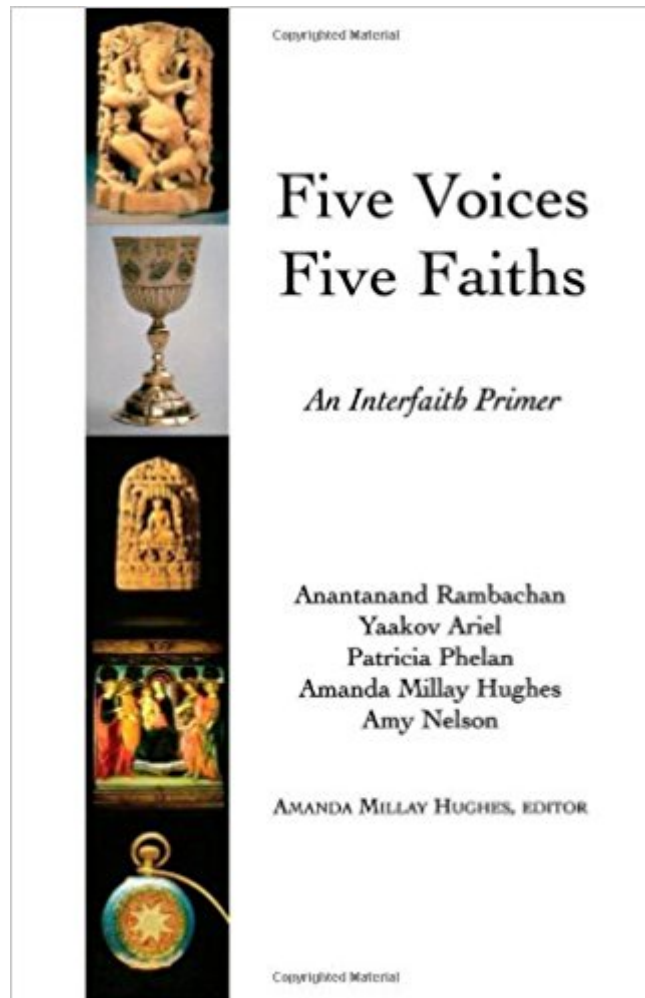


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Five Voices Five Faiths: An Interfaith Primer



Synopsis

In this unique book about the major religious traditions of the world, a practitioner from each tradition—Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—introduces the basics of his or her faith and participates in a conversation about the challenges of being faithful in the modern world. Each essay and conversation is followed by a list of suggestions for further reading. Written for the non-specialist, *Five Voices Five Faiths* is an accessible book in which neighbors honor both our differences and our common bonds. Some may say that my only obligation to other non-Christian believers is to preach the good news of God in Christ Jesus. They may also believe that participating in interfaith dialogue and relationship, by the very nature of the task, causes me to disobey the gospel mandate to go into the world and make disciples of all people. I understand the position, and for much of my life subscribed to it. But today, as a middle-aged woman, with grown children and aging parents, another line from the Christian gospels compels me. Today, I reflect more deeply on the new commandment Jesus gave, to love one another as he has loved us. In order to be obedient to that commandment, I understand myself to be required to participate in conversations in which I am not afforded the last word or the luxury of full agreement, compliance, or conversion. This love requires that I involve myself in the lives of others, even when my most basic human instinct is to run, to hide, and to avoid the unfamiliar. The love that Jesus commands of me requires that I, as he has done before me, kindle and engender deep relationships with those others: the outcast, the unfamiliar, the different, and the very ones that we presume constitute the greatest threat to our institutional and cultural norms. —from the Introduction, by Amanda Millay Hughes

Book Information

Paperback: 126 pages

Publisher: Cowley Publications (April 28, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1561012726

ISBN-13: 978-1561012725

Product Dimensions: 5.7 x 0.4 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #453,004 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #100 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Anglican #128 in Books

> Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Episcopalian
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Customer Reviews

This erudite paperback offers a fine example of the virtues of the spiritual practice of hospitality in interfaith adventures. (Spirituality and Health)The reader is left with the delightful feeling of having been gently and warmly introduced to something of personally deep, enduring, and intimate value. (The Living Church)

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Concise (sometimes painfully so) overview of the faiths covered. We used this book for a "Religions of the World" group held at my church. It was a good "starting point". It generated much discussion, and raised many questions for which we sought answers from other sources. Just a note...for the buddhism session we used a book by the title of "Living Buddha, Living Christ" (by Thich Naht Hanh)which was excellent.

As the title suggests, Five Voices, Five Faiths is a collection of five essays, each introducing one of the world's major religions and authored by a practicing adherent of that religion. In order of presentation (as well as the historical order of the founding of these religions, according to the

editor), we encounter a "Hindu," a Jew, a Zen Buddhist, a Christian, and a Muslim-Americans all-each explaining the basic tenets of their respective faiths. The five essays vary in their quality and depth of insight into the respective religions. Given the fact that each author was allotted only twenty pages to introduce a major world religion, one must expect the essays to be selective and limited with regard to their subject matter. The brevity, combined with each author's pluralistic outlook-a sort of rush to non-judgment as it were-lends itself to a misleading presentation of the views. Professor Anantanand Rambachan's essay on "Hinduism" blurs important distinctions among religious traditions that are often given this designation. Indeed, the reader comes away with the impression that Hindus are committed to a sort of panentheism, as he cites a hymn in the Rg Veda that "states that while God pervades the universe by a fourth of God's being, three-fourths remain beyond it" (p. 3). He fails to tell his readers that he himself is an adherent of Advaita Vedanta, Shankara's 9th century philosophy of absolute non-dualism. On Advaita, Brahman is the only existing being, so that the observable world of samsara around us is actually an illusion due to avidya or ignorance. Further, Brahman is literally "propertyless" according to Advaita Vedanta, so that no properties-from personhood to power to goodness-apply to "him." The Advaitan concept of Brahman is a far cry from any theistic conception of God, and readers may be misled by the theistic overtones of Professor Rambachan's use of "God" to refer to Brahman. Though the Hindu doctrine of ishtadeva and the corresponding doctrine of diverse margas or "approved ways" "has enabled Hindus to think of the world's religions in complementary and not exclusive ways" (p. 7), the Absolute Monism of Rambachan's own view entails that, while theistic belief may be instrumental as a stepping stone to the truth of Brahman, it is little more than a useful fiction. Yaakov Ariel's essay on Judaism emphasizes Jewish culture and practice and decidedly de-emphasizes doctrine. We learn something of Hannukah and Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Purim, and of the cultural shift from the priestly class to a lay priesthood, from temple to synagogue, but precious little about what Jews believe about the Creator-or the Messiah. Patricia Phelan tells us something of the Buddha's early life and original teachings, including the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The latter, with its practical emphasis, gets the most attention, and she steers clear of the metaphysical implications of, say, the Buddhist doctrines of "dependent origination" and its corollaries of anitya (impermanence) and anatman (no-self). After nodding in the direction of the other Buddhist traditions of Theravada and Mahayana, she settles into a discussion of her own Zen practice. Editor Amanda Millay Hughes, an Episcopalian, emphasizes the confessional nature of Christianity, and opens her essay with a statement and brief exposition of the Nicene Creed. She nicely articulates an orthodox account of such doctrines as the Trinity and Incarnation, and, importantly given this

interfaith context, the ontological transcendence of God ("God is fundamentally other than any created thing or being," p. 75). She affirms the universality of sin and the need for forgiveness, but says little to nothing about the Atonement itself. She does, however, offer the exclusivist claim that "Christians believe that all human life needs the redemptive action of God in Christ Jesus" (p. 79). This does not sit well with the pluralist motivation behind this project, as one of her collaborators points out in the Q&A section. Rambachan asks, "How do you relate [this claim] with the reality of different religions?" (p. 88). Her reply is evasive. She notes that exclusivist thinking engenders "dark judgments about other religions" and confesses, "it is hard to give a definitive answer to your question" (p. 88). The non-definitive answer that follows urges the need for love and the universal "desire to live in harmony," and concludes with an appeal to "mystery." I'll return to her dilemma momentarily.

Amy Nelson, a self-described "white, educated, American-born" convert to Islam, explains the basic tenets of her faith. Allah has no cohorts, and "there is no god but Allah" is the cornerstone of Muslim faith. She explains the exalted view that Muslims take of Mohammed and of the Q'uran. And we learn something of the five pillars of Islam: monotheistic belief itself, prayer, fasting, alms, pilgrimage. Many post-9/11 readers may hope to learn whether Islam is, after all, a peaceful religion. But for a couple of oblique references to "popular western conceptions" (p. 111) of Islam, little to nothing is said in either the essay or the Q&A section to dispel the alleged misconceptions.

Five Voices, Five Faiths is motivated by the desire to "live amicably" with those whose beliefs are different from one's own, to "live with and value fundamental differences" (p. xiv), and to find "common ground" for interfaith dialogue (p. xiii). These are noble aspirations, all, I suppose. But the concerns go beyond a desire for harmonious co-existence. We are told that mere "tolerant forbearance" implies (arrogantly, I take it) that one is in a "position of privilege" that is not enjoyed by the other. Indeed, we are to avoid "unproductive dogmatic debate" (p. xv) and are urged to "do more than tolerate difference—we can honor it as part of the richness of human experience" (p. xiv). "Celebrate diversity," as they say. Ms. Millay Hughes quotes approvingly from an essay on religious pluralism by a Christian pastor who bubbles that "the Christian calling allows him to sing his song to Jesus `with abandon ...without speaking negatively about others'" (p. xvi). Though she once subscribed to the mandate to make disciples of all people (p. xvii), now, "as a middle-aged woman," she "reflects more deeply" on Jesus' "new commandment" to love one another. Her advice to the adherents of the different traditions these days is "hold onto the truths you have received" (p. xviii). One might draw the conclusion that somehow the Great Commission and this "new commandment" are mutually at odds. One might also be a child of the times.

Ms. Millay Hughes' dilemma in attempting to answer Professor Rambachan's question is symptomatic of the pluralistic

perspective that motivates projects such as Five Voices, Five Faiths. She wishes to affirm her own Christian faith while commending other competing traditions, as "sacred truths." She wishes to "sing her song to Jesus without speaking negatively of others." Her trouble arises from a simple point of logic. To believe something just is to believe that it is true. And to believe that it is true entails believing that its denial is false. The Islamic version of monotheism requires that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is not only false but blasphemous. The Advaita Vedantan doctrine of Nirguna Brahman entails the falseness of all varieties of monotheism. There just is no sense in which all of these competing doctrines may be said to be "true"-not in a way that does full justice to the sense in which actual believers (as opposed to Religious Studies scholars) take their doctrines to be true. To believe anything is to believe that lots of other things-even doctrines that are cherished by fine people-are false. If tolerance means never thinking that those cherished beliefs of others are false, then, necessarily, no one is ever tolerant. I do not recommend Five Voices, Five Faiths as a text for the college classroom-especially at the Christian college. Win Corduan's Neighboring Faiths (InterVarsity, 1998) is much more thorough in its exploration of the various traditions, is even-handed despite being written by a Christian philosopher, and lacks the confused pluralistic outlook of the present book. Harold Netland's Encountering Religious Pluralism (InterVarsity, 2001) written by a former student of Professor John Hick, is a healthy antidote to the perspective of Five Voices, and is a fine text for the classroom. Scholars who wish to understand the perspective of Religious Pluralism itself should bypass Five Voices and go directly to Professor Hick's An Interpretation of Religion (Yale, 2005).

Five Voices Five Faiths: An Interfaith Primer is an introduction to five major religious traditions of the world for lay readers, as presented by five practitioners of each religion. A different faithful individual speaks for Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, providing a plain-terms summary of the basic tenets of each followed an intriguing interview that tests how the ideals of each faith co-exist (or conflict) with one another. Ultimately a tribute to both the differences and the common bonds between faiths, Five Voices Five Faiths is deeply reverent, respectful, and spiritual, and an excellent beginners guide to analysis, comparison, and contrast between religious ideals.

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