The Ambivalence of the Sacred by Scott Appleby

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For those weary of the secularist charge that religion has a unique capacity to produce violence, Scott Appleby’s new book is a refreshing, moderate voice. Amid the current noise about the dangers of religion, Appleby tries to show that religion is ambivalent rather than dangerous. Because it unleashes strong, non-rational impulses, religion can lend itself to violence, but for the same reason, he argues, religion can lend itself to peacemaking. Religions that produce fanaticism for violence can just as easily produce fanaticism for peace: “Both the extremist and the peacemaker are militants. Both types ‘go to extremes’ of self-sacrifice in devotion to the sacred; both claim to be ‘radical,’ or rooted in and renewing the fundamental truths of their religious traditions” (p. 11). While his approach is fruitful in certain respects, ultimately I think Appleby concedes far too much to his opponents.

The problem begins with Appleby’s reliance on Rudolf Otto’s dated analysis of “the sacred” in his 1917 book Das Heilige. According to Appleby, “Religion is the human response to a reality perceived as sacred” (p. 8). For a definition of the sacred, Appleby turns to Otto, for whom, according to Appleby, the sacred is “what remains of religion when its rational and ethical elements have been excluded” (p. 28). The overpowering and uncontrollable presence of the sacred is, in Otto’s words, mystrium tremendum et fascinans; it evokes both terrible dread and fascination. According to Appleby, this experience is translated into religion by limited human faculties, but as such it can never be fully domesticated by human reason or language. The two-sided power of the feeling of the numinous and the inability to capture the sacred with human faculties of reason account for the fundamental ambivalence of religion and its ability to unleash powers of life and of death.

The main problem here is that, for Otto, the experience of the sacred is sui generis and a priori and thus not subject to direct empirical verification. Otto’s analysis prioritizes an internal, intuitive, essentialist and ahistorical category of experience that, by its nature, is secreted away in the heart of the individual and therefore unavailing to the researcher. To study such things as institutions, bodies, symbols and political arrangements is not to study the religious object in itself. Appleby is skilled enough as an intellectual historian to recognize this problem. After defining religion, he registers this caveat: “It is erroneous ... to imagine that some kind of transhistorical, transcultural ‘essence’ determines the attitudes and practices of a religion’s adherents apart from the concrete social and cultural circumstances in which they live. Thus I ask the reader at the outset to imagine invisible quotation marks surrounding and thereby qualifying every use of general terms like ‘extremist,’ ‘liberal,’ ‘militant,’ and even ‘religion’” (p. 15). This is a salutary warning, but it conflicts with Appleby’s definition of religion in terms of...
Otto’s sacred. Appleby seems torn between a descriptive approach to the ways in which Muslims and Christians, for example, use symbols in the pursuit of violence and the need for a transhistorical essence of “religion” in order to pursue a more general argument about “religion and violence.” That being said, Appleby’s book is full of careful descriptions of the way that symbolism drawn from Christian, Hindu, Muslim and other traditions is used in the pursuit of both violence and peace. The analysis is often hampered rather than helped, however, by his attempt to define religion. Such a definition makes it necessary for Appleby to say, for example, that phenomena such as “political Islam” and “Hindu nationalism” are “hybrids” of religion and politics (p. 4), as if one could make sense of a purely religious Islam prior to its being “mixed” with politics or a Hinduism unrelated to what it means to be Indian.

The attempt to safeguard an essential category of religion is especially imperiled when the term “ethnoreligious” is introduced into the study of contemporary violence. Appleby acknowledges that many of these conflicts “are called ‘ethnoreligious’ because it is virtually impossible to disaggregate the precise roles of religion and ethnicity” (p. 61). Nevertheless, Appleby still seems to regard such disaggregation as possible and necessary. Appleby acknowledges that ethnic identity itself — stories of birth and blood, the feeling of attraction to one’s group and repulsion to outsiders — has a “normative dimension.” It thus reveals “inexhaustible depths of value and meaning,” has a “transcendent dimension,” and invokes “sacred warrants.” In the face of this evidence that ethnicity qualifies as religion under his own definition of religion, Appleby nevertheless attributes these dimensions of ethnicity to the “role of religion” in ethnic conflicts, as if attributing them to “religion” rather than to “ethnicity” would lend clarity to the analysis.

This indecision is most apparent when Appleby discusses particular cases of religious violence. Appleby’s analysis of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia gives a richly detailed description of Christian and Muslim participation in the violence, the use of Christian and Muslim symbols to legitimate violence, and the complicity of some churches and mosques in condoning the violence. What Appleby’s analysis does not do is provide serious warrant for attributing violence to a sui generis interior impulse called “religion.” Appleby quite rightly criticizes those apologists who, in analyzing the conflict in the former Yugoslavia “downplayed the religious dimension of the war and argued that political, economic, and cultural factors were far more prominent in causing and sustaining it — as if ‘culture’ were a category somehow independent of religion” (p. 67). Unfortunately, however, Appleby continues to treat “religion” as if it were a category somehow independent of culture. Responding to claims that the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia were ethnonationalist and not religious, and that Yugoslavia had been extensively secularized under Tito, Appleby uses the violence itself as evidence of religion’s influence: “Indeed, one might conclude that the enormity of the aggressors’ acts, the demonic character of which one observer described as ‘beyond evil,’ indicates the presence of intense ‘religious impulses or emotion’” (p. 68). If the very occurrence of intense violence can be used as evidence of the presence of religion, then we have moved from empirical evidence that religion causes violence to an a priori commitment to such a claim.

Even so, much of this book is devoted to examples of the power of religious belief being harnessed for peacemaking. This is helpful, but less helpful than it could be, because religion is still a product of non-rational impulses secreted away in the consciousness of the individual. “Religion” is
something sui generis and uniquely separable from culture and politics. This does not challenge the common tendency to search for the reason for Muslim hatred of the US in the mysterious encounter of individual Muslims with “the sacred,” rather than in the not-so-mysterious encounter of Muslims with American military and economic might. Ever since our TV screens were filled in 1979 with Tehran students chanting “Death to the Great Satan,” we have been searching for the root cause of Muslim fundamentalism in the non-rational impulses to which religion is supposedly prone, ignoring the rather mundane history of the American overthrow of the elected government of Iran in 1953 and the installation of the Shah’s brutal dictatorship. Appleby’s analysis would be much more helpful if his historical instincts caused him to leave Otto and the myth of religious fanaticism behind. □