

Ephraim Meir
Interreligious Theology:
Its Value and Mooring
in Modern Jewish Philosophy

(Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter and Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2015), hardcover, x + 219 pp.

BETHANY SLATER

slaterbe@bc.edu

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02467

Ephraim Meir's newest book, *Interreligious Theology: Its Value and Mooring in Modern Jewish Philosophy*, raises the question of how to construct a dialogical theology that can have a relevant role in shaping peaceful, humanistic, pluralistic cultures in different societies in our globalizing world. Meir sets out to articulate a new theological method, including its requisite values and presuppositions, and to ground it in modern Jewish philosophy. Drawing on Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy, Heschel's celebration of religious diversity, Levinas' radical alterity, and Franz Rosenzweig's idea of relational bridge-building, Meir contributes to pluralist interreligious theology by suggesting a method influenced by Jewish thought and values.

To address the need for social harmony he constructs a type of theological reasoning he calls "trans-different" theology (p. 39). This is based on his notion of a common world that does not override particular forms of identity. With "trans-difference" Meir is trying to capture a complex set of relationships. "Trans" signifies the in-between or the relational link between the "I" and the "you." He uses words like "bridging," "translating," "learning," "hospitality," and "recognition" to try to explain relationality (p. 15). Meir envisions theologians reasoning constructively from the learning accomplished in interreligious dialogue. Dialogue teaches us how others "legitimately organize their lives around the Ultimate Reality" (p. 185). The creative power and insights learned from others can expand one's own knowledge of the Ultimate. "Trans-different" theology reasons from that expanded place.

Next, with "different" Meir is pointing to a relationship to the self, to one's home tradition. "Trans-difference... creates unity with respect for differences and avoids total assimilation, as well as extreme dissimilation" (p. 142). In other words, the self is never swallowed up by the relationship to the different other. This does not mean that Meir supports the idea of a static self. On the contrary,

Meir reminds us that religions are “ever changing, fluctuating constructs” (p. 200). “Trans-different” theology resists the idolatrous urge to reify any particular instantiation of a tradition’s truth (p. 47). Meir’s theological method engages with contemporary discussions regarding identity, continuity, change, authenticity, influence, and otherness. His method offers a constructive theology of interreligious dialogue that engages in bridge building and translation as ways to “reach out to the world of others [and] to engender communication and mutual involvement” (p. 11).

This book contributes a Jewish approach to dialogical theology by connecting Meir’s method to insights from twentieth century Jewish philosophers. He relies on Buber’s vision of the “between-person,” the I-You [Thou] whose identity is dialogically formed, for his understanding of the dynamic identity of both religious selves and religious groups. He embraces Heschel’s celebration of plurality within God’s creation to support his own pluralism. Meir’s “trans-different” theology delights in the diversity of spiritual practices and spiritual paths, embracing the religious diversity that is reflective of multicultural identities. From Levinas Meir uses the notion of radical alterity of the other, influencing his argument for a theology that engages in critical reflection from an in-between place. Meir relies on Rosenzweig’s views of translation between people and between religious others. Meir’s study of Rosenzweig’s dialogical relationship with his Christian friend, Gritli Rosenstock-Huessy, provides one model for the creative unity within difference that Meir’s method champions. Another model for Meir is the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible translation project. It is a physical instantiation of the hybrid or bridged theologies that Meir celebrates in this book. In this case, Meir sees that project as the flowering of both a hybrid German-Jewish identity and a Christian-Jewish dialogical life (ch. 5). Finally, Meir finds inspiration for dialogically constructive “trans-different” thinking in the intercultural identities of intellectual German Jews from Mendelssohn through Buber (ch. 6). He suggests that Jews like these two as well as Hirsch, Cohen, and Rosenzweig illustrate the cultural vivacity of multiculturalism. Rather than being afraid of “trans-difference,” he argues we should acknowledge the spiritual wealth found in the contributions of people with complex identities (p. 128).

One way to grasp the distinctiveness of “trans-different” theology is to compare it to a related discipline, comparative theology. Meir claims that “trans-different” theology is methodologically distinct from comparative theology, because comparative theologians are engaged in trying to articulate “objective” comparisons, whereas “trans-different” theology tries to find theological insights through interreligious learning (p. 182). In Meir’s summary, the comparative theologian treats religions like reified entities that can be discussed and compared objectively. Meir’s description is not helpful, however, for it describes an outdated method of comparative religion and is not an accurate presentation of contemporary comparative theological methods. Meir’s description misses the subtle relationship that exists in comparative theology between dialogical and confessional theology.

From my perspective, the difference between comparative theology and “trans-different” theology is found not in their ways of thinking about identity and objectivity, but rather in Meir’s single-minded commitment to ongoing dialogical theology to the exclusion of confessional theology. Contemporary comparative theologians also recognize the subjective nature of theological discourse, are vocal about the dialogical nature of identity, and are fully committed to learning from the religious other. Contrary to Meir, comparative theologians listen for theological truth and then seek to bring that truth back to their own community. It is when they bring their learning home that they engage in confessional theology. They ask themselves how their confessional theologies appear differently in light of the truths learned in encounter with others. For a comparative theologian, coming home is crucial. While dialogical thinking is a dynamic creative force, comparative theologians believe that it is within the normative discourse of one’s own theological tradition that change can be enacted. The comparative theologian works within confessional theology in order to be an agent of change within a tradition. By contrast, the “trans-different” theologian focuses on building bridges, is ever engaged in dialogue, and seeks a new kind of unity.

The readers that will most appreciate this book are religious pluralists active in theological dialogue. Meir’s method contributes a Jewishly-inflected language to an approach represented by Christian theological pluralists and veterans of religious dialogue such as John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (p. 8). His method maps the tenuous balance that mystical and philosophical pluralists struggle to maintain between the one and the many. By using Jewish philosophers to think about these tensions, Meir highlights Jewish theological resources available for the field. However, the (non-academic) Jewish world is less likely to take notice. Meir’s choice to moor “trans-different” theology in the writings of twentieth century Jewish philosophers with limited influence outside professional and academic settings (perhaps with the exception of Heschel) may limit the book’s audience. An argument for dialogical theology using thinkers and texts with wider acceptance within the Jewish religious community is still waiting to be made.

Theologians who do not share Meir’s pluralism will find it harder to embrace his project. Meir presumes that there is a unifying religious experience among all religions of one Ultimate Reality (p. 12). He assumes that the proverbial blind men are in fact touching the same elephant. Yet such an approach as his is not logically necessary. The common ground for learning from the other can be our common humanity or our common experience of embodied existence. It seems to me that the next step ought to be proving the value of this new method by demonstrating the powerful and enriching insights it can generate. I await this next stage of “trans-different” theology.