
Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field. Edited by Hans Gustafson. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020. Pp. 279. Reviewed by Elyse MacLeod, *McGill University*.

While the field of Interreligious Studies (IRS) has been “a discernable thing” for at least the past ten years, debates on “how to define, name, and bind the outer limits of this field (or subfield) [and] on what belongs in it (and what does not),” remain active.¹ The edited volume *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from An Emerging Field* (hereafter *Dispatches*), contributes to a growing body of literature which seeks to delve into these issues, offering a diversity of takes – thirty six to be exact – on important questions such as: What is being researched in this field, and by whom? What are its historical precedents, and how does current scholarship imagine it relating to religious studies, theology, and interfaith activism? What are its theoretical, methodological, and normative orientations? What are its limits, challenges, and possibilities?

While these and other questions are explored over the volume’s five different sections, editor Hans Gustafson uses the preface and introduction to contextualize the volume in relation to pre-existing scholarship, clarify its organizational structure, and offer some important notes on terminology. In terms of contextualization, Gustafson notes that while previous publications in this vein have tended to thematically skew towards a focus on interreligious pedagogies and curricular development,² *Dispatches* was curated to focus “primarily on research and scholarship” (xiv). In terms of

1. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace and Noah J. Silverman eds., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), xiv, xviii.

2. See Patel, Peace, and Silverman, *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*, and Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

organization, he explains that the volume was arranged to give the feel of a roundtable discussion: each section heading provides a particular prompt or theme, while each response, “crafted with brevity,” seeks to provide an “on the ground” sense of contemporary, unfolding developments within the field as related to the theme at hand (2). With respect to terminology, Gustafson takes care to address the longstanding debate over the field’s name – should it be “interreligious studies,” “interfaith studies,” or interreligious/interfaith studies”? Noting that this debate tends to reproduce the confessional theology (interfaith) versus critical religious studies (interreligious) binary that many interreligious scholars feel is overly simplistic – if not problematic – Gustafson explains that he avoided imposing any terminological standards in this regard. In other words, contributors were free to use, and defend, whatever terminology they felt was most apt for describing their research and vision for the field. As a result, the reader is provided with a good sense of each contributor’s understanding of how the field relates to theology versus religious studies, as well as its relationship to “the so-called interfaith movement” (3).

Rather than attempting to engage with each of the volume’s thirty-six essays, I will focus on the essays which seem to highlight certain emphases and tension points that arise within each section and communicate different visions for the future direction of IRS. The first section, “Sketching the Field,” contains what can be described as a selection of meta-disciplinary reflections on how the field should conceptualize itself. Opening the section is Oddbjørn Leirvik’s piece, which presents the idea that IRS might best be conceptualized as a discrete discipline, rather than merely a subfield or area of study in theology or religious studies. He notes that obtaining disciplinary status requires theoretical and methodological innovations that differentiate it from pre-existing disciplines (21), and puts forward

his own thesis, that what differentiates it is a thoroughly *relational* understanding of, and approach to, religion. Anticipating some push back on whether this relational understanding/approach is actually “something exclusive to interreligious studies,” he does spend a full section addressing this point (see 19–20). Eboo Patel offers quite a different vision for the field, one that closely aligns it with the “so-called interfaith movement” (3). By Patel’s account, IRS – or, as he prefers, interfaith studies – should be conceptualized in more practical terms, as a program of study that seeks to train “civic interfaith leadership,” which is to say, leaders who are sensitive to, and have the means to operate within and mobilize the strengths of, religiously pluralistic societies (29–33). Marianne Moyaert’s piece offers a useful breakdown of the “three primary fields (and scholarly profiles) that have contributed to the emergence of interreligious/interfaith studies (IIS) in the academy: religious studies (the interreligious scholar), theology (the [comparative] theologian of religions), and the so-called interfaith movement (the scholar-activist)” (34). Moyaert’s piece is particularly useful for the way it showcases the subversiveness of this emerging field; how its “complex genealogy,” allows it to self-consciously blur some of the overdrawn boundaries between religious studies, theology, and activism, and to generate scholarship and pedagogical strategies that are both critical and constructive (35–36).

The second section, “History and Methods,” examines how historical examples of interreligious encounter and dialogue, as well as contemporary field work, highlight the need for thinking interreligiously and for engaging methods which help in this task. Opening the section is Thomas Howard, who argues that there is much to be gained from “attending carefully” to historical examples of interreligious dialogue and encounter. Thinking interreligiously, he asserts, isn’t historically unprecedented, and “assuming otherwise

impoverishes historical explanation and burdens present-day interreligious endeavours with amnesia about its own past” (74). In their respective pieces, Frans Wijzen and Nelly van Doorn-Harder offer accounts of how their fieldwork experiences led them to see certain limitations in, as Wijzen puts it, the “traditional paradigms” of religious studies. While Wijzen’s experiences led him to advocate for a conscious shift from religious studies to interreligious studies – which, he explains, involves a move from disengaged to engaged research, and from a comparative to a conversational epistemology (80) – van Doorn-Harder, writing from the perspective of an ethnographer, argues that, despite its pitfalls and limitations, “using seemingly safe and familiar academic language appears to be the best approach” (86). Hans Gustafson, for his part, advocates for “the lived religion (LR) method” (91). IRS, he argues, is “primarily interested in understanding religious people and relations, while understanding religious traditions as such remains secondary” (92). Accordingly, LR methods are “indispensable (vital) for IRS precisely because they expose the overwhelming complexity of interreligious encounters by focusing on individual people and communities” (92).

The third section, “Theological and Philosophical Considerations,” emphasizes how IRS both nourishes, and is itself nourished by, “theological and philosophical truth-seeking in the context of interreligious encounter” (6). While J. R. Hustwit “makes the case for how interreligious studies has helped support, give rise to, and provide valuable data for four important theological subfields: theology of religions, missiology, comparative theology, and transreligious theology” (129), Perry Schmidt-Leukel argues that given the reality and lived experience of religious plurality, interreligious thinking proves itself indispensable for negotiating “the age-old question of religious truth” (141). This section thus

affirms the sentiment, expressed in preceding sections, that the utility of IRS exceeds the academic study of religion and also services more practical and existential concerns.

The essays contained in the fourth section, “Contemporary Challenges,” deal with an important contemporary tension in IRS: its relationship to social justice and activism. The first two essays in this section, by Kevin Minister and Paul Hedges respectively, argue that the shift towards IRS reflects the broad shift in religious studies towards “decolonization,” which is to say, the shift away from the Western constructions and ideals that have historically dominated the academic study of religion. For both scholars, then, IRS represents a new opportunity; as Hedges puts it, “as a relatively young academic field, IRS has the possibility to seek to define its terms of study [...] and [...] modes of operation,” in opposition to the “Western norms, values, experiences, cultural perspectives, and agendas” (164) that must be decentered if we wish to attend to the harm perpetrated by colonial and orientalist discourse and do justice to the multidimensionality of phenomena as weighty as “religion,” “interreligion,” “culture,” etc. Kate McCarthy’s piece asserts the IRS “must frame its values and goals in terms appropriate to the secular academy,” and, accordingly, must resist the temptation to align itself with “interfaith initiatives” which promote a particular (read: pluralist) notion of the common good (172–175). Likewise, Brian K. Pennington’s piece argues that we must be careful not to conflate IRS with the “non-curricular interfaith initiatives” that have been proliferating on U.S. college campuses in recent years, initiatives which tend to support classically neoliberal understandings of society, personhood, and what constitutes the common good. Pennington is not wary of IRS expressing “an interest in social change” (179), but argues that it must remain vigilantly critical of the

type of social change it advocates for, lest it end up simply reproducing and repackaging neoliberal norms.

The final section, “Praxis and Possibility,” examines the various fields IRS draws from and contributes to, and highlights the generative potential represented by these connections. While Barbara A. McGraw speaks to the field’s potential for “deepening cultural studies, leadership studies, and especially the practice of cross-cultural leadership” (213), Catherine Cornille – an important voice in theorizing interfaith dialogue – offers a discussion on the contribution IRS can make to both cultivating interreligious empathy and understanding the obstacles that impede such empathy. Navras J. Aafreedi and Asfa Widiyanto explore the ways IRS can support peacemaking, while Douglas Pratt and Deanna Womack conclude with a discussion on how IRS’ dialogical orientation can contribute to strengthening Christian-Muslim relations.

The value of the highlighted discussions notwithstanding, there are some limitations to the volume. Readers who are keenly attuned to this growing body of discourse will find some articles rather repetitive – the articles by Anne Hedges Grung, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Kate McCarthy, for example, largely offer summaries of arguments already published elsewhere.³ However, the volume’s most significant shortcoming – as Gustafson himself acknowledges – is its Western bias: “the dispatches come from contemporary scholars

3. See Anne Hege Grung, “Inter-religious or Trans-religious: Exploring the Term ‘Inter-religious’ in a Feminist Postcolonial Perspective,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 13 (2014): 11–14; Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Interreligious Studies: A New Academic Discipline?” in *Contested Spaces, Common Ground*, ed. Ulrich Winkler, Lidia Rodríguez Fernández and Oddbjørn Leirvik (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Kate McCarthy, “(Inter)Religious Studies: Making a Home in the Secular Academy,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

from around the world, mostly the Western world. As such, the volume lacks a balance of non-western voices, a limitation which continues to plague much of western scholarship” (2). Given the volume’s own insistence that IRS represents and furthers the trend towards decoloniality, and, moreover, the fact that there is no shortage of non-western voices publishing in this field – see, for example, the diversity of voices on display in the Indonesian-based *International Journal of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies*⁴ – this lacuna seems somewhat surprising, and, to be frank, disappointing. Despite this disappointment, *Dispatches* remains an indispensable resource for scholars interested in gaining a sense of the contemporary self-conceptualization of IRS, its theoretical and methodological orientations, as well as its fault lines and tension points.

4. See: <https://www.neliti.com/journals/ijiis>.