



Thomas Matyók, Maureen Flaherty, Hamdesa Tusso, Jessica Senehi and Sean Byrne (eds.)

Peace on Earth: The Role of Religion in Peace and Conflict Studies

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014, ISBN: 0739176285, 454p.

Peace on Earth undertakes the Sisyphean task of convening an academic discussion on religion's role in Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS). The stated aim of the volume is 'to demonstrate the varied ways by which religion can contribute to the creation of a less violent world built on a foundation of justice, through faith-informed conflict management, transformation, and reconciliation' (p. 1).

The book is divided into three parts and the first section – 'Peace and Conflict Studies in a Contextualized Place' – consists of three stage-setting chapters. After a general introduction in Chapter One, the second chapter contends that religion has the ability 'to drive the transformation of human establishments' and examples are cited across several faith traditions from recent centuries. Chapter Three discusses the concept of 'ahimsa', as developed by Gandhi, as a universal lens. In Chapter Four, Girard's mimetic construct is applied to Corinthians 1:13 in an attempt to nuance a holistic understanding of reconciliation. Imitative desires which yield reciprocal violence are replaced with an ethic of mutual care or 'blessing-based love' that delivers authentic and sustainable reconciliation.

Part Two is entitled 'Religions and Peace and Conflict Studies' and takes up fifteen chapters, the majority of the volume. Each contribution discusses religion with regard to a particular tradition, namely Catholic, Evangelical, Judaic, Islamic, indigenous African, Aboriginal Canadian, Mennonite, Quaker, Haitian Vodou, Eastern Orthodox Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Daoist, and Baha'i, and indigenous faiths more broadly are also discussed. According to the editor's introduction, each analysis of 'faith tradition contributions to the PACS field' sets out to address a number of issues: the key relevant teachings of that tradition; its role in contributing to conflict; and the role of the tradition in contributing to peacebuilding and conflict transformation. In practice, however, each chapter stands independent of this rubric and of its counterparts. Arguments range from the deleterious impact of Christian and Western influences on Canadian Aboriginal peoples, to the implications of indigenous African religion for peace and conflict studies and practice. The resulting anthology provides useful, if perhaps scattered, insights.

Part Three, 'The Way Forward: Four Faith Models', attempts to provide case studies. Chapter Twenty argues that the church is uniquely placed to make a contribution in a world in which conflicts are 'simultaneously local and international'; it is also able to 'integrate' peace and conflict studies 'in local understandings and methodologies', a nod to the development trend towards *local ownership* (p. 367). Chapter Twenty-One is refreshingly specific. It's academic author, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, distances peacebuilding in Islam from historical figures and calls for new research, and specifically the inclusion of work by Shi'a and Sunni scholars, to complement the often-cited, but not universally accepted, Sufi interpretations. Abu-Nimer is effectively asking other academics to be more practical and relevant. Chapter Twenty-Two explains the meaning of 'Peace on Earth' from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. Chapter Twenty-Three provides an actual case study which describes the 'Oasis of Peace' community



established by a Catholic priest to promote Jewish-Arab relations; this community is now evolving into the World Peace College. It is worth noting that, while the idea of including religion in Peace and Conflict Studies seems new, the 'Oasis of Peace' has existed since 1972. Twenty-nine authors contribute to the twenty-three chapters here, with two more editors joining their voices with one of the previous contributors in the conclusion. While each writes with a unique perspective, and multiple academic disciplines are represented alongside varied practitioner experiences, three overarching points of view emerge as the volume progresses. The brief conclusion uses an agnostic and pragmatic voice, observing that 'Religion is a human creation' and a potential source for peacebuilding, tolerance, and coexistence (p. 418). This echoes the introduction which advised readers that 'It is foolish to ignore what is' (p. 6). Throughout the book, some authors manage to voice this pragmatic view without condescension, while others cannot contain themselves.

A second point of view, distinct but not necessarily mutually exclusive from the pragmatic one mentioned above, is expressed in a tone that is more apologetic in the philosophical sense: it rationalises that 'all of the great religions instruct people to forgive, reconcile, be tolerant, help heal, and advocate for the greater good' (p. 419). This view is expressed by many of the book's authors and is more closely aligned with 'The Charter for Compassion', 'A Common Word', and universalist movements: pluralism is accepted as normative and is promoted. In appealing to universality, however, some authors overreach pragmatic boundaries to make claims like the argument that 'spirituality is that which animates reconciliation' (p. 58). This second perspective is also problematic because it ignores the reality that many religious actors practice exclusivist particularism.

The most helpful perspective emerges where these two outlooks converge. Authors following this third line of enquiry suggest that religion is part of our human social construct; they also recognise that 'faith based actors are increasingly active in peacemaking and peacebuilding' (p. 367). Actors for whom religious identity and practice are part and parcel of their daily lives are at the frontlines of violence prevention, conflict transformation, and active peacebuilding. Herein lies the rub: as the editors note, the academic and policy relevance of religion to PACS and peacebuilding is new, but the role of religion and religiously motivated actors in conflict settings is as old as recorded history.

Yet a third voice looms in the background, less audible, though implicit and occasionally explicit in several of the articles; it aligns with Western national interests in its commitment to religious freedom and the democratisation agenda. Cormier reacts against Western influence in a discussion of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada: 'The emphasis of Western ideals within popular forms of peacebuilding undermines the cultural traditions of local communities and promotes modern versions of the civilized/savage dichotomy' (p. 174). Creamer and Hrynkow, by contrast, elevate Clinton Bennett's 'goal of bringing about a global democratic future', for which religion is a resource (p. 17). To draw on Redekop (Chapter Four), such a future risk developing into a state of ontological mimesis, an escalating spiral of tensions that will play out as a clash of civilizations, even as the book would like to counter that notion. Promoting religious freedom also happens to be, at present, a well-funded agenda.



This edited collection struggles to identify common threads in a complex debate, and the collection might have been more coherent if the contributors to Part Two had adhered to the pattern described in the introduction. Such a book would have been more encyclopedic but less authentic: the variety of opinions included here yield ideas that are more interesting. One of the great challenges within PACS discourse more generally, and one exacerbated in conversations about religion, is how to build vocabulary and establish terms that enable common conversation without alienating or violating those who use alternative discourses and this problem is acknowledged: 'One of the reasons why the language of reconciliation was not used in the social sciences for many years was its association with religion in general and Christianity in particular' (p. 61). Nevertheless, PACS discourses on religion will have to find a more unified vocabulary and ways of permitting divergence, especially with regard to something as heterogeneous as religion, while still encouraging conversation. The volume contains unhelpful phrases (e.g. 'well-established faith tradition[s]') which illustrate that the need to find appropriate language is a priority.

The editors of *Peace on Earth* are commendable for their ambition and for collating contributions from many gifted thinkers. As PACS research starts to take religion more seriously and acknowledges the long-standing contributions that have and can be made by religious traditions and religiously motivated actors, further volumes that focus on addressing the particular challenges raised here will be welcome.

Steven Leach
Cape Town