

Book Review

Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions*. SCM Press, London, 2010, pp. 287, ISBN 978-0-3340-4211-2.

The aforementioned book published in 2010 by the *SCM Press* is indisputably one of the key contemporary works on the much disputed typological and theological concerns in the realm of Interreligious Dialogue (IRD), and it is an important resource that draws attention to the fact that engineering the theology of religion and its interpretations contribute in locating our positions within the discourse of Interreligious dialogue. The author, Paul Hedges, is an Associate Professor in Interreligious Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU, Singapore, and is noted for his works in Theology of Religions and interreligious dialogue. The book under review *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions*, opens with a compelling introduction on the interconnectedness of controversies in theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, and the surreptitious role of one's history and tradition that informs a person of their understanding of themselves and the "Other" in interreligious dialogue. Focussing on theoretical and theological issues, this book aims to address empirical and ethical issues at stake, grounded with the Christian typologies of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and the novel label of particularism. The author cleverly admits to the position he assumes during his investigations right at the start, and acknowledges that it is an "explicitly Christian theological work" (Hedges 2010: 2) and the tone of the book may tenably reflect an "ecumenical intention" (Hedges 2010: 2). Following Tracy (1990), he believes that it is important to lay out the conscious biases at the very outset. While this book has been immensely appropriated and debated within the Christian theology dictum, in this review I wish to critically examine its utility for those exterior to the fold of the Christian theological traditions.

This book passionately attempts to interweave the theological standpoints with the social theories and philosophical concerns around postmodernism, (post)liberalism, and feminism while *conversing between religions*. The theme of the nature of religion, and how it mediates our cultural identity is a recurring topic in this book. On multitude fronts, Hedges addresses the category of "religion" itself, and asks "what does it mean for a Christian to

talk about and interact with Hinduism, Islam, Judaism etc.” (Hedges 2010: 66). This idea increasingly resonates with Race (2001) when he reflects- can there ever be a Christian understanding of Islam, Judaism or any other religion? It is important to establish this relational understanding with other religions, and especially with regards to interreligious dialogue because in order to have dialogical interactions, we need to move beyond the status quo we assume about other religions. Kung (1991) rightly promulgated that there needs to be less dramatic and more practical ways of seeing other religions to begin with. In Hedges’ understanding, pluralism is that practical way that legitimises others’ religion as rational and important, and can be used to minimise the barriers between religions.

At the core of this book, is the concept of “radical openness” and “radical difference”, which Hedges deals with in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Deploying radical openness to assess the tenacity of pluralism has been a matter of contestation. According to him, opting for different shades of pluralism, and sometimes for Comparative Theology, make way for radical openness for the religious other by allowing a “permeable and open border to exist between the Christian faith and other religious traditions” (Hedges 2010: 112). Gliding between different pluralistic approaches, Hedges rightly suggests that there can be no static model for pluralism that can best complement radical openness, but the fact that a person aligns with pluralistic views, should help them advance their approach of viewing the other with genuine moral basis and truth claims. He constantly draws the attention of the readers to the impasse of the fluidity of pluralism, but ascertains that each of the ‘pluralisms’ is fundamentally binding for mediating with the religious other. Most of his arguments are grounded in individualistic beliefs, and not in institutional absolutes of religious logics. One of the most interesting questions he raises is, “Is the pluralist option Christian?” (Hedges 2010: 133). There is no denying that Christian theology, like other religious traditions, is more polemical than what meets the eye, but the ecumenical imperative nature of Christian identity may itself manifest a paradox when the truth claim of “others” is viewed as justifiable (Carson, 1996; Phan 2000). There is a tension within the pluralists themselves with regards to the extent to which the “other” can be seen as having plausible truth claims, and the factors that determine the same. Hedges’ example of Jesus as an epitome of radical openness remains as one of the most disputed section of his work. D’Costa (2012), in his review of this book, remarked that “Hedges biblical exegesis in

defence of his position is weak” (D’Costa 2012: 219). He points out that the biblical instances needed more convincing and integration, and that the author seemed to circumvent engaging in depth with the Scriptures.

The chapter on *radical difference* introduces ‘particularism’, its standing in Christianity, and in the philosophical debates built around it. Hedges contends that particularism is not the alterity of universalism or pluralism; rather, it is the awareness of theological debates within the moral paradigms facilitated with a more sophisticated understanding of the historical and cultural similarities and differences that is explicitly hermeneutical, and is designed to be a comparative method in the discourse of Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue that illuminate us about the *self* and the *other*. Viewing the other as a culturally variant of ourselves is not bereft of presuppositions and value-judgements. Hedges elucidates particularism as a postmodern critique of pluralism that is an “independent language game mutually incompatible” (Hedges 2010: 148) with other religions. It seeks to redress the trivialisation of differences between religious traditions that pluralism insinuates. Drawing on Lindbeck (1984), Hedges argues that religion is constructed on the basis of learnt cultural and linguistic values, and hence, there can be no common religious experience. Twiss (2018) takes cues from Hedges, and views the relationship between pluralism and particularism “shifting pieces of a changing puzzle in which fixed meanings are neither possible nor desirable (Twiss 2018: 93). Both Alan (2013) and D’Costa (2012) find this notion of Hedges very problematic and suspect it is a category founded on superiority complex. The latter extends this debate to assert that Hedges initially proposes that theology determines the sociology, but most of his arguments places sociology of religion as a precursor to theology of religions.

Chapter 5 attempts to address and rectify the lack of accounts on women’s experiences in the discourse of interreligious dialogue. This section reinstates Hedges position as a feminist pluralistic Christian theologian. The framework adopted is to gauge the epistemological and theological roles of women in the Christian tradition. Hedges argues that the culturally prevalent ascendancy and gendered roles in all realms act as a social primer that protracts to the field of dialogue as well. The notion that “women are not born but made” theologically sanctions the suppression on feminist voices. The author suggests that feminist standpoint theology should be investigated to contest the “malestream

theology” (Hedges 2010: 224). The following chapter connects pluralism and particularism by means of theological reflections, and how the central values preached in the Bible can lay grounds for effective interreligious dialogue. For this section too, D’Costa’s (2012) puts forth that this chapter provided only provisional clarifications, and it left the readers with more questions than answers. The biblical references needed firmer grounding. The last section in this book is on religious ethics in the global context. It raises the important question of if there can be common ethical norms and understanding across religious traditions, and if those can be called “universals” (Hedges 2010: 254). This chapter makes a convincing case to acknowledge that there can be plenitude understanding of justice and peace, depending on the culture in context. It also emphasises on the tensions between the balancing “radical openness” and averting “moral decay”, and if at all one can walk the middle path. The book ends with a very rich list of further readings.

The book is a whirlwind of typologies and theories, well knit together into a flow of conceptual understanding on theological and philosophical debates that resound the currents within the dictum of Interfaith studies in today’s times. As a scholar from outside the Christian faith (and theological) tradition, I am convinced that this book can be useful on many fronts, the most important being the foundational understanding of typologies, and the contestations around them. There is no refuting that the book is a solid work which aims towards the immense task of giving a thought provoking as well as theoretically compelling explanations to the issues that are spanning the entire discipline. Marrying theological *self* and *other* is a herculean task, and while Hedges has done an impressive work, I wish to highlight a few gaps that I believed necessitates more attention. The labels ‘Christianity’ and ‘Christians’ were used homogenously, and the author may have oversimplified the diversity and differences within this tradition. D’Costa (2012) disagrees with Hedges’ style of implicitly deploying what the latter critiqued Hick of- the metacritique of pluralism becomes unerringly apparent. The intent of “mutual fulfilment and walking the middle path” (Hedges 2010: 7) was as much just, as grey sometimes. The author’s arguments in favour of particularism were borderline misplaced and paradoxical- on one end it is made context-sensitive assumptions, but on the other hand there was an attempt to privilege it as a common metaphysical theory. The discussions on radical openness and radical difference were founded on the principles of *self* and *other*, but as Dickens (2006) argued, pluralists

often fall prey to the temptation of “treating otherness as a mere matter of differently expressed sameness” (Dickens 2006: 207). Hedges seemed to trivialise the power of differences while dealing with the central theme of this book. Echoing Tracy, there is a constant temptation to control reality and reduce all differences into (what we deem) sameness (Tracy 1987: 9). His simplistic understanding of these differences may make the readers difficult to grapple with the distinctiveness in the two central concepts. There are several follow-up questions that beg answers- Can there be a common theme to which all religions can respond; can there be a commonality to which all religions can agree to; and to what extent can the Christian assumptions of beliefs and praxis of the “others” be warranted? While these are some broken analysis from different parts of the book, my chief criticism of this work is with respect to the title of the book- “Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions”. For a reader who wishes to delve into the actualities of complications in interreligious dialogue, this piece of work only hints at some potential problems. Although the hypotheses are useful for a conceptual backcloth in preparation for interreligious dialogue, Hedges leaves his readers with a bird’s eye view of the controversies in interreligious dialogue.

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