

Megan Shore, *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. xv+211. ISBN 978-0-7546-6757-9.

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC) is widely acclaimed for its contribution to the relatively smooth shift from the violent, non-democratic apartheid regime to the democratic rainbow nation. But in recent years the positive perception of the TRC is increasingly being challenged for its lack of focus on social justice, brought about in part by the growing frustration with the inability of the current democratically elected governments to narrow the extreme gap between rich and poor in South Africa. Some observers blame the Christian influence for this omission of justice as a key issue to be addressed. The argument goes that the chairperson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, dressed in his clerical robes, and the other Christian members of the Commission, redirected this legal procedure into a Christian framework with prayers, candles, and the vocabulary of confessing, forgiving and reconciliation, so that the focus on justice got lost. They see this as a confirmation of their conviction that religion should be kept far away from conflict resolution.

Megan Shore has deconstructed this argumentation in her dissertation, submitted for her PhD at the University of Leeds under the supervision of Kevin Ward and Nigel Biggar (Oxford). She follows the argument of Scott Appleby in *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) that religion has not only been a source of violence but also at times played a positive role in resolving conflict. This volume offers a case study in religious conflict resolution. Through an analysis of the role played by Christianity in the TRC, it aims to find insights on practices and procedures that will provide important lessons for those working in international conflict resolution, especially the role of religion in transitional justice mechanisms such as truth commissions.

The study contains two parts: the first part deals with the context for the study. Chapter 2 introduces the theory of religious conflict resolution as an alternative to the two converging trends of political realism and secularist political philosophy within Western political theory. It continues with a historical description of the practice of religious conflict resolution since the end of the Cold War. A final section focuses on the establishment of Truth Commissions in the transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic governments and describes the origins of the TRC. Chapter 3 describes the ambiguous role played by Christianity in relation to the development of apartheid, which is supporting and contesting its implementation.

The second part offers a description and an evaluation of the role that Christianity played in the TRC. Chapter 4 analyses the ways in which Christianity influenced the shaping of the TRC. The next three chapters investigate the Christian influence on the way the concepts of truth, reconciliation and justice functioned within the TRC. The Human Rights Violation Hearings empowered victims by legitimizing their personal – and in many cases religious – narratives of truth telling. It enabled their voices to become part of the collective memory and it contributed to building a moral community. At the same time, Shore admits, it was

difficult to translate a truth-telling narrative, which is rooted in Christian notions of forgiveness and reconciliation, into financial reparations.

Chapter 6 focuses on the reconciliation aspect of the TRC. Here, also, Christianity played a prominent role. The problem here was that it remained unclear throughout the life of the Commission whether 'reconciliation' meant interpersonal or national reconciliation, and whether it should be conceived of in legal-political or religious-moral terms. What became clear was that the TRC would not achieve reconciliation but only initiate a process.

Shore confesses in her conclusion that her initial plan was only to look into truth telling and reconciliation following the TRC slogan 'Truth, the Road to Reconciliation', but that the critics of Christianity in the TRC forced her to look into the issue of justice as well (p. 174). The first criticism was that Christian influence in the TRC as a political-judicial instrument impeded justice. According to Shore, because of the role played by Christianity in resisting apartheid, the responsibility taken up by Christianity in the TRC was helpful in the transition. At the same time, the future role of religion in the post-apartheid era still had not been defined. The second criticism was that the TRC denied local African forms of retributive justice in favour of 'Christian' Western concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Commission opted indeed for the values of freedom, gender equity, due process, forgiveness and reconciliation, values that were also part of African tradition of *ubuntu* and restorative justice. The third criticism, that amnesty fostered impunity, is countered by the argument that conditional amnesty was a reasonable compromise given the fact that the primary objective of the TRC was to record the history of South Africa's apartheid past. The final criticism was that the TRC's approach prohibited the pursuit of structural justice and reparation. Shore defends the TRC by referring to the accomplishment of the basic requirement of justice, namely justice as recognition. Creating a history of human rights violations was the central objective, not socio-economic justice. The last element was an unrealistic demand in the context of the limited resources available to the Commission and the unstable political environment of the mid-1990s. Shore ends her research with four lessons to be learned from the TRC for future religious conflict resolution.

This volume is a very welcome contribution on the growing interdisciplinary discussion about the question how the TRC should be evaluated. She offers a balanced description and evaluation of the work of the TRC in relation to the role played by 'Christianity'. She was not afraid to offer her views and prescriptions on the process. As a theologian, however, my main criticism is the use of the concept of 'Christianity'. The word suggests a common theory and practice. In reality, there exist a variety of Christian traditions, denominations, and individual believers, with an extended variation of opinion on the role of churches in society, on truth telling, on reconciliation and on justice. Many critics of the TRC are Christians and theologians. Shore is aware of this but she does little to address it. Instead she remains within the framework of the discussions among those involved with conflict resolution, challenging the traditional view that religion should be kept as far away as possible from this mechanism.

*Eddy Van der Borgh*

*Desmond Tutu Chair, Faculty of Theology, VU University Amsterdam*