



## Book Review:

### Wrestling with Angels: The Power of Argument in Interfaith Dialogue

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Book Review:

## **Wrestling with Angels: The Power of Argument in Interfaith Dialogue**

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Rev. Larry A. Golemon, Ph.D.



**If there were a story of how to till hope from rocky soil, this is it. Chris Leighton’s “[A Sacred Argument](#),” weaves a personal and theological memoir with a history of a vibrant organization dedicated to interreligious dialogue.**

This is not, however, a recipe for building Kumbaya moments of mutual admiration. Instead, it offers a nitty-gritty account of how to form the relationships, the infrastructure, and the in-depth encounters around similarities and differences that interfaith dialogue needs today.

The birth of the *Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies* (ICJS—later renamed the *Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies*) grew out of relationships forged in Baltimore’s urban renewal in the 1970s and 80s (ch.1). The interreligious nature of this new Baltimore was sealed by hosting the National Workshops on Christian-Jewish Relations in 1986. Leighton gives careful tribute to the array of lay and clergy leaders who founded the Institute the following year. They included an array of leaders from many Jewish movements, the Roman Catholic Church, the Black churches, and other Protestant denominations. Relationships that he formed are, in fact, the golden thread that runs through the entire book. The tenderness of some of these recollections, especially of Rabbi Zaiman and Rev. Obrecht, speaks to the impact of friendships on Leighton’s leadership and work. “Friendship is tethered to grace,” he writes (p.77).

Leighton is drawn from a chaplaincy at a distinguished prep school in Baltimore to become the first director of the new Institute. He helped shape the original purpose of the ICJS, which was to expose the roots of antisemitism in Christianity, to counter the proselytizing of Jews by conservative protestants, and to bring a more balanced, if not positive, view of the state of Israel.

Leighton's story of the Institute's mission and work is filled with ambition, talent, and provocation (ch.3). The ICJS has been most successful in mining Christian Scriptures (like the *Gospel of John* and *Letter to the Hebrews*), theologians (like Luther and Chrysostom), and religious practices (like hymnody and choral works) for anti-Jewish toxins and countering them. Gifted Jewish and Christian scholars are brought together to mine the traditions and expose any anti-Judaism embedded within them. They deploy staple methods of historical criticism to limit the meanings of these texts to only certain Jews or to their leaders, with the effect of blunting, but not erasing, their denigration of Jews (ch.6). What finally emerged at the ICJS was a pedagogy of disruption, whereby participants, especially Christians, are shocked, disoriented, and even grieved by the blatant anti-Judaism in their traditions. This pedagogy raised questions about the very integrity and truth of Christianity, especially if it was built on rocky soil held up by the twin pillars of denigrating and superseding Judaism.

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**“[Leighton] helped shape the original purpose of the ICJS, which was to *expose the roots of antisemitism in Christianity, to counter the proselytizing of Jews by conservative protestants, and to bring a more balanced, if not positive, view of the state of Israel.*”**

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In place of focusing on doctrine or even religious practice in dialogues, Leighton calls for the adoption of “sacred argument” as the norm and method of interfaith work (ch.8). Leighton identifies “sacred argument” as an appropriation of the Jewish practice of *machloket*—which means a debate or dispute that includes all possible points of view. The author learns this art from Jewish colleagues, like Rabbi Zaiman, who practice it with linguistic precision, moral interrogation, and occasional righteous indignation. Leighton admits to being outmatched at every turn, as most Christians and Muslims will be, but the effect is to disarm saintly platitudes and pretense in order to cut to the quick of what is truly at stake. One may be disappointed if one expects to find the heart of “sacred argument” in the chapter by that title. I find the better examples in the Leighton-Zaiman debate over *creed versus deed* (ch.5) and in their debate over how to read the Book of Job (ch.9). In both places, sacred argument becomes the pedagogy of stepping deeply into the disputation of another, sustaining the tension with respectful candor, and eventually recognizing one another in the differences laid out.

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Leighton tells of the growing national reach of the ICJS with warranted pride. Through the *Genesis Project* with Bill Moyers and PBS, they developed focused study groups between white and black churches and Jewish synagogues that broadened their reach. Through the *Atlanta Project*, they brought the study and dialogue methods used in Baltimore to a very different city. And especially through the Jewish scholars’ declaration “Dabru Emet,” the ICJS challenged Jews and Christians to see the possibility of “a reformation” (p.110) in how they move forward together.

This statement affirmed the use of the same sacred texts, a mutual recognition of the religious nature of the state of Israel, and more. But it also made controversial claims that Christians and Jews worship the same God and that Nazism was not essentially a Christian project. These last two points drew swift condemnation, especially from Orthodox Jews, who see Christian worship as “strange” or idolatrous and who continue to equate Christian anti-Judaism with anti-Semitism.

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The major test for the ICJS comes with facing up to the Israel-Palestine conflict (ch.13). In contrast to the vigor, debate, and lively characters of other chapters, this one is the most stilted. Leighton struggles to position himself between Christian Zionists who offer unequivocal support to the State of Israel and the declarations of main-line Protestant denominations (like his own Presbyterian church) that blame Israel’s protracted occupation for Palestinian resistance. The author strains to find a voice for balance and reason in these debates; but in the end, he confesses that the efforts of the Institute “came up short” (p.131) on a topic that was essentially “intractable” (p.132) due to the deep attachments and moral passions at work. Of all the chapters, this is the one where Leighton seems most vulnerable—and discouraged. Leighton and the ICJS agree to bring Muslims to the table because of the issue of the Middle East (ch.14). Leighton’s criticism of fellow Christians who pontificate about the Middle East without engaging Jewish and Muslim partners comes home to roost.

The initial engagement with Muslim leaders, however, was problematic, as their claim on all the Biblical patriarchs, prophets and even Jesus seemed presumptuous, if not supersessionist, to many Jews and Christians, including Leighton (p.136). Muslims, however, were bewildered and, at times, offended that this magnanimous embrace of the *People of the Book* would be so easily rebuffed. Everything changed after 9/11, however, when the ICJS rose to challenge the growing Islamophobia in the nation. Leighton and the ICJS appear to act most decisively when defending the victims of religious prejudice. However, this is one of the few places in the book where Leighton admits to “hubris” and “embarrassment” for the initial blunder of trying to rid Islam of supersessionist tendencies as the ICJS tried with Christianity (p.149).

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In sum, Leighton’s account of the growth of a unique interreligious organization through his own experience is dramatic, informative, and demanding. Yet, there are some problems in the tone and content of the account. First, there is a “creatio ex nihilo” (creation out of nothing) character to the story of founding the ICJS, as Leighton fails to recognize precedent organizations at *Seton Hall University* (1957), *St. Joseph’s University* (1967), and elsewhere. Moreover, Leighton gives no credit to the twenty-year-long Ecumenical movement in Baltimore that helped lay the groundwork for inter-faith work. Yes, the ICJS may be the only free-standing institute of its kind, but it arose in a growing web of organizations committed to strengthening Jewish-Christian relations.



Secondly, there are hints of prep-school pluck and condescension in how Leighton deals with perceived antagonists (pgs.12, 30, 35). His elitism becomes more refined as he and the story mature, and it does help him build a distinguished board at the ICJS and raise an impressive endowment. But his posture of eminence sets boundaries that Leighton, and perhaps the ICJS, could not cross. These include the lack of effective outreach to Christian conservatives (pgs. 45, 125), some moderate traditionalists (pgs. 145, 163), and, at times, Black church leaders (pgs. 29-30). Leighton’s elitism takes on a paternal tone when he writes the “heavy-lifting” of rebuilding a just and pluralist society falls to those who have “held the purse” and occupied “the seat of political power” (p.151). Unfortunately, most of “the one percent” who control the purse and politics in the U.S. show little regard for democratic pluralism anymore, and the prospect that rational, balanced discourse can reach them will probably fail. Leighton’s admission to a growing cultural and political divide in the country (ch.15) exposes the stark truth that the days when studied reason and measured discourse—the hallmarks of the ICJS—may, in fact, be over.

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Thirdly, Leighton’s deep loyalty to the Jewish community circumscribes his critique of religious nationalism in all the Abrahamic faiths. He does condemn the rise of religious nationalism in the United States (p.162), and he criticizes the role of Russian religious nationalism that fuels the present war against Ukraine. But he remains silent on the extreme Jewish nationalism that adds fuel to the fire in Israel’s devastating war against Gaza, which started before this book was published. Not even commenting on this travesty shows how stubborn Leighton’s loyalty remains. His inability or unwillingness to engage constructively with Christian proclamations against Israel also speaks to the limits of such loyalty.



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In the end, the most revealing feature of this memoir-history is how the author bears the memory of his own forebear who helped found a Protestant society for “Meliorating the Condition of the Jews” in the mid-19th century (ch.2). Leighton repudiates this effort as a scheme for proselytizing helpless Jewish immigrants, as charged by Cantor Isaac Lesser at the time. Yet, he ignores the charitable support it did provide to many unconverted Jews, and the ways it galvanized the Jewish community to begin their own outreach. My point is not to question Leighton’s grasp of history but to ask if he has thoroughly internalized the legacy that this forebear and his faith have left him. Has he in fact wrestled with the angels and the demons of this legacy that still work within him? As a child of a white Southern family, I know the waters of white supremacy I grew up in, and I tell my story as a persistent swimming and recovery from that racist undertow. Had Leighton done the same with the Christian supremacy he inherited from his own ancestors, he might tell a far humbler story of recovery and redemption instead of that of a white knight charging in to protect Jews and cleanse Christianity from its darkest sin.

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## **About the Contributor**

Rev. Larry Golemon, Ph.D. is the Executive Director of the Washington Theological Consortium. Larry has served the wider church in a variety of capacities: youth minister, local pastor, college and seminary professor, missionary, and researcher. As a researcher, Dr. Golemon was an associate for the national study of theological education by the *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*, and co-authored their findings in *Educating Clergy* (2006). He taught at *Dominican University of California* and the *Graduate Theological Union*, and directed their research project entitled "Sacred Visions and the Social Good." While at the *Alban Institute* in Virginia, he directed the *Narrative Leadership* project, which explored story-based transformation of congregational life. He also coordinated the "Ecumenical Project" at *Virginia Theological Seminary*, which identified capacities and new possibilities for ecumenical teaching and learning. He received a B.A. in History from *Stanford University*, a Master of Divinity and a Master of Sacred Theology from the *Yale Divinity School*, a Master of Theology from *Columbia Theological Seminary*, and a Ph.D. in contemporary theology from *Emory University's* Graduate Division of Religion. He is an ordained Presbyterian minister (PCUSA).

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