

Book Review

Martyn Percy, Section Editor

Religion and Politics: European and Global Perspectives. Edited by Johann P. Arnason and Ireneusz Paweł Karolewski. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2014.

In the 1960's, sociologists thought that religion was losing its social significance as a result of 'modernisation'. There had certainly been by then a decrease in overt religious practices and belief in God. However, the place of religion in society has come to the forefront in the twenty-first century as a result (for example) of the rise of religious conflicts, the 'Christian right' in the USA, and the integration into European society of non-European people with a wide variety of non-European faiths and traditions. Religion therefore has regained a surprisingly important place in sociological and political studies, and its anticipated demise has by no means taken place. This is not to say that what was formerly called 'the age of secularism' is dead; what is true is that religion has a different place in the social reality of many people and not the same place as before the so-called 'age of secularism'. This book of collected essays explores what the new place might now be.

Chapter One, written by the editors, is an introduction and overview of the book and sets out in broad terms the questions the book looks at – the secularising path that Europe continues to be on, the enduring significance of Europe's Christian origins, and the growth of religious pluralism, especially as a result of an increasing Islamic presence and influence in Europe. The 'main line' pursued in the book (p.2) is to approach the issues the book covers from historical and comparative perspectives in order to achieve a balanced view. What is particularly highlighted is 'the growing knowledge of non-European [religious] experiences and traditions' that are of 'key importance for later history' (p.2). As a consequence, it might be right to speak not of 'modernity' but of 'multiple modernities' in light of the 'different relations between traditions and modernities' (p.2).

The next ten chapters are stimulating and original contributions on religion and politics in the twenty-first century from both European and global perspectives. They look at questions to do with the subjects of the book from as widely as Japan, China, Turkey, the European Union, and post-Soviet Russia. There are also case studies. One such is political Islam with reference to the 'Arab Spring'. Though there is discussion of religion in the USA, I would have liked to see a whole chapter devoted to secularism and religion in the USA. The last chapter, the twelfth in the book, is a review article of three contemporary books on secularism.

In a book as wide-ranging as this, it is hard in a short review to pick out particularly thoughtful or original contributions. Some chapters explore more obviously theoretical and conceptual questions (e.g. chapters Two, Three, and Four, but not only those chapters and not exclusively in those chapters). The editors in the opening chapter point to recent scholarship in historical sociology that has 'highlighted 'the Axial Age', the period around the middle of the last millennium BCE during which monotheism emerged both in ancient Israel and in Buddhism in India. The editors describe these developments as

‘religious innovations with political impact’ (p.2). Highlighting such historical and comparative perspectives helps achieve, in their view, a balanced view of the issues around religion and politics.

Two suggestions in later chapters particularly stood out to me. The first is from Mark Juergensmeyer who suggests that the re-emergence of religious nationalism may be examples of global responses to political uncertainty and that religion offers ways of thinking and responses to new social realities. The second is from Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski who explores the notion of ‘civil religion’. These two examples are far from suggesting they are the only thoughtful suggestions in this wide-ranging book.

The editors and contributors may not have written the last word on the subjects they consider; they have, however, made useful contributions for both scholars and students of religion and politics.

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