

WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS

Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes

EDITED BY

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ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

It often begins with the best of intentions. So it was when Rabbi Or N. Rose asked his wife, a scholar-practitioner of Jewish feminism, to speak about intersectionality to participants in a leadership initiative. The session seemed to go well. “On the drive home, we talked about how pleased we were,” Or recalls. But, then came a strongly worded email, expressing concern over the session’s handling of the topic of “Zionism.” In spite of good intention, says Or, “we had made a mistake. During the next few hours, we would need to figure out how to repair it. Then we would need to consider how to avoid similar missteps in the future.” Incidents like this are at the foundation of *With the Best of Intentions*, a collection of stories exploring some of interfaith encounter’s mistakes, missteps, and outright failures.

Concept

This book is the product of the merger of two creative impulses. The first came from Or, who with Jennifer Peace and Gregory Mobley edited *Our Neighbor’s Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* (Orbis Books, 2012). Most of its essays focused on positive transformations, which was appropriate at that moment in the emergence of the field of interreligious studies. Yet, contributor Frank Clooney was moved to ask: “What about when things go wrong?” The question grabbed Or’s attention. Perhaps, one day, he might help to curate a follow-up volume. He already had a name for it: *With the Best of Intentions*.

The second impulse came from Elinor Pierce. She leads The Pluralism Project’s case initiative, in which the dilemmas and disputes of our multireligious society serve as primary texts for understanding religious diversity and interfaith relations. Having concentrated for some time on decision-focused cases (which steer directly into the problems of a protagonist), she wanted to experiment with a new format: the failure case. The emphasis would still be on a mishap, but the focus would shift from the *other* to the *self*. We might document our own mistakes, missteps, or misunderstandings as a move toward building humility, self-reflexivity, and other capacities for interfaith encounter. A volume of essays about

mistakes, she thought, would provide helpful examples for students, scholars, and practitioners.

In 2021, Or and Ellie—now aware of the symbiotic potential of their respective visions of a new interfaith resource—enlisted a third partner: Lucinda Mosher. Known for her particular skill as an editor of books and journal issues on multireligious concerns, she would act as catalyst, facilitating the merger of Or’s and Ellie’s impulses into a cohesive project highlighting accounts of specific, situated opportunities for considering alternative paths, means of repair, and improvements to interfaith efforts.

We three editors are no strangers to such phenomena. Many of Or’s reflections on interfaith challenges arise from his work at Hebrew College. For Lucinda, the contexts have been classrooms, denominational and grassroots interfaith engagement, and involvement with an international Christian–Muslim dialogue. Ellie’s perspective has been informed by case study interviews, but also by decades of field research and site visits. We recount challenges in an effort to engage others in a personal narrative that holds important lessons within it.

Approach

Our book’s subtitle includes the term *interreligious*, an apt descriptor of interactions between people who differ in their orientation toward religion—whether that relationship be deeply committed or aloof; whether that attitude be positive and generative or negative and destructive. In actuality, we use *interreligious* and *interfaith* somewhat interchangeably—fully aware of the debates around which term is broader and cognizant that some may feel that a neologism such as *interbelief* or *interspiritual* might be more appropriate. Whichever of these terms is in play, our primary concern is with the prefix. *Inter-* implies difference.

Our concern is with the work that takes place between and among different faiths, religions, beliefs, worldviews, life stances, ethical systems, and value frameworks. That work is intersectional: it recognizes multiple, diverse categories of identity. The work is also fraught. Bridge-building efforts traverse vast fault lines: some chasms cannot be bridged; some obstacles cannot be overcome. The complexity of religious difference and the challenges of bridging it provide ongoing opportunity for learning, growth, and real transformation. Reflecting on our missteps is crucial for this sometimes sacred and often complicated work. We need more (self-)critical discussion of the times and places that interfaith efforts go awry. Why did a particular program, initiative, or relationship falter? What was our part in it? Could it have worked under different circumstances? Were the conditions just not right for such an undertaking? Were we able to

regroup or salvage elements of what we hoped for? Did something unexpected emerge? What have we learned from these experiences?

Application

With the Best of Intentions foregrounds the lived experience of dealing with such questions. The reader hears from forty scholars, leaders, students, and activists whose stances vis-à-vis religion include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ifá, Sikhism, Ruism, Humanism, multifaith, blended identity, and unaffiliated.¹ Through their essays, they promote a new form of religious literacy. As Marianne Moyaert has explained, interfaith literacy requires humility, self-reflexivity, curiosity, and open-mindedness.² These tales of mistakes, missteps, and conundrums encourage us to ponder: What are the limits of my knowledge or understanding? What prejudices am I bringing to the encounter? What impact might my missteps, however unintentional, have on others? How might I repair, reframe, or reimagine my role?

Hence, this book's chapters, which can be read in any order, are well suited to collegial reading and discussion. This makes *With the Best of Intentions* suitable not only for the classroom but as a resource for community organizations, book clubs, and youth groups. As Diana Eck has suggested, the mistakes examined in this book are more significant than a mere hole in one's sock, uncovered during the removal of shoes at a visit to another's place of worship. They are situations that can help us uncover holes in our understanding, reveal our own privilege, or discover our own failings. In some instances, the writer is subject to the mistakes of others—whether situational or structural. Some involve intractable issues. Some reveal fundamental threats to the purpose, or premise, of interreligious work. A few are genuinely funny. All are grounded in personal experience—with the potential to help readers reflect upon their own.

Overview

A preface by Francis X. Clooney, SJ—an acclaimed scholar of comparative theology—sets the tone of this volume. *Part I: First Impressions* offers seven considerations of mistakes made in initial encounters. Lexi Gewertz and Kathryn Lohre explain how minor mishaps can have major impact. David Grafton demonstrates the value in getting people's names right. Leadership lessons emerge as Hans Gustafson considers the cost of deflection. Aida Mansoor affirms the importance of asking questions—particularly in matters of food. On the matter of identity, Or Rose describes a moment

of misinterpretation; Marcia Sietstra recounts missteps during a tour of a religious site; and Jon Sweeney details a misunderstanding.

Part II: Presumptions ponders interreligious misunderstandings in six diverse contexts. For Jack Gordon, a prayer at an interfaith event proves problematic; for Soren Hessler, the physical site chosen for interreligious engagement raises red flags. Wakoh Shannon Hickey offers a White Buddhist's perspective on religious and racial equity, while Rachel Mikva considers assumptions in faith-based coalitions. Hussein Rashid argues for authenticity in interreligious settings, and Heather Miller Rubens details how origin stories express organizational assumptions.

The six essays in *Part III: Conversations* explore difficult one-on-one encounters. Daniel Berman describes reflections that have led to greater understanding. Nancy Fuchs Kreimer discovers an intrafaith mistake. Jeffery Long recounts a contentious interreligious exchange. Nisa Muhammad considers her own bias. Anthony Cruz Pantojas explores radical interdependence. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh reflects on an interreligious tête-à-tête that she wishes had taken place.

Part IV: Competing Values examines seven examples of intractable interreligious divides. Preeta Banerjee argues for appreciation, rather than appropriation. Yehezkel Landau unpacks lessons from interreligious dialogue on Israel/Palestine, while Christopher Leighton describes how concert planning exacerbated longstanding interreligious tensions. Eboo Patel outlines competing concepts of justice in interfaith work. Jennifer Peace considers her boundaries in intra- and interfaith contexts. Bin Song details the challenges underlying the founding of a campus Confucian association. Jaxon Washburn reflects on mistakes in interfaith spaces—among them, his own family!

With eight diverse offerings, *Part V: Power Dynamics* steers directly into personal experiences of structural oppression. M. Ajisebo McElwaine Abimbola describes the impact of racism and colonialism on a global interreligious gathering. Bilal Ansari contends with religious and racial power structures while a chaplain. Danielle Buhuro (a Black clinical pastoral education supervisor) and Maggie Goldberger (through the lens of Gen Z) each question power structures in interreligious contexts. Chenxing Han and Andrew Housiaux respond to erasure of Asian American Buddhists by constructing an immersive educational experience. Cassandra Lawrence and Wendy Goldberg challenge male misconduct and create new pathways for women's leadership. Vrajvihari Sharan describes student experiences of classroom conversations gone awry. C. Denise Yarborough explores the power structures embedded in Israel/Palestine dialogue.

An *Afterword* by Mahan Mirza of the University of Notre Dame emphasizes the value of making mistakes.

Gratitudes

Any collaborative project succeeds only by virtue of the kindness of others. Our first round of gratitude belongs to each of this volume's contributing authors. We are thankful for their enthusiasm for our goals for *With the Best of Intentions* and their patience with our editorial process. We are grateful also for conversations with activists and scholars that did not yield book chapters but nevertheless informed our approach to exploring interreligious missteps.

Each of us editors is blessed to have had the support of family, friends, and colleagues throughout this project. Special mention is due to Barrie Mosher, Asheesh Gupta, and Judith Rosenbaum; to the staff of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*; and to our respective colleagues at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, and Hebrew College. In addition, all three of us acknowledge the impact of Diana Eck on our lives as interfaith activists. And, of course, we thank Robert Ellsworth, Jon Sweeney, and everyone else at Orbis Books who enabled the publication of this volume.

With the Best of Intentions is informed by belief that unpacking our mistakes, failures, and misunderstandings—surfacing awkward, and sometimes painful, moments—can disrupt assumptions, promote reflection, and lead to deeper transformation. This volume of essays—accessible by a general audience yet appropriate for the classroom—invites further reflection upon interfaith mistakes, disappointments, and conundrums, with the goal of identifying fault lines, exploring means for repair, and finding new insights. We hope it will be a vital contribution to the expanding field of interreligious studies and helpful for those engaged in local and national interfaith efforts. Finally, please know that any errors herein are ours and that we will be grateful to have our attention called to them. In return, we will strive to offer not only a sincere apology but also a means for repair.

Notes

1. We recognize that our roster of contributors, while quite varied, certainly does not encompass the full range of religious diversity in the United States, nor all key voices and perspectives from our field.

2. Marianne Moyaert "Interreligious Hermeneutics, Prejudice, and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice," *Religious Education* 114, no. 5 (2019): 609–23.