

## Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy

Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell, editors

*Boston, MA: E.J. Brill, 2020 (viii + 252 pages, ISBN 978-9004420021, \$64.00)*

### Reviewed By

John M. Thompson

*Christopher Newport  
University*

As an experienced 21<sup>st</sup> century instructor of religion and philosophy, I have long been aware that my students and I inhabit religiously pluralistic classrooms. To borrow from Durkheim, this is a “social fact” that poses numerous challenges and opportunities—challenges and opportunities that differ significantly from those that shaped my own undergraduate experience. That’s one reason why I so welcome this collection of essays compiled by Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell.

It offers university and college (and presumably secondary school) instructors a fascinating array of pedagogical ideas, techniques, and tools informed by scholarly theory and classroom practice. The result is a useful and provocative handbook of how to teach about religious and theological matters during these promising (and perilous) times.

This book is comprised of eleven of essays from a group of scholars (including established professors and graduate students) arising from a series of ongoing conversations in a project on “Interreligious Education and Pedagogy.” These teacher-scholars come from an array of institutional and faith backgrounds, primarily in theological and seminary settings. While each essay addresses distinct issues (e.g., institutional/denominational resistance, educational outreach to the larger community, the internal complexities of personal theologies), each author shares a commitment to grounding pedagogical points in personal experience and theory. This is the type of book that lends itself to diving in at various points rather than reading straight through from cover to cover. Still, I would especially recommend that readers begin with Judith Berling’s introduction and then turn to Heidi Hadsell’s conclusion, as both pieces frame the overall discussion.

Naturally there are a few essays that warrant special attention. For example, Monica Coleman’s essay, “Teaching African American Religious Pluralism,” challenges received notions of personal and communal religious identity by closely examining African American religiosity as a lived experience. As she and her students discovered, African American religious life is distinctly pluralistic, calling for adherents and scholars to wrestle with issues of multiple religious belonging and transreligious spirituality that defy neat intellectual categories. As such, examining African American religious experience offers important theological tools for students of all backgrounds, not just those who identify as Black. Christine Hong echoes some of Coleman’s points in her essay on interreligious education. While Hong focuses primarily on her Korean American experience (which she describes as both transnational and trans-spiritual), her discussion directly challenges the white and Christian assumptions that inform academic views of non-white and non-Christian communities. Indeed, one of Hong’s strongest points underscores the fact that some (I am inclined to say “all”) religions have been hybrid realities from the very beginning. Finally, John Thatamanil’s essay suggests a reimagining of “comparative theology” that harkens back to its ancient origins as a quest for “interreligious wisdom.” The latter is particularly interesting in that Thatamanil finds such striving involves practical and experiential embodied learning (i.e. meditation, devotional exercises, yoga, etc.). My sense is that such embodied learning holds great promise for contemporary college students (at least those in my classrooms) who by and large come from nominally “Christian” (or secular) families yet often express keen interest in “Eastern spirituality.”

I do not intend to slight any of the other authors included in this volume; I have learned (and am still learning) from each chapter. I would agree that the book’s subtitle, “Experiments in Empathy,” is most apt. More important, my sense is that this book reflects the early stages of a process of rethinking and reimagining theological and religious education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such thoughts, I must confess, gives me pause. While I share the authors’ strong commitment to values such as solidarity, friendship, and cooperation, when I look at our larger national and global situation, particularly in light of the harmful policies and inequalities laid bare by the ravages of COVID-19, I strongly doubt such values are widely shared. Instead, I wonder if the authors and others dedicated to interreligious education and understanding might better see ourselves, like the nameless wanderer from the Bruce Springsteen song, as “hunters of invisible game.”