

“Present Challenges for Religious Tolerance, Non-discrimination and Freedom of Religion or Belief,” with messages by Michael Bünker and Katerina Karkala-Zorba. Session V addressed “The Role of Religious Communities in Promoting and Protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief,” based on a paper by Anna Hyvärinen.

This collection of messages addresses the critical issues related to promoting peace and social harmony based on human dignity, forgiveness and non-violence. It reminds us of the importance of respecting human rights and religious freedom everywhere. It also helps us understand that in the case of persecution, Christian suffering will be crowned with God’s glory being revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). By going to the cross, Jesus showed us the more excellent way of love, demonstrating what is the natural outcome expected of a Christian as His follower.

Every presentation builds on these fundamental guiding thoughts, leading up to the final statement in which the conference participants declared, “For CEC a concern for human rights and freedom of religion or belief is part of our DNA. CEC stands for the promotion and protection of all human rights and freedom of religion and belief – for every human being, nation and people.”

Rev Dr Fernando da Silva, deputy director of the World Evangelical Alliance’s Religious Liberty Commission

Sacred fury: Understanding religious violence (3rd ed.)

Charles Selengut

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, xi + 237 pp., paperback, ISBN 9781442276840, US \$27.00.

Charles Selengut is Professor of Sociology at County College of Morris and a former Professor of Religion at Drew University. This third edition of his work adds mainly a discussion on “white supremacy groups” as well as some observations regarding Eastern religions. The introductory “Study of Religion and Violence” starts with a question that guides his research: “Why is it that religious communities whose holy scriptures call for peace are engaged in so many wars and violent conflicts all over the globe?” (1). He describes the “unique” relationship between religions and violence, offers five perspectives for studying the topic, and emphasizes his determination to avoid stereotypes. These perspectives are then applied to the book’s five main chapters: “Fighting for God: Scriptural Obligations and Holy Wars”; “Psychological Perspectives”; “Apocalyptic Violence”; “Civilizational Clashes, Culture Wars, and Religious Violence”; and “Religious Suffering, Martyrdom, and Sexual Violence.” Selengut’s conclusion seeks to develop a holistic approach to religious violence.

Unfortunately, the entire book does not describe the crucial idea of religion in an appropriate way. Following Durkheim, Selengut states, “Religious faith and commitment . . . are based upon sacred and ultimate truths and are, by definition, moral, desirable, and good” (6). This description may be helpful and may further the cause of his study. However, Selengut subjects this understanding to another important idea that becomes a heuristic and epistemological premise: “Religious faith is different from other commitments, and the faithful understand the rules and directives of religion to be entirely outside ordinary social rules and interactions” (6). This strict separation between religious and non-religious beliefs (like Stalin’s or North Korea’s ideology) obstructs the fact that beliefs (or worldviews) and the question of violence interact in many complex and varied ways. When reading Selengut’s statement in light of these two examples, the reader senses the need for some qualifications and, however, finds this statement tied to far-reaching phrases like this one: “Religion is an imperialistic institution that not only demands the conventional loyalties and commitments of mind and soul but also claims proprietorship over the physical being of the faithful” (153).

Various passages indicate the author’s strong personal opinions, which are significantly shaped by Western forms of monotheistic religions. Moreover, some generalizations seem to be founded on Western understandings of religion, such as this one in the introduction: “At the centre of all religions is the yearning for the *eschaton*, an end time when all the peoples of the world will live together in peace and harmony, without war or conflict” (1).

Selengut’s approach turns out to be both an essential strength of the book and a noteworthy weakness. Approaching his topic with a Western, modern perspective facilitates perception and helps Western readers to understand better what may at first seem to be strange and incomprehensible aspects of the relation between religion and violence. Selengut’s analyses and conclusions fit neatly into a familiar narrative of state, society, and religion. However, they are accompanied by a significant danger. For Selengut, the development of state, society and philosophy known to the West indiscriminately becomes normative, the only possible way of distinguishing and separating religion and violence. When this happens, it hinders sympathetic understanding. Ziya Meral’s book *How Violence Shapes Religion?* (2018) offers a better idea of how complex the relationship between religion and violence may be. Moreover, Meral’s title highlights the fact that Selengut overwhelmingly approaches the relationship in one-way fashion – i.e., religion’s impact on violence, not the reverse. As Meral shows, this direction is only part of the story.

Selengut addresses the lack of understanding of religions’ impact on violence, but sometimes in an incomplete or one-sided way. It does not seem appropriate to me, for example, to reduce the civil war in Ireland to a conflict between Irish Catho-

lics and Irish Protestants (4). Also, some statements are quoted without accounting for their literary, theological or historical context. For example, when Selengut refers to Deuteronomy 20:16-18, he describes God's instruction as absolute, introduces this passage by talking about "Judaism's approach to holy war" (18) without even mentioning the framing verses (which seem to dominate the entire passage) or other passages in Deuteronomy, let alone other passages in the Pentateuch.

Sometimes Selengut hints at important distinctions but then bypasses them with breath-taking ease. For example, he states, "Although in its beginnings Christianity was pacifist and opposed violence of any sort, many historians argue it could hold onto these sensibilities so long as it remained a sectarian and minority religion" (19). This observation hints at a more complex perspective on history and reality. But a subsequent statement derails the previous one without rationale, as Selengut makes Christianity's shift into a warlike mode seem inevitable: "Christianity, as a world religion, also had to protect its doctrines from theological contamination, and the just use of war and violence was understood as a way of preserving the genuine and authentic Christian faith" (20). The logic seems to be tied to the idea with which Selengut closes the book: "So long as religion is about ultimate truth and commitment to the sacred, to a vision of a utopia described in holy scripture, men and women will be defenders of the faith and willing soldiers in the battles for God" (195-196).

In a similar vein, Selengut's argument frequently lacks awareness of the complex relationship between people and religions. His argument is dominated by the conviction that religion regularly and inexorably justifies violence: "Religion can tell us that it is ultimately right to love our neighbours, but it can also instruct us that it is sacred duty to kill them" (2). This perspective does not account for the reality that people also preserve and mould religions, following a religious tradition but also changing it. There is a constant interdependence and interplay, which makes it inappropriate to conceive people only as merely obedient followers of religious commands. At the risk of oversimplifying, religions do not go to war – people do; people are the authors of violence. Therefore, it is confusing rather than helpful to portray religions as subjects and authors of convictions and actions.

I do not mean to ignore the positive value of this book. Selengut argues in engaging fashion that the relationship between religion and violence must not be ignored. He is frequently informative, raises important questions and offers some helpful answers. However, his perspective on the topic must be qualified and supplemented.

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