

RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
AT THE CROSSROADS

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*The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, R. Scott Appleby (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 429 pp., paperback (ISBN: 0-8476-8555-1).

There are a growing number of scholars and institutions that have come to recognize organized religion as a major factor in contemporary international conflicts. But this recognition has yielded very little in the way of in-depth analysis of the nature of religion’s role in conflict, and it has yielded even fewer results in analyzing the ways in which religion has played an equally important function in human patterns of reconciliation in these same conflicts.

The fact is that we live in an age in which millions of people are on the march, in a rather militant fashion, in the name of religion. Often this expresses itself in rage at a chosen enemy, or in a more generalized sense at the injustices inherent in a Western dominated social order. What has gone unrecognized is that religious commitments are also leading thousands of people to passionate devotion to human rights, social justice, conflict resolution, and deeper forms of reconciliation between enemies.

Scott Appleby, in this scholarly book of extraordinary range and exhaustiveness, aptly titled his book, “The Ambivalence of the Sacred”. We live in an era where the paradoxes abound in terms of religion’s contributions to peace and violence. On the

one hand, religious extremists are responsible for the most savage acts across the world, propelled by widely disseminated interpretations of their religious traditions. On the other hand, the leading lights of this century, in terms of peacemaking, people who inspired fundamental shifts in the global vision of civil society, have conceived and acted upon their program of action out of the depths of their religious faith, their rituals, and ethical practices. These would necessarily include, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Pope John XXIII, Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, Bishop Tutu, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Maha Gosananda of Cambodia, and many others, representing virtually every religion of the world.

We do not know most of these people, nor do we understand their impact, because we in the West have had a tendency in the modern period to view religion as only the problem in the human relations of civil society, never part of solutions. But the facts, as brilliantly delineated by Appleby, say otherwise. The facts suggest a dual legacy of organized religion, a tremendous potential for violence as well as extraordinary resources for reconciliation.

Dr. Appleby, whose exhaustive studies on fundamentalism are well known, has recently become director of the Kroc Center for International Peace Studies at University of Notre Dame. It is his clear intention in this work to demonstrate the precedents for and potential of organized religion to become a new and critical adjunct to international diplomacy and conflict resolution. Appleby argues, based on detailed demonstration of the major actors for peace and violence in the world's religions, that one cannot ignore the role of religion in both international violence as well as peacemaking. Furthermore, to focus on only the religiously inspired violence or only on the religiously inspired peacemaking is to engage in naïve approaches to international conflicts and their potential resolutions.

There are a vast range of actors whose story Appleby reveals, all the way from terrorist organizations such as Hamas, to courageous thinkers such as Abdullahi An-Na'im, from descriptions of settler philosophy in Israel to the religious life and practices of religious Zionist peacemakers, such as Yehezkel Landau. Appleby also enters into detailed study of a broad range of organizations, such as the Community of Saint Egidio, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and Moral Re-Armament.

These actors and many more have played roles in peacemaking that have gone unrecognized by an academic and policy community that tends to shrink from the evidence that mass religious movements and key individuals do change history in the contemporary period, for better and for worse. Appleby also integrates this work into perceptive analyses of critical junctures in conflicts in Bosnia, South Africa, Ireland, and the Middle East, to mention a few. He also addresses the critical need today to engage in multi-disciplinary study of international humanitarian intervention, such as the interaction of human rights issues, religion and conflict resolution. Finally, one can also find here an interesting discussion of some of the deeper questions of reconciliation, such as the question of apology, forgiveness, and the interaction between the demands of justice and the requirements of peacemaking. Above all, Appleby documents for the reader a vast world of religious actors, some violent, and some hidden heroes of the modern political world, whose effect on the contemporary world one will not find delineated as clearly and concisely anywhere else.

I have a friendly argument with Appleby on two matters. One is the issue of semantics. It has become very difficult for us in this field to come up with an adequate word to describe the centralization of the importance of religion in so many millions of lives across the planet. Some have termed this fundamentalism. Appleby has emphasized the use of the word "militant" in this work, suggesting that we have two

types of militants at work, militants for peace and militants for violence. I am less sanguine about the terminology for only one reason. The motives for religious action in the modern world are clearly inherently complex and multiple, and Appleby himself acknowledges this. There are inescapable structural/economic factors in religious violence that cannot be evaded. The same is true about psychological issues, such as the deep injuries of many ethnic groups that get translated into religious dogma, thus dramatically shifting the hermeneutic horizon of a particular ethno-nationalist expression of a particular religion. One cannot ignore the effects on Serbian Orthodox religion of past persecutions, especially World War II, nor the effects of the Holocaust on the direction of religious Zionism.

“Militancy” also suggests a kind of self-conscious extremism. But many actors see themselves as striking a balance between extremes from their vantage point. Militancy is a matter of perception. I think that we should probably steer clear of rigid definitions in this field and focus instead on a careful documentation of what these actors are actually thinking and doing, and how it is affecting global civilization, which is what Appleby does very well.

I also have come to disagree with some implications in Appleby’s work that much of religious violence is attributable to religious actors who are actually quite ignorant of their own traditions, such as the foot soldiers of the Balkan atrocities who knew nothing about Christianity. It is certainly the case that the average sadist in the trenches of extremist movements, and the average suicide bomber in the Middle East or in Sri Lanka is not a towering font of religious erudition.

But this is not always the case. Prime Minister Rabin’s religious assassin was quite gifted and knowledgeable. More importantly, one cannot say that all the senior clergymen in the Balkans, in Rwanda, in the Middle East, who supported violence

against civilians were simply ignorant of their tradition. That is letting organized religion off too easily. The fact is that while I agree that there are great untapped resources for peacemaking and conflict resolution in the world's religions, there is also a vast reservoir of texts and traditions ready and waiting to be used to justify the most barbaric acts by modern standards of human rights.

We cannot faithfully do this work without facing the serious challenge here. Old, complex and diverse religious texts are a resource of humanitarianism as well as for barbarity. At the end of the day, it will come down to interpretation, selection, and the hermeneutic direction of religious communities. That, in turn, is deeply tied up with questions of the economic and psychological health of their members, the wounds of history, and the decisions of key leaders, such as Nelson Mandela, on one side, and Milosevic, on the other, to direct their communities' deepest beliefs, practices, and myths toward healing and reconciliation or toward hatred and revenge.

Religion is a critical factor in this process, and we cannot help these troubled communities to a better place without positively engaging their deepest cultural and religious foundations. But we also must acknowledge the compelling nature of violent religious sources and seek to work in a variety of ways to prevent those resources from gaining the upper hand in the contest for the minds and hearts of millions of people today. There must be a courageous effort to stare into the dark side of religious legacies, but not bury the good with the bad, as Enlightenment institutions are wont to do.

Frankly, there are hundreds of millions of people today who will not let that happen. Appleby has done a brilliant job of charting a course for us, helping us to find the people and institutions who will help steer the religious communities of the world in

the direction of a global civil society committed to human rights and to the nonviolent resolution of tragic conflicts.

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