

COSMIN IRIMIEȘ

THE WILLEY-BLACKWELL COMPANION TO
RELIGION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Cosmin Irimieș

Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Communication, Public Relations and
Advertising, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
Email: cosmin.irimies@ubbcluj.ro

Review of Michael Palmer & Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2012).

Key Words: religion, social justice, influence, historical settings, life, civil rights, human rights, Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess

Created and published in a period of seeking not only social justice, no matter the meaning term, but also a huge attempt to retrieve, by a major part of the global nations, the real meaning of their own religious beliefs and concepts, *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice* represents a comprehensive plea for the influence the religion has over social justice and overall life. We refer here to overall life as no other aspect of it has such an influence on the rest of them.

“While other domains of discourse (political, economic) have much to offer, religion provides both historically important and continually significant perspective on social justice in at least two ways. First, religion has social justice implications in the way that it shapes what its adherents believe about their roles and prerogatives in society. (...) The way in which social justice is or is not administered has religious implications”¹

The essays within the book are structured into four major parts with sections for each major religion: *Major world religions*, *Religious movements and themes*, *Indigenous people* and *Social justice issues*, starting from colonialism up to civil rights and AIDS, going through issues related to gender and sexuality or environmental concerns. The essays establish not only the existence of six major religions, but arrange the topics in a way that they naturally lead from the first concept of the book – religion – to the second one – social justice, thus establishing an inherent logical relation between them and offering a comparative study of social justice for each of the major world religions, exploring the concept from the point of view of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism

In order to establish the premises of a rigorous scientific research, the book starts with a definition of the social justice concept reviewing and explaining some of the less obvious aspects of it, such as different ceremonies of gift giving and hospitality that have as primary purpose the redistribution of wealth, turning into „a practical embodiment of distributive justice in which the riches of the community are shared equally by all”.²

As in the case of religions, we are talking about a variety of social justice approaches. We can, thus, refer to distributive justice, compensatory justice, retributive justice, procedural justice, restorative justice and justice in relation to personal values, each of them being related to a specific part of the world or being associated to a particular religious belief. We can refer this way to „The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice” as a practical dictionary of social justice concepts so necessary in a time when justice has become a

matter of interpretation and, due to its association to religious concepts, has become even a specific type of fundamental value.

As we see it, social justice can be assimilated to common good as seen by Wilson Muoha Maina:

„The achievement of the common good presumes the possibility of an equitable distribution of wealth. Without excluding anyone, wealth distribution also goes with merit where people have a right to the fruit of their labor. The history of the Catholic social teaching is filled with questions of how to ensure equitable distribution of wealth as well as ensuring the protection and proper use of private property.

The very purpose of wealth creation is its distribution and this requires efficient and just systems in any society. One of the best ways to ensure wealth distribution is through just wages and ownership”.³

After setting the basis of a very structured analysis of social justice, the book offers us an insight on different major religions that have, over the time, succeeded to establish moral, social, even political and economic values on a large scale. The presentation of major the religions of the world is turning into a real comprised but comprehensive enough history of religions and of the evolution of religious beliefs. No doubt, as we are talking about a scientific research, every single presentation leads to and is related to the concept and perception of social justice, its administration depending closely on the inner values of the religious beliefs spread over a territory.

One of the greatest merits of the book we are reviewing refers to the fact that it associates each religious doctrine to one of the major meanings of social justice that leads to explaining some actions that may, at first, seem not to have anything in common to any religious belief or value or to the concept of social justice itself.

We are offered this way a pertinent or, at least, plausible explanation for Christian colonialism over African people.

„Some Europeans began to see the slave trade as a social injustice and became morally convinced that the colossal wrongs of the slave trade ought to be rectified. To Christian missionaries, this conviction was understood as God’s call to elevate the “uneducated heathen” from their state of ignorance and idolatry to a European level of religiosity. (...) In pursuit of their agenda, some Europeans established a number of small but permanent colonies along the coasts of Africa to facilitate trade, to resettle

slaved seized from illegal slavers, and to establish plantations".⁴

Colonialism was thus seen not only as the best way to educate slaves, but also as the only way to achieve social change in the sense of economic, intellectual and even human evolution.

The book presents different aspects of social justice seen as "both an ideological and a political construct. Social justice has to do with the application of the concept of justice on a social scale. The concept is also employed to describe the movement towards a socially just world".⁵ Apart from gift giving and other social and / or religious traditions, the authors talk about social justice related, for instance to equal rights to medical care in the context of AIDS spreading over Africa in the end of the 20th century. Even if undermined and often ignored, the religion, more precisely indigenous religions, religious groups and traditional healers that remain the most accessed "medical consultants", have a great responsibility in changing the population's response to the disease and to the existing treatments.

Regarding from the Christian American perspective, the research explains the concept of social justice as equal, fair and natural treatment in what the black versus white relations are concerned:

"The civil rights revolution in American history was, to a considerable degree, a religious revolution, one whose social and spiritual impact inspired numerous other movements around the world".⁶

The South African experience is one of the most interesting to analyze as "South Africa, like so many other countries, was faced with a past devastated by gross violations of human rights that occurred during many years of racism and oppression".⁷

This is one of the reasons why the authors approach the issue of social justice in South Africa from many delicate aspects, such as political actions and decisions, reconciliation – either individual or at the community or even national level, reparation and reconstruction. It turns into a comprehensive picture of the evolution and influence of the concept at the level of real life actions and decisions.

The book does not only present the religious beliefs and their evolution related to the concept of social justice, but it also analyzes issues regarding the failure of religion to keep away from fundamentalist doctrines that very often lead to violent conflicts and abolishment of any human or civil right: "With (...) destructive forces occurring between European revolutions, America's Civil War and the First World War, most evangelical Christians could not maintain with very much moral force that the world was getting better".⁸

The authors do not present only the rise of some fundamentalist doctrines, but also analyze the Evangelicals' failure to confront various types of social injustice, such as racism, for instance.

Written by two Romanian authors, one of the most interesting chapters of the volume approaches the issue of social justice from the point of view of ethnic minorities. Starting from the origins of the word used to nominate the Roma minority, the study reveals a certain discrimination both from social and religious point of view, and also from the point of view of popular beliefs:

“Gypsies were considered a heretical sect and called *atzinganoi* (unclean), due in part to their having been regarded as Muslims in a Christian Empire (...). According to one traditional religious myth, the Roma people were the crafts-men who made the nails used to crucify Christ, and that damned them to eternal penitence”.⁹

Real or not, these myths or beliefs generated negative perceptions, both religious and social, and this led to social exclusion of Roma people all over Europe.

Roma people seemed to be oppressed even throughout the new order, the new society imposed by the communist era, when sedentary life (seen as prohibition of being nomad and obligation to have a clearly defined permanent location) led to a certain improvement of their social condition. The Roma language was though still prohibited in public and so was the cultural expression.

“The aim of all of these actions was to annihilate their ethnic identity and to set in motion clearly defined assimilation policies”.¹⁰

The fall of communism in 1989 generated a massive migration of Roma people to Pentecostalism, as Pentecostal churches provided Roma people with an institution of their own, that enables them to express their own lifestyle and cultural identity. The Pentecostalism becomes thus much more than a religious movement, turning into a true social project meant to bring social justice.

The final chapters of *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice* present and analyze some extremely actual and controversial issues from the viewpoint of social justice and freedom of the will, such as gender and sexuality, women rights, fertility control, abortion, assisted reproduction, or cloning. Though, not only life seems to be of interest from the social justice viewpoint, but also the death, as the book approaches issues like meanings of the death, death timing and method, care, solidarity and compassion for the dying.

As a final conclusion, we can see that *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice* as a benchmark both for the

study of religious implications over social justice and for the influence social justice has over the evolution of especially local religious beliefs.

Besides a comprehensive presentation of history and evolution of major religions, we are also talking about a thorough social justice and religious related analysis of some major events / moments that have essentially influenced the evolution of population on different continents. All these events, even if we refer to diseases / epidemics such as AIDS in Africa, racial phenomenon in America or civil rights or gender and sexuality, all these are analyzed from the point of view of a social justice deeply anchored in the religious beliefs of the world's nations.

The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice „global range, intellectual ecumenism, and attention to diverse historical contexts provides a rich resource for exploring how religious beliefs and practices engage issues of colonialism, gender justice, political struggle, healthcare, race, and the environment, among other topics ... Bringing together theoretical discussions with case studies, it opens up new pathways for exploring how global and local religions interrogate matters of historical injustice, identity, and the moral quality of public life”.¹¹

As one can see, the book is not addressed only to specialists in religious studies or sociology, but also offers a viable framework for anyone interested in the social evolution of religious beliefs and concepts. The overall analysis conducted and presented by this book can be of major interest for specialists and common people altogether, interested in understanding and placing present religious movements and even religious conflicts within a more generous context of the evolution of concepts such as religion and social justice. Without aiming to be or to offer an exhaustive explanation for past or present religious movements, the book can be seen and used as a startpoint in any thorough attempt to create an overall, general context of religious evolution of social concepts and relations.

Notes:

¹ Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell. 2012), 1-2.

² Ana Maria Pineda, "Hospitality", in Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 315.

³ Wilson Muoha Maina, "The Common Good and/or the Human Rights: Analysis of Some Papal Social Encyclicals and Their Contemporary Relevance", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 10 issue 29 (2011): 19.

⁴ Brigid M. Sackey, "Colonialism", Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 458.

⁵ Afe Adogame, "AIDS, Religion, and the Politics of Social Justice in Sub-Saharan Africa", Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 484.

⁶ Paul Harvey, "Religion, Civil Rights and Social Justice", Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 497.

⁷ Glenda Wildschut, "Human Rights: The South African Experience", Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 507.

⁸ L. B. Gallien, jr., "The „Double-Conscious” Nature of American Evangelicalism's Struggle over Civil Rights during the Progressive Era", Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 526.

⁹ Sorin Gog, Maria Roth, "Europe: The Roma People of Romania", Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 388. On the role of the religious factor in the operation of Romanian nongovernmental organisations active in the social area see Daniela Cojocaru, Stefan Cojocaru, Antonio Sandu, "The role of religion in the system of social and medical services in post-communism Romania", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 10, issue 28 (Spring 2011): 65-83.

¹⁰ Sorin Gog, Maria Roth, "Europe: The Roma People of Romania", Michael Palmer, Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Willey-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, 393.

¹¹ Richard B. Miller, <http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-405195479,descCd-reviews.html>, accessed on October 17th, 2012