

Religion at Ground Zero: Theological Responses to Times of Crisis

by Christopher Craig Brittain

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Christopher Craig Brittain's *Religion at Ground Zero: Theological Responses to Times of Crisis* is a welcome publication, timely in its theme and accessible in style. Brittain opens the Pandora's box of 'religion and violence', echoing Claus Westermann's classic and difficult question:

What does it mean for those whose understanding of the world is conditioned by the natural sciences to say that God's action encompasses all reality, disasters included? (1994, p.480).

Confronting the issue head on, Brittain delves into a wide-ranging discussion of a number of historical events, from the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, the First World War and the Holocaust (or Shoah, to follow Brittain's example) to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7. Brittain offers a nuanced survey of theological responses to historical disasters, with much room for open criticism of religious leaders and spokespeople, but nonetheless avowing the possibility to respond theologically with tolerance, respect, and compassion for victims of trauma. This in itself is worthy of praise, constituting a much needed retort to the media-favoured 'New Atheist' trend that denigrates religion in all its complex multiplicity as essentially violent and unhealthy to society. *Religion at Ground Zero* is a defence of religion in the sense that it offers a more subtle argument in opposition to these dogmatic, sweeping claims against religion. The author's

consideration of religion *as* Ground Zero is interesting and apt, revealing it as ‘a site of tension and source of potential disruption, leaving in its wake both terrible violence and also considerable inspiration and consolation’ (p.155). This metaphor complicates the place of religion in the public space by historicizing religious practice and providing specific contexts for analysis in which to better understand the larger cultural, political and philosophical frameworks that religion, people, and events are always situated within. Brittain manages to do justice to the redemptive possibilities of theology, in particular acts and people, while not shying away from critiquing its sometimes harmful repercussions.

The thrust of Brittain’s discussion highlights the ways in which religion and ideology go hand in hand, though not always harmoniously. He warns of the problematic nature of drawing God into explanations of suffering, but contends that there *is* a space for theology in times of crisis, albeit not necessarily in the purely positive and comforting shape many might expect or want. This is an important point and valuably counters the versions of religion expounded by some atheist critics, such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Brittain holds that religious response to crises must refuse to be compromised and cornered into embodying comfort in the form of easy answers or simplified religious dogma, thus demythologizing what religion is supposedly ‘about’. Aligning himself with Archbishop of Canterbury, and theologian, Rowan Williams, he proposes that instead of,

[R]esting on an assured ‘positive’ message, it is rather a negative theology of the future, one which knows less about what is to come, not more, but which also interrupts despair and suspicion of one’s environment (p.200).

He calls for a Church (Brittain follows primarily a Christian trajectory) that embodies ‘hope against hope’. Theology’s place in the aftermath of crisis, but

also crucially in its day-to-day ongoing practice, should be concerned with helping Christians to respond well in the face of disaster and death, with wisdom and compassion.

The two main arguments are that religion itself is not inherently violent, and that theology must resist succumbing to the reductive images imposed on it as the ‘opiate’ of Marx’s critique, the ‘wish fulfilment’ of Freud’s psychology, or the dangerous but nonetheless ‘dead’ relic of the past Dawkins propagates. These are timely responses to the debate on religion, spurred on by a religious fundamentalism that spawns fear and judgement all in the name of ‘God’. Brittain’s conclusion is not original in its contention that *all* human thought and organisation is inextricably and often blindly caught up in ideological structures, religious and otherwise, with multifaceted motivations – sometimes with devastating effects – but it does need repeating. The religious perspectives that are vocalised in the media are too often fundamentalist cries of judgement and divine retribution, or, on the other hand, equally dogmatic and inflamed atheist proclamations imbuing all religion with the taint of violence conducted by the very few. Brittain’s account steadily leads us through a wide range of responses to historical crises, both religious and non-religious, critically evaluating both with lucid analyses and an unwillingness to shrink from critical assessment. He remains generous with his discussion partners and embodies the tolerant, critical but open-minded approach he himself calls for in relation to the surrounding world. Perhaps predominantly suited for undergraduate study, it is in many ways a publication that deserves a place in the wider market, with its helpful definitions and lack of academic jargon. One niggling question remains, however; the matter of what exactly religion uniquely has to offer, if anything, that for instance, a non-religious charitable organisation could not provide. This is touched on implicitly but demands more precise articulation. While, one could perhaps attempt to

synthesize and surmise an answer from reading the book, Brittain himself seems reticent or unwilling to spell out the potentially distinctive value to religious response and responsibility, and thus misses the opportunity to carve out a space for religion in contemporary society in which theological thought and practice can stand firm and come forth with integrity, honesty and vision.

Religion at Ground Zero is a welcome contribution to discussions on religion and history, theology and trauma and any form of religious discussion keen to avoid abstract theory and focus attention on particular people in particular historical times and places, including the present. With a variety of material, from Žižek and Adorno, Rousseau and Voltaire to Rowan Williams, Camus and *The Matrix*, *Religion at Ground Zero* is an accessible and engaging discussion that deals head-on with some extremely complicated and difficult issues surrounding theological practices and voices today. One lapse is the missing reference to the important, even prophetic, commentary on 9/11 by Jacques Derrida in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, which deserves at least a mention. Moreover, the book suffers from a large number of spelling errors. But apart from these fairly minor issues, Brittain has provided us with a helpful entrance into the hazardous territory of debate over religion and its relationship to violence in contemporary society.

Bibliography

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