Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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New York: Fordham University Press, 2004. 162 pages.

This book contains six essays presented at an international conference entitled "Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation." It

brings together academic and activist Jews, Christians, and Muslims to explore the potential of each religious tradition as a source of peaceful social transformation. The book thus problematizes the assumption that violence is minimized by excluding religion from public life.

The book appropriately opens with Charles Taylor's (McGill University) paper, which draws heavily on the thoughts of French philosopher Rene Girard *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press: 1979). Taylor explores the modes of transition of violence from purifying killing with metaphysical roots to political "categorical violence," which makes ethnic cleansing possible. He gives a tripartite solution to violence: building ordered democratic polities that are likely to be less violent, spreading the benefits of such a society widely to prevent the formation of desperate excluded groups, and denouncing the self-righteous reconstitution of violence for revenge by those who have suffered. These first two solutions involve political and economic correctives at the governmental level, which may not hold true in the face of evidence. For example, violence could be caused by a most democratic polity that finds no incentive to spread its benefits, even to the most desperate of its own people. Taylor's third solution, however, can resonate on a very personal level with many who, as a result of suffering, feel entitled to revenge. It is forgiveness, he argues, and a recognition of a common, flawed humanity that may suppress the madness of revenge and violent categorization (pp. 38-40).

This book has two Muslim representatives. Mohamed Fathi Osman (The Institute for the Study of the Role of Islam in the Contemporary World at the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation) provides numerous examples from the Qur'an as the basis for going beyond violence. He argues that even in the case of self-defense, Muslims must return to peace whenever offered the opportunity to do so (e.g., Qur'an 4:90 and 8:61). Osman points to the problematic of interpreting the sacred text, which, he argues, could be addressed by distinguishing between permanently normative principles and merely descriptive historical ones (p. 68). By noting the opinions of the Abu Hanifah, al-Shaybani, al-Shafi`i and Malik ibn Anas, he historicizes the juristic heritage that upheld the legitimacy of military aggression against the backdrop of the Byzantine threat to Muslim lands. The author's strongest point is his argument that modern Muslims view this juristic heritage as mainly concerned with *physical power,* which necessitates a physical confrontation. The glories of the past, however, are due more to the Muslims' *moral power*, which, according to him, is "always supportive and productive" (p. 65).

The other Muslim representative, Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric of Bosnia-Herzegovina, emphasizes religious pluralism, referring to the well-known Qur'anic verse forbidding compulsion in religion (2:256), and the Prophet's declaration of equality made in his Farewell Sermon. His most interesting point is that the similarities in the Abrahamic traditions' spiritual roots are the source of difficulties in their relationships. Therefore, in a postmodern fashion reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas' "ethics of the other," Ceric argues that recognizing differences can engender respect between religions and between each religion's often warring factions (e.g., Sunnis and Shi`is). Unfortunately, he neither develops nor offers any textual support from the Qur'an or Hadith for this important insight.

One wonders where a theologian/jurist like Ceric, who studied at al-Azhar and has a doctorate in Islamic theology from the University of Chicago, stands in regard to the purported divide between theology (speaking normatively from within) and the academic study of religion. In this essay, he takes his "ethics of the other" to a humanistic domain by advocating for "the moral man of the earth," who can disrupt the dichotomy of "the wise man from the East" and "the rational man of the West." He also offers a human-centered prediction to which Muslim theologians, who are ever so vigilant about the supremacy of God's will, may raise serious objections: "I believe that neither the meek nor the aggressive will inherit the Earth, but only those who cooperate in truth, justice, peace, and reconciliation among people and nations" (p. 51).

One of the Jewish contributors, Rabbi Reuven Firestone (author of *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* [USA: Oxford University Press, 1999] contrasts Jewish views on war after the Temple's destruction (70 CE) and after the birth of the State of Israel (1948). He argues that because of the lack of political/military power after the Temple's destruction, Rabbinic Judaism, which is what we generally call Judaism today, had very little to say about war – only one paragraph from its massive body of literature. However, this "1,900-year ban on the military" was broken with Israel's victory in the Six Day War (1967), which was seen as a truly divine miracle (p. 83), a "redemption" that brought about the religious Orthodox Jewish world's outward support for Zionism. He finishes with a sobering question: "When we are in a position of power, can we carry out the vision of peace?" (p. 86). The other Jewish contributor, Rabbi Irving Greenberg (president of Jewish Life Network), calls for self-criticism by arguing that each religion is responsible for correcting itself.

On the Christian side, Scott Appleby (University of Notre Dame) speaks to the profound shift of the last fifty years in Catholic social teachings. He argues that significant numbers of contemporary Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants consider nonviolence to be the non-negotiable dimension of Christian discipleship. He views the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as the key turning point after which the Catholic Church became a powerful proponent of religious liberty and universal human rights, which was further developed by liberation theology.

The essays in this volume represent the authors' opinions; hence, the book is not a survey of views from these three religious traditions. Reviewing them three years after their delivery, it seems that they hardly add anything new to the argument that religion could be the source of war or peace. However, reading these six essay together underscores one point: Whether it is in renouncing the right of revenge conferred by suffering, seeing glory in moral power, searching for "the moral man of the earth," balancing power with the vision of peace, engaging in honest self-criticism, or advocating religious liberty and universal human rights, each author, in his own individual way, calls for religious people to have the courage to choose peace.

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