

Book review

Violence, Religion, Peacemaking

Irvin-Erickson, Douglas and Peter C. Phan editors 2016

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*Reviewed by Jannie Malan**

The title of this book announces three topics, one after the other, with commas separating the three keywords. In addition to the title, the cover of the printed book also provides us with a sub-title, a contextual reference and a symbolic picture. The sub-title is: 'Contributions of Interreligious Dialogue'. The reference is to the series of which the book forms part: Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice. Next to the name of the series, there is a logo of a circle of five overlapping circles. And the picture shows a dark sky above a moonlit cloud.

This meaningful book has developed out of a 2013 conference in New York on the theme 'Nurturing Cultures of Peace in Contexts of Global Violence' (p. 3).

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The goal of this conference was ‘to strengthen relationships between religious leaders, peace practitioners, and scholars, and to create a forum for a free exchange of ideas at the nexus of theory, practice, and faith’ (p. ix). The three-day conference and workshops proved to be a ‘transformative’ event, and reading of the resulting publication may surely also lead to transformative experiences.

In a context of global violence, much, if not most, of which is to some extent religion-related, a free exchange of ideas is very relevant and required. Such dialogic, or multilogic, exercises are not uncomplicated or unchallenging, however. In the fields of violence, religion and peacemaking, we have (almost?) no provabilities or certainties, but mainly debatabilities, believabilities and expectabilities. The commas in the title of this book may therefore be regarded as indicators of open-ended relatedness, and as prompts to revisit one’s opinions about the relations concerned. Each chapter separately, and the whole book as well, certainly challenge its readers to rethink their conceptions, and perhaps even convictions, and to play their constructive roles in nurturing cultures of peace.

In the Introduction, orientating questions are asked and discussed: What is religion? What is peace? What is interreligious peacemaking? Such ‘What?’ questions may of course be answered partly or wholly theoretically, and the discussions in the introductory pages are indeed on a theoretical wavelength. (From some religious perspectives, there may be objections to using the terms ‘theory’ and ‘theoretical’ with regard to convictions of faith, but for our present purpose we will have to ignore such debate. After all, the title of the series in which this book has been published, is ‘Interreligious Studies in Theory and Practice’.)

In addition to the ‘What?’ questions, however, the Introduction also poses the very practical ‘How?’ question: How can religious leaders contribute to cultures of peace in the contemporary world? (p. 3). In my opinion, this is the core question of the book, and it identifies religious leaders as crucially important readers, and, hopefully, receptive and responsive readers. After all, most of the committed followers of religions usually do not have the opportunities and/or facilities to undertake open-minded and deeply

penetrating research into the convictions and traditions of their faith. With well-intentioned but naïve trust, they simply follow the guidance of their religious leaders. And when their leaders, albeit with good intentions, still happen to adhere to ancient but outdated persuasions and practices, the followers do the same. Even more deplorable and disastrous are the cases where a religious group has been diverted into a socio-political and/or ethno-national direction and the religious leaders compliantly adopt the slogans but fail to blow any whistles.

I have to add the obvious fact, however, that when the conference papers were written, and also when, after the conference, they were edited into the chapters of this book, the authors did not have the introductory chapter with its essential ‘How?’ question at their disposal. Nevertheless, there are many and valuable practical recommendations, and also between-the-lines suggestions. There are country-specific details – from, alphabetically, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Canada, Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan – which should be of special interest to readers from the countries and/or religions concerned, but which may also point to lessons that can be implemented in other geographic and/or religious contexts, with modifications where needed. Among the approaches and methods described and discussed, there are, for instance, the following:

- Counteracting environment-degrading resource extraction
- Practising nonviolent resistance against landgrabs, structural inequality, and structural violence
- Religious leaders remaining politically non-aligned
- Promoting environment-restoring tree planting
- Promoting not only coexistence, but also pro-existence
- Recognising and rectifying misapplication of religious elements
- Recognising religion as part of a solution
- Repairing individual relationships
- Rescuing a religion from destructive politicisation
- Reviving and promoting a vision of harmony
- Tourists befriending vulnerable locals
- Understanding each other’s religion and culture

The emphasis on *understanding* explicitly occurs in four of the chapters, and in two of these, understanding is repeatedly mentioned. In chapter 9 (Armed Peacebuilding: The Peacebuilding aspects of the Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan), for instance, the importance of understanding is discussed, firstly with regard to the education of women on their rights within Islam. An existing programme is mentioned which was founded by an *insider* who realised the need. Secondly, it is explained ‘how an effective counterinsurgency policy is based on engaging the local populations and winning their support, not merely defeating the enemy with superior firepower’ (p. 158). In this regard, it was an *outsider* military general who took important initiatives. He allowed himself to be guided by ‘paradoxical understandings’ and he promoted the development of understanding and relationship-building between the military and the religious leaders (pp. 163–165). And in chapter 10 (Religion as a Catalyst for Peacebuilding in Jos, Plateau State North Central Nigeria), it is emphatically stated that ‘Christians and Muslims in Jos, Nigeria need to understand that both religions preach peace’ (p. 177). This is followed by clear examples of what each group should understand about their own religion, and of how such understandings could pave the way towards forgiveness and reconciliation (pp. 177–179).

After my comments on the country-related chapters, I wish to underline the meanings and messages of the first two chapters, which make up almost a third of the book. In chapter 1 (Introduction: Interfaith Contributions to Nurturing Cultures of Peace), concepts and theories are briefly but meaningfully discussed. Chapter 2 (Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, Peacebuilding: An Interreligious Spirituality for Just Peace), the longest in the book, ‘attempts to expound the teachings of various religions on peace and just peacebuilding, and to elaborate an interreligious spirituality, that is, a way of living that promotes peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding’ (p. 22). Near the end of this chapter, it is stated ‘that all world religions recommend such a spirituality of knowing the truth, doing justice, forgiveness and social reconstruction’ (p. 48). I am inclined, however, to criticise this as an unreferenced sweeping statement, and also

as a partial statement. The *inner* and attitudinal nature of this spirituality is suggested by the mention of forgiveness, but the way in which such a spirituality deviates from *outward* religiosity is not emphasised. And, since it is usually the externalities found in creeds, codes and cults that cause and/or exacerbate conflict, I reckon that the making of this point, here and elsewhere, could have significantly increased the impact of the book. But I immediately have to add that in my opinion this crucial insight is missing from many books in the field of religion.

In spite of this (debatable?) shortcoming, however, *Violence, Religion, Peacemaking* does communicate and disseminate very meaningful contributions to the interreligious dialogue. It warns against the destructive role religion can play in the ‘deadly mix’ of ‘ethnicity, nationalism, land, and religion ... fueling most armed conflicts’ (p. 23), and it strongly recommends ways in which religion can be ‘a catalyst for peacebuilding’ (p. 181) – in a particular area and globally.

Technically, this book has been produced very professionally. I have noticed 24 typing errors, but as an editor I know very well how easily minor mistakes can slip through.

I can highly recommend this book to religious leaders, politicians, peace practitioners and scholars, and to all who are interested in religion and conflict. The more we think and rethink around the nexus of theory, practice and faith, the more our moon-lit clouds might become directly sun-lit. Or evaporate.