Book review

Peace: A world history

Adolf, Antony 2009

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In Peace: A world history Antony Adolf challenges the assumption that peace is solely the absence of war, and aims to provide a history of peace as an independent and self-sufficient concept. The author undertook the work

… in the belief that coming closer to terms with how and why the world’s peaces came or ceased to be what they are is a first and necessary step in renewed directions towards world peace – only to discover that, of necessity, there is no last.

Adolf contends that peace is not a state to be achieved but rather a process to be maintained, and that a better understanding of the history of peace will improve its prospects in the future. Hoping to contribute to this objective, Adolf has compiled an overview of peace from prehistory to the 21st century and beyond.

The book is primarily a historical account rather than an analytical or argumentative work. However, Adolf’s central thesis is that peace is a diverse concept, impacted by history and culture, and constantly evolving. Even at one point in history, there will be many different ‘peaces’ [sic] due to cultural and
other specificities. Nonetheless, Adolf argues that peace is a social imperative for the survival of the human race, and thus we must continue to strive for the appropriate ‘peace’ in each context. While this thesis is valid, it is also so broad that one questions its utility as a uniting framework for a book of such breadth. The reader senses that Adolf may have liked to contribute a more concrete thesis and analysis to the field, but having surveyed the history of peace and finding it lacking, has published a solely historical account.

*Peace: A world history* is broad and comprehensive in its scope, not only temporally but also substantively, examining both historical efforts to make and sustain peace, and the relevant literature analysing and envisaging peace. The book is structured chronologically, spanning millennia from prehistory to the ‘presents of peace’ [sic], devoting only two of its eleven chapters to history post-World War II. While the broad scope of the book underscores Adolf’s contribution to the field, it also limits its readability. Readers find themselves engaged by sections with which they have some previous familiarity or understanding, but overwhelmed by detail. One senses the book would be better appreciated after multiple reads. Nonetheless, Adolf has done an admirable job of synthesising a broad field of practice and literature within a coherent framework.

The book opens with the question of whether peace can even be said to have a world history, given its relatively rare occurrence throughout the history of time. In response to a quote contending that war appears to be a ‘normal attribute of human life’ and thus that the history of peace is irrelevant, Adolf challenges the common conceptualisation of peace as exclusively the absence of war. Rather, he introduces his audience to the ‘many other meanings of peace proposed and practiced throughout world history’. He provides three basic categories of peace which he utilises throughout the book: individual peace (or inner peace), social peace (peace within groups) and collective peace (peace between groups). Adolf warns his readers from the outset that his historical account is more a series of signposts than guidelines; that he does not intend to prescribe *how* to do something but rather to let you know ‘that you are on the way to somewhere’. This is a fair comment about his work, but readers are still likely to feel exasperated at some points along the journey and desire the signposts to be a little clearer.

The body of the historical account begins with the pre-human period, demonstrating that the basic characteristics of peace can be traced to primates.
While one may question the relevance of primate behaviour to modern international peace, Adolf contends that it is relevant because ‘whatever else we are, we are also primates’. He argues that peace has biological and social imperatives for the survival of any species and thus, even in humanity’s infancy, violence and war were evolutionary mutations, directly countering the argument that war is a natural state of being.

While there are a number of interesting facts in the chapter on prehistorical times, the reader is relieved as the book moves ahead to the early civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome, marking the beginnings of international statecraft. During this period, Adolf argues that peace and peacemaking develop from the bare survival strategies of the prehistoric period to create a basis for prosperous and unified states and civilisations.

The review of ancient civilisations is followed by an objective and unbiased survey of polytheistic ‘peaces’ in Ancient India, China and Japan and monotheistic ‘peaces’ in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Adolf skilfully draws out the commonalities in the world’s major religions with respect to peace and peacemaking, from Confucius’ passive Silver Rule to Jesus’ prescriptive Golden Rule. The history of the development of monotheistic religions is thorough and accurate, and the author adeptly demonstrates the common thread that runs throughout the religions, as well as their points of difference, and how each religion conceptualises peace.

The author provides a particularly comprehensive review of the Medieval, Renaissance and Reformative periods, arguing that the Middle Ages, more than any other period in history, has shaped modern peace principles and practices, particularly by innovations in treaty-making. He picks up the commonly accepted turning point for modern peace as the Peace of Westphalia among Europe’s major powers in 1648 and the consequent rise of the nation state as the primary vehicle of social and collective peace. Adolf devotes significant attention to a paradigm shift during the Colonial/Imperialist period, typically hailed as a period of violence, atrocities and oppression. Interestingly, Adolf argues that this period played a vital role, in both productive and counterproductive ways, of shaping modern peace and peacemaking, due to the innovative forms of peacemaking practised by colonisers, the colonised, imperial powers and their subjects.

The section on the modern economics of peace and peacemaking provides a succinct and thorough literature review of the predominant schools of thought.
Peace: A world history provides a comprehensive survey of the history of peace, providing a valuable reference point for students, scholars and general readers of peace. Its breadth and detail makes it a strong contender for resource room bookshelves, but perhaps it will have less appeal for practitioners and those interested in a more popular historical overview. In addition to its breadth and detail, other merits of the book include accuracy, objectivity, detailed literature review and a wealth of interesting facts about peace and history. However, the detail is overwhelming in parts and the writing style, at times accomplished, can also be unnecessarily complex. Although not touted as an analytical work, the analysis undertaken is insightful and one feels more analysis would have resulted in a more interesting work. Unfortunately, the density of historical detail may make it inaccessible for many readers. In his first book, Adolf can be admired for canvassing such a vast amount of material in one volume.