
Book reviews

Theology Today

2015, Vol. 71(4) 464–473

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DOI: 10.1177/0040573614554746

ttj.sagepub.com



From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace

Amy Eilberg

Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014. xxii + 278 pp. \$25.00

This is at one and the same time a highly personal account of the process of peacemaking as well as a more academic description of what such a process requires. Rabbi Eilberg, the first ordained female rabbi in the Jewish Conservative Movement, shares with her readers, whom she directly implores to join her as a peacebuilder, the story of her decades-long involvement in efforts at personal and social reconciliation, focusing in a special way on the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Rather ironically I would note that, while her discussion of inner Jewish tensions over the Israeli–Palestinian issue was written at the time of previous clashes between Israeli military and Hamas, I am writing this review in the midst of the even more intense conflict taking place in July 2014. So her perspectives have a special relevance at the present time.

There is an evident systematic development to this volume. Overall it is fundamentally rooted in Eilberg’s deep-seated conviction that biblical and post-biblical Jewish religious texts have applicability to contemporary personal and social conflict situations. She quotes directly from a fair number of such texts. Eilberg is not simplistic in this regard. She realizes that such religious texts cannot be introduced into discussions of contemporary conflicts without a measure of sophistication about the dynamics of hatred and anger and the techniques that have proven useful in resolving certain situations.

In the opening chapter she pays special attention to scientific assessments of how the human brain reacts at times of threat and discord. In chapter 2 she brings to the discussion her personal experiences of working in directing interreligious programs at the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis–Saint Paul as well as her involvements in dialogical and conflict resolution settings, including some sponsored by the World Council of Churches.

The remainder of the book examines how her understanding of the dynamics of peacebuilding might apply to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and to the internal divisions it has engendered within the Jewish community. Here is one of the few public discussions of this internal communal conflict. While she primarily addresses her reflections to a Jewish readership, people in other religious communities can profit from her reflections as well, especially given the internal conflicts that continue

to beset many religious communities such as in Catholicism, which the late Archbishop of Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin tried to address through his Common Ground Initiative. She even introduces us to the familial conflict she had to work through with her daughter who became quite active in a pro-Palestinian organization harshly critical of Israeli governmental policies towards Palestine and its people.

As part of her analysis, in the latter sections of the book Eilberg offers a brief introduction to what she terms “Peacebuilder Portraits” of individuals and organizations that have worked for Israeli–Palestinian reconciliation, many of them embodying the principles and techniques of peacebuilding she has explored throughout the book. Included are such individuals as Alick Isaacs, Zoughbi Zoughbi, and Souliman Al-Khatib and groups such as the Parents Circle, the Lights of Peace Center, and the Hand in Hand School.

At one point Eilberg goes into a description of two experiences we shared together in Istanbul several years ago. The World Council of Churches convened a meeting on how Jewish–Christian dialogue has impacted Christian self-understanding. This conference was immediately followed by the annual conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews that was being held for the first time ever in a Muslim-majority country. These conferences took place only two weeks after the confrontational encounter between the Israeli navy and a flotilla of ships attempting to break through the Israeli blockade of Gaza. So tensions were high.

Within the WCC conference Eilberg experienced a personal attack on her, an attack that included many of the Christian theologians as well, from an Arab Christian scholar who argued that any positive approach to Jews and Judaism in fact enhances the suffering of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation. She was profoundly distressed by this attack and tried to utilize her peacebuilding approach with the scholar in question. But, as she relates, in this case the process failed.

During a subsequent ICCJ conference she describes a more positive encounter with a Palestinian priest-professor, Fr. Jamal Khader, one of the authors of the KAIROS DECLARATION released by a group of Christian Palestinians regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This statement has seen much criticism from the Jewish side, even from more progressive sectors of the Jewish community. In her encounter with Fr. Khader she came to appreciate far better the genesis and the purpose of this document, though she says that Fr. Khader may be a minority voice within the KAIROS circle.

Overall Eilberg’s book offers extremely useful techniques for peacebuilding by religious leaders, both lay and ordained. The volume would have benefited from some tighter editing in spots as some of her analysis of the peacebuilding process becomes repetitious. Also issues of resistance and legitimate defense are ignored in the book. They need to be included in any comprehensive discussion of peacebuilding.

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