have been helpful to have this overview before each section, where a short introduction lays out the section’s significance and how the essays relate to one another. It would also be helpful to hear why Gustafson chose to divide the essays into the various sections. At the end of the book, Gustafson offers a perceptive conclusion, synthesizing the contents and sharing how the essays are significant to the emerging field. Gustafson’s questions at the end help the reader think through what they have read and focus on where future developments and collaborations might lie.

In terms of contents and methodology, the volume promotes IRS as a diverse field that encompasses opinions from a variety of actors. The volume includes opinions ranging from those who hold chairs in theology to students, practitioners, and directors of interfaith initiatives. The remarkable array of voices speaks to the great diversity of IRS and how membership in the field does not require a

tenured position at a research university. IRS is open to a multitude of views rather than just that of a few luminaries. As noted above, the “dispatches” or “roundtable” format is conducive to expanding the conversation and incorporating a large array of opinions and perspectives.

Moreover, the volume takes an important step in incorporating voices outside America such as those in Europe. Many of the essays are enriched by the European perspectives which include unique theories and methods as well as innovative interfaith and dialogic initiatives. However, as Gustafson himself notes (2), the volume lacks balance in voices and perspectives from the non-Western world, even though there are the essays by Aafreedi and Widiyanto. Several essays, such as that of Minister and Hedges, advocate incorporating non-Western perspectives and frameworks to study interreligious beliefs and interaction. Yet, such a goal can only be achieved if voices from the non-Western world are amplified and incorporated within the burgeoning field. The field needs to incorporate non-Western voices, hold conferences outside the Americas and Europe, solicit articles from non-Western scholars, and translate relevant IRS scholarship into English.

Additionally, the volume advocates for IRS as an academic discipline: the volume is printed by a university press, contains essays with extensive footnotes and references, and engages previous scholarship on the topic. Several essays explore critically where IRS would be housed on campus and how it would intersect with other disciplines, programs and fields. Initially, one would think that IRS would be situated in religious studies or theology departments, but the volume contends that IRS is interdisciplinary and not confined to one particular framework or approach. Programs in peace studies, cultural diversity, and philosophy could be collaborators and partners as well. Yet, while IRS is open to various methodologies, it appears that it is invested in a “lived religion” approach that interacts with communities of practice and explores their unique religious traditions, spirituality, and community activism. While history and texts are important, they are not the only focus or object of study. These various interactions often lead to calls to challenge structural injustices and engage in social transformation. While interreligious education and literacy are essential, many essays advocate activism for social justice.

The volume presents a strong vision for the future of IRS and a model of how productive discussions can occur. Gustafson and the various

contributors should be commended for putting together such a timely, erudite, and thought-provoking volume.

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