

Exploring Religious Pluralism: Christian and Muslim Responses

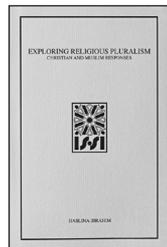
By Haslina Ibrahim

Kuala Lumpur: Islamic and Strategic Studies

Institute (2016) 199 pages.

ISBN: 978-967-11312-3-7

Reviewed by Brian Welter



In her book, *Exploring Religious Pluralism: Christian and Muslim Responses*, Haslina Ibrahim rejects the Western view of inter-religious dialogue because she finds that it is built on Christianity's preeminent position and self-image as the salvation-bringing religion. Associate Professor at the *International Islamic University Malaysia*, Dr. Ibrahim takes readers on an ambitious journey discussing the writings of leading religious scholars, including Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Annemarie Schimmel, John Hicks, Fazlur Rahman, and William Chittick. Through these writers, and supported by *Qur'ānic* verses, she deepens the discussion of her subject — religious pluralism — by contrasting exoteric with esoteric religion. This fruitfully expands the book's purview beyond inter-religious dialogue.

Journalists, policy makers, and students of globalization wanting to understand possible bridges among religions will find this book of interest. The author's highly critical discussion of Occidental views of religion make it a valuable addition to religious dialogue, as Ibrahim never tries to sugarcoat things. She remains faithful to an Islamic perspective which she clarifies through references to both Islamic scripture and to its teachers such as Indonesian thinker Hamka (Haji Abdul Mālik 'Abdul Karim Amrullah). People interested in spirituality will also benefit from reading the book as the discussion on esoteric dimensions of religion adds to the study of comparative mysticism.

The author centers the Western perspective of religious pluralism on Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*, which she regards as groundbreaking. For Ibrahim, Vatican II clearly broke with the Catholic teaching *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('outside the church there is no salvation'). She sets the background to this with references to the Enlightenment and the nineteenth-century development of sociology. Scottish philosopher John Hick (1922–2012) continued the sociological approach which, Ibrahim writes, "supposed that human factors are indispensable in the formation of one's concept of religion" (67). Hick contributed to the upheaval in Christianity's self-understanding in the second half of the twentieth-century. Whereas Christianity had seen itself as the soteriological religion around which all other religious beliefs revolved, Hick placed God at the center, served by all the world's religions. Much of Ibrahim's discussion seems initially to reflect a traditionalist viewpoint, though she does take issue later with many traditionalist ideas.

Ibrahim's familiarity with Western philosophy, including postmodernism, helps her see through the skepticism that often parades as cultural and religious openness. She criticizes McGill University's William Cantwell Smith for splitting religion into an unknowable transcendent realm and a "cumulative tradition, which is the mundane aspect of religion" (146). Smith saw this latter as separate from the sacred, something Ibrahim rejects: "Smith's differentiation is problematic, for such a differentiation leads to a dualism whereby the transcendent realm is totally disengaged from the worldly realm. Such disengagement is the essence of modernism, and indeed, the crux of secularism" (146 - 147). Readers would have benefited from the author more explicitly showing how much of twentieth-century western religious scholarship reflects Cartesian dualism. This would get to the heart of the matter, which is that Western philosophy inherently disfavors a religious perspective and fosters secularism. Ibrahim later repeats her rejection of Cartesian duality by quoting Muhammad Rashīd Ridā: "The moment that man depends wholly on his rational capacity and abandons God's guidance, man starts to fall into doubt and thereupon encounters conflict" (165). Cartesian duality leads to skepticism, which in turn generates Western religious pluralism emptied of genuine religious content.

Being based on the same foundation that led to traditional Christianity's evisceration in the West, Western religious pluralism harms

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