
Book Reviews

Marczewska-Rytko, M. (ed.) (2003) *Religion in a Changing Europe: Between Pluralism and Fundamentalism – Selected Problems*, Lublin: Maria Vurie-Sklodowska University Press. ISBN 83-227-2089-0.

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This interesting book seems not to be readily available in Western Europe. In recent years, with increasing immigration into Europe and political situations in, for instance, Israel/Palestine; Iraq and, probably most noticeably, the U.S.A. religion has suddenly returned to the forefront of academic discourse in the social sciences. In media studies in Britain, long a stronghold of the Marxist critique, this has been more than surprising.

Many European countries have seen an influx of immigrants who are not only from other countries, but who practice other religions and this has caused disquiet in some quarters. Garton Ash (2006) notes that a *Financial Times* poll (one might ask why the *Financial Times* undertook such a poll) showed that only one in three of the British public consider themselves to be a believer, in France, less than one in three, and in Italy less than two thirds. Only in the USA do more than three quarters of the population have a belief. This was evidently a non-sectarian poll and Garton Ash wonders how many of French and British believers are, in fact, Muslim. In academia particularly, it seems that it is not the belief itself, or its nature, that throws people, but the fact that those to whom they are speaking have a belief at all. While America considers itself a land of immigrants, immigration is nothing new to those countries that previously had empires, notably France and Britain (but also Holland and Belgium). In the U.K., for instance, we had a Member of Parliament from the Indian sub-continent before we had a female Member of Parliament. Britain now has around two million Muslims and a million Hindus (amongst other 'immigrant' religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism) as well as a Jewish presence that includes most branches of the Jewish faith. The first Mosque in Britain is now over 100 years old. These people are an active part of our population of 60 million. However, in some other European countries, the

influx of believers in faiths that are not the norm has come as a shock to many. The practice of these religious beliefs, with different foods, clothing and practices, often makes these incoming believers very obviously 'the other'. Lest we forget, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all come from the same roots – and they started as Asiatic religions.

Marczewska-Rytko has put together an edited book that should be given greater attention. The authors come from a variety of countries, both European and non-European, including writers from America, Russia and Israel, and the articles are sometimes theoretically based and sometimes relate to empirical research. The third and final section of the book deals with articles that have a comparative perspective.

With the influx of new religions, religion has, as I mentioned above, become politicised. It is difficult for those who thought, along with Kant, that God was dead, to come to terms with his/her resurgence at a time when secularisation was seen to be a force. Articles here consider, amongst other things, what may be the results of this – will it, for instance, lead to Christian unity as Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini suggests (Marczewska-Rytko, 8). Dr. Marczewska-Rytko (9) quotes Friedman (2000) who says:

...There is nothing about globalization or the Internet that eliminates the need for ideals or codes of restraint on human behaviour. The more we are dependent on this technology (the internet), the more we need to come to it armed with our own ideals of codes of restraint.

Mankind has always looked for something or someone in whom to believe – whether this is a totem, a political leader, a monarch or a God or Gods – and will probably continue to do so. If humankind is to live together reasonably amicably, then there must be ideals and sociological rules that restrain behaviour in some way.

In her foreword, Marczewska-Rytko (9) suggests that several problems can be observed and are dealt with in the book:

1. That the way in which a certain group of phenomena are chosen or described may predetermine the evaluation of religion in globalisation processes. While religion may have faced the crises and challenges of globalisation, it has simultaneously been itself in a state of crisis, which she suggests amounts to a choice between religious values and moral nihilism.
2. That attitudes towards a cognition of religion range across a spectrum that runs from idolatry to extreme scepticism.

3. She suggests that we should note the following problems in relation to religion: that secular organisations have taken over some of the functions of religious organisations; that some forms of religiosity have decayed; that there is a divide between the institutional Church and believers; that there has been an increase in the number of believers in 'new religions'; secularisation.

These problems, she suggests, lead to attempts to find a way out of this crisis and also to an awareness of a need to set universal principles and combine value systems with cognitive processes.

The book came from two events in which the Editor participated: the *Religious Syncretism, Religious Identity* held in Budapest in 2001, and *European Culture in a Changing World: Between Nationalism and Globalism*, which was held in Aberystwyth in 2002. One of the points of interest in this book is that many of the authors come from a background that is not specifically related to religion, theology or religious studies. This gives an interesting interdisciplinary slant to the articles.

My main problem with this book is that its very title shows the way in which religious topics are usually treated – as problems or problematics. Despite my own work's major focus on Roman Catholicism, I have increasingly come to the conclusion that this problematising is in itself a problem. We need to concentrate more on the similarities between religions and societies rather than on their differences, since the similarities are usually much greater than many suppose.

A minor problem here is the number of editorial mistakes. Despite these, the book is well worth reading and would be useful to those interested in religion or religious studies. It would also be useful to those whose focus is on international politics or sociology. I look forward to further books along the lines of this one, but hope that the title might be 'Religion in a Changing Europe: Similarities', rather than having a focus on difficulties and problems.

References

- Friedman, T.L. (2000) *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Garton Ash, T. 'It is possible to respect the believers but not the belief', *The Guardian*, 21 December 2006, p. 31.