Book Reviews

Tuomas Martikainen and François Gauthier (eds.)


The social scientific study of religion has since its beginnings been interested in the social contexts of religious belief and practice. In the last twenty-five or so years, national and comparative studies have been complemented by global approaches, exemplified by the work of people like Peter Beyer. The institutional, political and cultural contexts of global religion have been examined in a variety of studies, showing the movements and interconnectedness of ideas. If there is one ‘context’, however, that is truly global, it would be the proliferation of the neoliberal economy across the planet. Interestingly, this aspect has received less attention in the literature on religion and globalisation.

Hence it is about time that someone tackled the issue head on. The two volumes edited by European sociologists of religion Tuomas Martikainen and François Gauthier purport to do exactly this, and provide an interesting opening to the discussion about religion and neoliberalism. The twin set is published in the Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Series, which comes out of the significant Religion and Society programme funded by the UK Arts and Humanities and Economic and Social Research Councils in 2007–2013. Interestingly, Linda Woodhead, the Director of the Religion and Society programme and recent champion of the neoliberal establishment in Britain (Woodhead 2012), is also a co-author in the introductions to both volumes.

The first book, Religion in the Neoliberal Age, concentrates on the institutional contexts—especially that of the state—of contemporary religion. The second, Religion in Consumer Society, in turn focuses on the more cultural aspects of the neoliberal consensus, namely the effects of consumerism on religion. As I will argue below, the two are intertwined, but overall the distinction makes sense and is consistent. One wonders, though, that had this book
been published twenty, thirty years ago, it would have probably been one big 500 hundred page volume. As some prolific academics have noted, this does not seem to fit well into the publishing programmes of many publishers nowadays—an interesting neoliberal side story, perhaps?

Three main themes emerge from the Introduction and chapters of Religion in the Neoliberal Age: the impact of neoliberal discourse on thinking about freedom of religion, the securitisation of religion (especially in the context of Islam and the ‘war against terror’), and state-religion ‘partnerships’ in welfare provision. Although the book as a whole does not always manage to connect the three themes, some of the chapters do a great job in doing exactly that. Agnes Chong shows how the securitisation of Muslims in Australia has impacted their charitable practices: On the one hand, people become more cautious about giving when anti-terrorism legislation is so broad (‘recklessness’ in the potential facilitation of ‘terrorist acts’) that it is easy to become an unwitting accomplice in funding ‘extremists’. This clearly has a major impact on trust within Muslim communities, but also between Muslims and the public authorities. On the other hand, paradoxically, Chong argues that the securitisation of welfare has increased the awareness of the role of zakat, and made Muslims more pious—presumably not the outcome the neoliberal administration had in mind. In her chapter, Lori Beaman makes another brilliant case for the invasion of neoliberal discourse into legal freedom of religion cases in Canada. As she argues, Canadian courts have increasingly taken a neoliberal cost-benefit approach to religion cases, at the expense of basic ideas about equality and harm. These and some other chapters provide an interesting glimpse into the economisation of all spheres of life and its impact on the social role of religion.

Religion in Consumer Society treads a somewhat more familiar ground. The ‘religious marketplace’ and ‘selling spirituality’ have received more attention in recent scholarly discussions than neoliberalism. It is perhaps also the reason why the second volume of the set is less ground-breaking in its analyses and arguments. Some of the more insightful chapters include Simon Speck’s and Andrew Dawson’s separate theoretical takes on the meaning of ‘modernity’, and the more empirical chapters on the Burning Man festival and Glastonbury’s ‘spiritual economy’ by François Gauthier and Marion Bowman, respectively.

In terms of style the chapters in the two books range from descriptive, but lucid historical analysis (e.g. Ringo Ringvee on Freedom of Religion in Estonia) to theoretical pieces (e.g. the abovementioned chapters by Speck and Dawson, and the Introductions to both volumes), and combinations of theory and a national or comparative case—the latter which vary in breadth