

## Book review

Susan Kennel Harrison

*Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbors*, by Brice H. Balmer. Waterloo, ON, and Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006.

**B**rice Balmer's *Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbors* tries to make space in North American Christian circles for more reflection on the many ways we are encountering people of other religious traditions. He asks, "How do we as Christians interact with and engage neighbors of other faiths?" "Do we know what skills, attitudes, and disciplines are appropriate for meeting our new neighbors?" (9). He rightly notes that fears and misunderstandings can keep us from reaching out to people of other faiths. He reassures us that despite our stereotypes and anxieties, taking risks can be rewarding and transforming on many levels.

Balmer uses his and others' experiences to illustrate the psychological, spiritual, and material challenges posed to our identity by our encounter with people of other religious traditions. He writes about his experience with Interfaith Grand River to show how a religiously diverse group with goals for the common good of a community can work together over a period of time, thus providing bridges between peoples when circumstances threaten to erode goodwill. His account demonstrates the importance of creating a context that can sustain interfaith conversation, so we are able to collaborate and develop deeper understanding of one another.

Balmer does not try to spell out theological criteria for how Christ relates to other faiths, but he provides windows that allow us to observe what it might look like to live into that question. His contribution is valuable, because he shows that we can move forward in love and hospitality without having first answered all of our theological questions about the faith of others.

Through stories and commentary, Balmer consistently calls for curiosity, acceptance, and hospitality as foundational attitudes for reaching out and building relationships with others. His writing moves back and forth between biblical exegesis, personal experience, and pastoral mentoring.

The book's organization may lead one to conclude that his call to accept and relate to non-Christians as they are is oriented toward being politically correct, but it is instead grounded in his

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understanding of Jesus' commandment to love God and our neighbours as ourselves (134). The mandate to relate to people of other faiths is an imperative for him that is biblically based and reinforced by his personal experiences. Balmer provides a variety of biblical examples of hospitality, and he understands this virtue as a vital part of Christian spiritual practice (43–52). His

attention to what it means to be a person of social power in North America also informs his convictions about the imperative of building relationships of trust, if we are to have integrity as hosts (133).

Balmer writes pastorally to Christian leaders, and he gives guidance on how we can create a safe place in which to be hospitable to others (46–49). He acknowledges that it is impossible to open oneself to new relationships without taking the risk of being transformed spiritually, and he offers reflections about that kind of spiritual transformation (25–40).

This book is valuable for individual reading but designed for group study; Balmer recognizes that we need Christian companions when we start relating to our multifaith neighbours. The organization of the book leaves something to be desired, but it is a timely resource for North American Christians who are seeking models for building community with their neighbours of other faiths.

### **About the reviewer**

Susan Kennel Harrison is a graduate student at Toronto School of Theology, and she serves as a coordinator for the Mennonite Central Committee exchanges of students between Iran and Toronto.