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Keywords: pluralism; secularization; urban theory; post-secular urbanism; theory of religion.

The theory of secularization has long held the attention of scholars from a variety of fields—particularly following the work of social theorists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim pertaining to the decline of organized religion in modernizing societies. Secularization seemed to be an apt explanation for the decline in religious beliefs seen throughout the West. Since its initial postulation, however, the idea of secularization as an inevitable end is being challenged; many scholars are wondering if there perhaps might be a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, especially one that takes the issue into account with something other than a Euro-centric lens. With Religious Pluralism and the City, Helmuth Berking, Silke Steets and Jochen Schwenk put forth a powerful collection that does just this.

Religious Pluralism and the City joins other collections on urban religion with the intent to fill a gap in our understanding of the relationship between the city and religious pluralism. Berking, Steets and Schwenk weave together eleven captivating chapters that span a wide empirical and theoretical range, each exploring a new facet of the shift from secularization to pluralism. Each chapter in Religious Pluralism and the City centers and explores a variety of interdisciplinary, international perspectives on the question: what makes cities conducive to the pluralization of religion?

Berking, Steets and Schwenk identify three problem areas around which Religious Pluralism and the City is framed: first, clarifying definitions of both “city” and “religion”; second, teasing out the status of religion in urban pluralism; and third, considering that “urban formulas of peace” vary by local contexts (p. 18). The first two sections of the volume seek to address the first problem. The first section, “From Secularization to Pluralism”, includes a theoretical piece from sociologist Peter Berger, who works toward a theory of pluralism by framing a shift from an either/or framework to a both/and. This is followed by “Between Fundamentalism and Postsecularism: Conceptualizing the Relations between City and Religion”, a section which considers novel theoretical understandings of the relationship between the city, religion and modernity from interdisciplinary perspectives. Next, “Religious Pluralism: Conflicts and Negotiations in the City” shifts toward more empirical work that explores the lived experiences of urban religious pluralism by highlighting how people
in cities “negotiate, mediate, and control processes” related to material and symbolic religious expression (p. 18). Finally, “Changing Urban Imaginaries” asks the reader to consider shifting urban concepts and imagery as a result of religious influence from a variety of perspectives.

One of the volume’s greatest strengths is its attention to robust theoretical contributions from interdisciplinary scholars. Here, it is worth highlighting three of the first four chapters of the book. Peter Berger opens the collection with his piece, “Urbanity as a Vortex of Pluralism: A Personal Reflection about City and Religion”. Reading with more of a narrative voice, Berger proposes for the reader that cities have always been the centers of religious innovation. He uses anecdotes from what feel like familiar places—Washington, DC and Boston, Massachusetts—to illustrate two pluralisms: the proliferation of religious diversity and the coexistence of religious thought and activity within secular spheres. While Berger takes on a more optimistic tone, urban theorist and planner Nezar AlSayyad follows with “The Death and Life of the Fundamentalist City: A Prelude to a Medieval Modernity”, a spin-off of a familiar title. AlSayyad turns the reader’s attention toward the conflicted relationship between the city and religion, framing fundamentalism as a modern reaction by religious people to deal with the hardships of modernity, leading to “exclusionary patterns of space” (p. 19). Geographer Stephan Lanz applies a post-colonial lens to the models of the “fundamentalist city” and the “post-secular city”, expanding analytical focus beyond simply the limited views of the secular Christian “West” and the religious Muslim “East”. Lanz argues that contemporary manifestations of urban religion blur the traditional dichotomy of secular vs. sacred and instead renegotiate them.

A set of rich international empirical cases follows these theoretical contributions to the volume. For example, in “Religious Superdiversity and Urban Visibility in Barcelona and Turin”, Marian Burchardt, Irene Becci and Mariachiara Giorda investigate the material and symbolic expressions of Christian “place keeping” strategies in contrast to migrant and diaspora “placemaking” strategies in Spain and Italy. John Eade’s chapter, “Migration and Morality: Secular and Religious Considerations among Romanian and Bulgarian Migrants in and around London”, brings readers to the negotiation of their religion in a new context that migrants must make in their settlement process, particularly as they begin to relate to national politics. One final example is Tovi Fenster’s visual analysis of the changing spatial tensions between secular and religious groups in Jerusalem, where lines of prior conflict are becoming softened through a negotiation of belief and place. These examples and the cases that join them each bolster the theoretical arguments that precede them.

Berking, Steets and Schwenk’s Religious Pluralism and the City serves as an important addition to a growing literature that articulates and expands on nuanced views that look beyond secularization as the only fate for modernizing cities. Berking, Steets and Schwenk collect important theoretical and empirical contributions that challenge traditionally narrow conceptualizations of the relationship between the city, religion and modernity. Because of its robust content and construction, this volume should find itself on the shelves of anyone interested in a variety of methodological and disciplinary perspectives on what the future holds for our cities and the religious institutions that shape the everyday lives of those living in them.