

Module Code: HPPD7001

Module Name: Methods and Approaches in Interfaith Studies

Facilitator: Dr. Angus Slater

Assignment Type: Book review

Word Limit: 1500 words

Title of book: Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics

Editor: Thomas Banchoff (Senior Fellow, Vice President for Global Engagement at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion)

Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2008

Pages: 348

ISBN: ISBN-13: 978-0-19-532340-5; ISBN-13: 978-0-19-532341-2 (pbk.)

Reviewer: Urmi Chanda

Student no.: 1907527

Proposed journal for submission: Journal of Contemporary Religion (Taylor & Francis)

Actual word count: 1542

REVIEW

Introduction

It may be more than a decade since it was published (2008), but *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics* remains a pertinent book even today. Edited by Thomas Banchoff, it is a compilation of 12 essays divided into two parts, in addition to an introduction by the editor. Part I addresses the *Challenges of Religious Pluralism in a Global Era* in four essays, while Part II has seven essays that discuss *Religious Actors in World Politics*. Banchoff put this edition together – the second of a two-part series – following a 2006 conference titled “The New Religious Pluralism in World Politics”. The presenters’ papers were revised and edited for the volume in the same manner as volume one, which was titled *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (2007). Published in the tumultuous decade after 9/11 and the Iraq war, both these Berkley conferences and their resultant volumes address urgent issues at the intersection of religion and politics in a globalised world.

Banchoff’s primary objective here is to draw attention to the fact that religious and faith-based organisations play a significant albeit quieter role in maintaining the fragile balance of our pluralistic global society. After 9/11, society and the media have largely held on to a singular narrative that demonises all things religion and refuses to acknowledge the peace efforts led by religious organisations. All credit and credibility seems to be given only to secular organisations, and he aims to highlight the other side of the story, without justifying or defending it.

Section I

Banchoff’s functional definition of religious pluralism “patterns of peaceful interaction among diverse religious actors—individuals and groups who identify with and act out of particular religious traditions” is made against the backdrop of religious dispute or violence. This concept is elucidated in the first essay of the section by Kwame Anthony Appiah. In *Causes of Quarrel: What’s Special about Religious Disputes?*, he attempts to explain the nature of these disputes using several functional model, such as religion being an important social identity marker, as religion performing a psychologically integrative role, and being a source of epistemological dissensus.

Where Appiah presupposes religion to be the basis of many conflicts, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, starts his essay *On the Possibility of Religious Pluralism* by questioning it. He asks if religion is necessarily the

reason for the many disputes attributed to it and if it could indeed be cases of misdirected class conflict, incomplete nationalisms, unmet social aspirations, failed states, or repressed sexual needs. Mehta recognizes the different ways in which frictions manifest in modern, pluralistic societies. "The challenge for modern societies," he posits, "is not pluralism per se, but reconciling pluralism with a common political identity." He draws special attention to the communal nature of Indian politics, and how it plays out between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority. It is demonstrative of how politics and power have an undeniably love-hate relationship.

Like Mehta, (late) Jean Bethke Elshtain challenges some assumptions in the concurrent discourse of religion. She finds the demand for 'equal recognition' by religious minorities too idealistic to be practical, and chooses to build upon Charles Taylor's premise of only "deep toleration" being an honest possibility. In our post-modernist times when all ideas are subjective – including those of equality – such a secular aim is untenable. Unlike secular attitudes which decry proselytization, Elshtain upholds a radically different notion of religious freedom that is even open to proselytization and transformation of identity and hence, principally in alignment with human rights. She maintains that toleration fosters robust ties between communities in the case of shared humanity but also allows distance when ethical or theological points of view seem irreconcilable.

In the last and final essay of the first section, John Witte Jr. takes this subject forward. About *The Rights and Limits of Proselytization in the New Religious World Order*, he believes that they have emanated and evolved largely from Christian/ Western contexts. But today, an entire reconsideration is needed. He quotes a long list of articles and legislations that have shaped the global narrative around proselytizing rights and activities, but his stand is made very clear in this decisive statement: "If Coca Cola can hustle fizzy sugar water, and Hollywood can broadcast its violent movies in a newly-opened area of the world, then religious communities must be able to express their religious convictions as well." It is little wonder that Witte Jr. speaks in exactly the kind of language that a capitalist Western world is used to and will probably understand.

Section II

Having established some definitive theories and ideologies on religious pluralism in section one, Banchoff rounds up 'essays of action' in the second part of the book. True to his intent, he lets the movers and shakers take precedence and greater space in this book, because the religiously-committed Samaritans of peace and pluralism do not get enough credit or recognition.

R. Scott Appleby's essay, *Building Sustainable Peace: The Roles of Local and Transnational Religious Actors*, claims that there is no one way of formulating peace. He underscores the importance of context in any given situation of religious dispute and opines that local knowledge should be used to understand the nuances of conflict and tailor solutions. He offers three important examples of religious groups viz. the Cambodian Buddhists helping national reconciliation, the Catholics of Sant'Edigio mediating peace agreements, and various transnational Muslim networks taking up fairly secular causes, affirming that peacebuilding is "an exact science and a local art."

In the next essay, *Religious Actors and Transitional Justice*, Leslie Vinjamuri and Aaron P. Boesenecker offer several frameworks through which the role of religious actors can be assessed. The religiosity of an organisation is seen as no hindrance so long as they share beliefs and ideas of accountability, justice, peace and democracy with their secular counterparts. They surmise five 'logics of action' in which these beliefs are embedded. The logics of faith, legalism, emotion, custom and consequences define either singularly, or in combination, the motivations behind peace work, regardless of the actor.

An excellent case study of such intersection is presented by Katherine Marshall in her essay *Religion and Global Development: Intersecting Paths*. She holds up the example of the World Bank, which has been working in close conjunction with several religious organisations such as the Aga Khan Foundation, the Fe y Algeria, and Jubilee 2000 among others. Since 1998, when it recognised the importance of faith networks and decided to pro-actively engage with them, it has set a wonderful example of collaboration for others to follow suit. Marshall wholeheartedly endorses advancement in such faith-development partnerships because this is where the middle path between the cerebral and the sentimental lies, which comes across as one of the most plausible solutions emerging from this book.

Chapters nine and 10 zoom into the specifically Muslim side of the global story, each presenting cases from two opposites of the faith spectrum. Thomas Michel S.J. writes about the *Peaceful Movements in the Muslim World* whereas John O. Voll talks about *Trans-state Muslim Movement and Militant Extremists in an Era of Soft Power*. If Voll's elaboration of extremist organisations like the Al Qaeda using soft power for outreach makes one's heart sink, Michel's account of the deeply inspiring Risale-i-Nur, Fetullah Gülen and AMAN (Asian Muslim Action Network) movements offer a counter narrative of hope.

Essay number eleven, authored by Banchoff himself, brings in an important albeit misplaced subject of bioethics into the volume. Titled *Religious Pluralism and the Politics of a Global Cloning Ban*, it proceeds to dissect the cloning ban proposition mooted by the UN (and subsequently rejected by most member nations) in the early noughties. The author argues that this realm has remained in the shadows due to the media/social spotlight on religion, terror and war and needs to be discussed more often and with as much alacrity. Even so, its insertion in this volume seems somewhat unwarranted. In a more suitable context, addressing the religio-ethical dimensions of genetic research would be much more viable.

The penultimate essay of the volume by Elizabeth H. Prodromou, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Global Religious Pluralism*, explains how the world's most powerful country is in a unique position to address the issues of religious persecution and contain threats of militant religious movements. America has always positioned itself as a neutral nation through policies and acts like the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA, 1998). However, things changed in the Clinton and Bush eras, making their fight against terror sound like something they were doing in adherence to God's plan. Today, things have gone from bad to worse, with Trump propounding blatant separatism and US's moral authority stands weakened like never before.

However, as Prodromou grudgingly does, we too must accept the fact of the matter that US continues to be the most powerful nation in the world and that its decisions will directly or indirectly affect the rest of us. The book, then, serves as a good exercise in reconnoitring the global situation with respect to pluralism, politics and policy and is a useful read for anyone who aspires to or works in allied social fields. It offers several perspectives and points of departure which will prove useful to not just academics, but also journalists, activists and indeed, any conscientious world citizen.