



Book Review:

Virtuous Missteps: Valuable Resource for Deepening Interfaith Engagement

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Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington



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Virtuous Missteps: Valuable Resource for Deepening Interfaith Engagement

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his book is brave. It speaks to the predicament we all face that even “[with the best of intentions](#),” we may hurt one another, even those we hope to serve and be in a relationship with.

Even those who commit to walking the path of peace and understanding cause offense and harm, sometimes unwittingly. Furthermore, we experience hurt, in turn, by those we hoped would hold us more kindly. This is the human condition we find ourselves in, and this volume draws lessons from a myriad of experienced practitioners of interfaith engagement about various blind spots, transgressions, and successes in redress.

Professor Francis Clooney, SJ, points out in the Preface that “missteps” are often, paradoxically, likely to be a sign of progress, as they signal that we are engaging one another more closely, beyond barren niceties. As a result, we are more likely to make occasional slips. Professor Mahan Mirza, too, suggests that failure can be a kind of success. Indeed, a consequence of greater intimacy—“into-me-see”—may be some initial friction. For example, a cisgender female Christian minister reaches out her hand to shake the hand of a cisgender male Muslim cleric who steps back. What to make of this situation? Should she be offended? Should he? This initial friction could be considered a good thing—a step in the right direction toward mutual understanding and appreciation.

The trick is: Can we allow ourselves to be supple, vulnerable, and gracious? How do we forgive ourselves and each other for any perceived offense, keep our hearts open, and resist falling into the traps of cynicism or despair? How can we continue to give each other the benefit of the doubt and make learning and growing in our relationship with one another a priority? What actions can be taken to correct mistakes and to seek appropriate amends if needed? Forty interfaith practitioners grapple with these sorts of questions and valiantly model under varying circumstances in their chapter vignettes. Here are some broad lessons I draw from their rich stories and case studies.

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Interreligious engagement requires developing particular skill sets and character traits. Exercising interfaith leadership is much more than becoming better informed about what our religions have in common and how they differ. It requires even greater curiosity, compassion, courage, and tenacity. It requires a willingness to engage iteratively, honestly, and respectfully to navigate differences more skillfully. It requires going beyond merely tolerating one another to developing the capacity to truly respect the innate human dignity of others, even when we might not endorse their beliefs and convictions.

Dr. Eboo Patel asks:

“Is interfaith work principally about bringing together religiously diverse people who share a perspective on justice? Or, is interfaith work principally about bringing together religiously diverse people with *different* definitions of justice? I think it should be the latter. The reason for this is simple: *the former is already being done*... The central problem interfaith work seeks to solve is this: how are all of us, with our differences, to share a nation and a world together? The central task of an interfaith leader, in my view, is to help build relationships between people with profoundly different views of what is just.”

Learning to build relationships with those who share a common definition of justice across different religions could be a muscle to develop before engaging people of other faiths with *different* definitions of justice. Patel’s comment does suggest that, while those engaging in interfaith initiatives tend to be peace-loving and conflict-averse, a kind of daring might need to be cultivated.

A willingness to risk being wounded and wounding others around topics close to the heart may be a requirement if we wish to develop the capacity to engage across deep differences respectfully. In other words, learning to build safe “holding environments” that encourage participants to engage in conflict constructively (and transform them) may be a critical skill set for interreligious engagement “to have teeth.”

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Effective interfaith engagement also requires self-awareness, empathy, and emotional maturity. We all yearn to be understood when we are hurting. Wounded, we are like the otherwise gentle dog who bares its teeth and snarls when someone approaches. We think, “If only they would see how my foot is caught in a trap; I am in pain and afraid.” In our fear, we might not even recognize that our foot is caught in the trap and need others to point it out.

Moreover, sometimes, all sides are wounded and in pain. How do we care for ourselves tenderly while transcending the instinctive fear and impulse to strike out? And how do we approach others with the same tenderness, patience, and understanding that we ourselves crave?

Ultimately, the lessons in interfaith faux pas demonstrate the salience of the notion of “covenantal pluralism”: even when we might not regard the beliefs or behaviors of another to be equally right or true, we still pledge to engage respectfully. Moreover, we commit to protecting their freedom to believe and practice as they see fit as long as they reciprocally honor the rights and dignity of others. Covenantal pluralism necessitates profound humility and integrity.

This volume is a valuable resource for interfaith leadership training. Represented are perspectives from Bahaim, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Humanism, Ifa, Islam, Jesus Christ & Latter-day Saints, Judaism, Ruism, Sikhism, multifaith, blended identity and unaffiliated. It suggests successful interfaith engagement goes beyond becoming better informed about religious similarities and differences. It requires cultivating skillsets and virtues required for deep, transformative engagement.

Most importantly, it is about developing our capacities, regardless of differences, to keep our eyes on the prize, our shared mission and purposes on this planet. How can we effectively collaborate for our collective welfare and survival?

About the CFG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

About the Contributor

Dr. Sousan Abadian is the Executive Director of the *Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington* and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University, alongside two other degrees from Harvard in Anthropology and International Development. She is a Fulbright Scholar, having worked with First Nations in Canada on integrating Indigenous perspectives into curricula. Dr. Abadian's research on cultural renewal and addressing collective trauma in Indigenous communities has been praised by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen for its originality. She teaches and consults globally on leadership, healing intergenerational trauma, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge. Dr. Abadian has worked with the U.S. State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom and focuses on issues such as preventing violent extremism, defending religious minorities, and addressing gender-based violence. She has held fellowships at prestigious institutions like M.I.T.'s *Dalai Lama Center* and Harvard's *Center for Public Leadership*. She is also the author of *Generative Cultural Renewal: An Effective Resource in Ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting & Other Harmful Practices* (2022), which explores ethical and culturally sensitive approaches to evolving harmful traditional practices.

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