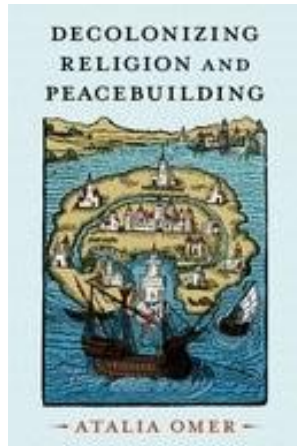


BOOK REVIEW

Decolonizing Religion and Peacebuilding

By Atalia Omer

Reviewed by Flora x. Tang



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In this book, Omer speaks *to* and *with* on-the-ground practices of intrareligious and interreligious peacebuilding in the Global South. Drawing on participant-observation and interview-based fieldwork with interreligious peacebuilding organizations such as Catholic Relief Services in Kenya and the Philippines, Atalia Omer offers a critical yet generous review of neoliberal peacebuilding industries' usage of religion as a bureaucratic tool in peacebuilding. Omer highlights how religion and religious traditions have been "harnessed" by peacebuilding non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and programs to become a "technocratic tool" to promote liberal governance and societal harmony. This process reduces the prophetic voice and rich, decolonial, or feminist theologies or religious interpretations present in major world religions, and instead emphasizes "hermeneutically closed accounts of religion and culture" (58) that can be used as simplified justifications for peace and neighbourly love.

One central thesis of this book is that these on-the-ground, NGO-ified religious peacebuilding practices are worlds away from decolonial theories of religion, which emphasize colonial history, power, empire, and gender/sexual dimensions of such power imbalances in the history of religion and coloniality. Omer attempts to highlight this abyssal gap between theory and praxis by

offering a decolonial critique of neoliberal peacebuilding industries' usage of religion, while also allowing for on-the-ground lived experiences of religious practitioners to speak back to the privileges and purist tendencies of decolonial theory. Omer notices the individual-centric nature of much interreligious peacebuilding: peacebuilding programs focus on "capacitating" individuals to adjust to their predicaments, as well as "planting a seed" of peace by promoting contact and relationships across communities to prevent intergroup violence (60). While these practices can have positive effects, they prioritize a "problem-solving" approach that facilitates people's resilience in present-day conditions rather than a more analytical or intersectional approach to challenging why the present-day conditions were there in the first place. As a result, religious traditions' deep historical and intersectional complexities are reduced to "sticky note" or "twitter" versions of religious aphorisms, harnessed solely for the purpose of cultivating individual resilience or harmonious relationships, rather than allowing for religious hermeneutics themselves to be complexified, decolonized, and transformed by or transformative of alternative futures of decoloniality. Omer dubs this throughout the book as an example of "doing religion," which comes at the expense of "knowing religion." The dichotomy between "doing religion" and "knowing religion" emerges as another central thesis of the book: "knowing religion" and knowing religious traditions in and through their colonial, historical, gendered, structural, and material complexities—as well as allowing for new hermeneutical reinterpretations from queer/feminist or decolonial perspectives—are sidelined in the current neoliberal peacebuilding industry, whereas "doing religion" (or putting religious traditions into easily understandable and essentialized, bite-sized information pieces that promote peace) emerges as the primary mode of religious engagement by these organizations and practitioners.

This attempt to "systemize, measure, and NGO-ize constructive religious forces" (111) affects women religious practitioners in unique ways. In particular, Omer notices that gender norms are re-inscribed in these efforts. The structural and gendered violences

that are caused by religiously-informed gender norms in society are not questioned or destabilized in this practice of religious peacebuilding. Women (imagined by NGOs as mothers) are seen as primarily responsible for forming youths' religious and peace education, for forming their children's religious morality in the direction of socially acceptable peace rather than extremist violence. Muslim and Christian women interviewed in the book also see a link between their pious religiosity and their capacity to survive personally, economically, and socially (135) in a "neoliberal and unequal economy" (141). Omer dubs this tendency among women and men to spiritualize resiliency and material survival as "pious resiliency" or "survivalist piety" (134): influenced by neoliberal religious peacebuilding industries, religious piety is increasingly experienced by people on the ground as that which leads to further capacity for survival and economic wellbeing for women and their families. This inadvertently spreads a form of "prosperity gospel" among Global South religious practitioners, thereby depoliticizing the potentially socially transformative messages (including decolonial, anti-capitalist, and feminist messages) of various religious traditions. Economic conditions of poverty, which are almost always rooted in histories of colonialism, structural exploitation, and systemic inequality (as theologies such as liberation theology would be able to identify), are now depoliticized in this analysis to become individual issues that are able to be transcended with enough piety and enough resiliency.

The book also unveils the many ways that these on-the-ground practices of interreligious peacebuilding have "exceeded the critical gaze" (5) and offer material insights into questions of survival—something frequently elided in academic decolonial theories of religion. The book's genius and humility lie in this very ability to allow for individual stories to be narrated in this complexity: just as decolonial academic theories offer valuable critiques of the neoliberal peacebuilding "industry," the lived religion of Kenyans and Mindanaoans speaks back to the academic "industry" of critique itself. Omer narrates, via stories of peacebuilding practitioners she interviews, the various openings to an unrevolutionary "decolonial love" (235) among Christians and Muslims who participate in interreligious peacebuilding programs. This love—manifested as relationality and friendship across difference—is neither feminist nor revolutionary, nor does it critique or dismantle the colonial power structure. Still, these "openings of decolonial love" are nonetheless real and tangibly impactful on the spiritual lives, material lives, and survival of Kenyans and Mindanaoans at the heart of Omer's ethnographic research. For scholars committed to decoloniality, the fact that this book includes these stories is a gift, even if (or perhaps precisely because)

these stories and these lives exceed simple theories of decoloniality, just as global subaltern lives have and will continue to exceed our academic imaginations of them.

This book presents several takeaways for practitioners of religion and peacebuilding: First, the book reminds us that interreligious peacebuilding programs may not work (or may do more harm) when religious difference itself is not the primary source of conflict—in many communities, it is not simply the hatred between Christians and Muslims that leads to local conflict, but rather centuries of colonial domination, historical power imbalances, structural exploitation, or territorial conflict that are the true cause of conflict. Interreligious peacebuilding programs ought not pretend that religious difference is the primary source of violence when there may be greater material concerns at stake. Instead, they ought to give space for these material, economic, and land-based sources of conflict to be concretely addressed in their programming.

Second, Omer's work reminds us that an over-emphasis on "doing religion" in peacebuilding programs may present a "hermeneutically closed" account of religious traditions that centers only the dominant, simplified, and sticky note-like versions of major world religious traditions. Practitioners of religious peacebuilding can work against this tendency by continuing to center more prophetic voices within religious traditions that offer hermeneutically open, decolonial, feminist, and empowering re-interpretations of religious traditions. This often looks like featuring the voices of liberation theologians (or preachers who draw from this background) and centering queer/feminist religious examples, as well as other groups who are at the margins of their respective religious traditions. These voices would also help combat the overly individualistic tendencies of these religious peacebuilding programs by inviting individuals of faith to not primarily see their economic suffering as their own fault and disentangle economic prosperity from religious piety. While simplified versions of religious traditions might be the easiest to "do" when implementing programs, we must continue to allow for the prophetic nature of religious traditions to offer people new imaginations of a radically different world, so that decolonial hope and love become more than just a struggle for survival in a violent world.

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