

Book Review

***Shalom, Salaam, Peace: Reflections on Interfaith Peacemaking***

by Allison Stokes, with a Study Guide by Pat Patterson.

Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries. 190 pages.

***Shalom, Salaam, Peace: Youth Study Guide*** by Barbara Ross

Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries. 56 pages.

***For the Peace of the World: A Christian Curriculum on International Relations***

by Peggy L. Shiver; Edited by Antonios Kireopoulos

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. 87 pages.

## Christian Mission: Making Jesus and America Safe for the World?

by Krista Shaffer

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As a student of international affairs and a young Methodist looking for opportunities to explore her faith, I took the project of reviewing study books on international relations published this year by the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, respectively, as an opportunity to revisit my United Methodist heritage, gain a better understanding of the work Christians are doing in the world, and consider prospects for future involvement.

What I got instead was the opportunity to consider the American causes of conflict in the world (*For the Peace of the World*), what Christians have done to allow or even bring about conflict (*Shalom, Salaam, Peace*), and two general (and several specific) ways I might resist these violent trends in my faith and my country. The two general approaches put forward are: I should hold my faith in a way that doesn't upset people of other faiths (*Shalom, Salaam, Peace*), and I should place my protection in the hands of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (*For the Peace of the World*).

*Shalom, Salaam, Peace: Reflections on Interfaith Peacemaking*, which appears to be a book on peace, argues the fundamentally Christian causes of war with special consideration throughout of the ways Christians draw from the Bible to condone violence, if not perpetrate it. (The war in Iraq is often Stokes' case in point.) Stokes promotes the view that Biblical images of Jesus' death on the cross for our sins reveal too violent a God and are too easily manipulated to justify violence. To address the problem, she puts forward her revised version of the story in the name of peacemaking. I'm baffled as to why the United Methodist Church would sanction this view with publication, much less allow it to set the tone for discussions.

*For the Peace of the World: A Christian Curriculum on International Relations* offers a similar idea that an America pumped up by the idea of having God's favor causes conflict. The authors leave Christianity intact, but put forward multilateralism through international institutions as a way to rein America in. And in any case, war is never a Christian option.

Aside from the questions of whether or not I agree with the authors, and whether or not a study book should consist of an argument, can these publications really serve to guide our world toward peace and away from war? What follows is a discussion of these books' main points with this last question in mind, including brief consideration of the companion study guides to *Shalom, Salaam, Peace* written by Pat Patterson and Barbara Ross. In short, the answer to the question is, No, for three reasons:

First, the purported efforts of these books to promote dialogue between religions and cultures would seem misdirected because the authors identify those with whom they disagree most as their fellow Christians. Why not talk to them? Second, by insisting on one view as the only *truly* Christian way, they set a rather confrontational tone for such a discussion. And finally, they fail to acknowledge that in many cases Christians do not have the final say on whether or not a war will occur. No one has figured out a way to make war obsolete – not the United Nations and not even Jesus (not yet). But by placing their Christianity at the forefront of their efforts to abolish war, the authors run the risk of making it an argument about the validity of Christianity itself – as Stokes anticipates in her book.

***Shalom, Salaam, Peace: Reflections on Interfaith Peacemaking* by Allison Stokes with a Study Guide by Pat Patterson**

*Shalom, Salaam, Peace: Reflections on Interfaith Peacemaking* is a study book by Rev. Allison Stokes, retired college chaplain and current executive director of the Women's Interfaith Institute, a New England-based organization that primarily promotes dialogue between women of different faiths. The book begins with a brief introduction and three short chapters which delve into the concepts of peace in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, respectively. As Stokes explains in her introduction, after describing the events of September 11, 2001, "most Christians in the U.S. acknowledged that Muslims who murder innocents are not true representatives of Islam. . . . So began a new effort. . . to learn more about Islam." (xiv) From this relatively innocuous starting point, one at which millions of Americans found themselves on September 12, Stokes as a leader in interfaith dialogue first takes the reader through the concept of peace in each of the three Abrahamic religions, and then through obstacles to peace, keys to achieving "a world culture of peace"; and finally, examples of women peacemakers. At least, that's what the table of contents indicates.

In Section I, "Peace and the Abrahamic Religions," the reader quickly discovers that all three chapters contain many more examples of prejudice, violence, and war than they do

images of peace, beginning with Stokes' comments on Israel's "superior military power over the Palestinians" and its "disproportionate use of force" in the chapter on Judaism and peace. (11) Christians come across as the most violent of the bunch. As a pastor and scholar of the United Church of Christ, Stokes takes aim at the views of Christians throughout the text, lining them up to show how and why Christians cause wars. "Most Christians are taught that the New Testament is superior to the Hebrew Bible, that many of the laws in the Hebrew Bible are outdated, and that Jesus taught another, better way," she complains in the chapter on Judaism and peace. (11) In the chapter on Islam and peace, Stokes brings up the Crusades and along with them, President George Bush. "[B]ad relations have existed between the Abrahamic religions ever since the Crusades [in the view of Karen Armstrong, cited at length]. . . . That [Bush] had to desist from [using the word *crusade*] and insist that the war is not against Islam marks a step forward." (22, paraphrasing Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, 6)

This is the first example Stokes gives of a possible alignment between the "holy war" justification for war and the Bush administration's conduct of the current war in Iraq. Later, Stokes returns to this idea – although it must be said that Stokes never writes or implies that Bush as a Christian holds that view of war, or that there is a direct link between past holy wars and our country's reasons for going into Iraq (although Stokes can't resist throwing in a few quotes by high-ranking individuals that would suggest it). Her main point is: A neurotic cycle of violence some Christians are caught up in has drawn us into war.

Stokes explains that some Christians and "fundamentalists of all persuasions" refuse to learn from modernity – that is, they refuse to adopt for themselves and apply to Scripture the openness and learning processes of modern science. Stokes, for example, finds the Freudian concepts of repression, projection, and transference useful to understand what draws humans to violence. (33) Stokes touches on this only briefly. However, in 1985 she published a book entitled *Ministry After Freud*, which is out of print. Stokes is working on a revised and updated version. (I have not seen either.) In the meantime, Stokes recommends James Hillman's *A Terrible Love of War* "to all serious students of the psychological origins of war and also to citizens of the U.S. whose notion of patriotism requires them to be willing to be critical of the country they love." (33-34)

Fundamentalist Christians, Stokes goes on to write, believe that humans are innately sinful, and they manipulate the Bible to preclude peace. "For Christians who hold original sin as central and basic, the essential sinfulness of human nature is, of course, *the* problem, *the* obstacle to peace." Moreover, they find in the Bible's violent imagery justification for committing physically and spiritually violent acts of their own. "[T]he problem is that religiously justified violence is embedded in the 'sacred' texts," Stokes offers. (44) Stokes later takes as her main example the story of Jesus' death on the cross.

For Stokes, such violence in the name of Christianity is a primary source of war. A central part of *Shalom, Salaam, Peace* is Stokes' ambitious effort to put forward a

remedy for this, the outlines of which become apparent already in her diagnosis in the next section, “Obstacles to Breaking Cycles of Violence.”

One must first understand that Stokes considers herself to be among the “good” Christians, who

hold a different idea of human nature – who see human beings as essentially good, capable of progressing in knowledge and wisdom, and even called to be co-partners with God in the ongoing work of peace and justice – will be more open to the notion that learning has a significant contribution to make to an objective [the end of war, perhaps] that is within the realm of human possibility. (32)

These Christians find it to be, as Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer says and Stokes quotes, “an essential act of faithfulness for believers in the twenty-first century [to challenge] our texts and our traditions.” (44, from Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us?* New York: Trinity Press International, 2003, xiv)

Thus, in the second chapter of section II, Stokes introduces her own understanding of Jesus’ death on the cross and Resurrection in order to make it compatible with her insistence on physical and spiritual nonviolence. In the new version, Jesus died because jealous people wanted to kill him, and He was raised from the dead because God is nonviolent and wanted to make the point that violence never accomplishes anything. In her words, “Some Christians. . . believe that God is a life-giving God, not a death-dealing God. God did not require Jesus’ death. Jesus died on a cross at the hands of those who could not abide his way of radical love, of nonviolence, and justice seeking. . . . God’s response to human death-dealing was the Resurrection.” (46)

Stokes thereby removes from Jesus’ crucifixion and Resurrection the concept of sin and forgiveness of sin. This is a minor loss for Stokes; what she really seeks to do is take the emphasis away from Jesus’ death on the cross and focus it on His life and its positive examples of nonviolence and justice seeking. This is the entire significance of Jesus, for Stokes and others. In the words of Bruce Bawer, quoted by Stokes on page 54:

The real Jesus – the Jesus who was incontrovertibly human, even as he was connected to God in a remarkable way that utterly transformed the lives of the people who knew him – was not about asserting power, judging, or destroying; he was about love. . . . Lose Jesus as a human being and you lose that: You lose Jesus as a model of how to lead a human life; you lose the possibility of love as a guiding principle of human relations; you lose Christianity – or, at least you lose any Christianity worth the name.” (Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997, 326)

This emphasis on life, not death, or positive, not negative, can be found in all of the study books and guides reviewed here. Stokes takes it to the extreme. Dr. Janice Love, the

chief executive of the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church, is more moderate about it, proudly stating in her piece, "Multilateralism: Faithful Reflections on International Relations" (Appendix A, *For the Peace of the World*), that in 1999 the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA approached the project of outlining conditions for humanitarian intervention positively, by stating what "peace rooted in justice" requires, rather than by "repeat[ing] the criteria for resorting to violence." (64) The *Shalom, Salaam, Peace* youth guide by Barbara Ross gives young people many opportunities to think about how they might be more positive. (pp. 28-29) For example, Ross asks study group members how the following statement might bring peace to the world: "We will only make positive, affirming statements about ourselves and other people in our community and world."

After dwelling on violence for most of her study book, Stokes turns to such positive examples in the last two sections of *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*, "Keys to Achieving a World Culture of Peace" and "Women Engaged in Peacemaking." But she does not for the most part return to a discussion of Judaism, Islam, or Christianity, save to qualify some interpretations of the Bible to make them more amenable to peace (for example her discussion of John 3:16 on pp. 97-99). (If you'd like to learn more about the understandings of peace in the three religions, you might have a look at an ambitious 500-page book published in 1998, *Theologies of War and Peace Among Jews, Christians and Muslims* by Albert B. Randall, vol. 77 of the Toronto Studies in Theology published by the Edwin Mellen Press.)

Rather, Stokes draws her vision of peace proudly from people of all faiths, Jesus' nonviolence (but more often modern figures, such as Nelson Mandela), and her own experiences, which she describes at length. The study guide attached to the book, written by retired United Methodist missionary teacher Pat Patterson, asks study group participants essentially to develop such a vision for themselves, based for the most part on their own experiences. There is no discussion of the ideas Stokes puts forward about Scripture. And there is limited discussion of the Bible; during the eight hours of study and discussion mapped out in the guide, less than two hours are devoted to the Bible.

Stokes writes, "My own belief in the living God means that I believe that 'God is still speaking.' Revelation continues." (31) Thus, we are all free to receive revelation, and there are many role models for nonviolent resistance – Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela. Any one of them may save humanity, for that matter, in Stokes' view: "I am taken by [Anne Lamott's] simple statement about what it means to be saved – 'If we are to believe in Jesus or Gandhi, specifically [to be saved] means to see everyone on earth as family.'" (81, from Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2005, 260) Stokes' references to Scripture dwindle, and many of them are not favorable; in the entire book she draws upon just one hundred verses.

For Stokes, in sum, it doesn't seem to matter whom one chooses as a role model when one adopts the religion of nonviolence. After all, it would be divisive to think that any one is better than another. Christians should note, Stokes writes, that many Muslims find

the Christian Jesus to be an unrealistic ideal; they find Muhammad and Islam much easier to follow. (19-20) This is an important point; Stokes comes back to it (40), and in the youth study guide, Barbara Ross paraphrases her language as follows: “For Muslims, the Qur’an is Allah’s divinely inspired repair of errors made by Christians and Jews.” (43)

Yet it is telling that Stokes never lets on what she thinks about Muhammad’s suitability as a model for peace – or that she thinks of him as a model for peace at all. (He was a political and military leader, she observes.) She prefers to let scholars in the Muslim faith tradition explore the “sensitive subjects” of charges of God’s violence in the Qur’an – “threats of hell, promises of paradise, God as a Holy Warrior,” she writes. (45) Thus, making Islam nonviolent is presumably a task for Stokes’ counterparts in the Islamic world. Making Christianity safe for the world is the real point of Stokes’ study guide *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*, because we Christians, before we focus on the speck in our neighbor’s eye, should do something about the log in our own. “I think the peace of the world depends upon it,” writes Stokes. (60)

***For the Peace of the World: A Christian Curriculum on International Relations by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA***

*For the Peace of the World: A Christian Curriculum on International Relations* has a similar focus on the log in our own eye. The book begins by claiming as its objective the examination of “underlying faith positions that affect the way we respond to current concerns.” (5) Already in the third paragraph of the text, however, the reader learns that there are really only a scant few responses to current affairs the book cares to address: America’s mistaken war and its voracious, consumer-driven, and wasteful economy. The third paragraph of the preface, written by Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos of the National Council of Churches USA, reads:

The United States of America, as the only remaining superpower, seemed throughout this period to have squandered its opportunity to lead the world in creating a better world for all. Indeed, as the victim of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. has now embarked on a war on terror that, as a guiding principle, impacts all that we as a nation do in the world. It has affected our relations with other nations; it has allowed the pursuit of unilateral military policies; it has led to the use of torture as a means of gaining intelligence. And it has altered our image in the world, from a nation that inspires ideals to a nation that perpetrates injustice.” (3)

In short, America is the problem; America has initiated a war – several wars, actually. And so, in the name of a discussion about peace, *For the Peace of the World* delves into the American causes of war and how concerned Christians might seek to rein our policymakers in. Chapters include “Is America Number One?” and “Is America God’s Favorite Nation?” (No and No.)

The views of the authors of *For the Peace of the World* and Stokes’ view on why America has gone to war are remarkably similar. America is a country that has done too

much wrong for too long; the world has come to realize it; and we Americans are afraid. So we lash out at those people upon whom we've projected our fears. "Fear is driving much of American thinking about foreign policy," reads *For the Peace of the World*. (16) "Perhaps excessive fear may even cause us to do evil." (17)

Like Stokes, the authors of *For the Peace of the World* show there to be two underlying faith positions, one misguided (and somehow in control of our nation's policies) and the other, the only Christian choice. This view comes forward most clearly in Appendix A, written by Dr. Janice Love, chief executive of the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church, and in that capacity quite possibly the woman who signed off on the publication of *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*. "We Christians have a notorious track record," she writes, and goes on to quote Baptist minister Charles Kimball, who said, "A strong case can be made . . . that the history of Christianity contains considerably more violence and destruction than that of most other major religions." (61, from Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, New York: Harper Collins, 2002, 27) Stokes quotes James Hillman's remark that the culture of Christianity "has inspired the greatest long-lasting war machine of any culture anywhere." (33, from Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War*, 211)

Christianity's darker side has formed around the idea that America is God's new "chosen people," a view that "has led our country at times to dominate others across the world and to impose our government's will on them whether they agree or not," writes Love. (62) Of course, America – although repeatedly referred to as the Biblical Rome throughout the book – has done some good in the world, Love acknowledges. Our Christian arrogance has been, at times, balanced by the practice of our American democratic tradition and the international exercise of our economic and military power. (62)

Dr. Love does not say any more about Christianity's dark side, but instead draws attention to an opposing viewpoint, that of Dr. Jean Bethke Elshtain. Dr. Elshtain supported the war in Iraq in the name of humanitarian intervention. These are clearly difficult issues and good people come to different opinions, it would seem. Then Love concludes her essay by quoting from a policy statement of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA: "Peace . . . requires . . . the use of non-violent means of resolving conflict." (64) Thus, in a pattern one finds throughout the book, token consideration is given to an alternative point of view, but ultimately that view is dismissed without further discussion.

But despite Christianity's dark side, *For the Peace of the World* avoids rewriting Scripture, as Stokes has done; the ideas that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and that those who believe in Him will have everlasting life are left intact. "The Holy Spirit is intended for persons from all nations, *who respond to Jesus' call*." (28, emphasis added) Instead, the authors focus on the problem of American military and economic might, and emphasize international institutions such as the United Nations and international law as a way to contain it. The church's role, incidentally, is left unexplored. (In all of these publications, only the companion youth study guide to *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*, written by Barbara Ross, includes a nod to charitable activities, UMCOR, and the international relief efforts and network of the United Methodist Church in its course of study.)

The authors of *For the Peace of the World* are too careful to address directly what to do about Christianity's dark side; as with Dr. Elshtain, they simply let the subject drop. Similarly, they give only token consideration to the idea of "just war" put forward by some denominations. (48-49, 63) In its place, *For the Peace of the World* advances something the authors view as much more positive: multilateralism through international institutions as the foundation of a "just peace." Readers of the book are asked to discuss with their study group which of these foreign policy stances – isolationism, unilateralism, or multilateralism – "is the most compatible with the Christian understanding of striving toward a 'just peace' among nations." (48) The text refers readers to Joseph Nye's book *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone* (suggested as background reading for the book) and Dr. Love's essay "Multilateralism: Faithful Reflections on International Relations." In it she writes, "Church leaders often lift up the need for systems of common security . . . . They assert that the safety and success of the United States can only be achieved and sustained through relationships of reciprocity that secure justice and freedom for all peoples and nations." (63)

Would a Christian have it any other way?

### **A Few Observations**

We live in a divided country, the first paragraph of *For the Peace of the World* observes. This theme persists throughout the study books reviewed here, even as the authors attempt to present *the* Christian view; they just can't seem to bear to acknowledge that there isn't one Christian view on war and peace, other than to say – and I think all Christians would agree – that war is bad and peace is good. (To that I might also add that exceptions make the rule.) There isn't just one view, and while study books seem to depend on the assumption that smart Christians *will agree*, in actuality they don't. What about those other Christians, the ones who make a conscientious decision to support our current war as a just war?

The study books implore Christians to have discussions with people of other faiths, people from other cultures, and their representative officials. Only Stokes sees the need to draw those other kinds of Christians into a conversation, which she mentions only tangentially in her chapter on interfaith dialogue. (107) Her organization is working with Maura O'Neill, author of *Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, on a new book, the provisional title of which is *Soulsister or Stepsister: Conflicting Feminisms and Their Effect on Interreligious Dialogue*. O'Neill's description is as follows: "It is the premise of the book that . . . dialogue is necessary in a world where conservative religion and politics are growing and the rift between both ideologies is getting wider and wider. . . . By making women's dialogue more inclusive there will be greater possibility of real and lasting mutual understanding." However, it is not encouraging that Stokes' study book and *For the Peace of the World* devote so much more space to dismissing these Christians' national security concerns and our government's efforts as neurotic or lacking in faith or reverence. Given these accusations, one must ask whether the authors are serious about setting aside differences.

In 2005, a teacher named Joseph Fahey published a book to help his students make a Christian decision about where they stand on war. “Christianity does not speak with one voice on the morality of war,” he writes (xvi). *War and the Christian Conscience: Where Do You Stand?* (Orbis Books) has lengthy chapters on four possible views: pacifism, just war, total war, and “world community,” in addition to a chapter on conscience and what forms it. That chapter begins with the observation that “each perspective is advocated by sincere people who believe their way is the best way to achieve an authentic human existence and a truly human society.” (11) I have not read Fahey’s entire book, but I’ve read enough to know that Fahey probably has a different view of war than I do. However, I admire his approach, I was glad to find the book, and I look forward to discussing it with the teenagers in my life.

A second observation about the study books under discussion is that the authors make the argument that there is no Christian justification for war, and that Christians are called to make peace and love our enemies. From this (backed up by dozens of Bible references, and despite their repeated hat-tipping to including different points of view) they draw the single conclusion that the most Christian stance is to never fight or go to war, and to actively pursue the cessation of all hostilities. (*For the Peace of the World* offers the lengthiest, most thorough consideration of “just war” – about a page and a half – but turns more readily to a discussion of multilateral peacemaking. Stokes raises the subject and dismisses it in two paragraphs.) As Fahey also suggests, this makes the discussion too narrow – and again, is not very conducive to discussion with those Christians who have different views.

For a contrasting view of peace and war and a useful treatment of the idea of just war (*jus in bello*), I recommend *The Virtue of War: Reclaiming the Classic Christian Traditions East & West* by Fr. Alexander F.C. Webster and Dr. Darrell Cole (Regina Orthodox Press, 2004). For one, Webster and Cole provide insight into the Muslim view of war as well as the passages of the Qur’an on holy war and promises of paradise that Stokes refuses to mention. (pp.11-15) The key message of the book, however, is that our national discussions of just war have come to dwell solely on the reasons for going to war, not on the conduct of war. As we fight in Afghanistan and Iraq and support our troops, we need to hold before us a clear concept of what it means to be a virtuous soldier with a strong sense of honor. The virtue of justice, as the authors write, must be “the primary characteristic of the conduct of a justifiable war, as well as the decision to go to war in the first place. Justice is, or ought to be, from the beginning to end, *the* virtue of war.” (35)

Webster and Cole place the impetus for making moral decisions not on multilateral institutions or even national governments, even as the book examines our government’s justifications for liberating Iraq. Rather, the focus is on individual Christians, specifically Christian soldiers. “The idea is not to create an ethical system to answer all our problems, but to create a sort of person who will know how to act in a given situation and have the power to do so.” (48) Here, the Church can – and does – play an important role. Moreover, this framework allows Christians to commend as morally upright the soldier

who works for justice, who plays with children in the streets of Baghdad, and who tries to help locals solve their everyday problems with his own money and support from friends, family, and perhaps even the Church. And it allows a framework within which the soldier who commits wrong can ask for forgiveness and be forgiven.

My final observation is that the history of international relations tells us that war is one proven method of bringing about peace between nations, and while many people have tried bold proposals to make war obsolete, no one has as yet succeeded. Moreover, some efforts have caused more harm than good. As Katha Pollitt stated in “Subject to Debate” (*The Nation*, 1995), “There ought to be a rule that bold proposals for the social and political betterment of mankind be accompanied by explanations of how these ideas will be brought to reality and why, if they’re so brilliant and beneficial as all that, haven’t they already been implemented.” By placing their brand of Christianity at the forefront of effort to abolish war and denying authority to anyone else, Allison Stokes and the authors of *For the Peace of the World* – but especially Stokes – only diminish it.

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