

'Learning from Other Religions reveals the analytical strengths of a leading scholar who has reflected over decades on the nature of religion. It shows the characteristics of a serious thinker whose engagement with religiosity and belief has changed with the times. Here the transformations of the modern world are recognised in a changed context where practitioners of other faiths are often one's immediate neighbours. The book marks a new level of inter-religious understanding and is motivated by a positive sense of hospitality towards the religious other in its many different forms. It is rare to find such a detailed, broad-based account of the principal religions. It is also encouraging to find a genuine openness towards these other religions and a preparedness to take them seriously on their own terms.'

*Oliver Davies, Emeritus Professor of Christian Doctrine,
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'While this masterful survey evidences an extraordinarily wide knowledge of the world's religious traditions, Brown's imaginative readings – marked by both rigour and generosity – move us ineluctably beyond mere pluralism towards a richly textured, complex and reverential re-envisioning of the very meaning of revelation. Anybody engaged in interfaith encounter will find their insight deepened and their sympathy enlarged through his always careful, yet often surprising, reflections.'

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'Learning from Other Religions brings new impetus to the debate about relations between other religions and one's own. Written by a leading Christian theologian, it contests the conventional classifications of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism and raises the challenging prospect that God's activities can be seen in all religions. It urges followers of each religion to appreciate the insights achieved in others and to discover the massive wealth and variety within them. The book takes this well-worn discussion in an appealing, if demanding, new direction.'

*David Thomas, FBA, Emeritus Professor of Christianity and
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‘This good and interesting book has a definite and clear aim – to improve understanding of religions by greater knowledge of their origins, histories and inner diversity. It has great merit, focussed on a well-argued advocacy of a particular view of revelation and religious understanding.’

*Keith Ward FBA, Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus,
University of Oxford*

LEARNING FROM OTHER RELIGIONS

One common argument against taking the notion of divine revelation seriously is the extraordinary diversity which exists between the world's major religions. How can God be thought to have spoken to humanity when the conclusions drawn are so very different? David Brown authoritatively and persuasively tackles this issue head-on. He refutes the idea that all faiths necessarily culminate in Christianity, or that they can be reduced to some facile lowest common denominator, arguing instead that ideas may emerge more naturally in one context than another. Sometimes, because of its own singular situation, another religion has proved to be more perceptive on a particular issue than Christianity. At other times, no religion will hold the ultimate answer because what can be asserted is heavily dependent on what is viable both scientifically and philosophically. Although complete reconciliation is impossible, a richer notion of revelation – so the author suggests – can be the result.

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To Ann Loades (1938–2022)

Whose support, enthusiasm and critique proved invaluable.

A model for how religious dialogue might be conducted.

A formidable, ebullient character: 'larger than life'.

As ready to learn from others as to impart understanding.

Passionate in innovation and in righting wrongs.

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PREFACE

Unlike much work written in the field of comparative religion, this book adopts an explicitly Christian perspective. This is done not out of any feeling of superiority but because such an approach can, I believe, secure a more penetrating analysis of what my fellow Christians might learn from other faiths. Instead of a strained effort to stand above or outside (which was likely in any case to prove too demanding in so short a work), I have sought to achieve two main aims. The first, essentially factual, is a brief but effective characterisation of each of the world's major religions in both their historical and contemporary context (with their salient differences from Christianity also highlighted). Secondly, there is a theological purpose, an attempt to answer the difficult question of what might have been happening across those religions, if the existence of the Christian God were to be assumed. In other words, is it possible to make sense not just of the human aspirations and searchings involved but also of a divine reality in turn reaching out to humanity in revelation – a revelation nonetheless constrained by the specifics of cultural conditioning? One novel feature in what follows is in consequence the suggestion of various insights in those alternative traditions where that revelation has penetrated more deeply than seems to be the case within Christianity.

After indicating some reasons for the topic's contemporary importance, Chapter 1 fleshes out this particular

Preface

understanding of revelation as resulting in what I call ‘complementary shards’, overlapping but imperfect constructions, rather like beautiful but broken pots. Chapter 2 then challenges any notion of Christianity’s own self-containment. Instead, its forms and ideas as developed in both the Jewish and classical worlds can be seen to have been heavily indebted to surrounding pagan religions. Then, while Chapters 3 and 7 are devoted to a single religion each, to what are perhaps the oldest and newest world religions (Hinduism and Islam), Chapters 4, 5 and 6 turn instead to examine the several interacting religions that are to be found in India (Jainism, Theravada Buddhism and Sikhism), China (Daoism, Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism) and Japan (Shinto, Zen and Pure Land Buddhism), respectively. Chapter 8 then contends that, far from all this leading to the diminishment of revelation, such an approach can actually provide an enrichment of its understanding. Finally, Chapter 9 briefly concludes with an examination of how my own work relates to earlier existing dichotomies within the field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although such a book as this was a long-standing intention on my part, only the COVID crisis provided the necessary restrictions on other activities to make the endeavour possible. In this I was helped throughout by my friend, Gregor Duncan, former Anglican Bishop of Glasgow, who read each successive draft with care and provided helpful and perceptive comments. I was fortunate to have Alex Wright, Head of Humanities and Senior Executive Publisher at Cambridge University Press, as the person to whom I became ultimately responsible, for he proved consistently encouraging and helpful, as did the two anonymous academic reviewers of the manuscript. It is at the suggestion of one of them that I have added the final chapter.

Last but not least, mention needs to be made of the various friends and acquaintances from other faiths I have had over the years. Not only has there been much to learn from so many of them but usually also a quality of life that had drawn me to them in the first place, and which I wished in some sense to share.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

There is no concluding bibliography. Instead, full bibliographical details are provided in the footnotes at the first occurrence in each chapter of any particular reference. The NRSV (New Revised Standard Version, 1989) is used for biblical quotations.