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Book Review: The Warrior and the Pacifist: Competing Motifs in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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***The Warrior and the Pacifist: Competing Motifs in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.* Lester R. Kurtz, editor. New York and London: Routledge, 2018. 342 pages. Hardcover, ISBN: 9781138585430. Paperback, ISBN: 9781138585447. EBook, ISBN: 9780429505263.**

The subject matter of this book is both relevant and urgent. Several contributing authors describe recent incidents of religiously motivated violence, and since its publication in May 2018 such violence has not abated. Notable incidents are the attacks on synagogues in the United States (October 2018 and April 2019), mosques in New Zealand (March 2019) and churches in Sri Lanka (April 2019). Such atrocious events demonstrate the continuing need for academic reflection on the relation between religion and violence. The Warrior and the Pacifist offers readers ample material to deepen their understanding.

The contributing authors make it abundantly clear that the mainstreams of Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam consistently call for restraint. All four religions boast a long tradition of carefully articulated guidelines concerning the use of violence. Two of them, Christianity and especially Buddhism, contain pacifist strands that dismiss nearly every form of violence. The reader of this volume cannot escape the conclusion that terrorist attacks such as the ones mentioned above go against the essential moral fibre of these four religious traditions. Furthermore, one of the contributing authors, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, observes that much that has been branded “terrorism” is in fact political violence as a response to perceived injustice. According to Satha-Anand, this distinction is a key to the nonviolent transformation of conflicts. (237)

The religious legitimacy of terrorism is, however, not the main concern of this work. Its primary aim is to reflect more broadly on the perception of violence in four of the world’s religions. The title is fitting because this word pair, warrior and pacifist, recurs throughout the book as its chief analytical category: how have the four religions, at various stages in their histories, depicted the ideal types of the warrior and the pacifist? In my view, this is an original and fruitful angle in the study of these religions. In all four cases, it has yielded both fresh retellings of their histories and helpful systematic analyses of their basic doctrines.

The structure of this volume is transparent and flows organically from its central concern, which is to explore pacifist and just war traditions in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each religious tradition is discussed in three chapters. The book closes with three additional chapters that take a cross-cultural approach, including a conclusion by the editor, Lester R. Kurtz.

Kurtz is Professor of Sociology at George Mason University. He has taught and published widely in the field of conflict and peace studies. His rich experience becomes evident in the conclusion, in which he helpfully connects many loose ends and makes a case for “nonviolent activism”, which in his view combines the best elements of pacifism and just war theories. Kurtz argues that Mahatma Gandhi’s approach to conflict embodied nonviolent activism in an exemplary way: “Gandhi’s approach to the question of violence as a weapon of conflict reshapes the battlefield.” (322)

The ambiguity of the sources of the four religions is recognized by all authors. As Iselin Frydenlund points out, even the ancient sacred writings of Buddhism leave space for interpretations that permit the use of violence under certain conditions. Another contention

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that may come as a surprise to some readers is that the early Christian church was not pacifist in the strict, Anabaptist sense of the word. This is argued on exegetical and historical grounds by Nigel Biggar, who maintains that “the use of force can be governed by the motive of love and by the intention of the end of a just peace.” (156)

Chapters with a more contemporary focus complement the historical and systematic material. Professors of conflict and peace studies will be grateful for the case studies offered in the chapters on engaged Buddhism, the ethical code of the Israeli Defense Forces, and peacebuilding initiatives in Sri Lanka. In the section on Christianity, Pope Francis’ message on nonviolence presumably serves as this more contemporary angle. While this is an inspiring and, in light of the long Catholic just war tradition, innovative text, it is prescriptive rather than descriptive and, therefore, less suited as case study material.

A noteworthy lacuna is the absence of a historical and systematic exposition of the pacifist tradition within Christianity. This omission is partly compensated by the foreword by Kevin P. Clements, a declared Christian pacifist, who convened the conference (Tokyo, 2016), which led to the publication of this book. Another missing element is a reflection on the different perceptions of violence in the Shiite and Sunni traditions. Understanding the way violence has been viewed by these traditions is important for an understanding of violent conflicts in today’s Middle East.

The Warrior and the Pacifist is an appropriate textbook for undergraduate and graduate courses in religion and conflict, especially if the learning objectives include theoretical reflection on the subject. For undergraduate students it offers an introduction to the different views of violence in the four religious traditions. Graduate students can profitably engage with the positions and arguments propounded by the contributors. This book is less suitable for practical courses in conflict transformation. Its aim is not to introduce or sharpen peacebuilding skills, but rather to outline the way four of the world’s religious traditions have viewed conflict. Its unique contribution is its plea for interreligious and non-violent activism, which transcends the dichotomy of traditional pacifist and just war theories.

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