

into a straightforward “encounter.” Is there another way to chart religious change? As a starting point, we ought to find a wider chronological lens. As Paul Landau shows for southern Africa, ideas of community, hierarchy, and the otherworld were already under debate when Christian missionaries arrived. If we enter the scene alongside the missionaries, we are obliged to see the world as they did: as a contest between two ways of life. If we widen our angle of vision (and expand our source-base), missionaries appear as one among several agents of change. It is for this reason that Landau’s chapter, and even moreso his book (*Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* [Cambridge, 2010]), anchors religious change within the *longue duree* of history.

Heather Sharkey is to be congratulated for assembling such a compelling group of essays. Together, they help to illuminate the unlikely places to which Africans and Asians have taken missionaries’ religion. We await, however, a scholarship of Christianity that takes us into the times, scales, and narratives that worked at a tangent to the missionary encounter.

***Claiming Society for God: Religious Social Movements and Social Welfare.* By Nancy J. Davis and Robert V. Robinson. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012. 234 pp. \$25.00 Paper. \$20.99 eBook**

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Claiming Society for God is the latest manifestation of Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson’s enormously productive collaboration studying religion and politics in the United States and other societies around the world. Distinct from much of their work in scholarly journals, it is more qualitatively oriented in data and presentation, and written in a more accessible style that should make it useful for classroom use and even general publics. However, it is in no way “dumbed down.” It contains a densely packed, sophisticated argument with relevance to those interested in religion, politics, social movements, and civil society. It should be useful in a number of different graduate and upper-division undergraduate classes.

Davis and Robinson compare orthodox religious social movement organizations in four different countries, from four different faith traditions (all Abrahamic): the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; the Shephardi Torah Guardians (Shas) in Israel; Comunione e Liberazione in Italy; and the Salvation Army in the United States. Each of these organizations/movements wants to “claim society for God” — that is, permeate and sacralize public space, in religiously orthodox ways. In this, they are no less ambitious than many ideologically totalizing movements; no less dedicated to seeing their version of righteous orthodoxy become dominant, and no less devout in their vision of a civil society and regime guided by a transcendent moral authority. But their principal strategy to achieve these ends is to work through civil society through the provision of social welfare services; not direct action, not partisan or party politics, and not violence. They want to contest the state by bypassing it, not confronting it.

The four groups are used here because they share a similarity in basic religio-moral logic. Davis and Robinson call these groups “orthodox” rather than fundamentalist, moving away from a strictly theological or doctrinal definition. Rather, they call the movements “orthodox” because they regard ultimate moral authority as residing outside human society, and believe society and its institutions should be organized in accord with divine will. That orthodoxy makes these groups “communitarian” in ideology, logic, and action. They privilege the health of the collective over the discretionary privileges of individuals. They pair a stern, often authoritarian cultural code — most often involving control of women, women’s bodies, sexual mores, and family life — with an economic logic that prizes the collective over individual self-interest. Realizing those goals in society produces extensive efforts to serve, aid, and assist the disadvantaged and marginalized, with some concern for egalitarian economic arrangements. As a result of this consistent communitarian logic, the groups reject the institutional differentiation and separation of public and private that functionally secularized the public sphere in modern societies. They have logic of de-differentiation that is fundamentally anti-liberal in the broad sense.

Davis and Robinson’s focus on four groups acting out communitarian logic in economic as well as cultural action makes two important points for them. First, it illustrates a point made consistently in their published work, that religiously-based politics should not be forced into a “one dimensional political space” (14), whether that be liberal-conservative or modernist-orthodox. One must conceptualize two dimensions — orientations to cultural and economic issues — to find groups that do not fit along

one continuum. This point is particularly interesting in the context of contemporary United States politics, as our two major parties tend toward complementary “diagonals” on this two-dimensional space — Republicans as culturally communitarian and economically individualist and Democrats the reverse. While a good point, if not new, about American politics, whether this is as relevant to the political cultures of other societies is not addressed in depth.

The second point is that this communitarian worldview leads the groups into extensive social service efforts — with the purpose of caring for the totality of the society. This is at least in part a *strategy* for “claiming society for God.” Building social welfare apparatuses bypasses direct confrontation with the state even as it usurps some of the functions that have been associated with its authority. They rival the state, but less directly, less visibly than direct action or violence, and more patiently.

Two important conceptual points arise from this claim, and the detailed empirical stories presented here. First, social service provision is not necessarily antithetical to efforts at social advocacy among religious, non-profit, and movement organizations. The distinction between ameliorating the effects of inequality/marginality through services, and addressing the causes of inequalities through social change advocacy, is not an either/or proposition. Davis and Robinson argue that these four groups use the former as a strategy for achieving the latter. Given other examples of just this type of service/advocacy combination, such as the Black Panther Party in the United States, a too-easy reform vs. revolution distinction must be abandoned.

Second, dimensions of this “social welfare as strategy” allow the four movements to address and overcome three dilemmas that scholars often argue bedevil religious (and secular) totalizing movements: (1) broad, multi-issue agendas; (2) ideological rigidity; and (3) reluctance to compromise. Each dilemma is thought to compromise a movement’s capacity to participate in the give-and-take of politics, and/or to keep and hold members over time. However, Davis and Robinson argue that these movement groups have all three characteristics, and yet thrive, partly because of the social welfare provision strategy.

One particular aspect of these groups’ operations is particularly persuasive in making the authors’ case. The groups tend to use “graduated membership structures” (107, 135). The social services organizations involve both movement members and people who are more “adherents” or “clients” (and basically non-members). Many of the former do not share the commitment to the full ideological system that deeply involved

members do. The genius of the graduated membership structure is that prospective members can “try on” involvement and develop fuller ideological commitment as they get more involved. Ideological fidelity need not precede mobilization — it is a *product* of increasing involvement. The services have a type of proselytizing function, yet open the organization to many different people. It is the opposite of the “selective benefits” strategy that movements are thought to need to use to keep voluntary members committed. The movements here share the societal majority’s basic religious tradition (Muslim in Egypt, Catholic in Italy, etc.), so the potential pool of members can be vast.

Clearly, this is a book with a complex and multifaceted argument, with richly portrayed case studies of the four organizations. But as with any book, it raises questions even as it provides answers. The basic argument is clear — social welfare provision is a viable strategy for orthodox religious social movements as it allows them to claim public space in society and at the same time to avoid some of the pitfalls that plague ideologically totalizing movements. But one gets the sense that the cases were chosen to illustrate that claim. In particular, the Salvation Army seems distinctly different organizationally than the other three groups. Further, the ultimate thing to be explained — the “success” and “longevity” of the movement groups — is not defined clearly or measured systematically. Further, while the book is about four religious movements, at several places the authors proffer the view that the key strategy — bypassing the state while challenging it through social welfare provision — is not limited to religious groups. That raises the question about what it is, specifically, that religion adds to the mix. Theorizing religion too often involves a focus mainly on the motivations of movement members. How else might religion be a specific contributing factor and in what ways, if at all, does religion matter in this type of movement success? To raise these questions is not to question the value of a book that is interesting, accessible, and well argued. I recommend it.