Book Reviews


The volume under review consists of eleven fascinating articles that focus on a diverse array of issues arising from the nexus of faith and society in variegated settings. The range of investigative topics and methodological approaches is aptly described by Ralph Piedmont in the preface as extending “the value of religious and spiritual constructs to understanding the human experience” by drawing upon “qualitative analyses of personal narratives and interviews, multivariate analyses, and traditional quantitative techniques” (p. viii). The articles not only describe but, more importantly, seek “to identify the causal impact of religion/spirituality on the individual” through “recognition of the empirical robustness of numinous variables” (p. viii). Therefore, the editor writes that the volume is intended not only for scholars of religion and society but for clinicians, therapists, and counselors as well, because the study of “religious and spiritual dimensions may offer potential therapeutic pathways for facilitating change” (pp. viii–ix).

The essays by Ines W. Jindra on conversion and religious judgment (pp. 1–38) and by Julie Juola Exline and Ann Marie Yali on belief in afterlife judgment (pp. 235–260) grapple with issues centering on why and how individuals adopt and adhere to belief systems. The project by Jindra on Jehovah’s Witnesses is qualitative; that by Exline and Yali on Christian undergraduates is quantitative. Each essay provides fascinating results about the relationships between individuals, groups, their notions of divinity, human agency, spiritual retribution, and the security offered by such tenets (pp. 7–9, 18, 21, 25, 27, 31, 248, 254–255, 256, 258). Both studies would have benefited from even briefly elucidating how participants related their views to members of other faiths – a glimpse of which emerges in tables 1 and 3 of the data gathered by Exline and Yali.
The article by Kelly M. McConnell, Maria R. Gear, and Kenneth I. Pargament on how religious systems help individuals resolve feelings of offense generated by transgressions (pp. 49–77), the article by Mark M. Leach, Jacob J. Levy, and Lisa Denton on uses of religion to justify social attitudes (pp. 197–220), and the article by Keith M. Wilson, Jennifer L. Acord, and Ronan S. Bernas on intolerance and its relationship to believing in the existence of the devil (pp. 39–48) share the theme of how and why faith can determine the parameters of tolerance and intolerance. So McConnell, Gear, and Pargament explore how penitence, acceptance, and transformation facilitate reconciliation that can reorient and reconcile, while suggesting fruitful avenues for further research (pp. 50, 52, 64, 73). Ultimately, as Leach, Levy, and Denton note, the underlying issue is how and why religion influences decision-making, and what the specific motivations for those faith-based choices are vis-à-vis other possible choices (pp. 200–201, 209–211). Yet, simultaneously, the multifaceted, occasionally inconclusive, and sometimes negative correlations of religious doctrines to social and antisocial behaviors can be contrasted with the more powerful influences of socioreligious attitudes as mapped by Wilson, Acord, and Bernas (pp. 39, 41, 43–44, 46, 47). These studies are especially important because confessional ideologies and affiliations have long served as impetus and justification not only for marginalization, condemnation, and persecution of individuals but of entire communities during humanity’s long and turbulent relationship with divinity and demonology. Therefore, data from beyond the restricted samples utilized by the authors would have been of much value.

Examination of means by which religion affects individuals and communities of shared ethic and national backgrounds forms the subject of a quartet of papers by Bonnie C. Nicholson and Leah McMorris on religiously-informed parenting techniques (pp. 221–234), by Leslie J. Frances and Mandy Robbins on the attitudes of British teenagers (pp. 123–155), by Douglas W. Turton and Leslie J. Frances on the ministry of English clerics (pp. 105–122), and by William L. Smith and Barbara Hendry on Irish men and women in the American south (pp. 79–103). The research of Frances and Robbins determined that prayer serves as an instrument that shapes socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors, that of Turton and Frances demonstrates how faith links with early experiences to shape self-image which in turn determines at least partially both performance and satisfaction in the public sphere (and possibly the private sphere) of an