

The Ambivalence of the Sacred

Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation

R. Scott Appleby, Rowman & Littlefield Inc.: Maryland, 2000. 427 pages. 291.1APP

There exists a lingering secular impression that religion is unhelpful for the advancement of humanity. Those who hold to this opinion claim that religion and politics should never mix. Why? Because religion rests entirely on faith, and faith is not rational. Secularists accuse religion of making their subjects exclusivist in their outlook, closed off to rational debate, and worse, employ violence in the name of their sacred cause.

Believers may regard this secular perspective of religion as distorted, but few can claim that it is unfounded. Religion and violence are not strange bedfellows, writes Scott Appleby in this important book. The author, an academic historian, cites ethno-religious conflict such as the Bosnian War, Northern Ireland, and the Israeli-Palestinian situation as examples where religion has been intertwined with nationalist and ethnic issues in the precipitation of violence. One might argue that religions are pacifist in themselves, the real failure being people who misuse religion to fuel bloodshed. Prof. Appleby submits a more disturbing proposal – that violence, as much as peacemaking, is already an inherent part of faith traditions.

“Ambivalence” in the title of the book points to two trends of religious intensification in faith communities, one inward and the other outward. Religious groups, more so the monotheistic faiths, exhibit both trends as proper to their own tradition. When faith communities feel threatened by external challenges, one response is to reclaim uniqueness in terms of how it is different and set apart from others. This usually involves a return to fundamentals in the understanding of doctrine and more intense worship in attempt to restore purity against the threat of compromise. This move towards fortification and defense of religion from the attack of perceived adversaries is the inward trend. Extremism in this trend has resulted in religious violence.

While the inward trend has the interest of preserving religious integrity, Prof. Appleby builds a case for the necessity of the outward way of intensifying religious sentiment. Through engaging the world, religions can and must develop an equally passionate or ‘militant’ commitment towards peacemaking. He refers to examples where religion has played positive roles in mediation, transformation of conflict, and sustaining peace: Buddhist interventions in Burma, Catholic involvement in brokering the halt of Mozambique’s civil war, the leadership of the Mennonites in global peace initiatives, and many others.

Prof. Appleby argues that it is impossible for faith communities to completely eliminate voices within their own ranks that legitimate violence as religious expression. Internal religious pluralism guarantees that each faith community, addressing challenges in the present, has many ways of retrieving wisdom from their past – some of these advocate violence as divinely inspired response. Whether a faith community takes the path of peace or violence depends on how its leaders and educators selectively interpret its historical tradition in the present context.

Peaceful dialogue is not necessarily self-evident as a religious good. It is an argument that needs to be put forward reasonably and consistently by those who lead faith communities. Believers who wish for peace must learn to become literate in the argument for dialogue, or risk religion being construed by civil societies as an unreasonable stumbling block to peaceful progress, if not a threatening source of conflict.

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Arthur Goh, 5 September 2008