

***After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics.* By Erin K. Wilson. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 232 pp., \$90.00 Cloth**

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Why were international relations and political science scholars taken by surprise by September 11, 2001? How can critically exploring dominant understandings of secularism help us understand this reaction? How can we move beyond simply criticizing this secular bias, and develop analytical frameworks that can shed light on the subtleties and nuances of the relationship between religion and politics? Erin Wilson's book is a sensitive and refreshing contribution to this ongoing academic discussion.

The first part of her book explores the secular bias that has affected the way international relations scholars approach relations between religion and politics. One of the most insightful aspects of this discussion is that it documents how this secular bias has provided scholars with an empirically and conceptually limiting definition of the religious. For the author, the fact that secularism is intimately structured around a dualistic mode of thinking explains why religion has been primarily defined in terms of three pairs of dichotomies, where religion can be either one facet of a dichotomy or the other. That is, institutional or ideational, individual or communal, and irrational or rational. In this discussion, Wilson documents how in fact international relations scholarship focusing on the West has had a tendency to privilege the "institutional, individual, and irrational" aspects of the dichotomies, paying less attention to the other facets, and completely overlooking the possibility that religion could take on both facets of the dichotomies, and/or manifest itself altogether differently (19). For Wilson, this preference has to be understood in conjunction with the fact that these forms reinforce the secular (i.e., dualistic) trope that religion is subordinated to the political, as these different aspects are easily constructed as belonging to the "private" realm and the transcendent, as opposed to the "public" realm or the immanent (24). Through meticulously uncovering this particular take on religion, the reader is invited to realize that this understanding is actually more telling about how the discipline of international relations is situated in history, and how it is the product of particular power-relations, than it is helpful in

studying the subtle and nuance manifestations of the religious in contemporary politics.

The great novelty of Erin Wilson's work is that it does not stop with exploring these secular biases around which the study of international relations and its understanding of religion are structured. It goes, in effect, one step further than other scholars involved in a similar critical project, as the second part of her book proposes a theoretical approach to move beyond these biases (chapter three) and applies it to study the contemporary impact of religion in American presidential speeches (chapters four and five). To develop this alternative framework, Wilson draws on works outside international relations, including works by feminist and literary scholars. This interdisciplinary insight is particularly noteworthy, as it is not only indicative of the current limits of international relations scholarship in providing resources to move beyond a dualist framework, but is also indicative of the fact that studying the subtleties of religion and its interactions with politics is a deeply multidisciplinary task that requires different fields to converse with each other (27). Accordingly, Wilson proposes that her readers embark on a journey that requires shifting lenses. She invites us to adopt a dialogical theoretical framework, in which the different elements that constitute the religious are not locked in an either/or framework, but are in conversation with one another: "This framework encompasses religion's institutional, ideational, individual, communal, irrational and rational elements, valuing them equally, recognizing the ongoing interconnections and interactions among them, infused with an understanding of religion's existential concern with and influence on both the immanent and the transcendent" (19).

While Wilson's work deserves high praises for its originality, the author could have considered conceptualizing the elements that constitute the dichotomies structuring the religious in dominant secular narratives earlier in the book (i.e., prior to chapter four). So doing would have helped clarify from the start the added value of the book's approach. Moreover, in her review of how some scholars have approached religion differently (chapter one), Wilson comments on their particular positionality, including how their more comprehensive approach to religion has been influenced by their own faith and knowledge of religion. Along those lines, and building on the importance other fields such as feminism and gender studies have given to reflexivity, it would have been interesting if the author would have included a discussion of her own positionality and how her ability to offer us a more comprehensive picture might be influenced by her personal journey. This would have had the benefit of

reinforcing one of the key arguments of the book; the importance of situating particular experiences and approaches to the interactions between religion and politics.

In her concluding chapter, Wilson notes that her relationist dialogist model is only one possibility among many others to rethink the relationship between religion and politics. Indeed, such theoretical models should perhaps not be approached as ends in themselves, but rather as conceptual tools that are indicative of the need to think beyond/outside a dualistic frame of mind. Wilson's book elegantly succeeds in convincing us of *why* this need is pressing and *why* it is not sufficient to simply critically deconstruct this framework. It highlights the potential of adopting an alternative framework, which already when applied to a single case study reveals a much more complex, nuanced, and promising world than the one that has been narrated by dominant secular tropes. Being aware of the existence of this alternative world and the need to develop conceptual tools to better understand it is of utmost importance for those of us interested in making better sense of global politics, and ultimately in thinking the political differently.