Richard E. Rubenstein

In this age of war on terror, a revival of populism, and a new awareness of the role that incarceration rates play in racial injustice and reconciliation, conversations revolving around politics, conflict, and “peace” seem to have become a normal part of daily interactions. While it used to be taboo to discuss politics and religion, political dialogue has now become an integral part of popular music, nightly sitcoms, and workplace conversation. As this discussion both unifies and divides present-day America one must ask what role the theologian has in this dialectic. More specifically, what is the role of the Pentecostal theologian? Pentecostalism’s early history of missionary fervor, racial reconciliation, and pacifism provides the movement with a unique perspective in the discussion. More generally, the Gospel’s subversive power, the Christian impetus of shalom, and the prophetic call for equity found in the “already, not yet” of the coming Kingdom bring an alternative perspective to the conflicting thoughts in the world. How might the theologian integrate the richness of Pentecostal history, the Spirit’s power to restore, and the truths of justice found in Scripture with the questions found in today’s conflicts and social violence? The trend of interdisciplinary dialogue displayed in much of academia is beneficial in bridging the gap between a theology of social conflict and a praxis that produces transformative change in the world.

Perhaps Richard E. Rubenstein’s Resolving Structural Conflicts: How Violent Systems Can Be Transformed can serve as such an interdisciplinary bridge. This book will offer any reader, including the theologian, an engaging and challenging look into the field of conflict and peace studies while highlighting further engagement with a systemic approach. The concept of systemically caused violence has gained prominence as a key concept in understanding injustice in our society. Rubenstein takes it further. He applies the concept to everything from prison violence and the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, to the present day war on terror against ISIS and the rise of populism. With a refreshing realism, he integrates various perspectives within conflict studies; not negating the role of economic interests, religion, race, and identity in conflicts but giving pre-eminence to the overpowering role of a system (particularly how it relates to class).

Even still, Rubenstein takes his thesis further. He argues that groups in conflict might benefit from reforms, constitutional changes, and third party mediation. However, such attempts might play into the hand of a violence-producing system. For Rubenstein true change will only happen through a total
transformation of the social system. For the theologian such an assertion has eschatological inklings.

This analysis provides a helpful introduction to the history of conflict studies along with an engagement with Rubenstein’s own perspectives and critiques on theory and practice. He converses with the founders of the field: Marx, Weber, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Galtung to name a few. This conversation will serve any student of theology with a helpful starting place for further study in conflict and peace scholarship.

With this being said Rubenstein’s work can clearly be understood as just that: a conversation. He interacts with multiple theorists, practitioners, case studies, and perspectives—all within the context of a question, answer, and counter-argument dynamic. It is certainly scholarly, but also dialogical parallel to Bourdieu, Weber, and Marx. It is as though Rubenstein is paying homage to such fathers of his field. His writing fluctuates from pessimistic critiques to optimistic hopes for a total transformation of global systems, while holding to a multidimensional realism.

Despite the strengths of this book, at times it seems that Rubenstein puts too much faith in the transformative power and role of conflict studies. He is, however, critical of certain theoretical approaches within conflict studies. For example, he opposes theories that give too much credence to race, religion and identity because they often negate the role of class and, more importantly to Rubenstein, the system. In spite of these critiques, he still holds the field of conflict studies in high regard. Perhaps too high for readers from other disciplines. One might get the impression that to Rubenstein conflict studies are the only hope to resolving structural conflict. Little to nothing is said of the potential contributions of other entities and disciplines such as the Spirit, the church, the Gospel, educational systems, and various academic fields. Furthermore, while this study is rich in theory and provides some helpful case studies, providing practical applications for these concepts would have been helpful. Rubenstein left questions unanswered but did so unapologetically.

Some readers might think that the book unfairly or harshly criticizes the United States as being the source of world conflict. Rubenstein labels the West, and particularly the US, as the neo-imperialistic system. However, such a critique illustrates the lack of the very self-awareness needed for systemic change and misses other key points that Rubenstein highlights.

In sum, Rubenstein’s Resolving Structural Conflicts can lead to a renewed perspective of integration. As a lay church leader and mental health counselor this book helped expand my understanding of the role that systemic structural violence has on individuals in various contexts. Rubenstein presents difficult questions to consider, especially about the systems within communities that