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## Review of: Andrew R. Murphy (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*

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**Review of:** Andrew R. Murphy (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). xvi+615 pp. \$194.95/£115.00 (hb), ISBN 978-1-4051-9131-9.

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*Blackwell Companions*, and instalments from similar series, should be initially sized up according to their purpose and audience. Such hefty tomes present themselves first as reference books—as collections of articles by scholarly experts that treat the key methods, topics, historical developments, etc., in the field. Second, each *Companion* is addressed to students and teachers as a state-of-the-field resource that provides several benefits: a sound picture of the field, assessment of various theories and methods used in the field, a sense of the innovative developments and open questions, and plenty of information to follow up on. Finally, some *Companions* give primacy to presenting particular developments in a field and arguing for a certain methodological approach over others.

Of the instalments in the *Blackwell Companion to Religion* series, all of the titles establish themselves as reference books in the first sense. Some stand out as even-handed, comprehensive companions in the second sense. These include *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* and *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*. Such volumes usually make their way to paperback because they could be profitably used in college courses. Examples of the third approach include *The Blackwell Companion to Christian*

*Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, in which the coeditors shaped a cohesive study of how Christian ethics looks when practiced as an outgrowth of ecclesial commitments. *Companions* of the third sort are worth reading if their purpose is understood, but they may not be effective as first-stop reference books for novices.

*The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* is not of the third sort. It is an excellent reference volume on the topic in the first sense, presenting how a range of academic disciplines try to understand and explain the causes of religious violence, and how a wide variety of religious traditions have wrestled with, sought to validate, and tried to alleviate violence. This review will consider the *Companion* from the perspective of Christian ethicists and ask how they might find it, particularly in the second sense, as a companion for themselves and their students.

The editor, Andrew Murphy, an associate professor of Political Science at Rutgers University, is author or editor of several books on religion and politics in colonial America. His straightforward aim for the book is to provide a guide to the complex interactions of religion and violence—to edit an intriguing and useful reference work in the first two senses described above. The authors are scholars either of social science, usually political science, or of religious studies. Most are based in the US, several in the UK, and some in Israel, Australia, or in countries of Asia or Africa. Most are university-based academics, but some are scholars working with development programmes. Several are well established in their fields, a few are new scholars, and a fair number are mid-career, associate professors. It is good to see all of these ranges, which help the *Companion* achieve a global perspective and a mix of established expertise and fresh perspectives.

Murphy offers two caveats in the preface: that he imposed no uniform definition of religion on the authors, and that no single volume can cover every topic and perspective. He could have proposed an additional caveat: that the conception of ‘violence’ in this volume is mostly about social violence, particularly war, terrorism, discriminatory attacks on religious groups, and state-sponsored violence (despite which capital punishment/death penalty is not mentioned). In some chapters, violence against women, suicide and martyrdom are addressed. The analysis of many chapters could be extended to other forms of violence—crime, interpersonal violence, sexual violence, domestic violence, corporal punishment—but, with brief exceptions, it is left to the reader to draw those connections.

The *Companion* is organized into five parts, the first of which considers definitions of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘violence’ as a precursor to understanding their relationship. The first chapter, by John D. Carlson, is a standard, serviceable survey of terminology. In the other introductory chapter, William T. Cavanaugh summarizes the argument from his book *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Cavanaugh sets out a very important warning for those approaching the topic to avoid simplistic notions that religion is inherently or exceptionally violent. He urges us to examine critically all ideologies, myths, and pragmatic interests that engender violence, and not to assume that nonreligious rationality is immune from these forces. ‘Many in the West love the myth of religious violence because it provides us with an irrational Other to contrast with our noble rationality. Doing away with this blind spot would level the playing field so that so-called “secular” violence would come under equal scrutiny’ (p. 32). Putting Cavanaugh up front was an interesting choice, because his is

one of the more provocative voices in contemporary Christians ethics. Seeing his name there initially made me wonder if the volume would have a specific interpretive angle, like the *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, to which Cavanaugh was a contributor. As it turns out, the *Companion* is not narrow in its interpretive range, and Cavanaugh's appeal to do away with the blind spot is sensible. Some contributors refer back to Cavanaugh favourably. On the other hand, Hector Avalos criticizes Cavanaugh's thesis thus: 'Secular violence kills for things that actually may be scarce, while religious violence may kill for things that are not scarce at all, or cannot be proven to even exist' (p. 144).

Avalos's chapter comes in the second part of the book. The nine chapters of this part look at the religion-violence nexus from various disciplinary perspectives, including economics, anthropology, evolutionary theory, sociology, law, gender studies, and media studies (some of the authors work directly in these disciplines, while others do so from a base in religious studies). These chapters are less about surveying the disciplines in a systematic fashion and more about presenting intriguing examples of how they currently address the relationship of religion and violence. For example, Avalos criticizes Cavanaugh on the basis of a 'scarce resource theory'; Anthony Gill uses economic theories to explain the rationale of suicide bombers; Aziz Esmail offers a 'bold' scheme of the transmutation of religious experience over time 'toward ideologization, and toward an associated politics of identity' (p. 63); Ariel Glucklich argues that 'seemingly irrational actions can be traced to the evolutionary principles in which are religious groups are based' (p. 76); and David E. Guinn presents his own typologies of the state's use of religion. Whether Christian ethicists agree with Cavanaugh or Avalos about the

value of the category of religious violence, they understand that to comment normatively on violence, it is important to understand what the scientific and social-scientific disciplines argue about the causes of violence, the ways religion and other ideologies can exacerbate violence, and options for alleviating violence. Hence, the chapters of this part are helpful resources for ethical analysis. Unfortunately, the volume features no arguments resembling Steven Pinker's recent psychological-cultural-evolutionary analysis (in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* [New York: Penguin, 2011]) that violence is on a long historical decline.

Part 3 of the *Companion* is 'Traditions and Movements, Concepts and Themes', wherein are found discussions of Christianity that will be familiar to Christian ethicists: Jonathan Ebel's historical survey of a 'gruesome catalog of Christian violence' (p. 10) and James Turner Johnson's summary and comparison of just war and jihad. Alongside these are 14 other essays, treating a number of religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, Jainism, Chinese religion, and a Jewish consideration of the legacy of interpretations of Genesis 34. There are two chapters entirely on Islam. David Cook's is a study of two specific concepts in classical and contemporary Islam, in which he evenhandedly concludes, 'Jihad and martyrdom are integral parts of Islam, but not crucial ones' (p. 290). Beverly Milton-Edwards critiques contemporary rhetoric in media and politics that reduce Islam to al-Qaeda. This concern is well placed, which is not to say that violence perpetrated by Muslims is ignored in the *Companion*. While there is nothing like Ebel's 'gruesome catalog' for the Islamic tradition, one can piece together from Turner, Cook, and a few of the later chapters some of the lowlights in the history of jihad. Five other essays round out the part on traditions, revolving around dynamics of how

religion can sacralise and spiritualise violence, and of how religious believers might enact violence to establish identity or to preserve a community that is experiencing humiliation.

Part 4 is intriguing, as it comprises several case studies of religion and violence in the past and present. The offerings are wide-ranging, for example, ‘Gender, Religion, and Violence during the Holocaust’; ‘Religion, Pluralism, and Conflicts in the Pacific Islands’; ‘Sudan: Religion and Conflict’; and ‘The Politics of Protestant Violence: Abolitionists and Anti-Abortionists’. This part is where the volume is most at risk of becoming uneven or idiosyncratic. And perhaps it is; it is hard to tell, for no reviewer has the expertise to assess the competence of all these specific historical and cultural analyses. But that’s not a problem for a few reasons. First, most readers are not planning to read all 15 case studies straight through. Rather, they will dabble, and read a few cases to fill out their knowledge. So unevenness here may not present a problem, even if it exists. Second, the purpose of the case studies is to enable readers to test and apply the theories and perspectives from the first parts of the book. Since the *Companion* does not privilege a single disciplinary angle or thesis about religion’s role in violence, it is difficult to say whether this aim of testing and application is achieved, beyond saying that teachers and students have the opportunity to make any number of uses of the case studies in conjunction with other articles.

Part 5 addresses the future and emphasizes peace. Its three chapters take on a more normative tone. Ira Chernus surveys religion and nonviolence in American history, striving to be broad; for example, he identifies the influence of Ghandi and the Dalai Lama on Christians. He concludes with peace activist A. J. Muste’s observation, ‘There is no way to peace. Peace is the way’ (p. 566). The other two chapters address religious

(largely Christian) peacebuilding from liberationist perspectives. Thia Cooper's account of how liberation theology describes a spiral of violence in unjust societies is well-worn territory, though certainly not unimportant; while María Pilar Aquino gives a state-of-field survey of religious peacebuilding with the longest bibliography of any of the chapters—over 8 pages.

To conclude, this survey of *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* indicates its breadth, and thus its value to those studying the religious ethics of violence and peace, and to those studying violence and peace in other disciplines. The intersections of religion and violence are so vast, and they need to be considered from so many angles, that hardly anyone is a master of the whole. This *Companion* is a very good road map to the whole. While the book in its entirety is not for introductory students, many chapters can be read by students at any level. The *Companion* will spur advanced students and academics to explore methodologies and historical-cultural examples with which they were only passingly familiar. It is to be hoped that this is one of the *Companions* that Wiley-Blackwell chooses to make accessible in paperback, so that it appears not only on library bookshelves but on many personal bookshelves.