Book Reviews

Arvind Sharma, ed., *Why I Am a Believer: Personal Reflections on Nine World Religions*, New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2009. 378 pp. $24.38. ISBN # 9780143066873.

Why I Am a Believer: Personal Reflections on Nine World Religions is a very useful book about core dimensions of diverse religions, conveyed by individuals who stand within each of the world religions reviewed: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

A major strength of this book, edited by the noted informant of world religions Arvind Sharma, is that writers loyal to a specific religion creatively explain why their chosen religion matters to them. The book's contributors (identified by location at the time of writing) make clear why they believe in and belong to a particular religion. Free to learn from others' religious truth, they persist with their own choice, further motivated to claim and improve that religion. Although each religion has shortcomings—like Hindu caste practice (with their potential for social divisions) or Christian imperialism (arrogance toward and ignorance of other religions)—most believers remain loyal to their chosen religion, finding that their religious traditions meet personal needs. And in today's context of religious pluralism, many believers choose to be allies or co-travelers with other religious adherents rather than religious rivals.

This book's chapters follow historical sequence—from most ancient Hinduism to more recent Islam. Although most chapters provide extensive information about the respective religion being discussed, the chapter describing Sikhism seems comparatively short. Women writers introduce Buddhist and Jain(a) thought. Brief reference to each writer and chapter follows below.

Editor Sharma, in addition to writing the introduction, authored the opening chapter on Hinduism, covering the complexity of the religion with quite succinct language. Sharma, Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montreal, shares three reasons for choosing to be Hindu: the religion's (1) subtlety, (2) charity, and (3) creativity. Subtle distinctions, for example, include those between emptiness and openness, the absolute and universal, single and narrow-mindedness, one and only. Readers do well to realize that Hinduism reflects a culture meaning "how things are done," Sharma notes.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who teaches at the University of San Diego, has edited a number of books about women and Buddhism and authored *Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Buddhism, Bioethics, and Death* (2006). Her chapter

here endorses the mind. Cultivating a wholesome mind and critical thinking become methods for arriving at truth. Freedom to question personal certitudes or to weigh opinions reveals an open mind. While the Buddhist discipline of *mindfulness* develops awareness of the present moment, meditation can enable a believer to achieve calmness.

Sandhya Jain, a postgrad in political science from Delhi University, has been a professional journalist in leading newspapers for decades. She writes of the Jain(a) universal belief in welfare for all beings. She believes in the supremacy of *ahimsa* (non-injury) toward all creatures, each with a soul. Priorities for Jain(a) link perfect faith, perfect knowledge, and perfect conduct.

Naming several of the ten Sikh Gurus, writer Kartar Singh Duggal includes the founder Guru Nanak along with Guru Gobind Singh, who declared that the eternal Guru would continue to live mystically in their scripture (Holy Granth) and in their community (the Panth). Duggal—skilled in four languages, master storyteller, and recipient of multiple awards before his death—believes in and discusses the Sikh faith's main expectations: Justice, Love, Compassion, Truth, and Working Hard.

Whether the Confucian Tradition is a belief system, philosophy, or way of life more than a religion is discussed by Vincent Shen, professor of Chinese philosophy in Taipei for two decades before moving to the University of Toronto in 2000. In addition to distinguishing Ultimate Reality, Shen believes and explains key terms like *ren*, *li*, *qi*, *shu*, *tian*, *yi*, *xin*, and *zhi*. The Confucian Tradition is not exclusive of any religion, he explains.

A seventh-generation Gold Mountain Daoist, Bede Bidlack began studying Daoist meditation in 1995. At one time a Benedictine monk of St. Anselm's Abbey, Bidlack earned a PhD in 2011 in comparative religions. His chapter in this book explains how disciplined followers of the Dao, or, the Way, refine energy *qi*, already absorbed into the body, to become more like the unknowable Dao (Christ, for Bidlack). The "universe moves by the interaction of yin and yang symbolized by the familiar taiji diagram" (199)—circle of black (yin) and white (yang) teardrops, each containing a dot of the other. In Daoism, through intense contemplation the practitioner becomes the mysterious force, the agent of salvation or immortality. Bidlack believes that he is a better Christian because he is also a Daoist.

Jacob Neusner, author of hundreds of books, finds a variety of Judaisms within the religion of ethical monotheism known as Judaism. His chapter gives most of its attention to Rabbinic Judaism, which took shape after 70 BCE and culminated in the Dual Torah—written and oral. In conflict with Rabbinic Judaism, the mystical movement called Hasidism began in the mid-1800s. Neusner says, "While Judaism is the religion of most Jews who practice a religion, it is not 'the religion of the Jews' viewed as a group" (268). While believing "there is only

God's truth: the Torah" (243), Neusner values features in other religions: Islam's simple liturgy, Christianity's aesthetic strength, Hinduism's dignity and variety.

For contributor Harvey Cox (recently deceased), Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, Christian faith is undergirded by the incarnation (God being present within human life) and God's love via a kingdom of radical inclusion. Cox describes two personal epiphanies: (1) singing freedom songs with black youth in a North Carolina jail several days after protesting racial segregation and (2) experiencing oneness while receiving the Eucharist along with handicapped children during a visit to Martha's Vineyard. Cox does not try to convert people to Christianity (288); to the contrary, he is honest enough to note features of other religions that tempt him—Gandhi's relentless pursuit of religious synthesis, Vajrayana Buddhism's discipline of sitting in meditation for an hour or two each day, Muslim validation of Jesus compared to Christian failure to know Muhammad's strengths.

In the final chapter, Amir Hussain explains why he is a Muslim, why he believes that the Qur'an is "the very word of God" (329). Born into a Sunni family in Pakistan, Hussain grew up as a religious and national minority in Canada before moving to the United States in 1997 to teach. He was married several years to a believer who lived within a Christian framework that enabled him to claim his Muslim themes of love, mercy, peace, justice, and compassion. Such plural vision enables contrapuntal being, he says.

I recommend this book for seminary students and ministers as well as for Anabaptists intent on forming new communities. Being informed, committed, and loyal believers in our multifaith world matters, and many individuals within communities of Anabaptists, as part of Christianity, wish to be more duly informed about people loyal to diverse paths of wholeness or salvation.

Anabaptists who want to be faithful followers of Jesus must take seriously his prime emphasis on knowing, proclaiming, and patterning the One Compassionate Universal God. This will lead to becoming inclusive of difference, to being committed to specific religious understandings while valuing those who express sacred belief in diverse ways. That task involves being grateful for Divine love for all peoples who live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

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