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Edited Collections: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

Review Essay by Chris Perkins, University of Edinburgh, chris.perkins@ed.ac.uk

J. Snyder, (Ed.). *Religion and International Relations Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2011.

G.Tameme, W. T. Bagatelas, D.Reichardt, and B. S. Sergi. *Studies in Contemporary International Relations and Politics*. Leverkusen Opladen: Budrich UniPress Ltd. 2010.

With various metrics pushing scholars to publish more and more, there is potential for the market to be flooded with hastily prepared edited collections that do little to further academic debate. On the other hand, a well-targeted and tightly edited collection can become an indispensable part of an academic's arsenal and a reference point for future developments for years to come. The two books under review here represent both poles. While Jack Snyder has put together an excellent collection of essays that provocatively and productively interrogate the role of religion in international relations theory, Tamene *et al.*'s collection, *Studies in Contemporary International Relations and Politics* is, unfortunately, less than the sum of its parts. In this review, I first discuss some of the reasons that Tamene *et al.* fails before moving on to Snyder's collection. Here I develop three prevalent themes related to religion and international politics: why religion has been left out, the distinction between the secular and the religious, and the potential novelty of religion in theorizing international relations. In conclusion, I draw out some things that I think should be kept in mind when putting together collections like these.

The blurb on the back of Tamene *et al.*'s collection pronounces that "the book represents a major examination regarding the current practice of international relations and world politics." I have to disagree. This book suffers from a multitude of issues both cosmetic and substantive. The cosmetic problems range from the odd (the spine details are upside down), to the annoying (paragraphs are far too indented and not consistent), to the infuriating (lists are not consistent, there are mistakes in bibliographies, in text citation is not standardized across essays, and for some unexplained reason, some of the essays have abstracts, while others do not). Finally, there are numerous proofing problems, and the English is at times strained. These issues, however, could be overlooked if the content of the book were arresting enough. Unfortunately, I cannot say this is the case. The introduction does a poor job, merely listing the essays with short summaries rather than attempting to place them in a particular context or debate. But then, it would be very difficult to do this, as there is very little to pull the essays together other than suspicions that democracy building is nothing more than a front for the propagation of a neo-liberal world order and that this is a bad thing. The lack of consistency is clear when looking at the topics of the 15 essays, which vary wildly in length and theme: Central European, EU, and US relations (Tamene); Slovakian elites (Toth); the American dream (Twyman-Ghoshal and Rousseau); the collapse of communism (Polisenska); Che Guevara (Brown); problems in international relations (Tamene); democratization and Belarus (Danilovich) and so on.

The first of four chapters by Tamene is by far the longest contribution to the volume. However, it does not get much further than offering a rambling account of the structure of international relations and a polemical critique of neo-liberal economic globalization, which is equated with neo-colonial imperialism. At times, the tone is shrill: neoliberal policies are labeled 'genocidal' at numerous points throughout the chapter and by the end, we are also told that there is a "yellow streak of petty bourgeois defeatism" in our "refusal to understand that human society is capable of outgrowing the capitalist phase of social development" (p.57). While I have much sympathy for critical approaches to international order, this sort of rhetoric does more harm than good. Furthermore, most of what is said is nothing new and has been said better elsewhere. It is quite clear from even a cursory look at the literature on the subject that a large number of

scholars are positively engaged in analysis of neoliberal economic policies and questions of cultural imperialism and global equality, although the work of either Robert Cox or David Harvey (for example) is altogether missing from Tamene's account. The chapters that follow generally relate instances of democratic failure, although as stated above, there are enough exceptions to this rule that it would be misleading to say there is any real unity among the essays. A case in point is Brown's essay on Che Guevara, which, while doing an adequate job of briefly introducing the man to the uninitiated, feels like filler. This is also true of Pajtinka's contribution on public diplomacy, which, at only ten pages, including notes and references, hardly gets going. Sabet's chapter on democracy and religious freedom, subject matter shared with the other book in this review, loses focus early on, and its discussion of international mechanisms designed to guarantee freedom of religious expression is again too general and does not engage with the literature on the subject. It is not all bad though. Pleschova's analysis of the democratic potential of village committee elections in China is well written and confidently argued, and Vasilevich and Kascian's chapter on the twists and turns of Belarusian democracy is lively and informative. Danilovich's chapter, also on Belarus, investigates the role of culture in the development of democratic institutions and makes a clear case for the importance of taking culture seriously as a variable in theorizing processes of democratization. But here is the rub. Parts of this book are angry polemic, whereas other parts present relatively calm analyses of specific issues. Due to this thematic schizophrenia, and the myriad issues I have drawn attention to above, the overall impression is poor. It is very difficult to recommend a book as weakly conceptualized, structured, and produced as this.

If Tamene *et al.* is an example of the edited collection at its most problematic, Jack Snyder has put together a volume that demonstrates the format's strengths. Religion appears to be making a comeback in international politics, and this book represents a systematic discussion of the implications of this for international relations theory. For the most part, the debate thus deals with why religion has historically played a small role in IR theory and, now that there is a recognized need for it, the best way to factor it into current IR analysis. Another question that stems from this position regards what we are talking about when we talk about religion: Do religions have universal characteristics? Are they unitary actors? Is religion the same as other discursive frameworks or must it be treated *sui generis*? The chapters complement each other very well and make reference to each other's arguments throughout. The only exception to this is Toft's chapter on religion, rationality and violence, which, as a focused study on the particular aspect of religion and conflict, feels somewhat out of place. This being said, I do not wish to suggest that all the contributors agree on the status of religion in international relations theory. Shah and Philpott see religion as a challenge to existing explanatory frameworks, while Nexon, although acknowledging the importance of factoring in religion, warns against the dangers of treating it *sui generis*. The rest of the contributors sit along this continuum. As such, this book does not present a grand new theoretical framework. Instead, it seeks to provide "a rich menu of choices for thoughtful readers to draw upon in designing their own approaches to mainstreaming religion in international relations theory" (Snyder, p.20).

First off, why was religion factored out of IR analysis in the first place? As Snyder notes in his introduction, part of the reason lies in core IR assumptions about the nature of order in the international system. The two dominant paradigms, realism and liberalism, hold states to be the key international actors. Realism, depending on the flavor, puts emphasis on power maximization and the anarchical structure of the international system in determining how states act and how order is maintained. Liberalism has its roots in secularist enlightenment thought: democratic peace theory and neoliberal institutionalism both leave religion out of the equation. There is also an emphasis on instrumental rationalism in both of these theories, which precludes other forms of rationalism, including those supplied by religion. Constructivism, with its acknowledgement of the importance of norms in international relations, would appear the likely choice for any international relations scholar trying to make sense of religion, but again, religion is conspicuous in its absence. Shah and Philpott offer a history of the secularization of

international affairs and theory that accounts for this absence. We begin with a patchwork of sources of authority in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and end with the modern state system, with the ordering principle of state sovereignty. By the late eighteenth century, there seemed to be a broad philosophical consensus that reason held the key to progress and that, paradoxically, this was the will of God; this notion then peaked in the 1960s, characterized by the authors' pithy description of the thinking of the times: 'no secularity, no modernity!' (p.46). However, they argue that it is now the case that religious groups constitute powerful transnational actors, and, as such, new assumptions are needed in international relations theory (p.53).

The simple message of 'no secularity, no modernity' and the theoretical assumptions of IR's main paradigms are complicated in different ways by Hurd, Barnett, and Cho and Katzenstein. From a critical theory perspective, Hurd historicizes the bifurcation of the social sphere into the secular and the religious, showing how religious talk provides the context for the development of forms of secularism, which is, in effect, a particular mode of managing religion in politics. She identifies the 'no secularity, no modernity' thesis with laicism, which builds on Kant's 'rational religion' (p.65) to advocate the strict separation of church and state. This is supplemented with another form of secularism, Judeo-Christian, which has come to signify the argument that modern political values such as liberty, equality, and even secularism itself stem from this religious tradition. However, these secularisms are internally related to specific religious orientations, leading to the conclusion that although laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism wear the mask of universality, they in fact smuggle in a particular orientation to politics and religion at the expense of other histories and traditions, threatening the potential for pluralism in the process. But while this is surely correct, I wanted to know more about the implications of this recognition, other than that secularism is a powerful pattern of political rule (p.83). To this end, it would have been useful to know how this unmasking process informs analysis of the international system and influences, for example, models of international justice or human rights.

Continuing with this theme of the relationship between the secular and the religious, Barnett provides a nuanced discussion of international humanitarian movements and sets out some analytical considerations for the treatment of religion, which I will discuss below. Cho and Katzenstein further complicate the picture by drawing attention to the East-Asian experience of using religion to constitute modern nation-states and, in doing so, offer a clear example of alternative political attitudes to religion. Japan's dramatic modernization is a case in point, with state Shinto being instrumentalized as the "backbone of Japan's evolving national consciousness" (p.174). Likewise, Confucianism plays a continuing role in the structuring of state narratives in China, whose own path to modernization now sees it as the second largest economy in the world. Cho and Katzenstein also comment on the relationship between religion and political legitimacy, specifically how East Asian states account for their own policies in terms of religious principles. But this practice is not limited to East Asia; for example, as Barrett notes, "The framing of the attacks and the post-September 11 climate as 'good versus evil' drew from Christian discourse" (p.107). Thus, while secular politics and religion have been nominally separated in the west, religion is still mobilized as a framework to legitimize state action. Overall, the distinction between the secular and the religious, the notion of a singular secularity, as well as any assumption that secularity equals modernity are convincingly called into question by these contributions. This is important, as highlighting the continued salience of religions in the constitution of our lived experience helps start the process of breaking down a number of unhelpful categorical cul-de-sacs.

For instance, Barnett, Nexon, and Toft all demonstrate how familiar but misleading binaries (including interests/norms, rational/irrational, and material/idealist) are called into question by the consideration of religion in international relations. Toft notes that the motivations of religious actors are best understood in terms of 'values rationality,' rather than the 'instrumental rationality' that is oft taken to be the hallmark of modern, rational man. This does not mean that religious actors are not rational. Instead, their calculations are influenced by

factors that are brought in by the belief system they adhere to: religions are not just transnational actors, but they are also orienting discourses that define and anchor terms for the justification of action. However, it is important to recognize that reference to discourse should not end in a form of religious idealism or, for that matter, determinism. As Barnett notes, religious discourses are fractured and shifting: If they appear solid, it is the result of political work that requires analysis (p.106). This brings the functioning of power into play. Nexon, whose chapter assesses claims that religion necessitates paradigm shift, presents an approach that is needed in the field and is particularly suited to grappling with this key concept. Arguing against the need for a paradigm shift, he uses his discussion of the Reformation to convincingly question the habit of thinking in terms of the relative importance of material or ideal factors in determining outcomes. First, echoing both Hurd and Barnett, he says religion should be seen in terms of discursive context: “Religious orientations supply ways of apprehending the world, which, in turn, constitute conditions of possibility” (p.158). But building on this, he notes how such a material/idealist dichotomy gets in the way of understanding the social forms implicated by religious organizations (e.g. social position, power relations, the division of labor, and so on). In this way, religious organizations display many of the same characteristics as other transnational groups, and the questions that arise as a result of such characteristics concern the intersection of specific religious claims with more general dynamics (p.159).

This gets us back to Shah and Philpot’s claim that the rise of religion in international politics necessitates a conceptual rethink. It is clear that strong versions of realism or liberalism will have difficulties integrating religion into analysis. Despite this, what emerges from this volume is the impression that international relations theory can make sense of religion in international politics if it remains flexible, recognizes the interpenetration of regimes of authority, and overcomes the unhelpful binaries noted above. In this way, it is a bit of a shame that the conclusion of the book brings back some of the oppositions in its summative argument. Finally, it is clear that getting religion does not mean understanding in terms of a particular essence. Religion itself is more of a catchall term for ontological principles, organizations, and processes that share family resemblances, and the use of “religion” as a label is historically specific and always related to power. As Barnett astutely observes, “Different kinds of faith—and not merely different religious denominations—exist in global politics” (p.110). This fine volume takes us some way towards accounting for faith and religion in international politics.

As stated at the beginning of this review, it is likely that we will see more edited volumes appear on the market as pressures on academics to publish increase, and obstacles to printing and distribution decrease. Whereas a more pluralistic publishing environment is surely a good thing, what is clear from consideration of these two very different books is the importance of getting the fundamentals right: quality of content, thematic unity, tight editing, and high production values. When these factors come together, the resultant collection becomes more than the sum of its parts.