

In Kenneth Cracknell. *In God and Generous Faith*, vii–ix.
Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006.
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Foreword

One of the most significant challenges for Christians in the twenty-first century will be our engagement with other religious traditions. While this challenge is not new, it has been intensified and reshaped by changing circumstances. As a disparaged minority, the focus of early Christians in engaging other religions was mainly on defending their own right to exist. With the political establishment of Christianity in the Holy Roman empire (ca. 400 C.E.) this changed dramatically. For the next 1500 years most Christians had little direct contact with members of other religions, and the relating that did occur was largely hegemonic—either as the majority culture in the Christian West imposing severe restrictions on Jews and on indigenous religions in colonized areas, or as restricted communities themselves in the Christian East under Islamic control. Over the last 150 years things have been changing again, particularly for Christians in North America and Europe. As a result of spreading political disestablishment of religion, and several waves of immigration, we are much more likely than our predecessors to have active participants of other religious faiths as our neighbors and family members. Moreover, with the emergence of global media we are exposed to the beliefs and practices of the range of world religions on a regular basis.

This increased contact has helped to reveal some of the caricatures, and simple lack of knowledge, of other religions that have been common among Christians. It has opened our eyes to the beauty and wisdom that can be found in every major religion, helping us appreciate why these religions remain compelling for many. But these new circumstances have also forced us to confront the negative legacy of earlier hegemonic relationships—as reactionary groups have often invoked religion to justify their violent actions. The fear sparked by events like the attack on the World Trade Center can easily reenforce

false stereotypes of other religions and increase the difficulties of living together in an ever-shrinking world.

In this context Christians must surely accept the reality of an enduring religious plurality, and our role in promoting peaceful and respectful coexistence among people of all faiths. But how best might we contribute to this goal? Too often the answer suggested is framed within either a paternalistic liberalism that assumes all religions teach the same thing, no matter how much they protest this characterization, or a strong relativism that protects the diversity of religions by dismissing all comparative universal claims. Neither of these models is conducive to the type of dialogue among serious adherents of alternative religions that can lead to mutual respect. There is growing consensus that we need instead an approach that weds humility and conviction, where participants are equally open to learning from others and to sharing their own convictions.

One of the great values of Kenneth Cracknell's book is its embodiment of this desired wedding of humility and conviction—demonstrating that it is not an impossible ideal! Cracknell models throughout the “good and generous faith” that he commends as the character of authentic Christian engagement with other religions.

Equally valuable is the central focus of the present work. Unlike those who take the desirability of Christians approaching other religions in a more dialogical manner as self-evident, or those who dismiss such a desire as mere “political correctness”, Cracknell demonstrates in a series of arguments that it is in keeping with sensitivities deeply grounded in the Christian tradition. His treatment of key biblical passages and central theological themes will be of great help to others seeking to understand religious plurality in Christian terms.

But the greatest contribution of this articulation of a “good and generous faith” is its challenge to the frequent assumption that Christians must choose between dialogue and evangelism as the goal in engaging those of other faiths. Cracknell recognizes that the possibility of conversion is always resident in authentic dialogue, and argues that such dialogue is the most appropriate approach to evangelism/mission

for our time. Indeed, the deep hope undergirding his book is that it might help Christians in the twenty-first century recover the self-confidence to share the good news of Jesus Christ with their neighbors and friends with humility and deep courtesy.

I commend the book to you with the same hope!

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