

Monica D. Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy S. Shah, *God's Century*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2011. \$ 23.62 (paperback)

God's Century

God's Century is a welcome addition to the literature on religion and politics. It offers a simple and powerful model to explain the divergent outcomes of religious influence on politics. The book's narrow definition of key terms such as politics, religion, and religious actors would appeal to political scientists but would disappoint scholars of religion as well as sociologists and anthropologists.

The authors define religious actors as "any individual, group, or organization that espouses religious beliefs and that articulates a reasonably consistent and coherent message about the relationship of religion to politics" (p. 23). These actors have increasingly influenced social and political agendas over the past forty years. Religious actors' political assertiveness has produced divergent outcomes: some religious actors have engaged in civil war and embraced terrorism while some others have advanced democratization, human rights, and social justice.

Two factors are behind these varied results. The first is political theology: the religious actors' ideas about political legitimacy and justice (p. 27). Neither fixed nor epiphenomenal, these ideas shape religious actors' political engagement (p. 29). These ideas cannot be reduced to socio-economic or political factors but to actors' interpretation of their key religious sources. The second factor is the institutional relationship—the level and quality of independence of religious actors from political authorities. They can be constitutionally or financially independent, as in the United States, or integrated, as in Iran. Moreover, this relationship can be consensual, one in which both religious actors and the state regard cooperation as legitimate, or conflictual, wherein at least one party wants to change the status quo (p. 39). In addition to exogenous factors influencing political theology and institutional relationship, the changes in each can also influence the other and together they shape a religious actor's political activity.

According to the authors, religious actors have a greater capacity and more opportunities to influence politics today than anytime in modern history (p. 49). The increasing institutional independence of religious actors from political authorities and the religious actors' growing acceptance of activist political theologies allowed this development (p. 50). Besides the decline of secular actors, the authors note that three additional factors are important for the growing power of religious actors since the 1960s: the urbanized middle classes and petit bourgeois have turned to religion; the spread of democratization has allowed religious actors to complete for political influence; globalization facilitated religious actors developing transnational links and mobilizing international resources, thereby enhancing their power over states.

Using their model (religious actors' political theology and institutional relationship between religious actors and political authorities), the authors discuss the religious actors' influence in four areas: democratization, terrorism, civil wars, and peace-building; and reach some surprising conclusions. Take democratization:

contrary to the conventional wisdom, “the preponderant disposition of religious actors in relation to democratization has been one of supportive engagement” (p. 120). While it is true that religious actors have resisted democratization in 39 countries, the authors point out that they have promoted it in 70 countries. The authors conclude that religious actors will promote democratization if they have “a liberal democratic political theology and a conflictually independent relationship” in a non-democratic state (p. 120). They argue that Turkish democratization under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) illustrates this dynamic. Furthermore, the party’s experience of suppression “by the military arm of the secular Kemalist regime, with whom it had a conflictually differentiated relationship” further cemented its commitment to democratization (p. 118).

The authors’ discussion of terrorism is also a good illustration of the explanatory power of their model. They argue that terrorism may occur if a religious actor and a political authority have an integrated relationship that excludes other religious actors who have integrationist political theologies of their own, as reflected in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Terrorism may also occur when political authorities are slow to fulfill some of the demands of the religious actors in an integrated system; the authors indicate that this is the case in Saudi Arabia. If political authorities “fail to address the grievances and expectations of religious actors within their borders,” this lack of comprehension can “contribute to the globalization of terrorism” (p. 123).

Religious actors will continue to play significant roles in politics of the twenty-first century. Neither celebrating the increasing religious influence in politics nor condemning it, the authors provide a cautiously optimistic picture about this influence.

The book’s model is persuasive and its empirical chapters drawing on major religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) are rich. The authors advise that attempts to suppress religious actors will backfire and that political authorities are best served by finding ways to engage with them. Political theologies matter and in dealing with religious actors, political authorities should take religious beliefs—in particular those about legitimate political authority—seriously. Institutionally, the greater independence religious actors and political authorities achieved, and the more secure and consensual this independence was, the greater the prospect was for religious actors to contribute to “social and political goods, including democratization, peacemaking, and reconciliation” (p. 216).

The book is a good qualitative political science study. Yet this disciplinary orientation becomes a shortcoming. The authors define the key terms such as religion, religious actors, and politics narrowly. For example, the authors’ conceptualization of political theology would exclude religious ideas like the importance of collective worship that do not directly relate to the issues of political authority and justice yet can still have important consequences for political action. It also excludes how some “secular” ideas about political theory and justice may in fact be grounded in religious teachings. The book’s political science orientation also excludes the religious communities who avoid asserting themselves politically, but whose social, cultural, and economic activities can have transformative effects. Some sociologists and anthropologists would also question the authors’ exclusive focus on five