

Religious Violence and Peace-Making: A Meso-Level Theory

Philip S. Gorski

Yale University

In his essay for *Practical Matters*, R. Scott Appleby surveys the expanding, interdisciplinary literature on religion and violence, dividing it into three major camps: “strong”, “weak”, and “pathological.” The strong argument sees religion as an “independent variable”, a sufficient cause of violence. The weak argument sees religion as a mediating variable, one that generates violence only in interaction with other factors. The pathological argument, finally, sees religion as a form of neurosis, in which individuals cede their autonomy and embrace dependency on a fictive god, be it supernatural, political or both.

In her companion piece, Atalia Omer presents a critical review of the recent literature on faith-based peacemaking, a literature that has drawn much inspiration from Appleby’s work. Her criticisms of the literature are threefold. First, she notes that efforts to identify the “good” elements within a religious tradition—ones thought to be conducive to peace and reconciliation—are not always sufficient; sometimes, it is also necessary to challenge the bad elements as well. Second, she argues that religious peacemakers too easily accept the tacit premises of international relations, specifically, a negative concept of peace qua absence of physical violence along with a geopolitical notion of conflict qua conflict between nation states. Against these tendencies, she inveighs for a more reflective approach oriented towards a positive understanding of peace—a peace premised on justice—that attends to “cultural and structural violence” within states.

Appleby’s and Omer’s interventions provide a useful corrective to a number of problematic assumptions that pervade much of the contemporary literature on religious violence. The first

is that a religion is a cultural monolith. The most (in)famous and influential example of this approach within the social sciences is Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis.¹ Its attraction is its seamless incorporation of religion into a realist theory of international relations. Just replace "nation-states" with "civilizations", and it is business as usual. Otherwise, the basic premise of the theory—"competition under anarchy"—remains unaltered.² The problem is that religious traditions are not monolithic; they are internally pluralistic and in ways that do not always line up neatly with state boundaries.

The second problematic assumption, one that is widespread within popular and journalistic writing on religion, especially on Islam, is that a religion is a sort of operational code, a kind of machine language that steers the actions of religious automatons.³ Thus, when a terrorist commits an atrocity in the name of Islam, Western pundits scour the Koran in search of a code that commands violence ("jihad"!). The liberal-minded respond in kind, pointing to other passages in the Koran suggesting that Islam is a "religion of peace."⁴ The problem with this approach is not simply that it ignores the multiplicity of scriptural interpretations and the multivocality of the texts themselves. Such text-centric, religion-as-codes approaches also ignore the way in which religious action is mediated by collective interpretation and motivated by personal experience (mystical, ritual, etc.).

Still, like wrestlers grappling at close quarters, Omer and Appleby do sometimes wind up mirroring the positions of their opponents in ways that may perhaps escape their attention. For example, by counterposing "tradition" to "civilization", Omer frames her overall analysis in very macro-social terms. Likewise, by substituting "numinous experiences" for ethical codes, Appleby frames his analysis in rather micro-social terms. To be sure, in their substantive analyses of religious violence and peacemaking, they focus most of their attentions on the meso-level of religious life that lies between individual experience and historic tradition, on the collective memories of local communities, say, or on the religious formation of particular leaders. But they do not conceptualize this meso-level as explicitly or as systematically as they might. So perhaps it is here, at the properly sociological level of religious life, that a more sustained engagement with social theory could contribute to the study of religious violence and peacemaking.

What might such a meso-level theory look like?

The contemporary sociology of religion still draws heavily on the classical theories of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, and their works suggests two different, if ultimately complementary, approaches. In Weber's sociology of religion,⁵ to begin, the meso-level of religious life consists of: 1) "religious leaders" and 2) "religious communities." Weber distinguishes different types of religious leaders along three underlying dimensions: a) the basis of their claims to authority; b) the type of the "religious goods" they promise; and c) how these goods are exchanged with the community. Thus, "the prophet"—a type of religious leader that first arises within Ancient Judaism and that Weber regards as distinctive to the Abrahamic faiths—claims authority based on a personal calling, promises to reveal divine laws and commands, and renounces any remuneration for his message. By contrast, the "priestly" type of religious leader—particularly important with-

in, but not specific to, the Christian community—bases his authority on his ecclesiastical office, promises a sacramental good, and collects fees of some sort for his services. In Weber's typology, the prophet is closely related to certain types of secular leaders, specifically, "the lawgiver" who founds a political community and "the teacher of social ethics" who preaches moral responsibility and social solidarity. Though Weber himself does not elaborate his typology in this direction, one could argue that secular analogues of the priestly leader might include the leaders of worldly "churches" such as dynastic regimes and political parties.

Weber's typology of "religious communities" is not as fully developed but seems to be built along three axes: 1) the degree of communal authority claimed by the laity; 2) the presence (or absence) of horizontal ties between laypeople; and 3) the strength (or weakness) of boundaries between members (and outsiders). In Ernst Troeltsch's famous typology, for instance, the religious leader of a "sect" is often a layperson (or a renegade priest), and there are strong horizontal ties between members and a strong boundary between members and non-members. A "church" is an intermediate type of community, normally led by a "priest" (or "pastor" or "rabbi"), with strong horizontal ties between members (as in a "congregation" or "parish") and clear but permeable boundaries. In a "temple", by contrast, the religious leader is typically a priest, lay authority is minimal to non-existent, and there are few if any ties between "clients" and weak or non-existent communal boundaries.

The late, great French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, used Weber's sociology of religion as the template for a more general theory of "social fields."⁶ Social fields, in the Bourdieusian sense, can be understood in two different but interrelated ways: they are akin to "playing fields" where opposing teams compete for control and position; but they are also akin to "magnetic fields" insofar as they exert force over individual actors, aligning them into certain predictable but variable patterns, much like iron filings between two magnets. All social fields, Bourdieu argued, have two constitutive and invariant properties: "hierarchy" and "heterodoxy." Consequently, the secular spheres of modern societies—the polity, the economy, the arts, and so on—can be understood as analogous to the religious sphere itself. Bourdieu's theory implies that ideological alliances across social fields are most likely to form between actors who: a) have similar "trajectories" and b) occupy "homologous" positions within their respective fields. For example, "heterodox" actors who occupy "subordinate" positions and experience "blocked trajectories" within their own social field are most likely to feel kinship and therefore ally with similarly positioned actors in neighboring fields. Thus, Bourdieu's theory would lead us to expect that the theologically uneducated pastor of a "low evangelical" free church in 1960s America would typically feel a much greater affinity to, say, Richard Nixon than to, say, John F. Kennedy or Norman Rockefeller.

In Durkheim's sociology of religion, the meso-level comprises collective rituals and the *conscience collective*.⁷ Raised in a Jewish milieu and surrounded by Roman Catholics, Durkheim tended to emphasize the bodily and collective aspects of religious experience,⁸ where Weber's socialization into, and ongoing interaction with, liberal Protestantism had led him to highlight its

cognitive dimension (e.g., “ethics”, “values”, “world-pictures”).⁹ Indeed, for Durkheim, beliefs are secondary, insofar as their plausibility is (re)produced via ritual, above all via collective rituals. Our sense of divine powers, for example, is premised on experiences of “collective effervescence”, the sense of self-transcendence and communal unity that arises out of collective rituals. Importantly, in Durkheim’s theory, the sacred cannot exist apart from, or be (re)produced without a sense of, “the profane.” We can distinguish three different senses of the profane in Durkheim’s usage: the ordinary or everyday, the polluting or impure, and the forbidden or demonic. Just as importantly, his theory also implies that neither the sacred nor the profane can ever be entirely stripped of their materiality. The crucial implications of Durkheim’s theory for the present context are that: 1) the (re)production of the sacred necessarily involves the (re)creation of a profane, and vice versa; 2) the profane has multiple valences that will evoke a range of negative emotions from indifference through disgust to hatred, while the sacred will evoke a range of positive emotions from concern through joy to love; and 3) these emotions can be cathected to the material embodiments of sacred and profane, be they persons, places, or things. In Durkheim’s theory, then, the potential of religions for violence and peace derive not from “the ambivalence of the sacred”, but from the division of the world into sacred and profane, and not from the “militancy(?)” of the religious, but rather from the multivocality and materiality of religion.

The term *conscience collective* is itself marked by a certain ambivalence or, rather, an etymological ambiguity, since the French *conscience* connotes both “conscience” and “consciousness.” But the term is in fact precise, because in Durkheim’s theory, consciousness cannot exist apart from a conscience, thinking requires categorizing, and all categories, in his view, are social in origin and therefore moral in character. Hence, *conscience* in this double sense is necessarily collective: like language, *conscience* emerges interactively and exists intersubjectively. In smaller and simpler societies, characterized by much face-to-face interaction and little division of labor, the *conscience collective* is relatively unmediated and quite strong. In larger and more complex societies, however, the *conscience collective* can only be sustained by “collective representations” of social unity, sacred persons, places, and things (e.g., a revered leader, a capital city, a great monument) which stand in for the collectivity (e.g., the “nation”, the “state”, the “homeland”). The difficulty—and this again is a crucial point—is that the most potent source of collective representations, even in a relatively “secular” society, is apt to be religious. This is why nationalist and state building movements so often draw on religious imagery. The blending of religion, state, and nation is extremely powerful: it can create high levels of solidarity, even in a highly fragmented society. But it is also highly combustible: any threat to religion now appears as a threat to nation and state as well, indeed, to the very social order itself.

The theory of *conscience collective* suggests the possibility of “collective memory” and also of “collective trauma.” The theory of collective memory was initially developed by Maurice Halbwachs,¹⁰ one of Durkheim’s prize students, and has recently been taken up again by a number of American sociologists.¹¹ In “primitive” societies, collective memory is mainly stored in oral

traditions. Over time, new storage media are invented and utilized: songs and anthems, writing and books, paintings and sculptures, and now various types of digital files. In cyber-parlance, not all memory is wet memory (i.e. memory stored in a human brain). Drawing on the idea of collective memory, the concept of “cultural trauma” adds a sociological dimension to well-established theories of psychological trauma.¹² It implies that certain events (e.g., slavery, the Holocaust, 9/11) can threaten and thereby alter the *conscience collective* of a particular group (African-Americans, Jews, Americans) in an enduring way. Subsequent events will then be interpreted through the lens of the original trauma, lending them a drama and significance that may be difficult for outsiders to understand. In many cases, including the ones just cited, this lens is constructed out of religious materials. For example, many African-Americans understood the trauma of slavery through the lens of the Exodus narrative, and many Jews interpreted “the final solution” through the lens of the Shoah.

The meso-level theory outlined here is not meant to be “predictive.” It does not lead to empirical forecasts or “testable hypotheses.” Nor does it aim to. Instead, its goal is to identify some of the meso-level social mechanisms that can generate religious violence and peace.¹³ Put more plainly, it tells us where to start looking for the causes of a particular event or for possible points of intervention in an unfolding situation.

How so?

Weber’s theory directs our attention to religious leaders and communities and the relationships between them. Above all, it prompts us to probe into divisions and conflicts between different movements, strata, and factions within the religious elite. It is here, in Weber’s view—in the jostling and infighting of elites, more than in sacred texts or religious values per se—that the proximate causes of, and possible remedies for, religious violence will most often be found. After all, it is religious elites who are the stewards and interpreters of religious traditions, who tease out their implications for everyday life. Bourdieu’s theory also emphasizes elites, but broadens our focus to inter-elite relations, to possible alliances and latent antagonisms between religious and secular leaders, especially political ones. It tells us who an elite grouping will most likely align with and against whom, be it for violence or peace. Specifically, it implies that *social position* is often just as important as theological interpretation, sometimes even more so.

If Weber and Bourdieu draw our attention to the “human, all-too-human” element of religious life, Durkheim and Halbwachs shift our attention to its material, all-too-material aspects. The sacred and the profane, they suggest, can never be entirely stripped of their materiality. This means that collective memories and traumas are stored not just in human minds, but in material mediums as well (books, buildings, monuments, etc.). Consequently, conflicts about religion are never just conflicts about disembodied “values” or “memories.” They inevitably involve conflicts over concrete places, persons, and things—“ground zero” or the Temple Mount, saints and martyrs, images and relics.¹⁴ The serious student of religious violence and peacemaking must therefore be a serious student of religious geography, hagiography and iconography—and not just of religious texts.

Common catalysts of religious violence therefore include: 1) competing claims to sacred spaces or other “non-divisible goods”¹⁵; 2) intentional or accidental mingling of sacred and profane spaces, persons, and objects (e.g., a pig’s head tossed into a Hindu temple or a Hindu procession through a Muslim neighborhood at prayer time¹⁶); and 3) intentional or accidental destruction or profanation of the sacred objects of another traditions (e.g., damaging sacred books, destroying religious icons, etc.) In its most extreme form, religious violence involves systematic attempts at cultural annihilation and even religious genocide—the effort to extirpate all material traces of a particular religion. Escalation of violence towards genocide is typically accompanied and driven by an escalation of rhetoric towards the view that evil is localized in particular places, persons, or things whose annihilation will literally “rid the world of evil” once and for all.¹⁷ Rhetorical escalation of this sort typically invokes apocalyptic tropes, a final battle between the forces of good and evil. Sometimes, they also involve the effort to undo a cultural trauma, to somehow restore the status quo ante by means of a symbolic reversal (e.g., avenging the “murder” of Prince Lazar by “Turks” through genocide against Muslims¹⁸). The Durkheimian approach also suggests various strategies for religious peacemaking, most of which are identified and discussed in Omer’s contribution. These include: 1) careful balancing of competing claims to contested spaces (e.g., the Temple Mount); 2) public “mixing” of religious leaders from “competing” camps; and 3) ritualized forms of inter-faith reconciliation. As Omer rightly points out, all of them presume a nuanced understanding of lived religion in specific contexts.

(Endnotes)

1 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

2 The classic text of realist theory is Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

3 For example, see Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (London: Continuum, 2005).

4 One influential example of this sort of apologetic strategy is Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

5 See Chapters 4 and 5 of Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

6 The best general introduction to Bourdieu's thought remains Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

7 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

8 The definitive biography is Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work, a Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

9 The best biography of Weber is Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009).

10 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1992).

11 A helpful introduction and overview to this literature is Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

12 Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

13 For an overview of the neo-realist, post-Popperian approach to social science, see Philip S. Gorski, "The Poverty of Deductivism: A Constructive Realist Model of Sociological Explanation," *Sociological Methodology* 34, no. 1 (2004): 1-33.

14 Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

15 Ron E. Hassner, "'To Halve and to Hold': Conflicts over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility," *Security Studies* 12, no. 4 (summer 2003): 1-33.

16 Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

17 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

18 Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

Notes from the Field (and Classrooms) of Ethics

Ellen Ott Marshall

Emory University

As one who teaches Christian Ethics and Conflict Transformation, I found myself lingering over one sentence in particular in each of these excellent essays. In her discussion of the theological dimension of the conflict transformation approach to religious peacebuilding, Omer notes that “ethics is not yet an intentional interlocutor with religious peacebuilding, specifically, and peace studies, more broadly.” She rightly observes that the field of ethics has been preoccupied with the question of moral justification of violence. Near the end of his discussion of ethnoreligious violence, Appleby comments, “Unfortunately, the numinous power of the sacred—accessible to human beings through multivalent symbols, elastic myths, and ambiguous rituals and conveyed through the imperfect channels of intellect, will, and emotion—does not come accompanied by a moral compass.” He is absolutely right. There is no moral compass by which one can reliably orient the ambivalent sacred toward the good. I lingered over these sentences not because I disagree with them, but because they warrant a response from someone in the field of ethics who also teaches religion, conflict, and peacebuilding.

In her discussion of the disciplinary gap between ethics and religious peacebuilding, Omer focuses on comparative religious ethics as an underutilized resource and on the emergence of ethics of reconciliation as a promising bridge. It is also important to note the contributions of Dr. Glen Stassen, beginning with the 1992 edited volume, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*.¹ Stassen intended this work as a supplement to the “dichotomous focus on war and pacifism” that Omer describes. Rather than pursuing this debate, Stassen secured twenty-three contributors to describe practices that lessen the likelihood and intensity of war. At the ten year anniversary of this work, Stassen described the project as supplementing the x-axis of debates over war with the y-axis of practices that range from conflict resolution to economic development. In its interdisciplinary approach to identifying causes of conflict and means and conditions for peace, Stassen’s *Just Peacemaking* (with a new edition published in 2008) does constitute engagement with peace and conflict studies. In 2011, Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite (who articulated just peacemaking language for her denomination, United Church of Christ, in the 1990s) edited *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War*.² This

volume constitutes religious peacebuilding, as defined by Gerard Powers, because it “includes ... the beliefs, norms, and rituals that pertain to peacebuilding, as well as a range of actors, from religious institutions, faith-based private voluntary organizations that are not formally part of a religious institution, and individuals and groups for whom religion is a significant motivation for their peacebuilding.”³

The work of a number of junior and mid-level scholars in Christian social ethics might also contribute to the literature of strategic peacebuilding. Dr. Susanna Snyder at Episcopal Divinity School focuses on migration and co-chairs the Religion and Migration group for the American Academic of Religion. Her forthcoming book with Ashgate is titled *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church*. Dr. Christine Pae (Denison University) focuses on transnationalized militarism and the sex industry surrounding U.S. military bases. She is currently working on a manuscript titled *Sex and War: A Christian Feminist Ethic of War and Peace*. Dr. Grace Yia-Hei Kao (Claremont School of Theology) works on issues of religion and public life, ecofeminism, and human rights and religious diversity. She has recently published *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralistic World*.⁴ In the doctoral programs where I have taught (Claremont Graduate University and now Emory University), students have produced and are working on dissertations on feminist ethics and conflict transformation (Debbie Roberts, Claremont), the ethics of torture and theologies of revelation (Paul C. Miller, Claremont), mobilizing churches to engage the Responsibility to Protect (Richard Hankins, Claremont), transitional justice (James W. McCarty, Emory), empathy (Jeremy Lowe, Emory), and genocide (Joe Wiinikka-Lydon, Emory). Dr. Omer’s observation still stands: as a discipline, ethics remains preoccupied with debates over moral justification of violence. But I see a critical mass of scholars whose work pushes our field to contribute to the literature of strategic peacebuilding as well.

Although there is not a lengthy publication list to support the following claim, I think that a number of scholar-teachers trained in ethics engage the literature of religious peacebuilding and peace and conflict studies in their teaching. We may continue to orient our students to the x-axis of debate over pacifism and just war, but we are increasingly supplementing our syllabi with discussion of peacebuilding practices. Speaking for myself, I even construe the required introduction to Christian ethics course I teach as an exercise in religious peacebuilding because one of the stated objectives of the course is for students to clarify their processes of moral discernment and to understand why other Christians hold different positions. My hope is that this course not only equips students to think carefully about the complex moral questions of our day, but also prepares them to constructively engage those who think and believe differently. There are many of us teaching in ethics who also see ourselves as “intentional interlocutors” with peacebuilding and peace and conflict studies. However, as is often the case, the engagement that takes place in our classrooms remains invisible to the guild. Moreover, the nature of our rather parasitic discipline means that we often lose our identity as “ethicists” as we ingest the literature of the disciplines that house the topics we engage. As we seek to understand the contexts and dynamics of violence and to persua-

sively articulate mechanisms for justpeace, we speak and write like social historians or political theorists, for example.

So, what does it mean for ethicists to engage religious peacebuilding and/or peace and conflict studies more generally as ethicists? Well, for one thing, we take Appleby's point about the missing moral compass not only as a statement of fact, but also as a charge. Appleby makes this observation after sharing several examples of manipulation of religion by ethnonationalist extremists during the Bosnian war. In this category of "weak religion," religious actors function with a mix of religious and non-religious motives, and they collaborate with a mix of people. The missing moral compass implies that religion is all the more susceptible to "external" influences intent on instrumentalizing religion for violent purposes. In contrast to weak religion, "[s]trong religion" captures "movements, groups, networks, and organizations driven primarily by religious goals and dynamics." Appleby also uses the category of strong religion to illuminate the power of "religions themselves to enjoin or legitimate deadly violence." In the strong category, the moral compass is also missing, such that this religious force steams ahead without moral direction.

It is conceivable that meta-ethicists would use Appleby's trope as an occasion to consider the meaning of morality itself. What exactly constitutes a moral compass? Others of us are likely to affirm Appleby's argument because of the job security it offers: "See? The world really does need religious ethicists!" Indeed, the ambivalence of the sacred is the starting point for the work of religious ethics. The descriptive phase of our work entails explicating the myriad configurations of belief and action. The normative phase constitutes a spectrum that I think of in terms of the debate between two nineteenth-century German Protestant ethicists, Adolf Von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch. Harnack and Troeltsch shared a commitment to the historical method. They viewed Christianity as an organism that takes shape over time as it interacts with social forces and historical contexts. However, somewhere inside this dynamic and diverse religious tradition, Harnack insisted that one can identify a red thread that constitutes the essence of the faith. Troeltsch challenged his elder colleague about the ethical ramifications of identifying an essence and argued instead that Christianity can only be considered in its entirety. The essence of the faith *is* its historical development, the way in which adherents conceive of the ideals of the faith differently according to context. Troeltsch argued that the job of the Christian ethicist is not to dam this river of religio-historical development, but rather to attend to its banks so that the waters of change do not entirely rip them away. Obviously, Harnack and Troeltsch do not represent all possible responses to the ambivalence of Christianity, let alone the ambivalence of the sacred. But they do provide two helpfully contrasting positions on a spectrum that stretches beyond them.

Those of us who teach ethics in the context of theological education also enter the work of religious peacebuilding as we contribute to the formation of religious leaders. The seminaries attached to historic peace churches have had an explicit curricular commitment to religious peacebuilding for years. Many mainline theological schools are now supplementing their long-standing offerings in the morality of peace and war and nonviolent social change with courses in restorative justice,

conflict transformation, and interreligious peacebuilding. Retrieval of theology and religious practices that make for peace is surely a part of this. But I also think the teaching and learning involved is more dynamic than this. It reflects an effort to craft a moral life and to contribute to the shape of a living tradition that is faithful and also properly responsive to a changing world. We are not trying to affix a moral compass to the sacred, but rather to equip religious leaders with the capacity for navigation.

(Endnotes)

1 Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992).

2 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

3 Daniel Philpott and Gerard Powers, *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 322. [I do not know this work; it seems as if you might be citing a chapter or essay within it, in which case, we would need to change this endnote to reflect that.]

4 Dr. Grace Yia-Hei Kao, *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralistic World* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

The Limits of Theory for the Study of Religious Violence

Edward L. Queen II

Emory University

As might have been expected, Scott Appleby's article in this issue of *Practical Matters*, "Religious Violence: The Strong, the Weak, and the Pathological," is an exhaustive and informative overview of the current state of scholarly work on the topic of religion and conflict. The article manifests an admirable level of even-handedness and depth of knowledge. Not only does Mr. Appleby do a superb job detailing the different positions, he also highlights the level of discord in the scholarly work. To a great extent, Appleby finds this discord to be rooted in varying understandings of religion itself, hence his use of the terms strong, weak, and pathological. He uses these terms to highlight his claim that the theorizing of religion and conflict is, to a great extent, conditioned by the theorizing about religion and its role in human life. His article, therefore, proceeds to organize writers in this field within these categories, recognizing that, to a great extent, the labels describe positions along a continuum and not placements in a box.

In structuring the current state of the field, Appleby provides a tremendous service. He locates the source of disagreement. In doing so, he provides a basis for arguing, in a Habermasian sense, between and among theoretical positions. He gives us something about which to speak. In doing this Appleby also hints at some of the places where these arguments may be located, and sources for further research. To a great extent much of the research will be, or at least should be, empirical. This research needs to take place at multiple levels because even with his formulation several questions emerge.

One can ask, is there a "correct" position between strong, weak, and pathological religion as it relates to all manifestations of religiously structured violence? That is, are all forms of such violence always one of these? Or, one might focus more on the specific and inquire as to whether the role of religion in this manifestation of religious violence is strong, weak, or pathological? Finally, there is the most specific question; was a particular act of violence *religious* violence at all? In framing this question, I am concerned less with claims that religion is just superstructure or false consciousness and that there are other "real" causes. This discussion can, I believe, be subsumed in Appleby's categories under the category of weak religion, although my critique of that position would be much stronger. This question addresses cases such as Timothy McVeigh's. If, as has been reported, Mr. McVeigh was admittedly agnostic and arguably a-religious, can we see his bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City as an act of religious violence, as some in the "strong religion" camp seem to do, or must we simply acknowledge it as ideologically driven with little

arguable religious content.

I raise the case of Mr. McVeigh because it connects closely with Appleby's point about agency. To what extent ought our analyses and discussions of religious violence take seriously the agency of those who perpetrate it, either in their explanations for why such violence is acceptable or necessary or why they choose to undertake it? Why do far too many, particularly in the social sciences, deny that people actually believe what they claim to believe (as some in the "weak religion" camp seem to do)? Why the refusal to accept that some individuals are intellectually or morally convinced that a particular way of understanding and being in the world is appropriate, correct, or even divinely mandated?

This question involves the issue of agency. We must ask much more directly, why do some individuals, at particular times and in specific historical situations, decide to commit acts of violence against others and to interpret, in religious terms, those acts of violence as legitimate?

Individuals choose to engage in aggressive violence against others. Certainly some may be coerced and others may be certifiably pathological, but the overwhelming majority of such individuals are not. Individuals choose to do things. One cannot claim that Timothy McVeigh did not choose to blow-up the federal building in Oklahoma City or that the individuals who crashed the planes into the Twin Towers in New York City did not choose to do so. They did. Whether religious understandings structured their choices and made them seem appropriate is an empirical question. How such understandings might do so, as well as when and under what conditions, is both an empirical and theoretical question. Additionally, we need a clearer examination of why many, if not most, individuals who inhabit the same mental and social world of those who undertake violence do not do so.

Appleby makes this point most clearly in his discussion of fundamentalism. In that section, he raises the most important counterfactual looming behind all theories of religious violence, namely that, "the vast majority of the world's fundamentalists *do not* take up the sword." (Appleby, 16, italics in original.) And indeed many people who share similarities with any movement within any theoretical camp of religious violence do not undertake violence. Any understanding of religious violence and agency must be able to explain why certain individuals choose violence and others, with the same moral universe, do not.

My discussion of agency differs markedly from Appleby's. At the beginning of his article he introduces agency as a basis of lifting up the issue of the legitimacy of religious violence. Once he picks it up, however, he drops it as though it were a horseshoe just pulled from a blacksmith's forge. Rightly so. Scholars not only have been burned when they approached too closely the fire, they often emerge, as well, covered in soot and ash.

To a great extent this is *the* moral to be taken away from Michael Sells', *A Bridge Betrayed*.¹ Mr. Sells reminds everyone very directly and very concretely that beyond our theorizing, beyond our clarifications, and beyond our nuancing, there are situations where innocent people are slaughtered by individuals who find justification for doing so in religious rhetoric, symbols, and stories.

The failure or refusal to begin with that fundamental fact is to the field of religion and conflict what creationism is to biology. It does not nuance and clarify. It obfuscates and denies.

I do not deny the importance of the question, “When is violence in general, and religious violence in particular, legitimate?” I simply am unsure that it is a question appropriate to the theoretical models of this seemingly emerging field. We are playing with people’s lives and our failings, both personal and intellectual, to take that fact seriously opens us up, deservedly, for moral condemnation.

This is an important caution for the field. Our closeness to our subjects, our feelings that they are misunderstood, and our sympathy for their (sometime) legitimate grievances, not to mention our own ideological, theoretical, and disciplinary blinders, can lead us to being apologists for their actions. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that most of the theoretical approaches to religion and violence (here I leave out the pathological strain) are structured to provide an understanding of why certain individuals, either individually or collectively, undertake violent actions for reasons grounded in religion. Our focus on understanding can bend us too often into inappropriate apologetics.

If I have any strong objection to Appleby’s superb essay, however, it is with the concluding discussion, although I must acknowledge that on re-reading, it is much more nuanced than I originally interpreted it. While I do not doubt that someone undoubtedly will make the “first sustained attempt at a comprehensive general theory of religious violence,” I do not welcome it as a positive step. We are no closer to such a theory than we are to any theory of human behavior. Just as economists, sociologists, and psychologists cannot adequately explain and predict human behavior, we should not anticipate a theory of religious violence to emerge that does so. Certainly theories are necessary and essential to providing insights to various elements of religious violence. We need theories, however, not *a* theory. Let me be clear, there will be no explanation and we should not expect one. The phenomenon and the subject matter are too complex and too multi-faceted to be reduced to unitary explanations. Certainly let us continue our theorizing, but let us also manifest appropriate epistemic humility and acknowledge that our theories offer insight and some understanding, but not explanations. Indeed I would argue that what Joseph Stiglitz recently said about economics and economists is equally valid for the field of religion and violence:

Their models were overly simplified, distorted, and left out the most important aspects. Those faulty models then encouraged policy-makers to believe that the markets would solve all the problems. Before the crisis, if I had been a narrow-minded economist, I would have been very pleased to see that academics had a big impact on policy. But unfortunately that was bad for the world. After the crisis, you would have hoped that the academic profession had changed and that policy-making had changed with it and would become more skeptical and cautious. You would have expected that after all the wrong predictions of the past, politics would have demanded from academics a rethinking of their theories. I am broadly disappointed on all accounts.²

So let us move forward, thinking and rethinking our theories, but please let us never believe any of our theories can totally capture or explain the complexity of lived human existence.

(Endnotes)

1 Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

2 Joseph Stiglitz. Interview in *The European*. 04-23-2012. <http://theeuropean-magazine.com/633-stiglitz-joseph/634-austerity-and-a-new-recession>.