
BOOK REVIEW

Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics, edited by Thomas Banchoff. Oxford University Press, 2008. 348 pp., Hb., £54. ISBN 978-0-19-532340-5

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Banchoff's 2008 edited volume, *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics* is the second in a series drawn from the proceedings of the 2006 international conference New Religious Pluralism in World Politics, organised by the BCRPWA in Washington, DC. The first volume is *Democracy and New World Religious Pluralism*. In this second volume, Banchoff succeeds in bringing leading scholars from different academic disciplines into dialogue on the dimensions of religion and world politics and its ramifications for the public sphere.

The book is structured in two parts. The first part deals with existing tensions between religions, modernity, and world politics. The authors address questions such as: what are the definitions and functions of religion? Is religious plurality a catalyst for violence? What is the nature of religion? Is it a belief, culture, or a marker of identity? Is it all of these, or none of them? The second part focuses on the role of 'religious actors' in world politics. It explores how national and transnational religious communities organised as powerful forces are engaging issues of global concern – human rights, conflict resolution, poverty reduction, freedom, dignity, and equality. The authors explore themes related to religious pluralism, globalisation, and world politics. They emphasize that scholars have often underestimated the role of religion, both constructive and destructive, in human society.

By engaging the theme of religion and politics across different contexts, the authors provide a theoretical framework through which scholars, policymakers, and students can analyze global religion, including its belligerence, conflict, oppression, and nationalism. They argue that, although religion is often a contributor to conflict, it is also a viable force for peacebuilding and development. Religious pluralism, as a response to religious plurality, is therefore a realistic way to address territorial disputes and alleviate social inequalities.

Generally, the authors refrain from engaging in the debate about whether religion is inherently more peaceful than violent. They seek

to project religion as an immensely important player in the global dialogue on peace, development, and world politics. They argue that religion goes far beyond the simple definitions that limit it to the realm of the supernatural. It consists of the realities of everyday life including social, political and relational issues. At least three main elements are evident in the authors' arguments: there is what religious people do—known as the practice; who they do it with – the community, and there are also beliefs and values – the doctrine. To, therefore, think of religion principally as a matter of beliefs alone, the authors argue, is deeply misleading. Most significant is how the authors present the religions as inherently complex phenomena. As such, they argue that it is often not “clear what we are invoking when we invoke ‘religion’ in contemporary arguments” (67–71).

The book explores the relationship between religion and violence. The authors make very compelling arguments that it is often not clear what role religion plays in these violent acts. Often, there are rival explanation that trace the root of the conflicts to other causes—ethnic, national, or social explanations including oppressive regimes. According to the authors, in most cases, it is when people see their religion as the basis for national identity, and want their *religious* rituals, morals, and laws to become *national* rituals, morals and laws, that religious disagreement occur.

Similarly, the authors observe that globalisation is changing the way people relate to the issue of religion and violence. On the one hand, the growing salience of religions around the world is generating intense competition across religious divides leading to new crises at the intersection of the religious and the secular, including controversy over the meaning and scope of religious rights and freedom. On another hand, the reemergence of transnational religious communities in world politics has become a potent force in peacebuilding processes. This theme can be found throughout the volume, especially in the chapters by Kwame Anthony-Appiah, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Leslie Vinjamuri and Aaron P. Boesenecker, Thomas Michel, Katherine Marshall, and R. Scott Appleby. Both Marshall and Appleby observe, in their respective chapters on the relationship between religious actors and international development institutions, that both entities are working separately towards the goal of peace, while also fighting hunger, poverty, and disease.

The book moves beyond the reductive interpretation of religious diversity as “different religions on diverse paths to the same truth.”

Instead, it describes patterns of “peaceful interaction among religious communities, society, and politics” (5). In this sense, religious pluralism participates in a political process that joins communities together. Given that religious conflicts are often exacerbated in societies where institutions have failed, the authors suggest that religious pluralism most often succeeds within modern democracies where the authorities ensure the effective functioning of institution. Failed states cannot prevent religious differences from escalating into violence. Lamentably, the authors fail to recognise that religious violence can occur, and indeed, does occur in both ‘failed states’ and in modern democracies, as is the case of Somalia and India, respectively. Like authoritarian regimes, modern democracies have frequently failed to address the religious convictions and practices that form the basis for these violent acts.

Another weakness relates to the authors’ suggestion that only democratic states can ensure religious diversity and tolerance. It is true that religious diversity and tolerance have defined modern democracies like the US, UK, and France; however, these nations have also been affected by radical religious extremism and adopted less favourable attitude to immigrants from certain countries on religious grounds. Islam in particular has been singled out for tough immigration sanctions. Moreover, religious tolerance as the authors portray it has been criticised by minority groups since toleration does not equate to acceptance. Hence, to argue that tolerance necessitates democracy constitutes a significant weakness in the authors’ argument.

The authors also draw an overly clear distinction between retributive and restorative justice. In essence, the authors create the impression that retributive justice is mainly concerned with punishment and imprisonment, while restorative justice is concerned with reintegrating individual offenders into the wider community. The authors fail to recognise that retributive justice, other than capital punishment, in the final analysis is also restorative, as many punished offenders are often given the opportunity to be reintegrated into society.

Overall, the volume provides tremendous insight into religion and politics in this rapidly globalising world. For example, Elizabeth Prodromou observes in her chapter how the US influences religion around the world at the level of society and transnational engagements, as well as at the levels of policy and governance. We recently saw evidence of this when the US officially recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and also decided to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The authors' attempt to incorporate history into contemporary discourse is certainly commendable. Moreover, even though they emphasise religious pluralism and world politics throughout, the book also highlights the reconstitution of religious communities as transnational actors. Overall, the volume provides excellent critical tools for understanding the role of religion in global politics. I recommend it to scholars and policymakers as well as students of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies, Politics, and International Relations.