The Complex Reality of Religious Peacebuilding
Conceptual Contributions and Critical Analysis
by Katrien Hertog


Religious peacebuilding is a curious endeavor given that the role religion plays in conflict is often ambiguous or, upon further reflection, not what it is purported to be. Interpreting religion as either the source of conflict or a resource to mitigate conflict depends, in part, on the orientation towards religion that the individual interpreting the conflict has. There is a sense that much cause of conflict is due to an unwillingness to engage with the religious other and that, in reality, conflicts of religion are not theological in nature but rather a means to increasingly entrench tensions through politicization of religious terminology. Yet regardless of one’s view, theorizing religion as a resource within peacebuilding is far less developed than other subfields of peace studies, a deficiency that Katrein Hertog’s *The Complex Reality of Religious Peacebuilding* seeks to address.

Recognizing gaps between peacebuilding theory and practice, Hertog’s book argues that certain religious resources can help in moving us towards an environment of sustainable peacebuilding (42). With a brief introduction and conclusion, the book contains three cumbersomely long chapters—both chapters two and three exceed 80 pages—that survey an emerging field within peace studies and provide a good introduction, as it is understood, to the potential of religious peacebuilding. The first chapter overviews the field of religious peacebuilding while the second chapter seeks to provide a conceptual framework that explores the concept of sustainable peacebuilding and the third attempts to give a sense of applicability through a case study of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In offering a survey of ten years of scholarship, Hertog credits publications by R. Scott Appleby and Marc Gopin for creating the field of religious peacebuilding. Her indebtedness to these
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Review, *The Complex Reality of Religious Peacebuilding*

authors, especially Gopin, can be seen throughout the work and sets her within the trajectory of their arguments. Useful as a literature review, the first chapter points to the theoretical deficiencies of the field of religious peacebuilding and fleshes out its heterogeneous character (18). In noting the diversity of those in the field, she mentions the religious contributions of Mennonites (seen in the work of Lederach), Muslims (as articulated in the work of Abu-Nimer), and Buddhists (such as the Dali Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh), arguing that the diversity of these approaches have yet to evolve into a coherent, systematized understanding of religious peacebuilding (39).

Building upon the under-theorized nature of the field, chapter two discusses the soft and hard aspects of the peacebuilding process and explores the transformative potential of religion, specifically where it can influence feelings such as frustration, hope, principles, and perceptions (71). Hertog argues that the entry point of religion in this process is “formed by the universal human values embedded in the deep spiritual sources of all religions” (73) and explores the impact of viewing religion as an organization, a social actor, and a living tradition (74ff.). She discusses approaches to religious peacebuilding (87–95), presents a conceptual model of religious peacebuilding (98–99), and outlines the stages of religious peacebuilding (103–14). Yet for all this, what seems to emerge out of the argument is that despite any structural or theoretical frameworks that are initiated, there remains the belief that what makes for a lasting impact is not so much the institutionalization of religious peacebuilding as the need to change individuals, a change seen to be influenced by individual actors rather than institutions. As such, her view of religious peacebuilding centers on indigenous religious leaders (122). While it is recognized that the process of religious peacebuilding can be initiated from outside, the sustainability of such an approach rests on individuals in conflict environments with the moral courage to risk what most others are unwilling to risk. This seems quite reasonable, that change is likely to come from individuals, but does lead one to question what impact we, as religious peacebuilders, can expect to have if the entire utility of the project rests on others who think and assess their environment differently than outsiders.

While this is not specifically taken up in her book, the ambiguous relationship between institutional and individual actors constitutes the theme of the third chapter. Here, Hertog aims to highlight the potential for religious peacebuilding by exploring the resources of the Russian Orthodox Church. Based on a series of interviews with forty-two representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church conducted between October 2004 and August 2005, she seeks to understand religious leaders’ attitudes and opinions regarding the Russian-Chechen conflict. The official point of view of the Russian Orthodox Church is that “peace is seen as a gift of God which transforms the inner person” (136). Yet what we see throughout the chapter is how the discourse of peacebuilding varies among the representatives of the church with whom she talks. Hertog details what she sees as the resources and obstacles for peacebuilding to the church (textbox 3.3, 162–67; textbox 3.4, 180–90), but the overall sense of the analysis is that clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church view peacebuilding with a highly individualized degree of vagueness. At times the burden of the church’s involvement rests with the organization while concomitantly individual leaders are seen as the ones who make a difference.

While the chapter is intended to establish a framework for analyzing religious resources for
peacebuilding, given what is recognized as the importance of individual leaders with the courage to initiate or facilitate directions for peace, it is not clear how this connects to the larger project of religious peacebuilding. Undoubtedly one can make an argument that all religious traditions can be framed or analyzed in ways that show both resources and obstacles to peacebuilding, but if the start for such peacebuilding rests predominately on individuals, why is it that some choose to engage peacebuilding and others do not? Saying, for example, that Islam is a religion of peace is nice but not of primary importance to a jihadist who does not accept the prevailing notions of global order. What is more, one assumes that religious leaders understand the resources available within their own traditions and that what activates their involvement in (religiously-framed) peacebuilding efforts is something other than and in addition to awareness of the resources of their tradition. While it is useful for those interested in peacebuilding to be familiar with available resources, the problem of engagement remains most critical; an outside observer—religious or otherwise—is less likely to inspire change by discussing the resources or potentials of different religious traditions precisely because he or she is an outsider. While The Complex Reality of Religious Peacebuilding is structured as something of an academic handbook, the questions one begs to ask are how and why do local religious people become engaged in local religious peacebuilding?

Hertog’s book does stand as a useful resource for entry into the field of religious peacebuilding, but in pushing the utility of religious peacebuilding, many of the real problems within the field go unexplored. It does not, for example, address the issue of what happens when religious agendas get involved and contradict peacebuilding strategies. There is an attempt to formulate the incorporation of religion into peacebuilding efforts but this formulation leaves one to view religion as something to add into a mixture, e.g., take the “good” of religion and stir it into the existing peacebuilding approaches for a better response. Regrettably, the book does not call into question any of the neoliberal assumptions or agendas that drive the field. Specifically, Hertog advocates something of a cherry-picking approach, stating that we “must examine the respective religious traditions with an eye to identifying appropriate values, concepts, and practices as resources for peacebuilding in that conflict setting” (xvii). Such a statement does accurately reflect neoliberal approaches to peacebuilding, in that “appropriate” is assumed to be part and parcel of democracy and free trade, but harkens back to the orientalist concerns that confounded Edward Said.²

The most notable strength of the book is its overview of existing literature on religious peacebuilding from the perspective of someone engaged in such activities, of someone working within the system of peacebuilding programs. What this misses, however, is the deeply religious perspective where convictions come in conflict; religious difference cannot be easily transcended, and it is the differences that matter most. It is, for example, insufficient to assume that Jews, Christians, or Muslims can ignore their differences by building on a shared Abrahamic ancestry. Though Hertog does not suggest theological sameness as the foundation for religious peacebuilding—only that religion should be viewed as a resource in peacebuilding—one does get the sense that sameness is advocated in the assumption of peacebuilding as a goal common to all religions. A more convincing text on the challenges of religious peacebuilding can be found in Adam Seligman’s Modest Claims: Dialogues and Essays on Tolerance and Tradition³ in which we see people engaging in
the challenges of religious peacebuilding through discussions of tolerance. Yet while Hertog’s text shows us how religious peacebuilding is emerging as a field of study, the reconciliation of theory and practice remains wanting.

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Notes


