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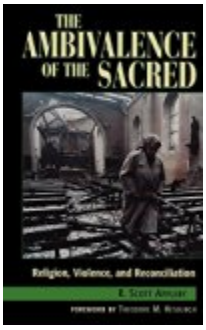
R. Scott Appleby. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation.* Lanham, Maryland and Oxford, England: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. xiii + 429 pp. $24.95 (paper) ISBN 0-8476-8555-1; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8554-7.



Reviewed by Anne M. Martinez (American Studies and Chicano Studies, University of Minnesota)
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Blessed are the Peacebuilders: Reconciliation in a New Millennium

In March, 2000, in the spirit of the Lenten season and at the dawn of a new millennium, Pope John Paul II also spoke of reconciliation. "We ask pardon for the divisions that have come between Christians, for the use of violence by some of them in service to the truth, and for the attitudes of indifference and hostile assumptions in meeting with followers of other religions."[1] In the days that followed this homily, the pope was criticized for the lack of specificity his words offered – in particular, for neglecting to apologize for atrocities committed against Jews during World War II. His attempt at reconciliation failed in some quarters. He continued, "But what does the term 'reconciliation' mean to us? To understand its exact meaning and value, we must first take note of the possibility of divisions, of separations. Yes, human beings are the only creatures on Earth that can establish a relationship of communion with their creator, but they are also the only ones who can separate themselves as well. They have often in fact distanced themselves from God."[2] The PopêÒs message was quite timely. As R. Scott Appleby notes, "the idea that religions evolve and reinterpret their mission takes on special significance in an era of globalization" (41). With these words, Appleby addresses one of the critical challenges to organized religion at the turn of the millennium.

R. Scott Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* addresses these very issues – violence and reconciliation– in a global setting, post-World War II. Appleby's ambitious project addresses not only historians, but policy makers and educators invested in peace. Drawing a distinction between religious peacemakers, who are committed to ending violence and resolving conflict, and religious extremists, who are committed to victory at any cost, Appleby argues that religious peacemakers are critical to the peace process, and deserve greater support and attention from interested parties locally and internationally. Appleby is not naive to the ways that religions, or political leaders in the name of religion, have contributed to deadly conflicts. His goal, however, is to emphasize the ways that religious peacemakers have been present and active in reconciliation in conflicts around the globe.

The Ambivalence of the Sacred is organized around two pivotal questions: "why and under what conditions do some religious actors choose the path of violence while others seek justice through nonviolent means and work for reconciliation among combatants? " and "what might be gained from involving [nonviolent religious militants] more directly in peacebuilding" (19-20)? Appleby examines the role of religion and the faithful in conflicts in South Africa, Bosnia, Southeast Asia and Northern Ireland, highlighting individual efforts and those of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Catholic Relief Services and the Mennonite Central Committee. Appleby's global coverage and religious diversity is quite impressive. He provides complex analysis of issues that receive superficial news coverage, revealing the deep roots of many contemporary conflicts.

Appleby's work left me wondering how we find peacebuilders in what often seem like irreconcilable situations, such as the abortion debate in the United States, and the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian struggle – perhaps the quintessential post-World War II religious conflict. Through a series of extremists and peacemakers, these conflicts have raged for years with reconciliation still out of reach.

Appleby ultimately finds that it is not enough to have peacemakers, or nonviolent militants. Ultimately, reconciliation depends on peacebuilders, whom he describes as involved in a "comprehensive, theoretically sophisticated, and systematic process performed by religious and secular actors working in collaboration at different levels and at various proximities to conflict zones" (20). He concludes by focusing on the work of peacebuilders who "strive to create coalitions across ethnic and religious boundaries…and channel the militancy of religion in the direction of the disciplined pursuit of justice and nonviolent resistance to extremism" (283). Appleby emphasizes coalition building, both within and across religious denominations and with other NGOs and political leaders. According to Peter Wallensteen and Margereta Sollenberg, "two-thirds of contemporary wars turn on issues of religious, ethnic, or national identity. Less than 10 percent begin as interstate conflicts" (17). The role of religious peacebuilders in these conflicts is immeasurable. As such, Applebŷ Òs work is timely and a must for anyone interested in peace and justice efforts worldwide.

Notes

[1]. Pope John Paul II, *Homily of Holy Father Asking Pardon*, Zenit translation, www.zenit.org.

[2]. Ibid.

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