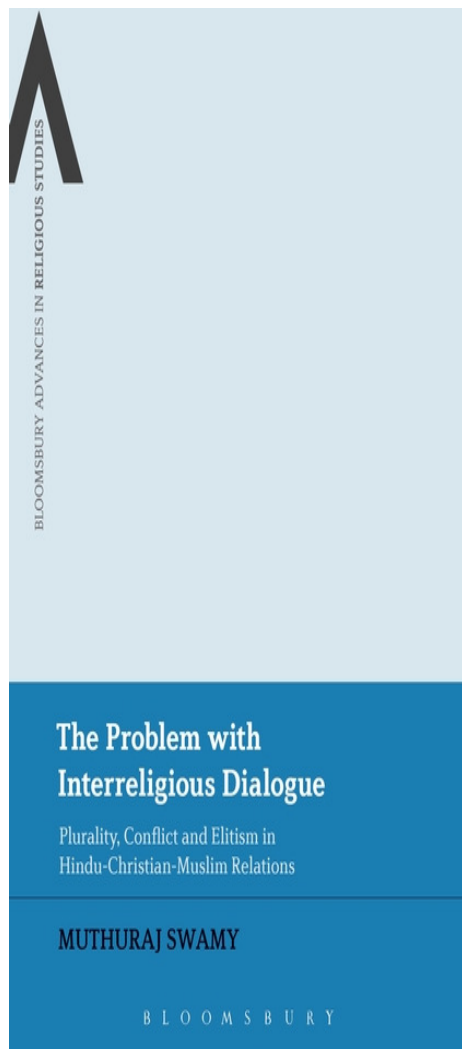



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The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue


Plurality, Conflict and Elitism in Hindu-Christian-Muslim Relations

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Muthuraj Swamy

Bloomsbury Advances in Religious Studies

New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, March 2016. 248 pages. \$112.00. Hardcover.
ISBN 9781474256407.

For other formats: [Link to Publisher's Website \(http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/the-problem-with-interreligious-dialogue-97\)](http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/the-problem-with-interreligious-dialogue-97)

Review

One hears much of interreligious dialogue, particularly after 9/11, as a method of resolving religious conflicts and coping with religious fundamentalism. However, what goes mostly unquestioned is the premise that modern conflicts have religion as their cause or that dialogues about religion are the concerns of an ordinary person, unconnected to the academy or the elite. It is with this assumption that efforts to resolve conflicts have been made, and it is no wonder that there has not been much progress on that front. Probably we need to critically rethink interreligious dialogue, and that is exactly what Muthuraj Swamy has done in the present book.

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The main thesis of *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue* is that conflicts that are labeled religious are mostly based on social, political, linguistic, or cultural factors, and that the practitioners of different religions do not actually come into conflict at the grassroots level. Hence, interreligious dialogue does not focus on the core causes of conflicts and is restricted to exchanges limited amongst the elite. Swamy clarifies that religious practitioners have many identities apart from their religious identities which are not always based on “world religions.” In an age when the religious are becoming increasingly disillusioned by organized religions and are looking toward non-conventional approaches to inner life such as the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), this book presents a timely and cogent analysis of how religious differences are overrated at the level of the faithful.

The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue evolved out of Swamy’s doctoral thesis, and is divided into three parts that analyze interreligious dialogue, highlight its limitations, and present an alternative. Swamy brings out the assumptions that are not critiqued in dialogue—plurality, the very term “religion,” interpretation of religious conflicts, and elitism. He locates his work as “concerned with critiquing these trends in dialogue in the Indian context over the last seven decades” (7). He does an analysis of the Mandaikadu Hindu-Christian conflict in Kanyakumari, India that took place in 1982 through a study of the Venugopal Commission report, erstwhile print-media reports, other related studies, and interviews of people connected with the conflict. Swamy takes into account everyday relations amongst the Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities. He gives us a brief but broad picture of the geography, society, and culture of Kanyakumari where he bases his study.

In this volume, Swamy gives a bird’s-eye view of literature on interreligious dialogue and highlights materials that are frequently neglected in such a discourse. He maintains that homogenization of faith traditions and religions have led to discrete religious identities that are actually outcomes of the colonial period. Swamy creates an engaging web of narratives drawn from the experiences of different religious practitioners to show how ordinary social or cultural conflicts may take a religious color. In a style that is accessible, yet not reductionist, Swamy has successfully shown that most conflicts termed “religious” are anything but that. He emphasizes the need for adopting a “bottom-up,” subaltern approach to understanding religious issues. He closes his book by making this affirmation: ‘That religion, multiple identities and the everyday relations of people from the bottom need to be learnt and understood by those at the top rather than delivered in the reverse direction through elite discourses such as dialogue based on world religions is my succinct conclusion’ (209–10).

Swamy’s interactions with the grassroots make this work unique as almost all studies on interreligious dialogue until now have taken an elitist approach. He positions interreligious dialogue as an exercise that started and was influenced by missionary and colonial forces, and shows how such dialogue was used to develop theological standpoints. He stresses the urgency for revisiting the very defining attributes of dialogue in the context of contemporary India. This work encourages academics and social scientists to undertake similar researches in other areas of religious studies, where many centuries-old constructs have been blindly followed. Such studies would enable the academy to broaden its depth of understanding of sensitive issues such as interreligious dialogue.

About the Reviewer(s):

Swami Narasimhananda is the Editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

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