Book Reviews

The Ambivalence of the Sacred

R. Scott Appleby. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999. 429 pages.

The Ambivalence of the Sacred book attempts to articulate a framework for formulating specific answers, on a case-by-case basis, to three overarching questions pertaining to the seemingly ambivalent relationship between religion and violence. First, it seeks to examine conditions under which religious actors become violent; secondly, the opposite circumstances under which religious actors reject the violence of religious extremists according to the same principles of religious sanctity; and thirdly, the settings in view of which non-violent religious actors can become agents of peacebuilding. The purported goal is to identify and develop means and methods by which religion may become an instrument of conflict management and/or resolution instead of being a source of deadly conflicts. Appleby argues that religion can be administered in such a prudent, selective, and deliberate fashion so as to allow it consistently to contribute to a peaceful resolution of conflicts. Additionally, that a new form of conflict transformation —"religious peacebuilding"— is actually taking shape among local communities plagued with violence. In this sense "ambivalence of the sacred" projects an awareness that both possibilities of life and death reside within the holy.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part (chs. 1-5) attempts to elaborate elements of a theory of religion's role in deadly conflict and to address the first two overarching questions above. Citing the cases of South Africa and the transformations in Roman Catholic teachings, in response to both state apartheid violence in the former, and to post-war era pressures for pluralism on the latter, chapter 1 examines the paradoxical and ambivalent logic of the sacred. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the conditions under which religious actors legitimate violence as a sacred duty or privilege in light of the violent forces of ethno-nationalism and religious extremism. Chapter 4 examines the phenomenon of nonviolent religious militancy by looking at Buddhist peacemaking in Southeast Asia and by introducing transnational NGO's that work with and among local religious actors. The

last chapter in this part (ch. 5) attempts to narrow the book's focus to the one conceptual resource of "reconciliation" and forgiveness, as has been developed in the Christian religious tradition and in the contexts of the conflict in Northern Ireland and post-apartheid South Africa.

Drawing on the cases and theories of religious conflict transformation, part two examines the third question—the logic and potential of religious peacebuilding. Chapter 6 surveys the various functions and social locations of religious actors who work to resolve conflict nonviolently by serving as educators, advocates, intercessors, mediators and reconcilers. This is then followed by a discussion of three post-Cold War modes of religious conflict transformation. The following chapter discusses the internal debates within both Christianity and Islam concerning issues of human rights, religious identity, and mission. Finally chapter 8 ponders the future of religious peacebuilding and reflects on the possible contributions to be made by scholars, governments, NGOs, the international and local media, and interreligious and ecumenical organizations.

Occupying much of the thrust of *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* is the lofty and illusive goal of peace on earth. Or so it seems if one can overcome the cynicism inevitably generated by studies made at the behest of "research institutes" of the Carnegie Commission caliber. The role of such "academic" patrons and their invisible links to US policy agencies remain shrouded in ambivalence, if one may use the celebrated term, and hence raise legitimate questions about the purposes and policy implications of studies of this kind. Throughout his book and with a skillful sleight of hand, Appleby appears to want to convince his audience by confusing them, discomfiting the sense and implication, form and substance, meaning and content of "peace." His rhetoric about that condition strikes the reader as rich with euphemisms more concerned with *pax-Americana* objectives, rather than with world harmony. Enlisting the service of religion, the basic equation that the author appears to want to arrive at — in so many words — is how to transform and collapse "religion" (read Islam) from being a potential source of mobilization into being an "opium of the masses." Yet, serving two masters remains a highly risky endeavor, the incongruity of which frequently collides with the solid reality of having either to cater to the cause of peace or to that of *pax:* the former usually associated with justice and revealed religions, the latter with imperialism.

Admitting to the intricate relationship in some non-western cultures between religion and society, which rendered faith unaffected by the

private-public distinction, Appleby suggests a subtle approach to address this secular dilemma—secularism being an American national interest. Rather than directly confronting and opposing religious forces and actors so as to enforce this distinction, he proposes a dynamic of outflanking and cooptation which would allow the infiltration of "religious" societies, through recruited religious figures and actors, the "civil society", and NGO's. The book's forward (by Theodore M. Heburgh), for instance, cites the US declaration of independence as the most eloquent manifestation of all the social and political principles that conform to the requirements of peace, justice, and the human right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Implicitly or explicitly the book sets the US declaration of independence in judgment over "revelation" and in effect relates religious understanding and interpretation to this new secular religion of humanity. In other words, the seeming reality that inspires this project seeks to co-opt religious dynamics under the banner of peace and justice, substantively understood as falling under the canopy of the US declaration of independence. From the outset, the contradictions of this project was visible, as humanism and theocentrism constitute two entirely different and self-referential worldviews and foci of reverence.

While it is not the purpose here to judge Appleby's intentions, much of his study inspires discomfort. He does put forth cases ranging from South Africa, and Catholicism, to Buddhism, Evangelism, Hinduism, and Judaism, yet with relatively constrained references to Islam and to the profundity of the Arab/Islamic-Israeli conflict. However, one cannot help but wonder as to whether that which has been downplayed (i.e., Islam) does not in effect constitute the principal focus and target of Appleby's project, camouflaged by seemingly more detailed discussions of non-Islamic cases: an implicit and "ambivalent" disclaiming of bias and prejudice while proclaiming objectivity and neutrality. This is visible in the way in which he defines and perceives religion, identifies challenges, and proposes their resolution.

In typical structural-functionalist fashion, religion is reduced simply to being a "human response to a reality perceived as sacred," and hence could be nontheistic, polytheistic, or monotheistic. The first step thus is to introduce reductionism, away from truth and revelation, and confusion, so as to allow for reconstruction, remisinterpretation and rearrangement. Within this fissuring framework one can then present the argument that there are many Islams, and hence render the category pliable and malleable,

or in the extreme case unknown and unidentifiable. As he put it, there is "no Islam, no Christianity, no Buddhism — only Muslims, Christians and Buddhists living in specific contingent contexts." Separating Islam from Muslims, a trap which many Muslims as a matter of fact have fallen into, it becomes possible to declare war upon them within the new global context, without necessarily being susceptible to accusations of malevolent intentions toward Islam (e.g., Iraq, Palestine among other cases). Furthermore, one interpretation calling for *jihad,* say against Israel, the seemingly hidden objective in this whole exercise, becomes as good as one calling for peace with it. In typical liberal-pluralistic molding, it all boils down to simply being a matter of opinions rather than standards. This constitutes a first discursive step toward fragmenting consensus within the Islamic religious field and consequently infiltrating Muslim societies.

The second step is to render Muslims both apologetic and on the defensive by identifying for them their agenda and priority settings. The major challenge that faces "Muslim peacemakers", as Appleby puts it, "is to sustain a culture that rejects retaliatory violence as a means of redressing grievances or defending the rights of aggrieved minorities." Essentially that is, Muslims (Jews are not mentioned) are required to ignore the divine injunction "an eye for an eye" in favor of "turning the other cheek." Deciphered, Christianity becomes the referential principle and the guardian over Islam rather than the other way round as the Qur'an clearly stipulates (3:9; 5:48). Policy wise, and in intriguing words such as "forgiving" and "reconciling" this would translate into convincing the Arab and Muslim people, as opposed to their already penetrated regimes, to accept the usurpation of Palestine and Israeli control over Jerusalem. Peacemakers after all, even in the face of perceived injustices, "reject" and "sublimate violence" by restricting it to "noncoercive means".

Having subtly identified how aggrieved Arabs and Palestinians, for instance, should behave toward Israel, Appleby then suggests what he calls, a "nested paradigm of conflict transformation." According to this paradigm, local actors already embedded or "nested" in a conflicted community or situation, collaborate in a wide range of activities and functions "that precede and follow formal peace accords." Those actors would include respected educational, business, health, and religious leaders who control primary networks of groups and institutions — i.e. leaders and representatives of the presumed "civil society".

Within this fissuring and infiltrating framework, Islamic groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah or *Jihad*, in their commitment to resistance and martyrdom and thus to choosing "death over life" as Appleby accuses, would be marginalized and outlawed as "terrorists" by fellow "Muslim peacemakers". Assigning to himself the right to speak for Muslims and to represent them, he states that many Muslims would refuse to recognize "suicide" missions as conforming to the will of God, and as a matter of fact, would see it as a gross misinterpretation of Allah's will. Presumably, Appleby's interpretation is the correct one. Such pretentious statements constitute a relatively clear example of the irreconcilability of religious and secular logics and understandings of life and death. Whereas in a secular logic, an act of self-sacrifice would mean death, in the Islamic logic this very act constitutes martyrdom and therefore life (2:154). Martyrdom becomes the essential principle within which the contradictions of life and death are resolved. In this context, Appleby's accusation and disarming interpretations simply make no sense. Policy-wise, however, his logic attempts to depoliticize Islam and hence to deprive it of its mobilizing elements, reducing it down to a private moral domain, typically encouraging otherwordly spiritual Sufi tendencies at the expense of Islam's actual and physical *jihad* doctrines.

Much more could be said about these specimens of pseudo-academic approaches to religion in general and Islam in particular, were space to allow. Their scholarly claims nevertheless should not blind the reader to their practical and policy implications, particularly now that Muslim societies are the identified targets. As far as Appleby's Bible of peace is concerned it may do well to remember President Jomo Kenyata when he addressed this question to a Western Priest: "Father" he said, "when you first came here (i.e., to Africa) you had the Bible and we had the land. How come now we have the Bible and you have the land?"

Amr Sabet
Department of Political Science
University of Tampere, Finland