

Harry J. Huebner and Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen, eds., *On Being Human: Essays From the Fifth Shi 'i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue*, Canadian Mennonite University Press, Winnipeg, 2013. 269 pp. \$27.50. ISBN: 9780920718940.

Readers may recall Columbia University President Lee Bollinger's 2007 remarks introducing then-President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Speaking before Ahmadinejad did, Bollinger assailed the Iranian President for denying the Holocaust and his record on academic freedom and human rights, telling him that he bore all of the signs of being a "cruel and petty dictator." Ahmadinejad began his speech, in turn, by complaining about being treated poorly by Bollinger as his guest at the university.¹ The essays printed in *On Being Human* chronicle a very different, more fruitful exchange. The fifth installment in a series of Muslim-Mennonite dialogues that took place in summer 2011 at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Canada, the essays explore differences in religious anthropology between scholars of two faith communities committed to both hospitality and generous engagement with theological difference. The dialogues have their origins in the extension of disaster relief to victims of the 1990 earthquake that struck Rudbar, Gilan, Iran.

The essays serve several purposes that recommend them to the reader. First, because the authors from each tradition mix reflection on faith with explanation of belief, the essays are accessible to non-specialists. Rather than pursue new interpretations or questions, authors return to their unstated assumptions of their faith. In making those assumptions visible for their interlocutors, the authors also illuminate the underlying commitments that link the traditions. The most important of these is the centrality of dissent in both Shi 'i Islam and Mennonite Christianity. Both faiths are reformist in their origins and prioritize the conscience of believers to choose to follow the path towards divine guidance. Second, these essays reveal the importance these beliefs take on in a community of believers for both Shi 'ah and Mennonites. Authors share a concern for articulating the features of the virtuous community and because the authors see human achievements as possible only by the grace of God, there is special attention to the role of divine mercy and grace in each tradition. The volume concludes with essays that focus on flash points in discussions of religion and culture: the status of human rights and gender in each tradition.

The introduction makes clear that the essays were prepared in advance of the dialogue and do not reflect that dialogue. As the editors put it in their introduction, "what is most lacking in this collection is the give and take and answers after the delivery of each paper." While they invite readers to explore "the issues in dialogue" with the participants, the current format leaves us only to "observe the similarities and differences" (17) that the essays lay out. As they are now, the essays sit alongside one another, sometimes in uncomfortable silence on issues that beg for and probably were the focus of questioning among participants.

As an American-born Muslim, I read these essays from the perspective of someone who has only lived in the context of religious pluralism and then only as a religious minority. What struck me is how divergently the contributors seemed to treat religious pluralism in their reflections. On one side, writers representing the Shi 'ah tradition seemed to ignore the problem of pluralism in their essays. Ali Mesbah's contribution "Religion, Culture, and Social Wellbeing from an Islamic Perspective," for example, imagines the possibilities for virtue within an Islamic paradigm and, judging from his provocative attack on humanism, which might be secured only if Islam is made identical to the state.

For Mesbah, humanist commitments to the preservation of freedom as the highest priority are premised a narrow understanding of humanity and a misplaced confidence in human potential operating without the benefit of divine guidance. Yet Mesbah's analysis of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto produces a scarecrow version of humanism that feels out of date with the way that scholars like William Connolly and Talal Asad have been reconsidering the mutual imbrication of the secular and religious. He does not consider why deeply religious individuals living as minorities might commit to secular, liberal-democratic regimes or why a majority of religiously minded people might nonetheless commit to protecting the rights of members of all faiths to practice freely.

Abolfazl Sajedi's "Islam and Human Rights: Equality and Justice" betrays a similar instinct. By locating human rights in Islamic principles of gender equality, fraternity, and a commitment to justice that is the natural accompaniment to equality and fraternity, Sajedi assimilates human rights discourse to Islam without difference. Here is Sajedi, "Since Islamic human rights emphasizes brotherhood and equality, Islam supports justice and recommends Muslims to expand it in society. Justice is the result of equality. If brotherhood is valuable, justice should be respected, established and supported" (163). Based on my reading of the essay, Sajedi suggests there is no "outside" to Islam. As a Muslim, I believe that Islam illuminates a path for believers yet part of the challenge that believers face is to live with ideas that are not located in or are only part of the tradition.

On the other hand, writers representing the Mennonite tradition portray sensitivity to pluralism that sometimes invites questions of the limits or borders of the tradition. David W. Shenk's account of biblical exegesis in the context of the translation of Scripture into new languages and cultural contexts undoes any claim to privileged knowledge that the missionary or seminarian might claim. Writing that the Kekchi people of Guatemala were empowered by reading the Bible in their native language to challenge his interpretation of the text, I wish he had said more about how Mennonites might resolve tensions rooted in issues of translation, which are ultimately issues related to authority. It seems as if the Mennonite missionary commitment to organizing cultures around Christ (rather than proselytizing, which Shenk explains involves drawing individuals away from their cultures insert-

ing them into Christianized culture) invites the possibility of divergent Mennonite communities. But this, too, may be the inheritance of dissent.

While I admire such radical receptivity and as several essays attest its centrality in the Mennonite tradition, I was glad to see Peter Dula wrestle with what is not part of the tradition, namely human rights. Observing the lack of rights mentioned in Scripture, Dula sees the attempt to read rights in Scripture as others have, as an effort not to listen to the Scripture on its own terms. Instead, Dula reads the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 as an example of discerning what it means to follow Jesus' injunction to show mercy to his neighbor. For Dula, there is no universal concept of human rights but only the struggle of believers to identify what actions might be appropriate to a particular time and place. The essay sounds a discordant note when read next to other contributions in the volume.

My sense is that readers, like the contributors, have the most to gain from dwelling with points of tension provided they are explored with the generosity and respect that the editors write characterized the meetings in Winnipeg. With the grace of God, another installment in this series is on the horizon. My hope is that the next volume might offer readers a closer view of the disagreements that bind these scholars in dialogue so that we, too, may learn from them.

ALI ASLAM, *Princeton University*.

Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010. 294 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 9780199329281.

Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem invites the reader into the stories of West African immigrants as they find their way in a new home. The stories frequently describe encounters with the variety of challenges faced by newcomers. The author has structured the book so that each chapter addresses one of those challenges. "Unlike similar works, this book does not simply cover these immigrants in isolation. It takes on the way they publicly engage others; shift their religious, racial and ethnic identities; alter the urban terrain; and give new meaning to our world" (13).

Abdullah does an excellent job of exposing the range of issues and difficulties facing newcomers to the United States. Nothing, it seems, is simple or to be taken for granted. There are the obvious difficulties of language and culture, and the unavoidable hard work of getting acclimated enough to function well in one's new location.

As Abdullah discovers, Islam is critical to the survival of his interviewees. But it is also the source of strain on some newly forming relationships. For example, in their home countries, many of those interviewed lived among those whose faith