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Review of Faith-Based Organizations in Transnational Peacebuilding

Timothy Seidel
Eastern Mennonite University, timothy.seidel@emu.edu

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***Faith-Based Organizations in Transnational Peacebuilding.* Tanya B. Schwarz. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, paper, 240 pp., ISBN 978-1-78660-410-1.**

Timothy Seidel
Eastern Mennonite University
timothy.seidel@emu.edu

Despite a growing number of studies into the role of faith and religion in peacebuilding and International Relations, Tanya B. Schwarz has the sense that something is missing. What's missing is a fuller engagement with religion and how it is understood and lived out by Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) on their own terms and not in the a priori terms set out in the prevailing scholarly and donor discourses that often only seek to represent, not engage, faith and FBOs.

This is what Schwarz is trying to do in *Faith-Based Organizations in Transnational Peacebuilding*. The aim of the book is not to determine whether or not a particular organization is “faith-based,” or even to evaluate its effectiveness in peacebuilding, but rather to understand how particular values, identities, and practices are understood by FBOs, how such meanings shape peacebuilding strategies and goals, and assess to what extent those understandings confirm or challenge scholarly and donor discourses about those organizations.

Using what she calls a reflexive, bottom-up approach, Schwarz explores these questions by examining three organizations: International Justice Mission, the Taizé Community, and Religions for Peace. A critical takeaway here is that an overreliance on a priori categories without paying attention to how FBOs understand themselves in terms of those religious categories “can miss the ways FBOs not only draw on existing religious traditions, but also construct their own unique transnational communities through the development of unique practices” (p. 5). This is important because understanding the meanings of these practices can also shape understandings of the role these organizations might play in building peace.

Prayer is one such practice that Schwarz explores at length in each of these FBOs. Her exploration of prayer as a practice with consequential effects is an example of an “ontological discrepancy” (p. 6) between how scholars and donors talk about the work of peacebuilding and how FBOs carry it out. Instead of assuming a practice like prayer is “inherently religious,” focused on the “transcendental,” and so largely inconsequential to “real” peacebuilding work, Schwarz’s approach starts at a different place seeking to understand the work that prayer is doing in these organizations, as understood by those actually working in them. This reflexive approach is spelled out at length in her first chapter. Her discussion on how religion (and the secular) is too often defined and talked about in peacebuilding and International Relations (e.g. essentialist or instrumentalist, in rigid binaries) helpfully grounds this approach.

Schwarz’s choice of organizations is interesting, each representing a particular kind of FBO and a particular kind of understanding of “politics.” The limitation is that it is still pretty Christian-centric and had me wondering: what difference would it have made if a “Muslim” or “Sikh” FBO was included? How are these FBO typologies themselves somewhat Christian-centric and so take a particular understanding of the “secular” as a given, as a frame of reference?

Schwarz acknowledges the broad range of understandings of peace and practices of peacebuilding. Beyond processes focused on diplomacy or conflict resolution, she underscores holistic approaches that give attention “to structural issues related to poverty, race, health, gender, and other areas that contribute to violence” (p. 7). This informs her understanding of transnational faith-based peacebuilders to be not only those explicit, self-identified “religious” organizations” working for “peace” but also those “striving to strengthen the global human community through a range of activities that include, among other things, conflict resolution, post-conflict reintegration, humanitarianism, development, and human rights work” (p. 7).

Chapters two through four are dedicated in turn to these three FBO’s. Schwarz begins with International Justice Mission (IJM), one of the leading human rights organizations in the world. She describes the ways in which IJM’s conception of justice emerges from specific interpretations of Christian scripture that align with its evangelical political philosophy and shaped by the views on human nature, punishment, and law enforcement of its founder Gary Haugen. IJM focuses on violent crime such as sex trafficking, forced labor slavery, police abuse of power, sexual violence, and citizenship rights abuse. It addresses these issues through programs that rescue victims, bring criminals to justice, restores survivors by providing aftercare, and strengthen justice systems (pp. 61-62). One of the ways that IJM challenges the a priori categories Schwarz is examining is in its integration (or rather the lack of separation) between human rights and “religious values.” Schwarz points out that IJM’s understanding and commitment to human rights from within its Christian theology, values, and practices challenges the “secularity” of human rights as typically understood within global governance and international legal terms (p. 76). The role of prayer emerges as a practice that also challenges rigid distinctions. That is, at IJM prayer is not necessarily separate from the other work of the organization. Schwarz describes how IJM staff emphasized prayer as necessary for both staff care (e.g. managing emotional and psychological stress by shifting the burden of authority to God) and for achieving organization goals (e.g. appealing to God for direction and intervention).

Next, Schwarz examines the Taizé Community, an ecumenical monastic brotherhood working towards peace and reconciliation all over the world. Taizé promotes an understanding of reconciliation that “brings people together in often-difficult contexts and, though prayer and other practices, encourages them to see each other as people, rather than as enemies or others” (p. 100). In contrast to IJM, Taizé articulates less a savior narrative (e.g. fighting on behalf of the poor), not claiming to bring solutions per se, but instead be “a simple presence of love” (p. 108). Also in contrast to IJM is Taizé’s approach to seek reconciliation instead of punishment and focus on the goodness of people instead of the inherent evils of human nature—an approach that indicates the impact of Taizé’s founder Brother Roger. Taizé’s focus on both inner contemplation and direct engagement with political and economic institutions has included supporting agricultural cooperatives, trade unions, refugee resettlement, engaging institutions like the European Union.

The practice of prayer is a critical component to peacebuilding and reconciliation as well as daily communal life for the Taizé Community. It is understood to be at least as important as dialogue or other practices and in some instances more important for the journey toward reconciliation across lines of religious, political, and cultural difference. Schwarz observes that “the Taizé brothers agree that dialogue can be an important part of cross-denominational, cross-ethnic, cross-cultural

engagements, but they also contend that communal practices, including prayer, are often more effective in bringing people together and building trust” (p. 127).

Finally, Schwarz considers Religions for Peace, the world’s largest multi-religious peacebuilding organization. This multi-religious identity distinguishes Religions for Peace from IJM and Taizé and informs its approach to promoting “a ‘secular’ or ‘secondary’ language of values, which draws from religious traditions, but is meant to be a separate and distinct language in its own right” (p. 134). This shapes Religions for Peace’s ability to engage International Organizations, in particular the United Nations, which as Schwarz observes, reveals the influence of organizational leadership and global governance norms on the organization, its values, and overall approach to transnational peacebuilding. This also shapes its agenda as an organization focused on bringing together religious leaders to discern common values towards peace writ large. This includes regional, national, and local activities like assemblies as well as conflict resolution, development, humanitarian and human rights projects. Its broad conceptualization of peace is complemented by its complex organizational structure and its “secular” language. As Schwarz describes, this is more a kind of “neutral language” that allows many groups to engage peacebuilding issues together, while still drawing from both religious traditions as well more commonly understood “secular” influences like the UN.

The role of prayer is more complicated for a multi-religious organization like Religions for Peace, yet Schwarz argues it remains central to their peacebuilding work and helps to distinguish it from secular organizations. She found a range of opinions on the appropriateness of prayer in any given situation, but there was consensus that prayer was important to peacebuilding, whether indirectly through the lives of individuals doing the work or more directly in situations of conflict resolution and post-conflict reintegration.

The comparative analysis of these three FBOs allows Schwarz to assess how they conceptualize and enact their own values, identities, and practices. In terms of practices, as discussed, the importance of prayer in peacebuilding was evident across FBO’s. In terms of values, important elements include the role of organizational leadership in shaping values, how FBOs complicate distinctions between “secular” and “religious” values, and how those values (like reconciliation) go beyond motivating factors to embodied and enacted forms of action. In terms of identities, FBO’s are unique and transnationally cohesive. FBOs share practices that draw on established religious traditions but also attend to specific organizational discourses and goals. Here organizational leadership and goals—as well as international norms related to global governance or multiculturalism—shape identity in terms of what it means (and when) to be a “Christian” or “multi-religious” organization.

This comparative analysis offers helpful insights. But I wonder if a more important contribution that this book offers is the reflexive approach taken to perform that analysis. This is because of the ways the prevailing literature locates faith and religion outside of the political—exposing a secular bias—leaving it as an object to be represented and evaluated, not a subject to be engaged. This is revealed most sharply in her exploration of practices of prayer in these FBOs. In addition to the reflexive sensibility she models as a researcher, that allows her to begin to engage FBOs on their own terms, this approach interrogates claims as to where the work of peacebuilding—and politics more generally—“really” happens.

This is an important contribution to the study of faith and religion in peacebuilding and politics. As Schwarz described it, scholars, donors, practitioners “should pay more attention to what are presently regarded as peripheral peacebuilding practices—not just ‘religious’ practices like prayer, but other practices that do not necessarily fall under the umbrella of dialogue through talking or listening” and yet are consequential for achieving peacebuilding goals (p. 183). This important approach helps us see things that we might not otherwise see (because of a priori or ontological discrepancies, etc.) or that we dismiss as peripheral. There is a kind of erasure in this dismissal, an erasure of peacebuilding and political possibilities that are already present (or past) and only heard when described in secular terms.

Another important contribution that follows Schwarz’s general critique of reification is an interrogation of the essentialist conclusions that follow such reifications that render religion either “good” or “bad.” Though she opens up the door for further critique, Schwarz does not engage at length, for example, the scholarship on Orientalism and de/postcolonialism that traces the genealogies of these conceptualizations. Here I wonder if Schwarz had included an FBO that was not “Christian” but “Muslim” or “Sikh,” this line of inquiry would have been more clearly picked up. This is important because essentialization obscures the instrumentalization of faith and religion for particular political ends. This has been no less true in peacebuilding theory and practice, where religion, properly disciplined, may occasionally be a means to a more just society (because it offers “cultural proximity” to “local” populations targeted for peacebuilding), but it can never be an end in itself. Religion is only instrumental to a goal that is privileged over and above it: the well-being of the nation-state.

And while an assessment of the impact of peacebuilding of these three FBOs was beyond the scope of this study, the question over what “work” the religious-secular distinction continues to do in peacebuilding and International Relations remains critical to understanding not only the role of these (ontological) categories but the function of the binary itself to (de)legitimize and (de)authorize particular acts in particular places by particular people (who are not incidentally racialized and gendered in particular ways).

Not taking a rigid secular-religious distinction as a given allows us to see the ways in which so-called “secular” NGOs exhibit a kind of “faith” in ways similar to FBOs. Following this, Schwarz implies a critical question for further research in her conclusion to “assess and possibly challenge the claims that FBOs and secular NGOs are different *enough* to warrant an analytical separation” (p. 178). What difference does it make to identify an organization or a set of peacebuilding practices as particularly “faith-based” or “religious” or not?

Schwarz looks to not only challenge common assumptions about the role of religion in FBOs but in politics more generally, by examining how FBOs conceptualize their own values, identities, and practices. This seems like a simple move to make, but it requires a reflexivity that does not take as its point of departure the existence of religion as a “thing” in the world that precedes the work of the peacebuilding scholar or practitioner. Indeed, this was the sort of epistemological sensibility that Edward Said brought to the study of *Orientalism* when he pointed out that terms like “Orient” or “West” do not have any ontological stability but instead “is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other” (2003 [1978], p. xvii).

Like Said, I think Schwarz identifies the same problem with talk about faith and FBOs in peacebuilding by pointing out biases and lack of knowledge that reflects, in Said's case, the power of the "West," with little to do with the realities of life in the "Orient." Following this approach, it would have been interesting to hear Schwarz further explore the implications of this "destabilization." For example, Said points out that the effort to make ontological and epistemological distinctions between "Orient" and "West" emerge from a discourse articulated to "deal with" the "Orient": "dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (2003 [1978], p. 3). Like the "Orient" to "Orientalism, faith, religion, and FBOs are often discussed and analyzed in the prevailing scholarly and donor discourses on peacebuilding and International Relations (that turn on the secular-religious binary) in an attempt to "deal with" it, which is to say rule, restructure, and have authority over it.

Schwarz remains skeptical with a sense that something is missing, that the field is not fully engaging religion on its own terms. I agree with her and have felt it too. In this book, she offers a compelling, sharp, insightful discussion. But the something that is missing still feels missing. Maybe it is because this inquiry is unavoidably happening in a discursive and political space where modernization and secularization still hegemonize the field and set the terms for how we can talk about religion in peacebuilding and International Relations—where it is instrumentalized and deemed "good" only in as much as it points us toward the state and the market as the proper political and economic telos. Whatever they may be, this book helps us to name these constraints, and begin to push back. That alone makes an important contribution.

References

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