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War and its Discontents: Pacifism and Quietism in the Abrahamic Traditions (Book Review)

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BURNS, J. PATOUT, ed. *War and Its Discontents: Pacifism and Quietism in the Abrahamic Traditions*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996. xi+221 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

What does it mean to ask whether Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, in the words of J. Patout Burns, “define[s] standards according to which the recourse to arms, either for conquest or in defense of life and justice, would be forbidden? Might they encourage, approve, or at least allow a pacifist stance in the contemporary world order?” (p. x)? If “a pacifistic stance” means preferring peace to war and encouraging others to do the same, the authors embrace too many diverse groups. Advocates of Cold War realpolitik preferred peace to war and amassed military stockpiles, deployed nuclear weapons, and projected American might to encourage others to do the same. Muslims, Christians, and Jews have for centuries insisted on absolute limits to initiating and prosecuting war, while recognizing that it may, nonetheless, be a lamentable necessity. Thinkers of the democratic left, like Michael Walzer, may abhor war without being “quietist” or “pacifistic.” Even just war thinkers of the far right maintain that military *conquest* is forbidden. Perhaps it would be more useful to ask whether the various traditions forbid their adherents either to join in or endorse military force used by the public authorities against armed threats to justice and the integrity of the community—one way of drawing the distinction between pacifism and the just war tradition—or recognize noninvolvement in the armed defense of justice and the community as a faithful stance within the tradition—a tentative characterization of quietism.

Put in these terms, pacifism turns out to have little credibility, quietism a bit more. Thus, Michael Broyde, surveying the Jewish traditions, insists that “theological pacifism has no place in the Jewish tradition” (p. 19). Everett Gendler, Yehudah Mirsky, and Naomi Goodman emphasize the Jewish commitment to peace, instance cases of martyrdom, risk-taking, and nonviolent strategies as ways of responding to aggression and injustice, without seriously challenging Broyde’s central claim. Similarly, Abdulaziz Sachedina, while insisting “that Islam is not monolithic,” concludes nonetheless that “pacifism in the sense of rejecting all forms of violence and opposing all war and armed hostility before justice is established has no place in the Qur’anic doctrine of human faith” (p. 147). Justice is God’s unequivocal demand and cannot be forsaken by God’s community. Quietism, in contrast, is a legitimate “strategy for survival in minority communities with the hope of regrouping and reasserting their ideals of justice” (p. 148).

Sachedina insists on the theological point that “the search for peace and integral existence” without acknowledging the absolute priority of God’s demands “has proved to be fatal in human history” (p. 157). Faithfulness is emphasized from the Christian perspective by Edward Gaffney, who sees the triumph of “secular pacifism” in the Vietnam-era courts as an impediment to selective conscientious objectors, thus shielding imperial America from its most serious critics (pp. 186–89). Gaffney’s concerns relate closely to those of John Yoder, who has long emphasized the eschatological context of the Gospel narrative and the dangers for the church inherent in the “constantinian temptation” to see in the state the

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principle agent of historical fulfillment. That the Christian shoulders the “scandal of the cross” emphasizes the profound gulf between Yoder’s pacifism and the natural desire to pursue justice and protect those we love. Reflected in several essays here, including Yoder’s, is an unfortunate trend toward using “justifiable war” as an alternative to “just war.” *Only* just wars, those fought with proper authority, just cause, right intention, and the rest of the traditional criteria, are ever justifiable. If the wars from which we have benefited were unjust, then we benefit to our shame, but that scarcely supports Walter Wink’s proposal “that we terminate all talk of ‘just wars’” (p. 116). To claim, as Wink does, that “Christians can no more speak of just war than of just rape, or just child abuse, or just massacres” (p. 116), is dangerously confused, as well as an affront to the Catholic tradition, represented here by John Langan. It is also a symptom of that debasement of our political discourse that worries Gaffney. Wink represents the sort of simple-minded Christian liberalism that drove Reinhold Niebuhr out of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Oddly enough, this makes his the most instructive essay in the volume. If pacifists and advocates of nonviolent strategies for social justice fail to distance themselves from shoddy argument and rhetorical posturing, they risk damaging their credibility and thus their cause.

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