

***Open to New Light: Quakers and Other Faiths* (Quaker Quicks series), Eleanor Nesbitt, Christian Alternative, 2023, 104 pages, ebook \$6.99/paperback \$12.95**

Reviewed by Rhiannon Grant

This is an accessible overview of the relationships between Quakers and other religions, including their historical development and current positions. In fourteen short chapters, Nesbitt provides information about how Quakers have approached other faiths in the past and how they undertake this work in the present. She starts by exploring interfaith encounters in the early movement (from their origins in seventeenth century England, Quakers read, wrote, traveled, and sought out different groups at home, so the first generation of Quakers had contact with both Jewish and Muslim communities). She then intersperses chapters on Quaker relations with specific traditions (Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and Jains, Sikhs, Baha'is, indigenous religions, and humanists) with chapters on the development of Quaker approaches (history, representation in Quaker books of discipline, interfaith approaches and initiatives), and finishes with a chapter called "Looking Forward, Looking Back," which comments on the ways in which her branch of the Quaker movement, often known as the liberal branch, is changing and engaging more deeply in interfaith encounters. This is followed by a references section longer than some of the chapters, with many useful pointers for readers who want to explore further.

The greatest strength of this book is the way in which it weaves together multiple sources and time periods in order to build a clear narrative about the shape and development of Quaker relationships with other faiths. Accurate and well-resourced, it takes the reader through the sometimes complex changes in relationships with a deft hand. For example, the chapter on Jews begins in the seventeenth century and ends in the twenty-first, having taken in questions of supersessionism, work supporting refugees during the Holocaust, the experience of people who are both Quaker and Jewish, and responses to the situation in Israel and Palestine. Given that the chapter is only five pages long, and that each of these topics receives due attention, a plain and comprehensible explanation, and quotations from original sources when relevant, this book is a masterpiece of concise and straightforward writing. It also moves fluidly between understanding faiths as religious traditions (including a range of traditions well beyond those often called "world religions," and accepting that "faith" does not require a specific belief) and understanding faith as a personal experience, so that people who have experience of multiple religious belonging or spiritual fluidity of

various sorts are included in the consideration of interfaith work without getting caught up in technicalities or definitions.

The nature of the Quaker Quicks series is, as the name suggests, to give a quick introduction to a topic; authors inevitably find (as I have found in my own contributions to the series) that there is a good deal of interesting and useful material which has to be left out. In this specific case, readers should know in advance that Nesbitt does not cover anything about Quakers and other churches; although not all liberal Quakers today identify as Christian, the roots of the Quaker movement are in Christianity. This book therefore focuses on *other* traditions and does not look at the relationships between Quakers and other churches, leaving plenty for a future author to say on that subject.

There are also some specific chapters in which it would be possible, and perhaps useful, to say more. For example, although I applaud the decision to include humanists as a faith tradition in this context and find what Nesbitt has to say about the relationship between Quakers and the humanist movement helpful, this very short chapter also felt lacking in some of the historical context. In other places, Nesbitt makes good use of the Swarthmore Lectures, given annually at a time when British Quakers are meeting anyway, but she does not mention William H. Thorpe's 1968 lecture "Quakers & Humanists"; she discusses the founding of the Quaker Universalist Group, which embraces the practice of learning from all religions, in the chapter on Quaker interfaith approaches, but does not talk about the founding of the Nontheist Friends Network, a notable group with strong connections to humanist thought.

Readers who are actively involved in interfaith work may find that this book inspires them. There are certainly a number of cases where Nesbitt's historical consideration points to a gap in current work or areas where more could be done: for example, she identifies African indigenous traditions as a group of faiths with which liberal Quakers have had little engagement (61); this is a case where the book's focus on the liberal branch of Quakerism, and exclusion of the evangelical branch which is very active in East Africa, among other places, is visible. The holding of the World Gathering of Friends in South Africa in the summer of 2024 may lead to the need for an update on this. In the meantime, a reader looking for ideas might find that Nesbitt's work suggests productive future projects in several places. Another idea might relate to building ongoing connections with the Baha'i community despite the potential divergence in politics between this group and the liberal branch of the Quaker movement.

In general, this is a very helpful book. It provides, briefly and easily, a wide range of information which will help people to have meaningful and historically informed conversations between different religious traditions. It will provide a useful grounding for Quakers wanting to get their bearings in the complex field of interfaith work and enable them to connect with the work of previous generations. It will provide helpful insights for people not part of the Quaker tradition but perhaps wanting to understand the Quaker approach to other faiths or to work alongside Quakers in interfaith contexts, whether with specific goals about dialogue or with shared aims in social and climate justice. It will not necessarily satisfy all the questions of an academic reader, but it provides an orientation and

a starting point from which further research could be pursued. It would be helpful to an undergraduate wanting to write an essay on Quakers and other faiths; it is accurate, well-referenced, and beautifully clear about where it draws on textual sources or the author's own experience. Both short and reasonably priced, it would be a good purchase for many individuals and libraries.

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