

# Book Review

Villa-Vicencio, C. 2021. *Living between science and belief: The modern dilemma*. Eugene: Cascade Books. 156 pages. Paperback ISBN 978-1-7252-6500-4. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-7252-6501-1. E-Book ISBN 978-1-7252-6502-8.

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## **Living between Science and Belief**

We live in an interregnum between the claims of science and those of faith. With this conviction, Charles Villa-Vicencio has commenced with a book, as John De Gruchy succinctly puts it in the Introduction, which was born out of the writer's 'long and often painful personal struggle...to relate religious faith to science' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:ix). As such, *Living between science and belief* is therefore aimed at 'believers trying to deal honestly with doubt' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:ix).

Chapter 1 is Villa-Vicencio's personal take on the (modern) dilemma of living between science and religion, while Chapter 2 is a summary of the traditional debate between what he clearly accepts – *à la* Gould (2002) – as two non-overlapping magisteria. Chapters 3 to 5 is an overview of some of the core moments in the theological development of the three Abrahamic religions. Chapter 6 is about what he believes to be the best challenges that the neurosciences specifically pose to modern believers. The questions underlying the book – not surprisingly – are the following: Can the claims of science be reconciled with those of religion? *Should* the claims of science be reconciled with those of religion?

To these questions, Villa-Vicencio answers with a provisional 'Yes'. Any possibility of reconciliation will require from theologians to not only renounce any scriptural literalism and dogmatic beliefs, but also to be prepared to re-examine all religious claims in light of scientific findings. On condition that these two prerequisites are met, Villa-Vicencio argues, religion

can still play a key role in providing life with meaning and sense. Furthermore, when not captured by institutionalism, religion provides us with powerful tools for what he understands to be the essence of religion: The command to create a more just society.

Indeed, according to him, the (justified) criticism of religious institutionalism should never detract one from the fact that, through all the ages and in all three the Abrahamic religious traditions, there were always theologians who adamantly defended this command. To prove his point, Villa-Vicencio provides his reader with a synoptic overview of certain defining moments in the histories of respectively Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He concludes that, despite their monotheistic nature, the history of this family of religions testifies to an ongoing apophatic rejection of any literal claims to the truth. There were always those religious individuals, so he quotes Jonathan Sacks (2011), who remained ‘open and accountable to the world’ (Villa-Vicencio 2021:60).

This part of the book shows Villa-Vicencio at his best. It also shows that this well-known icon of the struggle has remained true to himself: A professor in theology, although one who regards religion as a lesser subject for study, and more a tool to be wielded in the name of societal justice. It therefore feels unfair to criticize him on his Abrahamic take on what religion is. He has authored this book after all ‘in an attempt to come to terms with my own religious identity’ which is that of an evangelical Christian (Villa-Vicencio 2021:8).

It feels even less fair to criticize him on his somewhat dated knowledge of the findings of the neurosciences. His stated endeavor was not to take his reader on an intellectual tour of the sciences, but to give us a glimpse on the conflict between his own convictions on the one hand, and his uncertainties on the other.

What I do find problematic, though, is Villa-Vicencio’s uncritical acceptance of the somewhat tired notion that, through the ages, religion has been the main cause of conflict and wars. This conception is provably false and historically inaccurate. It is also dangerous, because it creates the illusion that wars can be made to disappear simply by eliminating religion. Research reveals, though, that only about 7% of humankind’s wars had religion as a cause, accounting for barely 2% of all deaths because of war. A graph of the worst war atrocities on record shows that while the French religious wars caused the death of about three million people, World War 2 caused the death

of at least 70 million people (cf. HistoryNet 2022). Furthermore, eugenics – one of the most dehumanizing ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to some of the worst atrocities in the history of humankind – had as its roots not religion, but the theory of evolutionism (Troskie 2020:682-684).

Like religion, science is a human endeavor. Like religion, it was not developed to serve ‘the truth’, but to further the wellbeing of humankind. Sure, science has ‘taken us closer to understanding the complexities of the universe, the origins of life, and the enigmas of the human mind than we have been ever before’ (Villa-Vicencio 2021:122). Like religion, though, at times it enables monstrous atrocities like eugenics or the atomic bombing of the two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The true issue is therefore not religion or science, but the ‘human propensity to appropriate whatever...ideas available in order to further greed, ambition, and power’ (Villa-Vicencio 2021:109). Hopefully, that is the question that Villa-Vicencio can next turn his brilliant mind to.

## References

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