


## Various perspectives on religion and global politics

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**Uskonto ja maailmanpolitiikka**, eds. Heikki Pesonen, Tuula Sakaranaho & Sini Paukkunen (Helsinki, Gaudeamus, 2019), 365 pp.

*Uskonto ja maailmanpolitiikka* ('Religion and Global Affairs') is an anthology edited by Heikki Pesonen, Tuula Sakaranaho and Sini Paukkunen. It brings together sixteen Finnish writers with diverse academic backgrounds including the study of religion, theology, Asia studies, history and political science. The publication is a very welcome one as the most recent Finnish anthology on a similar theme, edited by Heikki Palva and Juha Pentikäinen and titled *Uskonnon maailmanpolitiikassa* ('Religions in Global Affairs') came out in 1999.

The introductory chapter states (p. 14) very generally that the volume 'examines the connections between, and topical questions related to, religion and politics from global and local perspectives'. Theoretical anchors concern secularization and public religion, which do fit the theme of the book well. However, as is often the case with such anthologies, the writers of individual chapters make use of these framings to varying amounts.

The volume is composed of thirteen chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. The chapters are grouped into



three sections. The first is the most general in nature and includes chapters on the big players and themes: the United States, Russia, European integration, the United Nations and the Vatican. The second section focuses on the Middle East with chapters on sectarianism, Saudi-Arabia, Turkey and ISIS. The concluding section covers a range of topics, containing texts on Islam in the Balkans, the Sudanese Civil Wars, Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, and

Christianity and politics Latin America.

From the perspective of global affairs, the greatest general shortcoming of the volume is the fact that there are no chapters on China or India. In other words, it cannot be taken as a comprehensive overview of religion and world politics. Both China and India are important global powers, and both would have offered possibilities for many intriguing perspectives. Some examples from the former include the treatment of Uyghur Muslims, and the atheist government's relationship to Confucianism and the Han folk religion. In the case of India, a look at, for example, the influence of Hindu nationalism or traditional customs in an officially secular state politics, or on the local tensions between Hindus and Muslims would have served the book well.

A related criticism concerns the balance of the content: religion-wise, six out of thirteen chapters emphasize Islam. Undoubtedly Islamic countries are important, and Islam is certainly one of the first things that comes to mind when, for example, a journalist talks about religion and world politics. However, in a more balanced scholarly volume, perhaps texts on the abovementioned China and India could have taken the place of two of the aforementioned chapters.

Yet, what the anthology does offer are some highly informative chapters. One learns a lot, for example, from the two excellent chapters by Hannu Juusola on sectarianism in the Middle East and the relationship between Wahhabism and the Saudi Arabian leadership, both of which strike an enjoyable balance between theoretical discussion and empirical analysis. In another excellent chapter, in this case on Turkey and its relationship to Islam and secularism, and written by Johanna Vuorelma, the background of the Turkish

state ideology is traced, illustrating the complex interplay of religion and secularism, and how these relate to its position in international relations.

On the other hand, some of the chapters contain essentialist language and theological determinism that do not seem to fit the otherwise historically and contextually well-tuned style of the book. For example, Teija Tiilikainen writes (p. 74) that 'The core values of EU, the freedom of the individual and tolerance, are against Orthodox values'. Yet, there are many different interpretations of what 'Orthodox values' entail. If the writer is thinking, for example, of the position of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is better to specifically state that.

Some texts appear to adopt a quite an empathetic approach to their subject matter. For example, Mikko Ketola (p. 104) writes that the Catholic church is not 'primarily concerned with their material interests and defence of their property; the more general aims of the church are the defence of freedom of religion, peace and human rights'. Undoubtedly the Vatican has a notable position in global politics and has engaged in admirable activities such as peace mediation and humanitarian aid. However, these aspects could be balanced by noting, for example, that it has also promoted its controversial position on condom use in countries with HIV epidemics.

One could also argue that while the efforts of religious bodies in social work and healthcare are in many ways worthy of applause, they are also a way for the organizations to maintain and expand their influence. The golden rule, as iterated by the Biblical Jesus, among others, is probably a good principle for anyone interested in soft power.

While the volume is not entirely theoretically coherent – the writers more or less

tackle their areas of expertise as they see fit rather than strictly following a set methodological outline – it nonetheless comes highly recommended due to its informative content. The book reads in many ways like well-written university course material, and I can imagine many utilizing it in their teaching in the future. Although it cannot claim to be a comprehensive overview of religion and global affairs, it can easily be described as a very good introduction to the bulk of the key contemporary topics in the said field. ■

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