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Jan G. Platvoet

AASR Bulletin Co-Editor

Religion's Ambiguity: Barrier or Bridge to Peace?

Gerrie ter Haar & James J. Busuttil (eds.) 2005, *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence, and Visions for Peace*. Leiden, etc.: Brill, XI + 392 pp., 1 map, bibliography, index, ISBN 9004139435 (pbk), Euro 48, US\$ 62 (= International Studies in Religion and Society, 1).

This volume is the outcome of a conference in May 2001 at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, The Netherlands, organised by Gerrie ter Haar shortly after she had been appointed at ISS as Professor of Religion, Social Change and Human Rights. Apart from the Preface, Notes on the contributors, the unified bibliography and an index, the volume has four parts: 'Religion, Conflict and Peace' (3-118), 'Religious Perspectives on Conflict and Peace' (119-200), 'Visions for Peace' (201-295), and 'Documentary Sources on Religion, Violence and Peace' (297-369).

Part I

Part I is analytical and studies religion primarily as generating violence, though it touches also on its constructive potential (32). It has four contributions, by Gerrie ter Haar, Marc Gopin, Chandra Muzaffar and Daniel Miguez. They probe when

and why is religion a source of violence, and when a bridge to peace. Gerrie ter Haar's contribution (3-34) is a lucid introduction to the subject, and to the book. Against the simplistic view of religion as merely a source of conflict born from the fear of 'fundamentalism' of secularists, and from the romantic view of believers that religion always heals, she proposes to view it as a social fact. As such, it has been both a source of violence, and a resource for conciliation. Without denying or ignoring religion as a source of conflict (e.g. 20), the purpose of this volume is primarily to shed light on religion as a resource for peace, and also to encourage scholars of religions to take the position of 'caring critic' by actively engaging in initiatives that help increase religion's capacity for peace-building. When she discusses religion as a source of conflict (9-18), ter Haar emphasises that migration and the pressure to share resources, not religion, is worldwide the true source of conflict. The burning down of a mosque or a church is a violent attack, not on a migrant community's religion, but on that community as an out-group (15). In her examination of religion as a resource for peace, she proposes to view religion as consisting of ideas, practices, organisation and experiences (22) and examines how each of these may contribute to the furthering of conciliation (22-26). She emphasises the need for secularists to have a proper understanding of what religion means to people. The state, therefore, should take charge of education in religion, as in post-apartheid South Africa, while leaving religious education to the various faith communities (31).

Gopin criticises the various conflict resolution theories as too individualistic and secular: they are unable to comprehend the powerful nature of religious commitment and its sacralised violence and to include religious communities, particularly rejectionist ones, into their approaches to conflict resolution (36-43). Their defects may be remedied by introducing into them practices of empathy and pacifism, and the concept of the sanctity of life, and the Eastern concepts and practices of *ahimsa* (non-violence), *metta* (loving kindness), and *karuna* (compassion) (43-48), as well as Gandhi's authentic religious pluralism (48-49) and the use of mythic imagination (49-52), e.g. by using the 'Abrahamic family metaphor' for reconciling 'monotheistic conflicts' between Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Muzaffar, detailing religion's contribution to conflict and conciliation in Asia (57-79), emphasises that religious conflicts are not between religions, but between

some of their adherents who may actually be quite ignorant of the teachings of their religions (58-59). The causes of religious conflicts are mostly secular. Muzaffar discusses the following: competitive party politics (60-62); the religious majority identity which some modern nation states, particularly authoritarian ones, adopt and promote for political reasons, e.g. through religious education programmes (62-64); deeply entrenched cultural attitudes of enmity and exclusivism between religious communities in a nation (64); economic stagnation (64-65); migration upsetting the established order (65-66); the colonial factor (66); the self-interested manipulations of imperialist powers (66-67); and the distorted images that the powerful Western media create of religions, and in particular of Islam (67-68). These causes of religious strife must be remedied first of all by political and economic reforms (68-72), but also by religious reform through the fostering of a spirit of universal unity in religions (72-76), a more profound understanding of other faiths and inter-faith dialogue (76-78).

Miguez discusses the different roles religions – RC, mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, ‘African’, and Spiritist – played in Brazil, Chili and Argentina under the violent military dictatorships from the 1960s to the 1980s, and after the turn to democracy in the 1980s (81-118). In the repressive period, their roles were mainly ‘institutional’, i.e. directed at these violent governments. They were either confrontational by defending human rights when seeking to curb these dictatorships, or collusive by sanctioning them in order to use them for their own purposes: to restrict religious liberty and maintain their ‘traditional’ majority position, or as minority religions for obtaining more religious liberty for themselves and a larger share in the ‘religious market’ (84-90). After democracy had been restored and religious liberty had been established, causing an increase of religious pluralisation, the religions had to revise their roles. They had to replace their institutional, upwards approach with a grassroots, downwards approach of influencing the identities of common people in their everyday activities in order to win them, or to win them back, in the ‘religious market’. They did this through the politics of symbolic confrontation between the religions (90-118). Miguez defines ‘symbolic confrontation’ as ‘the struggle by which social groups try to impose their own understanding of reality as the true one’ through the use of symbols (90-94). He presents examples how it was used by the poor (e.g. in Pentecostal ‘spiritual warfare’ theology that assigns spiritual causes to social problems) as a strategy for contesting

the social order by demonising it when they suffered extreme exploitation. Or for partly contesting, partly accommodating the social order when symbolic confrontation enabled them to overcome the *anomie* of misery and to endure deprivation by the sense of coherence, which symbolic confrontation imparted to them, to recover their self-esteem by the sense of mission it instilled in them, and to improve their position in society, even through ‘worldly’ programmes of social assistance (94-109). Symbolic confrontation was used between the religions to establish that they were exclusively in possession of the one-and-only religious truth (109-113). Though such a claim is polemic by nature, it is, says Miguez, ‘not very problematic’ (82) as long as it remains a symbolic confrontation, as it usually does, and does not lead to open violence between religious communities or to the restriction of religious liberties (112-113). Miguez’ advice to policymakers is, therefore, not to aim at a total elimination of religious conflict, but at keeping it within boundaries by allowing the discourse and rituals of symbolic condemnation. By maintaining a balance between tolerant groups promoting religious freedom, and intolerant groups restoring the dignity and social rights of the downtrodden, both will contribute in their own way towards diminishing the gap between the rich and the poor (117-118).

Part II

In Part II (119-200) four ‘Abrahamite’ perspectives on conflict and peace are presented. In the first (121-152), Jan van Butselaar examines the problem of the practice of the promise of the Kingdom of God in the history of Christianity. After discussing the violence Christians perpetrated during the crusades, the wars of religion in Europe and colonialism (123-130), he examines attempts at conflict resolution in Augustine’s two cities theology and by Beza (130-134); in the modern ecumenical debate on violence and non-violence outside and inside the World Council of Churches which allows only exceptionally for limited and controlled counter-violence (134-145); and through recent Christian appeals and actions for peace, also in Africa (145-152).

In the second contribution (153-167), Joseph Adero Ngala, Director of People for Peace in Africa (PPA), in Nairobi, Kenya, maintains that ‘religion can only

serve as an effective institution for peace making by forming rightly the consciences of its adherents' (154), as individuals and as groups. The first must do that by internalising a religion's beliefs and values; the second by socialisation (154-156). He delineates the methods and mechanisms of conscience formation by means of the psychological stability their cosmologies provide and through locating the self in a continuity of past, present and future (156-159). When discussing the role of religion in conflict and peace (159-162), he distinguishes between believers with a wrong conscience, with no conscience, and with a right conscience. The first justify violence perpetrated in the name of religion; the second are not able to do anything in the name of religion, be it good or bad; the third shun violence (159). Whereas 'peacemaking is a mandate for all Christians', the 'contemporary Church in Africa ... [has] failed in this effort almost entirely' (161), in part because the Bible and the Qur'an can be (ab)used for both hateful and peaceful purposes (161-162). He deplores that the social teaching of the churches has remained ineffective and that quite a number of churches, e.g. in Kenya, have become deeply involved in divisive party politics (162-166).

In the third contribution (169-183), Yehiel Grenimann, past Chairperson of Rabbis for Human Rights (www.rhr.israel.net) at Jerusalem, surveys the 'largely negative' role of religion in the conflict over 'the land [of Israel]' between Jews and Palestinians. In his view, changes of attitudes are unlikely to come from the 'liberal peripheries of Judaism and Islam' but must come 'from the fanatics themselves' and 'from the very elements at the heart of the problem' (170-171), the issue of 'the land' (174-178). He sees glimmers of hope in that religious Jews and Muslims may find common ground in their critique of Western 'rampant materialism' and moral decadence; in the dialogue of apolitical liberal Jews with Muslims; in his own RHR, a coalition of some 100 rabbis 'struggling to impact on the public conscience'; two organisation in the Orthodox camp; and the Sefardi *Shas* party, which, however, abandoned its earlier stance on a possible territorial compromise (170-173). After a survey of Jewish 'theological passion for the land' and the intensely messianic hopes attached to it by uncompromising Orthodox nationalists (176) because they believe that Jews are the chosen people of God (177-178), Grenimann proposes to emphasize *talmudic* teaching on the moral conditions of this covenant – keeping God's commands, strict monotheism, no defilement of 'the land' by immoral behaviour – as the basis for a change of heart in the conflict

and a hope for peace (178-182). But his hopes are dim and perhaps utopian, for 'Judaism is not a pacifist tradition' (181). Only in 'some more distant future' is there 'room for cautious hope'. Meanwhile, 'bloodshed and injustice continue' (183).

In the fourth contribution to Part II (185-200), Ali Salman, a ISS graduate in development studies, investigates the 'uneasy relationship between [...] Islam and human rights', especially in Pakistan, by delineating points of cohesion and conflict between the two (185). Salman first uses Durkheim's concept of 'the sacred' to forge an epistemological link, and point of cohesion, between religion and human rights that will find favour with Christians and Muslims. However, with the marginalisation of religion in the human rights discourse, a deep conflict was established between religion and human rights (185-187). Then he undoes three dichotomies: (1) that religion is 'collectivist' and human rights 'individualist' – human rights are conditioned by duties and other restrictions; (2) that human rights are 'universal' and religions 'relative' – dispensations have been granted and so the charter is not universally applied;¹ and (3) that in Islam human rights should be replaced with its system of responsibilities: Salman argues that the two cannot be interchanged, for the duties of Muslims are towards Allah and fellowmen; they are no rights of the individual human person. The latter, moreover, are secular in nature, which is fortunate, for that allows Indian Muslims to appeal to them to urge their right to practise Islam in the predominantly Hindu society of India (187-192). He notes that Islamists tie human rights to the *shari'a* (192-193); that gender equality is likely to remain a bone of contention in Muslim societies for the foreseeable future (193-194); but also that neither secularism nor religion can be identified as either guarantor or oppressor in the practice of human rights (194-195). In his case study of Pakistan (195-199), he argues that the public order provides the state of Pakistan with a legitimate reason for declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims by law. This discrimination, as well as the exclusion of non-Muslims from high offices and the law on blasphemy, are offset by the abolition of the separate electoral systems for Muslims and non-Muslims in 2002 (195-197). If religions, by and large, teach

¹ He adds that Muslims states forward the wrong arguments for not applying it, e.g. the Muslim religious rule against apostasy in stead of the demands of e.g. the public order.

tolerance, cultures usually do not, as the order by a village court in Pakistan that a girl be gang-raped for the alleged sexual crime of her twelve-year old brother, 'honour-killings' (two a day in Pakistan!), and other examples show. The weakness of the rule of law is the main impediment to the protection of human rights in Pakistan (197-199). Due to the universalist claims on behalf of human rights, the tension between them and Islam is inherent and permanent. Its advocates should not forget that they a 20th century phenomenon born from the devastations wrought on Western societies by the Western secular totalitarian ideologies of Nazism, Fascism and Marxism (192, 200).

Part III

In part III (201-295), three efforts at peace building by religions have been collected. The first two are localised and Christian; the third is Buddhist and global. Benny Giay discusses the history of West Papua (204-206); Indonesia's use of development ideology to destroy West Papuan culture and identity (206-208); the human rights violations since 1990 (209-213); the role of the churches (213-218); and the initiatives to convert Papua into a peace zone by Marthen Tanawane, so far unsuccessful because the Indonesian government and army refuse to get involved (218-223).

Maria Lorenza Palm-Dalupan discusses the positions of the RC Church and the Muslim community in the Philippines (227-230), details its complex history of religious violence (230-238), and the leading role of the 'religious sector' in the peace process through advocacy and constituency building; institution building; empowerment of the BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities); the declaration of peace zones in areas torn by guerilla warfare; interfaith dialogue at several levels; and mediation (238-267). She recommends that the justice sought in conciliation should be restorative rather than retributive and lead to structural reform that undoes historical inequities (270-271).

In the third contribution, Thanh-dam Truong seeks to illustrate how Buddhism may add a spiritual dimension to the debate on human security in the 21st century though 'interparadigmatic learning on ethics, rights and human interaction' (276). She argues that the Western, 'compartmentalised' view of human security, that ig-

nore the role of religion in violence, must be complemented by an Eastern emphasis on its systemic interconnectedness with not only good governance and the rule of law, but also with economic (in)security and migration in a global political economy. The ‘ontological insecurity’ globalisation produces through the de- and re-traditionalisations that question self-identities is in need of a spiritual dimension by it being collectively protected and enhanced by the virtues of compassion, patience, modesty and respect for others. If these are absent, human rights cannot function (277-284). She proposes that ‘ontological security’ be found through the fourth, global ‘vehicle’ of Buddhism, *Lokayana*, in which socially constructed identities are renounced and which accepts that there can be a diversity of means to spirituality and peace (285). She divides human minds into those that are ‘wholesome’, those that are ‘neutral’, and those that are ‘unwholesome’. The latter are ‘guided by conceptual errors’, ‘misdirection of perception’, and the inability ‘to grasp the principle of interbeing’, i.e. are full of *tanha*, ‘craving’. They may be transformed into ‘wholesome’ by the practice of Buddhist meditation ‘on the ethics of restraint, virtue and compassion’ (286). The harm (*karma*) their ‘unwholesome minds’ produce, they may undo through the fountain of compassion, *prajna*, ‘penetrating insight’ (into the interconnectedness of all life forms) (287-288). ‘Ontological security’ is derived from perceiving oneself in relation to others as others (290). She concludes with an agenda ‘towards a compassionate human security’ (290-294).

Part IV

In part IV (297-369), eleven important documents, drafted by secular as well as religious bodies, are presented in their historical order, from 1948 to 2003.

Appreciation

In the Brill tradition, this book has been beautifully produced and is a pleasure to read. It is also a paperback and so not superexpensive, as are bound Brill books, though still outside the range affordable to African university libraries. Co-publishing with African, Latin American and Asian publishers should remedy this.

The purpose of this volume is to highlight religion's potentialities as a bridge to peace. Actually, it is impressive, and disheartening, as an analysis of the power of religion to generate conflict, and of its history as a war machine, though the devastations wrought by secular ideologies surpass those by religion. But as a demonstration how religion has been, and will be, effective in conflict resolution, the book is weak. It is then utopian, at times messianic, and prescriptive rather than descriptive, full of 'if', 'when', 'can', 'might' and 'should'. If believers or the churches would opt to follow the 'right path' – the liberal-theological, elitist, enlightened one of tolerance and dialogue –, then they will generate peace. This is particularly so for the contributions by Gopin (43-56), Ngala (159-167) and Truong, but marks also the 'visions for peace' by Muzaffar (72-79), Grenimann (182), and Giay (223-224). The only article to show that 'intolerant' religion has itself a distinct contribution to make to conflict resolution by addressing – be it indirect – its roots through symbolic contestation (94-96, 9-103, 109-113) is that of Miguez. His is the most important contribution to this volume. Despite this criticism, this book should be read and discussed critically by many scholars of religions, also those of Africa. But for scholars of religions in Africa, the price is, I fear, prohibitive.