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# FOREWORD

Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626), English author and philosopher, famously proffered this reflection on books: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, other to be read but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.” In my view, Richard Olson’s book *Side by Side: Being Christian in a Multifaith World* meets the criteria for inclusion on the list of a rare “few to be chewed and digested.” It is a timely, engaging, and accessible book that needs to be discussed, debated, and utilized “with diligence and attention.” This bold claim and affirmation deserves explanation. Why is this book so important and timely?

The world today is vastly different from previous eras. We live in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world community. As the title of Olson’s book suggests, we now live *Side by Side* with an astonishing diversity of people who embrace different religious convictions and worldviews. The global dynamics visible in daily headlines are now present at the national and local levels as well. The extensive research of Harvard professor Diana Eck’s Pluralism Project reveals how the United States is now the most religiously diverse country in the world. And, the diversity is not found simply in large cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. Today, every U.S. city with a population of 100,000 or more is literally a microcosm of the world community with Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, practitioners of Shinto and of various indigenous traditions living side by side.

The twenty-first century may well be defined by interfaith relationships. The ways in which people of faith relate to one another in local,

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national, and international settings present both great challenges and great opportunities. The status of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations—the focus of Olson’s book—presents a mixed and precarious dynamic. One can point to substantial improvements in Jewish-Christian relations since World War II, but these are set against a backdrop of a long and deplorable history of Christian anti-Semitism. And, as large white supremacist rallies (such as the now infamous one in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, where the torch-bearing mob chanted “Jews will not replace us!”), threats against Jewish institutions, and the desecration of Jewish cemeteries make plain, anti-Semitism remains a very present reality.

Similarly, we can identify a number of constructive initiatives for education and cooperation among Christians and Muslims in recent decades. Even so, persistent Islamophobia and misunderstandings about the basics of Islam are widespread in the West. Understandable media focus on horrific actions by violent extremists who claim inspiration from Islam provides fuel for many politicians, pundits, and preachers to fan the flames of fear about the world’s second largest religion.

There are no easy answers or simple solutions to the multiple challenges presented by interfaith relationships. But the way forward is not blocked. Olson’s thoughtful and accessible book makes enormously valuable contributions at this point, especially for individuals and local congregations. He not only illustrates the pragmatic necessity of peaceful coexistence; he underscores how respectful understanding and cooperation with neighbors is central for followers of Jesus. The apostle Paul’s admonition states it clearly: “Insofar as it is possible with you, live peaceably with everyone” (Romans 12:18).

But why is this directive so difficult to fulfill? A history of misunderstanding, fears of the “other,” and periods of conflict present major obstacles. Even more, longstanding theological presuppositions continue to block many faithful Christians from intentionally pursuing constructive relationships with Jewish and Muslim neighbors. The subtitle of the book—Being Christian in a Multifaith World—prepares

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the reader to explore the often vexing theological issues of particularity and pluralism while discovering specific ways to live faithfully alongside people of different religions. In each chapter Olson provides substantial food for thought, inviting diligent readers and discussion groups to chew and digest.

The autobiographical framework for the book is both appropriate and effective. Readers are invited to discover what Dick Olson has discovered over many years. His faith journey is rooted in his American Baptist tradition but takes him into the wider world of Christian ecumenism and finally interfaith explorations. A large segment of Christian readers will easily identify with his experiences and the questions he formulates along the way. Olson continually wrestles with the overriding question: How can one be a person of deep and committed faith while also acknowledging that one's own experiences and theological framework do not exhaust all the possibilities within and beyond the Christian tradition?

He gently but clearly shares ways he has grown, learned, and changed over time. He does this as a pastor and teacher who wants readers to come to their own conclusions as they explore anew what the teachings of Jesus and other parts of the Bible might reveal to our time and circumstances. Accordingly, he includes helpful and provocative questions and suggestions for consideration at the end of each chapter in a section labeled "Reflect, Discuss, Do."

Seminarians will find *Side by Side* to be invaluable as they train for vocations in Christian ministry. Clergy will appreciate the guidance and access to useful resources; many will find a wealth of material for sermons or series of sermons. Individuals and adult study groups will discover a great deal about their theological presuppositions and options for specific ways to learn, grow, and work together with Jews, Muslims, and others for the betterment of their communities.

Christian readers will not all come to the same conclusions—especially theologically—on how to formulate a faithful approach to particularity and pluralism. Olson not only recognizes this; he affirms it. At several key points he offers his view or an image that he finds in-

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structive. He then invites the reader to embrace that view or image if it is helpful; if not, then leave it. Throughout, however, he affirms both the mandate to overcome inaccuracies and misunderstandings about other religions and the responsibility to live peaceably with others.

Thirty years ago I completed my doctoral dissertation at Harvard Divinity School focusing on what had been learned during the first twenty years of Christian-Muslim Dialogue programs convened by Protestant and Orthodox Christians through the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. As a Baptist minister and student of world religions with specialization in Islam and Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, I have lectured and spoken in several hundred colleges, universities, churches, synagogues, and mosques. I have also been an active participant in interfaith programs at every level. I know from experience that large numbers of Christians recognize the importance of positive interfaith relationships and are eager to facilitate these relations. In this valuable volume, Dick Olson has provided a treasure chest of information that builds upon what people of faith and goodwill have done, even as it equips individuals and congregations to lead constructive interfaith initiatives in our interdependent, interconnected, and all too quarrelsome world of the twenty-first century.

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