BOOK REVIEW

Protectors of Pluralism:
Religious Minorities and the Rescue of Jews in the Low Countries during the Holocaust

by Robert Braun

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 278 pages

In 2020, Robert Braun's *Protectors of Pluralism: Religious Minorities and the Rescue of Jews in the Low Countries during the Holocaust* was the winner or co-winner of the book awards given by five sections of the American Sociological Association: the Altruism, Morality, and Social Solidarity section, the Collective Behavior and Social Movements section, the Comparative and Historical Sociology section, the Peace, War, and Social Conflict section, and the Sociology of Human Rights section. The recognition is well deserved and perhaps even unsurprising given that *Protectors of Pluralism* is the rare book that contributes simultaneously to our understanding of some of the core concerns of sociology and to multiple subfields within sociology. It should be of widespread interest to sociologists as well as to anyone else seeking to better understand religion, morality, altruism, violence, or related phenomena.

The book begins with a reflection on the "ambivalence of the sacred." The phrase refers to the apparent contradiction between what might be seen as religion's "dark side"—religious believers' participation in and support for massacres, genocides, and other evils—as well as its "brighter side"—their support for humanitarian causes, tolerance, and empathy. This contradiction can present a theological challenge for religious believers, to be sure, but it also presents an intellectual challenge for sociologists studying the connection between religion and morality. If religion is sometimes connected to xenophobia and at other times to altruism, what accounts for this puzzling variation? It is not religious rites or beliefs, Braun suggests. Instead the variation is due mostly to variation in the social locations of religious groups. Specifically, in examining the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust by Christian groups in the Netherlands and Belgium, Braun finds that religious minorities were more likely than religious majorities to carry out successful rescue operations.

Consider the fates of Jews in two medium-sized Dutch towns: Almelo and Borne. In Almelo there was a successful Catholic rescue operation, and 42 percent of the town's Jews survived, while in Borne there was no successful Catholic rescue operation, and only 22 percent survived. One key difference was that Almelo was on the Protestant side of the Netherlands' religious fault line, and Borne was on the Catholic side. And this is just one illustration of a

systematic pattern, as Braun shows through careful research and data analysis: In majority Protestant areas of the Netherlands, Catholics were more likely to carry out successful rescue operations than in majority Catholic areas. Similarly, it was also true that Protestants were more likely to carry out successful rescue operations in majority Catholic areas than in majority Protestant areas. And in Belgium, where Catholics were a majority everywhere, Protestants were more involved in successful rescue operations.

But why were religious minorities, whether Catholic or Protestant, more likely to be rescuers? According to Braun, their social location facilitated both the motive for rescuing and the opportunity for carrying it out. First, because religious minorities depend on pluralism for their own survival, they are more likely to support pluralism and to empathize with other religious groups when they are targeted by the majority. This *empathy mechanism*, as Braun calls it, facilitates rescuing, but it is often not enough on its own. In the Netherlands, members of majority religious groups, though they were often empathetic enough toward targeted groups to conduct rescue options, were frequently thwarted in their efforts to do so when parishioners or others in their community reported them to authorities. Patterns of religious association in the Netherlands gave minority groups a structural opportunity and advantage that majority groups did not have, in that the dense and isolated networks of minority groups made disloyalty from group members less likely. This *capacity mechanism* meant that minority groups were better able to carry out rescue actions regardless of their motivations. Rescuing during the Holocaust, unlike many forms of altruism, required secretive mobilization that was difficult for majority groups to pull off.

The amount of detailed data Braun was able to collect is impressive, and his meticulous analyses offer strong support for his hypotheses. Even the divergent or "off-the-line" cases, those that do not conform to the typical pattern, tend to support Braun's theory when they are analyzed further. For example, where rescue groups composed of religious majorities were successful, it was because the groups' social structure at least partly resembled what was usually seen among minority groups. For example, they might be able to operate in isolated areas where they could avoid exposure to group members who could not be trusted. Similarly, while most rescue groups were religious, some were secular groups whose networks were similar to those of religious minorities. These were political groups, such as communist organizations, and they were outcasts who formed tight-knit communities.

That Braun's theory can aid in our understanding of patterns beyond the main subject of the book—the over-representation of minority religious groups in rescue operations in the Netherlands and Belgium during the Holocaust—is also demonstrated in the book's final chapter, which explores rescue operations not only in other countries during the Holocaust, but also in other genocides. This analysis identifies some limits to the theory. It does not apply in rare situations where rescuing does not require secretive mobilization, nor when minority groups identify strongly with the perpetrators. But in other situations, the empathy and

capacity mechanisms seem to have led to more rescuing by minorities. This applies to non-Christian religious groups as well, and it seems even to apply at least to some extent to non-religious minority groups.

Those who study genocide and other forms of mass killing see human behavior at its extremes. Genocide confronts us as an almost incomprehensible evil, and it can be hard to deal with the fact that it appears easy for people to be swept up in conflicts to the point where they celebrate or even participate in mass killing, while many others willingly ignore it. Still, whether it is the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the Rwandan genocide, or some other case of mass killing, there are always rescuers, always people who do not conform, and some who even risk their lives to help members of targeted outgroups. These extremes of good and evil, of altruism and violence, exist alongside one another, and the altruism perhaps provides some hope to counteract the despair of the violence.

However, both the violence and the altruism can be understood sociologically, at least in part. Zygmunt Bauman, in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, said that cruelty is more social than characterological in origin, and Braun demonstrates that this may be just as true of rescuing. Should this affect our hope or our despair? Braun says his book "is not as much a story of hope as of tragedy" (p. 238). What he means is that it shows that extraordinary goodness is rare, that it occurs successfully only in unusual circumstances, enacted by communities with a rare combination of sociological characteristics that provide the motive and opportunity to help members of an outgroup. Most people, though, have neither the will nor the means to engage in heroic behavior when unusual circumstances call for it.

Braun is surely correct in his sociological analysis, and he is persuasive about the tragic elements of the patterns he has uncovered. But whether we ultimately view the situation as tragic or as hopeful, or as some combination of the two, may be a matter of perspective. However rare it is that all the social forces conducive to moral heroism align, it does happen, and when it does, as Braun shows, many people live who would have otherwise been killed. And as books like Braun's help us learn more about the structural obstacles to and enablers of moral heroism, perhaps we can find ways of making it more likely in our own lives and communities.

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