

Richard A. Burrige and Jonathan Sacks (eds), (2018) *Confronting Religious Violence: A Counternarrative*. London: SCM Press; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press. Xxv + 284 pages, ISBN: 978-03-34-05713-0 (hbk), £25.00.

The last few decades have seen a proliferation of academic and more popular writing on religious violence, which has coincided with the rise of Islamist terrorism. The decade after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in particular witnessed an explosion of literature on religion and violence. Why does such work take 'religion' as its subject, rather than Islamist terrorism? There are two different types of answer to that question, depending on author and audience. Among secularist authors and audiences, the indictment of Islamist terrorism is part of a wider vindication of secularism against religion more broadly, or at least the public expression of religion. For ecumenically-minded Christians and Jews, on the other hand, the subject is religion and violence as a way of confessing our own guilt and not simply pointing fingers at Muslims.

The present book is of the latter kind in intention, but as we will see, it has difficulties escaping the former narrative. The book is the result of a Templeton Foundation sponsored symposium convened by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and the Anglican biblical scholar Richard Burrige. A group of mostly Jewish and Christian scholars, joined by one Muslim, reflect on the causes of, and cures for, religious violence. After an introductory essay by Sacks, there are two chapters on anti-Semitism in the New Testament and in Christian antiquity. The rest of the chapters fast-forward to the contemporary situation, and reflect in various ways on how to counter 'religious' violence, meaning mostly Islamist violence and violence between Muslims and Christians. Although religion is the ostensible subject, the authors were charged with the much narrower assignment of reflecting on 'how a rereading of the hallowed texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam might mitigate the militancy whereby group identity can lead to deadly conflict' (p. 3). The analyses oscillate between consideration of the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths and much more general pronouncements on the nature of 'religion', which is never defined.

In his introductory essay, Sacks describes religion as emerging from the need for group cooperation. Religion is therefore bound up with identity and particularity. The Enlightenment, however, sought to replace such obsessions with an emphasis on the universality of reason and rights. But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the repressed particularity returned in secular substitutes for religion, especially nation, class, and race. After such projects crashed and burned in the two World Wars and the Cold War, 'the West has been living through a new attempt to escape identity, in favor not of the universal but of the *individual*' (p. 27). This attempt has produced anomie, and so religion has returned, for better and for worse. Religion is 'the most potent

form of identity yet discovered' (p. 30), and so it has the capacity to produce violence. It also has the capacity to produce peace, however, and we must recover the scriptural counter-narratives that tell of a God of abundance, not scarcity.

As with any such collection of breezy generalizations, there is much about Sacks' account that invites scepticism. Are nation, class, and race simply reactions against the Enlightenment, and not bound up with the Enlightenment project itself? Is the 'resurgence of religion' really explicable as a reaction against some 'late twentieth-century project of abolishing identity in favor of individual choice' (p. 30), rather than against Western imperialism and the disruptions caused by global capitalism (which does not garner a mention in Sacks' account)? Most problematic is the fog surrounding the term 'religion'. Does the term mean, as in the work of René Girard, the dynamic of identity formation in any society, or does it mean the set of belief systems including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and so on, that are distinguished from 'secular' phenomena like nationalism? Sacks writes, 'The culprit [of violence] is not religion, but identity, and identity is a constitutive feature of the human condition' (p. 27). If that is the case, then why does the volume try to solve the problem of 'religious' violence, but not the violence of 'secular' forms of identity formation?

The volume is at its best when it descends from misleading abstractions like 'religion' to examine more carefully circumscribed justifications for violence. Richard Burrige's contribution examines apparently anti-Semitic rhetoric in the New Testament, and argues that an accurate historical-critical understanding of the texts can mitigate Christian anti-Jewish hostility. Paul is not a convert from a religion called Judaism to a religion called Christianity; Paul did not cease to be a Jew when he acknowledged Jesus as Messiah. Controversies in Paul's letters and John's gospel are best understood not as Christians versus Jews, but as sibling rivalries among different types of Jews. Sibling rivalry exists alongside a counter-narrative of God's love for all, so anti-Jewish supersessionism is not the only way to read the New Testament. Burrige's essay contributes to the possibility of a more peacemaking hermeneutic.

Historian Guy Strousma follows with an essay on Christian anti-Semitism in antiquity. Christianity, Strousma argues, is more inclined than Judaism toward persecution because it is a missionary and universal faith. Universalism is a two-edged sword, inviting all but potentially anathematizing as perverse any who decline the invitation to join the universal community of love. These tendencies in Christianity were exacerbated when Christians took power after Constantine.

From the ancient world, the volume moves to assess the contemporary situation. Eliza Griswold considers violence between Muslims and Christians in Africa and observes that 'such seeming religious grievances almost always have worldly—or secular—causes underlying them' (p. 85). She concentrates on climate change, and shows how desertification is pushing Muslims south into Christian lands across central Africa. Amineh Hoti, the lone Muslim voice in the volume, follows with suggestions on how to teach empathy in what she calls a new 'Age of Hatred', drawing on the work of the Center for Dialogue in Pakistan. Scott Atran considers ISIS and contrasts what he calls 'devoted actors' with 'rational actors'. Rather than trying to understand ISIS in rational political and economic terms, we need to see their devotees as clinging to sacred values in a world disrupted by global capitalism. According to Atran, 'religions sanctify and incite fear' (p. 108), but also hope. We need to respond to religious violence not merely with material quests for comfort and safety, but with 're-enchancement', an appeal to the 'transcendent values' of an open society (p. 129).

There follow three disparate essays from moral, philosophical, and scientific points of view. Legal scholar Robert George puts forth a defence of religious freedom, arguing that we should not see it simply as a kind of mutual nonaggression pact, but as a recognition of the human 'right to be who we truly are as human beings' (p. 134). The 'religious quest is a constitutive part of our humanity' (p. 134), so it must be protected, regardless of how people answer the ultimate questions of life. Violence thrives where religious freedom is not respected. Marc Gopin locates the solution to religious violence in the cultivation of 'compassionate reason'. Gopin credits the Enlightenment with the growth of compassion in the West, moving us from tribalism to universal principles and reason. Gopin throws in some potted neuroscience, arguing that Enlightenment virtues are associated with the neocortex, which controls the baser instincts of the amygdala. Religion, properly tamed, also has a role to play, in motivating, educating, and inspiring ethical behavior. David Sloan Wilson, an evolutionary biologist, considers the role of violence from an evolutionary point of view. In laying out the latest consensus on group selection, Wilson argues for seeing violence and nonviolence as 'social strategies that succeed under some conditions and not others' (p. 174). Wilson pours cold water on the goal of the volume to confront religious violence with a counter-narrative. He thinks counter-narratives often 'depart from factual reality' and that 'even the best counter-narrative will fail in an environment that favors violence as a social strategy' (p. 180). Violence depends on context: 'If religious extremism is spreading worldwide, it is because existential insecurity is

spreading worldwide' (p. 181). Counter-narratives are necessary but not sufficient to evolve nonviolent social strategies.

The volume concludes with some theological reflections. Miroslav Volf offers twenty-five theses on monotheism, nationalism, and violence. Exclusive nationalism tends toward violence; inclusive nationalism, linked to universal moral commitments, can be peaceful. Monotheism can be captured by exclusive nationalism, but its universality—all people under one God—gives it an inherent resistance to exclusive nationalism, relativizing mundane loyalties and separating religion from politics. According to Volf, the single greatest factor predicting whether religion will be violent is its entanglement with politics, a contention that appears to mark Muslim non-separation of mosque and state as inherently violent. Michael Welker contributes a biblical reflection on the interconnections of justice, mercy, and freedom, and advocates an education that allows people to let go of hate. William Storrar offers his experiences leading the Center of Theological Inquiry and its programming involving scholars from the Abrahamic traditions. Storrar gives practical examples of interreligious dialogues and Scripture study that inculcate the virtues of hospitality, honesty, humility, hope and what he calls 'the dignity of dialogue'.

Jonathan Sacks closes the volume with a brief reflection, in which he writes, 'It is not religion as such that leads to violence. That is embedded as a permanent possibility within human nature itself. But when it is involved and used as a vindication of violence, then we cannot ignore or deny that fact, saying instead that religion is a force for peace' (p. 219). It is hard to know how to make sense of these sentences. Sacks first says that 'religion as such' does not lead to violence. But then he says religion is sometimes 'involved' in violence and used as a justification of violence. Besides the exact role that 'religion as such' plays in violence, the deeper problem lies in identifying what 'religion as such' is. For George, 'religion' is used very generally to denote the human propensity to 'ponder life's deepest questions' (p. 134); for Volf, the question of religious violence is limited to examinations of 'monotheism', meaning Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Is Buddhism a religion, despite the absence of gods from many forms of it? Are nationalism and Marxism religions, as generations of scholars have argued? Are Hinduism and Islam religions, despite the fact that many Hindus and Muslims reject the label?

The possibility that the separation of violence into 'religious' and 'secular' is arbitrary and confused is broached by several authors in the volume. Atran attributes violence to sacrifices for the sake of ideas that give a sense of significance: 'Call it "God" or whatever secular ideology one prefers, including any of the great modern salvational *-isms*, such as colonialism, socialism, anarchism, communism, fascism, and liberalism' (p. 108). For Atran, 'sacred values' can

include either “God is great, bodiless but omnipotent” or “free markets are always wise” (p. 108). For Wilson, likewise, there does not seem to be a bit of difference between ‘religious and nonreligious meaning systems’ in explaining violence (p. 181).

Why is there such an industry, then, in addressing religion and violence in Western society? Griswold provides a clue when she writes that ‘labeling the violence simply “religious” obscures our role and responsibility in creating the conditions for conflict, which lies in part in the wreckage of the colonial project and in postcolonial support for despicable puppet leaders’ (p. 89). In other words, confronting ‘religious’ violence calls attention away from the role of Western ‘secular’ violence, through the interventions of both our military and our corporations. The discourse of religion and violence has a long Orientalist history, a history sometimes echoed—despite the best of intentions—in this volume’s frequent Enlightenment triumphalism, its obsession with *their* violence instead of our own, its dismissal of Muslim political arrangements, and its lack of Muslim voices more generally. Nevertheless, there is much wisdom in this volume, especially when it descends from confused generalizations about ‘religion’ and examines resources for both violence and peacemaking in the Scriptures, doctrines, and practices of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. There are useful suggestions for the practitioners of all three faiths. I fear, however, that the way that the volume is framed will give aid and comfort to the Orientalist and secularist discourse of ‘religious violence’.

*William T. Cavanaugh*

DePaul University, USA

*WCAVANA1@depaul.edu*