

BOOK REVIEWS

Religion, State and the United Nations: Value Politics

Edited by ANNE STENSVD

Routledge, London, 2016, ix + 202 pp (hardback £90.00)

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As the title suggests, *Religion, State and the United Nations* seeks to analyse the role that religion plays at the United Nations (UN), as well as its impact on the policies of the UN that flow down to the national level. It is a collection of 11 essays divided into two parts, 'Religion at the United Nations' and 'Religion and state', and forms part of a wider Routledge book series on the role of religion in various international fora. The majority of authors are from Norway, and the University of Oslo in particular. The benefit of a relatively homogenised group of contributors is that, unlike many other essay-based books, particularly those that are bi-product of an academic conference and stitched together in the months that follow, *Religion, State and the United Nations* holds together well as a collection of essays. It is further assisted in this process by Anne Stensvold's helpful introduction and concluding remarks. The downside of such a grouping is the obvious lack of diversity that comes out in the book, as discussed below.

The book's central theme is summarised by Stensvold as follows,

The question is not *if* religion matters, but *how* religion makes its presence felt at the United Nations, and what difference it makes . . . When we look at religious actors and analyse their arguments, we ask pragmatically: whose interests does it serve, what is at stake, and to whom does religion matter? (p 2)

The essays that follow attempt to answer those questions and cover a wide variety of topics, including thematic areas such as hate speech, gender equality and freedom of religion; implementation of UN policy in nations such as Tunisia, Norway and the US; and the role of Islamic, Jewish and Christian (in particular Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic) actors. Each of the 11 chapters contains relevant and helpful information on areas that are little studied, and the quality of research is high throughout.

However, it should also be noted that the essays are not a dispassionate analysis of the role of religion at the UN, and the authors' presuppositions frequently pop up by way of stated fact and not meaningful engagement. 'Conservative' religious groups are treated with suspicion throughout. According to Stensvold's analysis, 'liberal religious initiatives . . . are in line

with established Human Rights policy', whereas 'Conservative religious leaders and organizations constitute an especially ardent counter-force to equal rights for women [by which Stensvold means abortion], a modern concept of family and LGBT rights' (p 186). At another point Stensvold refers to 'the UN's hero worship of Pope Francis' (p 95) and states that the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not a Catholic document, as illustrated by the Declaration's clause on gender equality – a position which the Catholic Church is adamantly against' (p 105). Other authors make similar statements: according to Vik and Endresen, 'One main obstacle' to 'women's reproductive health' is 'fundamentalists' who seek 'the control of women's sexuality' (p 179); according to Marshall, who has two chapters, problems are caused by religiously inspired actors who seek to limit the inclusion of references to 'LGBTQ rights and gay marriage [and] abortion' within various UN texts. They are said to 'color ... the image of religious groups' and contribute to a 'dilution of the commitment to universal human rights' (p 24). In sum, religious groups that support the views of the authors are described as 'positive and deeply engaged' and those that do not are described as 'hostile and contentious' (p 25). Such characterisations are unfortunate and detract from the book's otherwise useful research.

It would surely have been more beneficial to discover why the Catholic Church and other 'conservative' religious actors truly believe they are supporting human rights – including 'women's rights' and 'reproductive health' – rather than portray human rights as a Nordically understood concept that you are either for, in the case of liberal religious actors (and the authors), or 'adamantly against', as in the Catholic Church.

This reviewer leads an international NGO which is engaged with the UN on a daily basis and which would no doubt be categorised by Stensvold as 'religious' and 'conservative', and I come away from the book thinking 'This was an interesting read but you really don't understand us, nor have you tried to.' For that reason, the book was enjoyable and frustrating in equal measure.

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Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology

Edited by STEPHEN SPENCER

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This is a good book on an important subject. It is concerned with Anglican social theology but has important repercussions for the whole Christian community.