

Discussed: fundamentalism, conversation, hospitality, Christian Arabs, intrareligious conflict, vitriolic culture wars, political rights, simplistic definitions of the “self”

When Faiths Collide

A review of Martin Marty's recent manifesto

Reviewed by Sasha Ross

It is little wonder that religious observance and support for conservative religious traditions are on the rise as people search for certitude and meaning in a chaotic world transfixed by acts of violence and terrorism. Sociologists of religion suggest that people respond at least two ways. Either they seek to understand, and thereby pacify, the threat posed by the religious “other,” or they keep it at bay by creating strong and narrow identity boundaries.

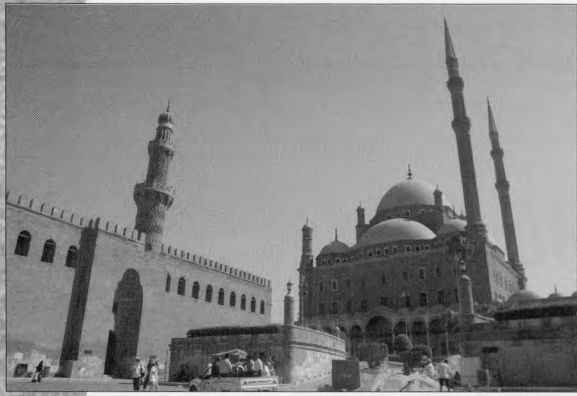
As religious groups increasingly come into contact with each other, interaction with traditions other than one's own often yields conflict, says church historian Martin Marty. For Americans, this was exemplified by the events of September 11, 2001. This interreligious conflict sometimes strengthens internal ties and can even cross national boundaries, but more often it leads to a collision between “belongers” and “strangers.”

Marty's recent book, *When Faiths Collide* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), is more than a chronology of that phenomenon. It is a subtle but carefully constructed argument—a manifesto of sorts—on

behalf of a “religiously informed civic pluralism” (70). One of the preeminent historians of modern Christianity in America, Marty's publications have long addressed the history and ideology of religious fundamentalism, but in this volume he moves past it to find strategies for understanding and genuine “conversation” between those who think they belong in a place, nation, or faith tradition, and those they regard as “other” (10).

The strangers to which this book most frequently returns are Muslims in secularized non-Muslim societies—in France, Britain, Australia, the United States, or the Netherlands—but Marty is careful to hold his argu-





ment separate from theological pluralism. He recognizes the way that calls for tolerance, like calls for a resistance to tolerance, have often been used to

jostle and trivialize other faith traditions by suggesting that all religions are equally true or valid.

He does not seek—or accept—easy solutions to the existential and theological obstacles that prevent dialogue, for example, with Christians and those who reject the salvific role of Jesus; with mainstream Jews and those who reject the politically salvific role of Israel after the Holocaust; or with mainstream Americans and those who use Islam against the American body politic.

Marty does not go so far as to challenge those walls. Instead, he proposes strategies for an accommodation within a “pluralist polity” that permit development of a moral ethos and reconciliation between groups in conflict where one is vulnerable and honest toward the other through the “risk” of hospitality.

Whether the book’s treatment of the normative self in the United States and the theological struggles that are often couched in political terms—and that play out against self and other alike—are adequate for civic and moral engagement remains for the reader to judge.

It may be that a broad comparative study is the best introduction for an audience for whom civic pluralism poses a problem. However, one must consider whether ignorance and disregard of the other really are the key problems faced today, or whether a deeper study of the “estranged” self is necessary to ask why certain categories of identity exist and remain beyond their immediate relevance—categories such as the boundaries of land ownership, race, and gender in past eras.

Although the book is persuasive in its narration of the occurrences of interreligious conflict, its treatment of intrareligious conflict and the political machinations over the soul (and face) of the American body politic remain hotly contested topics where hospitality may not be the sole or full issue.

One example of this might be found at a political campaign stump last year in northern Virginia, where gubernatorial and state legislative candidates spoke

before a packed ballroom of leading Arab Americans. There, the role of religion in determining identity and civic engagement proved to be a problematic motif.

Few Republican candidates had chosen to attend the event. However, their representatives stressed the supposed commonality between Christian and Muslim political values. Seated next to the daughter of the Arab Republican organizer, I was struck by this glaring assumption—not that all Arabs are Muslim, but that the problems Arab-American voters cared about most were religious or cultural ones.

As I watched the silent and increasingly inattentive audience, it was clear to me that they responded more to issues of civic and political rights, economic and educational attainment, and foreign policy—not culture war issues regarding the sanctity of life or family values.

Unsurprisingly, a colleague who attended confided to me frustration at the fact that Republican politicians and candidates were more likely to reach out to his community as Muslims (the religious “other”) than as Arab Americans (part of the “self”), which contradicts the premise of Marty’s manifesto.

Although some Americans may indeed remain ignorant of religious and cultural strangers, these Muslim and Christian Arabs saw political acceptance and simplistic definitions of the “self” as the key problem. They do not consider themselves outsiders any more than they see religion as the main basis for—or against—their civic and political engagement in the United States.

This fact, combined with the increasingly vitriolic culture wars that fragment religious communities along what have been called “horizontal” lines, seems to suggest that Marty’s risk of hospitality is most critical toward the “stranger within,” and that a deeper search for conversation is most needed toward the shifting nature of “belonging” and the politics of identity at work in American society today if true healing is to be found.

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