

## Book Review

J. William Frost, (2004), ***A History of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim Perspectives on War and Peace***, Studies in Religion and Society, Vol. 65a, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 858pp.

Reviewed by Katrien Hertog<sup>\*</sup>

---

<sup>\*</sup> Katrien Hertog is a PhD Candidate at the Centre for Peace Research and Strategic Studies, Catholic University Leuven, Van Evenstraat 2B, 3000 Leuven, Belgium, [Katrien.Hertog@soc.kuleuven.be](mailto:Katrien.Hertog@soc.kuleuven.be)

Book review of ***A History of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim Perspectives on War and Peace***, *Peace, Conflict and Development: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 7, July 2005, available from <http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk>.

This massive work, in two volumes, tells the story of organised religion and how it relates to war and peace throughout history. At the basis of this work lie some interesting and very pertinent questions. It wants to explore the ambiguities in organised religions' proclamation of peace on the one hand, and full involvement in the origins, course, and conclusion of wars, on the other. Is there historical evidence that peoples' faiths caused wars, stopped wars from beginning, shortened their duration, changed conduct, or fostered peace after the end? Why does organised religion remain a potent influence on war and peace, today as in the past? What are the political effects of the classical religious doctrines on war and peace (Just War, Holy War and Pacifism)?

These questions are worked out through a historical narrative, stretching from Genesis to the recent ethno-religious conflicts of the 1990s, linking political and military stages and developments in world history with evolving religious thought and practices. The main emphasis throughout the book is on the three monotheistic religions. The first part of the book introduces the basic beliefs of the world's religions to show how religions and Greek and Roman civilisations structured the practice of war and the desire for peace. These chapters reveal very clearly the ambivalence of the sacred, with a remarkable emphasis on violence in the case of Hinduism, the Roman Empire and Islam. The following parts discuss the changing role and influence of religion on war and peace, as well as the influence of war on the attitudes and behaviour of religions, from medieval Europe to the Second Gulf War.

After reading the book, one cannot help but surrender to the historical evidence of religion as an effective and almost constant factor in starting, catalysing, justifying or condoning violence; historical facts that sound more powerful and convincing than the mostly silent and behind the scenes work of the religious potential for peace. Indeed, there is a close linkage

between the practice of religion and political wars. There has always been and there will always be. Religion, joined with nationalism, sacred land or an ethnic group, is still a dominant force in our time. And it is still true that religions sanctify war's objectives; provide a reason to fight; ease the burden of suffering during the conflict; and make the losses seem worthwhile. However, in my opinion, this predominantly violent portrayal of religion throughout history might partly be reinforced by the overall approach of the work.

This history of religion, peace and war is mainly written from the overall perspective of the classical religious approaches on war and peace (Just War, Holy War, Pacifism), which is of course very acceptable and maybe even inevitable from a historical point of view. However, as Frost indicates in the preface, the application of these classical approaches brings with it some problems, which are richly illustrated by the history told in this book. One of the problems with these approaches is the fact that they only offer a perspective on the kind of war that should be waged, and on the moment when the question about war and peace is reduced to the choice between going to war or not going to war (at which moment the best resources of religion for peace are usually already exhausted). Pacifism is often accused of having a lack of effectiveness in solving conflicts, while one of the main problems with the Just War theory is the question of who has the authority to decide upon the interpretation of the Just War criteria. This overall perspective might be one reason why this work mainly highlights the contribution of religion to war. Coming from this perspective, it is logical that J. Frost also chooses to define peace in a very traditional way, namely as the absence of violence. This approach seems outdated to me, and it is all the more surprising to read this from a specialist on the Quakers, who have been engaged in many peacebuilding initiatives throughout history with a much broader aim than solely to stop or avoid armed conflict. J. Frost argues, however, that a positive definition of peace would mean that virtually all

societies have been at war constantly. Such a dualistic approach to war and peace leaves no room for the recognition of the more subtle and less evident dynamics of conflict and peace, and for a refined exploration of the different layers and aspects of peacebuilding processes, so evidently required after witnessing the new kinds of conflicts of the 1990s.

Interestingly enough, J. Frost himself indicates, in the introduction and in the concluding remarks, the problem of complexity and the importance of nuance. Picking up the aforementioned critique at the end of the book – saying that it is difficult to conclude anything on the role of religion because there are so many other factors and processes at work – he calls for a different approach. Such an approach is gradually taking shape in the recent development in the study of religion and peacebuilding, of “the fourth model” named by the specialist on religion and conflict resolution Marc Gopin of George Mason University. This fourth model refers to a pro-active stance of religious representatives or scholars in exploring their religious traditions, in order to draw out peace-enhancing concepts and practices, on the basis of which concrete conflict prevention strategies and conflict resolution mechanisms can be worked out. In view of the fact that the aim of this book is to explore and describe the relationship between religion and war and peace, the lack of reference to academic studies of the past five years, which start from this different approach, feels like a missing perspective. However, it would sound rather unfair to blame J. Frost for missing the latest perspective, which has been formulated more straightforwardly only at the end of his fourteen years of study and preparation of this book. Nevertheless, J. Frost himself opens up this space by referring at the end of his book to liberation theology, religious mediation, the role of spiritual leadership and the idea and practice of non-violence. He also bravely offers some preliminary criteria to predict and evaluate religions’ potential to support war or peace. These criteria are very general, as he acknowledges himself, and should be refined and checked through study

Book review of ***A History of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim Perspectives on War and Peace***, *Peace, Conflict and Development: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 7, July 2005, available from <http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk>.

of more in-depth cases, in order to better understand the dynamics and characteristics of specific religions, in a certain moment of time, in one peculiar conflict situation. Also further reflection is needed on the development of a theoretical framework for religious peacebuilding.

The inclusion of this new approach to the study of religion, peace and conflict might shed some light on the otherwise very gloomy picture of religion as a very effective source of war and violence. Until such a new historic account is written, a more appropriate title for this work by J. Frost would be “Religious perspectives on war and conflict”.

Credit should be given to J. Frost for his courage and vision in undertaking the massive task of writing this historical account of religion’s relation to war and peace. Indeed, the topic is too pertinent not to have such a survey to rely on. J. Frost’s choice to provide a survey of actions and interpretations of many religions over a long time period, instead of doing intensive research on one time period, is undoubtedly valuable in its aim, but makes this study inevitably superficial at times. At the cost of a general overview, there is sometimes not enough depth and too much generalisation. Among the sensitive generalisations, excluding here once again the potential of religions to be a force for peace – albeit as the exception that confirms the rule - I noted on one single page (781): “Because a primary function of religion is to bring all men and women to salvation, the devout will seek this goal in almost every political environment, including war”; “To ask that the church, synagogue, ashram, or mosque prevent war is to misunderstand how they function in society”; “Common today is the secular value system of realpolitik that ignores religious teachings except as an instrument of national power”.

Book review of ***A History of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim Perspectives on War and Peace***, *Peace, Conflict and Development: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 7, July 2005, available from <http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk>.

J. Frost's work has been written primarily as a textbook or reference book, for those who believe lessons can be learned with regard to how faith communities in the past dealt with issues of war and peace. It is not particularly written for specialists on religion and war, but for intelligent, curious people. In this regard, the work has definitely fulfilled its aim, since it contains a lot of information written in a very readable style.