

Christopher M. Leighton
A Sacred Argument:
Dispatches from the Christian, Jewish,
and Muslim Encounter

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The election of Pope Leo XIV in May, 2025 aroused concerned voices within Jewish-Christian relations. Given the new pope's long engagement with indigenous Peruvian communities far from any Jewish presence, how would the new pontiff continue and extend the highly visible interfaith commitments of his predecessor? Among mainline Protestants, as well, the significance of interfaith engagement in the 21st century is facing serious questions. Across Christianity in North America, institutional decline, leadership scandals, political polarization, and the urgency of social needs all pull attention away from a seemingly narrow, arcane focus on something many see as an old problem that has largely been resolved. Chris Leighton's dispatches, gathered at the end of a distinguished career on the front lines of that old problem, effectively dispel any such cloud of irrelevance. Leighton has crafted an engaging, comprehensive retrospective that situates the key issues of interfaith encounter at the very core of human community. The deep lesson of this book is that we conceive of interfaith relations as parochial to our own risk and detriment.

The volume is framed as a memoir of the founding executive director of a surprisingly long-lived institute for interfaith dialogue and encounter. Situated in Baltimore, Maryland, the (then) Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies grew out of local explorations of interfaith dialogue and the vision of lay and clergy leaders who hosted the Ninth National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations. As Leighton says, "They dreamed of an educational venture that would raise the consciousness in and beyond the city of Baltimore by demonstrating that the health and vitality of our country hinges on a new era of interreligious cooperation" (4). The surprise to come was Leighton's; he initially thought that he would spend three years raising the issue of antisemitism and supersessionism for churches and that they would carry the ball from there. More than a half-century later, the "venture" is an internationally-recognized leader in the field. It has led programs and provided

resources that help Jews and Christians (and now Muslims) engage together on the issues that lie closest and often most painfully near the heart of their traditions.

Also notable is the ICJS's civic profile. Originally independent of any ties to higher education—except in the impressive credentials of its staff—it remains corporately separate from the seminary and university with which it frequently cooperates. Both of these distinctive marks reflect the origins of the Institute's vision in individuals who were committed to living out their religious vocations for the common good of their communities. Rabbi Joel Zaiman was Leighton's monthly lunch companion (and muse) and Presbyterian layman Charlie Obrecht was the "indomitable force" (5) behind the ICJS. Both understood their religious identities as foundations for their engagement with the whole world around them.

Each of the 16 chapters of *A Sacred Argument* grows out of an episode or an era in the life of the ICJS, beginning with its inception as a follow-up to the 1986 National Workshop and the formation of early partnerships among leaders in the burgeoning field of interfaith dialogue. At the center of the book are human relationships framed around different experiences of the holy, of religious practice, of spirituality. Time and again, Leighton reports having "discovered the best way to encounter a religious tradition is through personal relationship" (142). The relational thread running through the book is the friendship with Rabbi Zaiman, to whom the book is dedicated. Although Leighton doesn't report it in detail, I easily imagine that it was Zaiman who introduced him to the idea of the "argument for the sake of heaven," as the rabbinic phrase is usually translated (*Pirke Avot* 5:17 [or 5:20 in some English editions]). This becomes the "sacred argument" of the book's title. Rather than aiming at a decisive win, "a sacred argument seeks the inclusion of divergent points of view and affirms an ethos of both-and rather than either-or.... Rather than treat your interlocutor as an enemy to defeat, your verbal opponent is affirmed as an ally who instructs you to see the world from a different angle" (71).

Such instruction comes best from a person who lives at that different angle and testifies to it unapologetically, while remaining humble in the willingness also to learn at the intersection of the two perspectives. Leighton acknowledges the difficulty of such encounters, recounting his own "bungling" in one particularly painful incident (150). Yet he is himself convinced, and goes far to convince the reader, that the deep learning necessary to unseat ingrained, generational, systemic biases can only be gained through the "embarrassment [of conversations] in which we are brought face-to-face with our own cluelessness" (21). Time and again throughout the book, Leighton draws from the specific episodes of the Institute's work penetrating insights and truths about interfaith engagement in theological terms as well as in relationships and the process of dialogue. Collectively, his reflections provide the reader with a generous syllabus for exploring the dynamics of interfaith encounter. It is no small achievement that he does so with a steady measure of dry wit, humble vulnerability, self-criticism, and a most accessible narrative.

Leighton ends by looking ahead: "When scanning the terrain we currently occupy, the temperature feels unreasonably hot. Disillusionment clots the

atmosphere. Hopes once inspired and sustained by religious communities are curdling. We are acutely aware that religious fervor continues to fire many if not most global conflicts, and the earth gives irrefutable testimony: it is drenched in blood” (187). Appropriately, the book includes a thoughtful and compelling afterword from Leighton’s successor at the ICJS, Heather Miller Rubens. Her voice carries forward the spirit of Leighton’s leadership, in the afterword and in the work of the (now) Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies. There the effort continues to rise to Leighton’s challenge, “to [see] whether our religious communities can embolden us to step outside our respective sanctuaries and engage religious and political strangers face-to-face in sacred argument.” (188). One can hope that, everywhere this book is read, its readers will take up the challenge implicit in the goal that Rabbi Zaiman set out for Leighton when he began to write the book, and which Leighton has plainly achieved, to “tell... a story your readers must finish themselves” (x).