

Book Reviews

Methods to Explore Freedom of Religion and Belief: Whose Reality Counts?

Jo Howard and Marit Tadros (eds.)

Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023, 255 pp., ISBN: 978-1529229288, £28.99

A 255-page book on research methodology? Who is going to read this, and will it be interesting to anyone at all? These questions came to my mind when I was asked to review this book. However, I was pleasantly surprised. This is a valuable source for anyone interested in learning about how to do research and interpret social impacts, and especially in the method known as participatory research (PR).

The book refers to research involving religious minority groups in various contexts, including India, Nigeria, Iraq and Pakistan. It shares a number of observations and challenges that are familiar to everyone doing research on freedom of religion and belief (FoRB), such as “mistrust between different communities, or between certain groups and their government, due to discrimination, persecution and even lynching and murder” (17). The multifaceted nature of FoRB extends beyond legal rights; it’s described as “a multi-dimensional resource or stock of fungible capital – spiritual, moral, psychological and emotional capital” (44). As one of the editors comments, applying PR to the study of religious inequalities has “challenged me to consider how people’s religion and belief are profoundly connected to how they experience the world” (6). Finally, research can also suffer from very practical limitations such as a lack of female researchers, as a contributor from Pakistan explains (181).

What does PR do to overcome such challenges, and why might it be a better approach to understanding how limitations on FoRB are experienced in everyday life? First, it is interesting to contrast the participatory model with the more traditional use of surveys based on questionnaires, or what one researcher from Iraq termed the “extractive model” (141). One strength of the participatory model is its recognition that participants are more than victims; they are humans with agency (219), and in PR, the individuals’ realities count (235). They are listened to and not treated merely as sources to fill in pre-formulated answers or confirm a pre-concluded research concept. The book showcases various forms of PR, such as “river of life/road of life” exercises and participatory and matrix ranking, illustrating how they are adapted to specific cultural and political environments.

Each model, along with how it was practiced in and adapted to real life, is described in some detail. This is one of the book's strengths.

Each chapter contains a background section that provides information about the political, ethnic and religious setting of the region where the research took place. Then, methodology and actual implementation are described, with discussion of the findings and challenges that were encountered. Each chapter concludes with reflection on the results, benefits and limitations of the particular method used.

One obvious challenge is that PR results in the production of granular or highly localized (the book uses the term “decolonized data”(45)), which is difficult to generalize or apply fruitfully at a nationwide or even broader level. PR also has the potential to frustrate and even disenfranchise participants. Although the results tend to be hyper-local in nature, participants, having shared deeply personal experiences, may anticipate quicker and more substantial change than is realistically possible. Hyper-local results are difficult to translate into tangible policy proposals that decision makers can easily implement. One very encouraging example of successful implementation appears in a chapter that explains how teachers were trained to become effective promoters of FoRB principles in education (144ff).

Building trust, active listening, and reconciling conflicting accounts require considerable time. One researcher from Nigeria remarked that PR is “a long procedure” (90). A researcher from Pakistan highlighted the need to clarify “recorded contradictions within each interview” (183), illustrating the painstaking process involved. This is, however, a challenge with any method, as all researchers encounter new questions or difficult-to-resolve data issues along the way. After all, researching FoRB means researching real-life matters that are very close to people's hearts. As a result, one rarely gets simple, black-and-white answers.

The editors write in their conclusion,

Global data on FoRB is in high demand. Participatory methods may not allow the production of such data, however, because, as discussed in the introduction, global data on FoRB is necessarily problematic on grounds of reliability and rigour of methodology. Hence, it may be that we need to live with a trade-off between an accurate but localized pulse of the situation of the religiously marginalized on the ground through participatory methods, with global datasets premised on the aggregation of datasets collected through problematic methods (230).

This might sound like a rather dark view of research on FoRB. But I believe that as long as global research is transparent about its methodology and if its advantages and limitations are discussed openly, all research methods can complement each

other and contribute to the ultimate goal – namely, not only counting the realities of individuals but helping them experience an improved quality of life.

Daniel Ottenberg, Human Rights Lawyer, Germany

Ending Persecution: Charting the path to global religious freedom

H. Knox Thames

South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press 2024, 400 pp., ISBN 978-0268208677, \$45 US

Ending Persecution illuminates the threats to religious freedom, proposes innovative strategies for response, and challenges the United States to reaffirm its commitment to combating persecution. Knox Thames frames the stakes with a critical question: “The defining question of the twenty-first century will be whether we can defeat the age-old scourge of religious persecution. How can we best help those suffering for their beliefs? What should we do?”

The book intertwines Thames’ personal experiences as a US State Department diplomat and US Commission on International Religious Freedom commissioner, offering insights into both the theory and practice of international religious freedom.

Let’s begin with a pressing question: In the context of the second Trump administration, does Thames’ book belong to a bygone era?

Thames champions a principled, consequential US foreign policy and an outward-looking American polity. He calls for stronger bilateral and multilateral engagement by the United States, and he suggests elevating international religious freedom as a foreign policy priority, as well as institutionally within the State Department (306).

The opposite is happening. The State Department has been downsized and is now staffed by leadership skeptical of multilateralism. Human rights, development, and humanitarian aid have been deprioritized within the institutional framework. The current administration’s foreign policy is characterized by a transactional approach, with America increasingly looking inward. Furthermore, the US has withdrawn from the United Nations Human Rights Council, the World Health Organization, and the Universal Periodic Review – the UN’s human rights monitoring process. It has shut down many of USAID’s lifesaving programs.

Thames rightly calls for the credible and consequential use of sanctions as well as accountability for genocide, including through the International Criminal Court (ICC). Yet the US has continued to supply weapons to Israel as it conducts a devastating war and imposes starvation, resulting in the death of close to 70,000 (possibly 100,000 deaths according to some studies) Palestinians in Gaza. At the

same time, the United States has imposed sanctions on the ICC in response to charges against Israeli leaders for crimes against humanity. Refugee resettlement in the United States, another policy for which Thames advocates, has come to a screeching halt in recent months.

As I read the final chapter, “New Approaches for New Results,” I couldn’t help but remember the Arab proverb, “To whom are you reading your psalms, David?” Is anyone listening? The current political climate in Washington, DC, is anything but favorable to the weighty reforms Thames proposes.

However, given the turbulence of the current political moment, Thames may have emerged as a much-needed prophet, albeit unintentionally.

Thames’ personal journey is unique, set against a geopolitical backdrop that may, unfortunately, be singular in history. Thames played a pivotal role in initiating the first International Religious Freedom Ministerial, and his influence within US foreign policy and at the United Nations has been significant. Religious freedom advocates, civil society leaders, aspiring civil servants, and educational institutions will find in Thames’ book and journey invaluable information and insights that complement their knowledge and enhance their strategies in support of religious freedom for all.

Notably, he adopts a principled approach to religious freedom advocacy, critiquing countries based on facts – including US allies such as India, Pakistan and Egypt – rather than limiting his criticism to the usual targets of US foreign policy such as China, Iran, and North Korea. His chapter “Tyrannical Democracy” is a refreshing read and serves as a warning of the direction any democracy can take if left unchecked. And he emphasizes repeatedly some of the difficulties and failures the United States has experienced in upholding standards of religious freedom and human rights. Thames does omit what I considered the largest recent US foreign-policy failure, one that decimated Middle Eastern Christians and laid the foundations for ISIS: the 2003 war on Iraq.

Throughout the book, Thames provides examples of successful advocacy for religious freedom, illustrating how governments have yielded to such pressure, at least temporarily, and how leadership and commitment can effect change. These examples should inspire all advocates for religious freedom, who often wait years to see the fruits of their labor.

The book offers a more practical approach to understanding the full scope of the right to freedom of religion or belief than a traditional scholarly textbook, featuring real-world examples of advocacy for the right to worship, the registration of places of worship, freedom from arbitrary detention, and the right to convert.

Thames explains the advocacy tools at our disposal and how to utilize them, and he also highlights the international platforms and forums with which we

must engage. The book further emphasizes the efforts of scholars, diplomats, politicians, religious leaders, civil servants, and civil society leaders who have tirelessly supported religious freedom, many of whom I have had the privilege to meet and work with. It was most encouraging to read of the courageous efforts of indigenous leaders from minority religious groups (including Shahbaz Bhatti from Pakistan, and Haider Elias and Ashur Eskrya from Iraq) and of secular civil society groups (such as EIPR in Egypt) whose work Thames supported.

At the heart of *Ending Persecution* lies its most important lesson: the need for quality leadership. Knox Thames exemplifies principled ethical leadership committed to the dignity and rights of all individuals. His book calls every person of faith to recognize both the opportunities available and the challenges that can be overcome. Their leadership can effect real change in support of religious freedom for everyone. Despite the new direction the United States is taking, diplomacy, human connection, friendship, and principles can still make a meaningful difference.

Wissam al-Saliby, President, 21Wilberforce

Towards A New Christian Political Realism: The Amsterdam School of Philosophy and the Role of Religion in International Relations

Simon Polinder

Milton Park/ New York: Routledge, 2024, 236 pp., ISBN 978-1032612515, €175 (hardcover)

“I never discuss anything else except politics and religion. There is nothing else to discuss.” This quotation, often ascribed to G. K. Chesterton, captures how many Christian academics feel about these two subjects. It would be remiss to study politics without taking religion seriously (and vice versa) because human beings are fundamentally worshipping beings as if we have idol factories for hearts, to use John Calvin’s phrase.

Within Simon Polinder’s *Towards a New Christian Political Realism* lies a flavour of Chesterton’s bold claim. From the realist forefathers of international relations (IR) to contemporary critical perspectives in the field, IR scholars have not always done a good job of understanding how we humans, religious or not, are zealots at our core.

To improve this academic conversation, Polinder presents two compelling analytical arguments. First, he contends, mainstream IR theory is unequipped to understand religion because the field is built on presumptions against religion’s importance and ubiquity. Inspired by a Hobbesian interpretation of the post-1648

state system, the dominant assumption among IR scholars is that religion was to “be separated from, and then subordinated to, the affairs of the state” (36). Matters like religion and spirituality, then, should not function as important variables in political life. Contrary to popular belief, this state system reconfigured religion’s place in society and opened the door to religious freedom.

Expecting a religious decline, mainstream IR scholars who held this Hobbesian worldview were caught off guard during the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the 9/11 attacks. Beyond Tehran and New York, a cursory overview of the 20th and 21st centuries reveals how religion has saturated the international political arena: the rise of religious nationalist parties in Egypt and India in the 1960s, the Holy See’s global reach since the Second Vatican Council, growing evangelical influence in American politics in the 1980s, and Putin’s weaponization of the Russian Orthodox Church in his fight against Ukraine. Religion is also at the foundation of ethical criteria such as just war, core documents such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and concepts like egalitarianism.

Second, Polinder argues, the IR field would benefit from a “new Christian realism.” His proposed building blocks for this framework start with an analysis of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz’s realism. Here, he demonstrates that realism ought not to be associated with cold-hearted amoral thinking, given its astonishing religious roots. Morgenthau described secular ideologies like Nazism and Marxism as having religious features, appreciated certain forms of religiosity (e.g., Quakerism), and acknowledged Christianity’s influence on modern humanitarianism. Waltz too defended ideas that could be viewed as Augustinian concepts painted with secularized language. Paraphrasing Waltz, Polinder writes, “perfect earthly justice is impossible, [...] it is about the approximation of a little more justice or freedom” (141). Put differently, according to the neorealist playbook, the City of God is unattainable, but it can still be reflected in the City of Man. Combined with the Amsterdam School, the new Christian realism accepts religion as a feature of reality and asserts that all humans possess something akin to it: a worldview. In other words, every person, group, and nation has a *telos* (an ultimate purpose or anchor of trust). Thus, Polinder’s chief suggestion for IR theorists and practitioners is one of reflexivity: “One need not talk like a theologian but one should recognize that political-theological considerations and worldviews play a role [in their own starting points]” (207).

Polinder’s work is distinguished by extensive research and its accessibility to the average student of international relations. Though he makes unequivocal claims about religion’s ongoing relevance in the international arena, he writes with intellectual humility – a willingness both to challenge his own side (the religionists) and glean insights from opposing perspectives. And despite the Am-

sterdam School's Protestant roots, its lexicon is useful for those of other religions, given that "sin," "proximate justice," and "creational norms" are concepts found across other theologies and mainstream religions.

This work, however, might have functioned better as two separate books, one investigating the religious side of realism and the other dealing with how the Amsterdam School can contribute meaningfully to IR analysis. The first half of the book, after all, argues that Westphalianism ignores religion, whereas the second half indicates that Westphalians like Morgenthau actually took religion seriously. Also, while the book expresses confidence that new theories can generate new policies, the reader may still wonder how factoring in religion within IR can practically address the weighty injustices we face today.

Nevertheless, at a time when religious beliefs and symbols are invoked in the most consequential conflicts of our lifetime (Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan), this book effectively urges IR students and scholars to further investigate the intersection of worship and power. What is typically held as common sense in IR is flipped on its head: political realists do care about religion, the IR field was wrong about the post-1648 state system, and religion matters much more than we are often inclined to think.

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Equal and Inalienable Rights: Essays on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Melanie R. Bueckert and Derek B. M. Ross, editors

Toronto: LexisNexis Canada, 2024, pp. 407 + 44, ISBN 978-0433533801, \$145 CDN

This book resulted from a symposium in 2023 celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The focus is on how the UDHR has influenced, or could influence, Canadian human rights law. As with many such books, some chapters are gems, while others barely relate to the theme.

Among the gems, the last two chapters, on two of the men involved in drafting the UDHR, are outstanding. A. J. Hobbins, the literary executor of John Peters Humphrey, provides a short chapter on Humphrey's writing of the first draft of the UDHR. The chapter includes many details on the formation of the Human Rights Commission and the drafting committee that formulated the UDHR. Habib C. Malik, son of Charles Malik, a key figure on the drafting committee, contributes a stellar chapter summarizing his father's involvement in the wording of the UDHR and the negotiations leading to its adoption on 10 December 1948. Together, these two chapters soundly refute the argument that the UDHR is a product of Western thinking that does not represent the views of other parts of the world.

William A. Schabas and Ryan Alford's chapters offer helpful buttresses as the international human rights system continually faces challenges. Schabas, a highly respected international legal expert who published the three-volume set of the *travaux préparatoires*, the drafting history, of the UDHR, identifies contributions from the Majority World, particularly the Haitian delegation. Alford's chapter, titled "The Enduring Significance of the UDHR's Characterization of Rights as Inherent and Inalienable," discusses the arguments used by the USSR to undermine the understanding of individual human rights. Yet the universality of the UDHR, along with the Soviet agreement to uphold its human rights commitments in the Helsinki Accords, ultimately empowered Vaclav Havel and other dissidents to play a role in the USSR's downfall.

Other chapters examine particular aspects of the UDHR and their application in Canadian law. Some of these have more universal application to other contexts. Both Blair Major and Tersha F. De Koning present excellent elucidations of the concept of human dignity. Major discusses human dignity in relation to religious freedom; de Koning identifies the Judeo-Christian roots of human dignity in relation to cruel and unusual treatment and torture.

The book's first part focuses on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In addition to Major's chapter, Farrah Raza, a lecturer from Pembroke College at Oxford University, considers the challenges of defining FoRB and elucidates the multiple interpretations. Christopher Mainella and Melanie R. Bueckert discuss religious freedom in Canada, identifying the lack of consistency in interpretation of this important freedom.

Dwight Newman's chapter on collective rights, though not in Part I, is also relevant to the interpretation of FoRB. Newman published a seminal book, *Community and Collective Rights*, on this subject in 2011, and his chapter draws on the theoretical framework developed therein. Newman also draws extensively on the *travaux* to illustrate his argument that the UDHR can be interpreted to support collective dimensions of rights.

One of co-editor Derek Ross's two chapters may seem esoteric to those outside Canada as it focuses on equal access to public service. However, the province of Quebec has passed legislation banning the wearing of religious dress or symbols by many public-sector workers and limiting religious dress for individuals accessing public services. This legislation, known as Bill 21, invokes the "notwithstanding clause," insulating it from review under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Ross looks to the UDHR for support of his claim that the legislation violates international human rights standards.

Ross's second chapter identifies the family as a community deserving human rights protection. While the UDHR provides certain guarantees to the family and to

parents, the Canadian Charter is silent on human rights of the family. Ross notes that Canadian law functions “as a mediating force between family members ... more so than a mechanism to generally protect the family’s integrity as a whole” (284-285).

A few chapters are somewhat disappointing. While the participation of a former Supreme Court of Canada justice is almost always desirable, the chapter contributed by the Hon. Michel Bastarache is wrong-headed. The title indicates that it addresses the UDHR and the recognition of social rights. But the chapter addresses the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights while neglecting the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The latter includes social rights.

The chapter by Peter D. Lauwers, a justice of the Ontario Court of Appeal, and Eric Fleming should also have been left for another book. The first paragraph indicates that the authors were asked to address the link between free speech and human dignity in the UDHR. However, they instead wrote about judicial reasoning and moral philosophy. This is interesting material but unrelated to the topic of this volume.

The chapter on freedom of thought, contributed by Marcus Moore, is interesting in this era of disinformation, propaganda, censorship and artificial intelligence. However, at 60 pages in length, it reads more like a master’s thesis than a book chapter. If you have a strong interest in this topic, you will find a thorough exploration of it here.

The book offers much of value to international human rights theorists and practitioners alike. As the symposium was organized by the Christian Legal Fellowship in Canada, it is not surprising that this volume includes a significant focus on FoRB and other issues of interest to religious communities, or that it addresses critiques of the international human rights system itself.

Prof Dr Janet Epp Buckingham, Professor Emerita, Trinity Western University, Director, WEA Office to the United Nations in Geneva

Religious Freedom and Covid-19: A European Perspective

Edited by Jelle Creemers and Tatiana Kopaleishvili

London and New York: Routledge 2025, 232 pp., ISBN 9781032326900, € 140.00 hardback, € 41.59 eBook

The COVID-19 pandemic, the worst global health crisis since World War II, posed severe challenges to the enjoyment of human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). This book offers a valuable analysis of the impact that emergency has had on the exercise of religious freedom in Europe. Member states of the Council of Europe, bound to respect for the same standards of FoRB

protection, had to find proportionate ways to limit this right in the pursuit of the legitimate aim of protection of health, which had been very seldom invoked since the entry into force of the European Convention on Human Rights. Social groups, including religious denominations and belief organizations, were called to a great responsibility insofar as they could use their influence to encourage either virtuous or vicious behavior on the part of their members. Individuals were forced dramatically to choose between respect for secular measures limiting their right to FoRB and obedience to religious norms that prescribed acts involving propinquity, such as burials.

The book's focus on a specific crisis has not prevented the contributors from addressing broader questions in terms of the balance between competing but equally legitimate interests, for which reason this volume will not become outdated soon. As the revealing title of the editors' introduction states, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." Setting aside the different context from which this phrase originated, this book stands as a significant contribution to the debate on the lessons learned from the global crisis that can hopefully be applied in future emergencies.

The book derives from a project of the Institute for the Study of Freedom of Religion or Belief (ISFORB) at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven, Belgium. Along with chapters written by members of ISFORB, it incorporates perspectives of authors from other backgrounds. One merit of the volume is its multidisciplinary approach, as highlighted by the presence of contributions by sociologists, theologians, legal scholars and historians, among others. The insights offered are not exhaustive (and it could not have been otherwise), but comprehensive: the first part centers on theoretical perspectives, while the second part presents case studies on practical aspects of management of the health crisis.

The first part, devoted to European values, norms and policies, includes a comparison between US and European approaches to pandemic management, an accurate legal analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the manifestation of FoRB in Europe, and an assessment of religion-based conscientious objection to mandatory vaccinations. The chapter comparing the Belgian and Dutch approaches is among the most original. Its relevance lies not so much in its evaluation of the particular policies implemented by the two states as in the broader focus adopted by the authors, which goes beyond religion as a specific legal category and instead emphasizes human dignity. While their criticism of the special treatment of religion may be questioned by other scholars, it certainly offers much food for thought.

The second part is well-structured. Space restrictions have necessarily limited the number of case studies that could be included, but the editors have expertly selected four varied perspectives on the management of FoRB-related challeng-

es. These present the points of view of the state (as in the chapter on Belgium), society (whose internal tensions are examined with regard to Orthodox Georgia), new religious movements (the specific national context is Ukraine) and an established church (the Church of England, which collaborated with the state in the lockdown). None of the chapters is limited to a single perspective, and common themes pervade all these contributions. Nevertheless, the choice of such a structure successfully transmits the complexity and variety of existing situations to the reader.

The interesting perspectives and balanced structure of this book make it a highly recommended resource for scholars as well as practitioners, political, religious, and societal actors.

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The Non-Religious and the State: Seculars Crafting Their Lives in Different Frameworks from the Age of Revolution to the Current Day

Jeffrey Tyssens, Niels De Nutte and Stefan Schröder (eds.)

Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2025, iv + 397 pp., ISBN 978-3111337012, €64.95 (hardcover)

This edited volume is the result of a 2022 international conference of the Secular Studies Association Brussels research group (SSAB) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). The introductory chapter explains that the volume as a whole calls for attention to diversity in thinking about both “the non-religious/secular/humanists/nones” and about “the state,” which knows multiple localities and levels of “public authority.” Particular attention is devoted to the roles and frameworks of a variety of individuals, rather than organizations or other usual suspects. Tyssens and de Nutte make a helpful distinction between actors with a “protest identity” (such as atheism) and those with a “project identity” (humanism). This differentiation could also be very helpful in typologies of other (non-)religious individuals and societal actors. Finally, while the volume pays attention to different time frames since “the age of Revolution,” the primary focus is on present-day situations.

The book contains 18 contributions by both established and younger researchers, including varying but all very helpful case studies demonstrating the diversity of seculars and their contexts. Although Belgium and Europe more broadly receive (not surprisingly) much attention, the contributions also discuss the United States, Ghana, Brazil, Mexico and the Middle East. The chapters are country-specific or comparative, and the authors come from a variety of disciplinary

backgrounds, including (but not limited to) historical studies, socio-anthropology, law and political science. Below, I highlight three chapters that especially caught my attention.

To the IJRF reader who wants to understand better the importance, complexities and structural challenges related to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in everyday life, I strongly recommend Joseph Blankholm's contribution. Based on interviews with non-religious women in the US and scholarly literature, Blankholm convincingly explains how non-religious women are particularly challenged to live their everyday life in American civil society with its Protestant imprint. The growing role of religious non-profit organizations in the neo-liberal sociopolitical framework turns Christian religious communities into strong social powers. In combination with a pervasive social patriarchy, however, this situation disadvantages non-religious women who are looking for sympathetic local service providers for life-cycle rituals, ethical education for their children, or a social safety net. As a result, many of these women have become reluctant to express their non-religion openly.

Sofia Nikitaki offers insights from her analysis of in-depth interviews of non-religious millennials in Belgium (Flanders), Greece and Norway. Interestingly, the interviewees largely agreed in their general understanding and appreciation of "religion," but Belgian and Norwegian appreciations of church-state relations differed greatly from the Greek perspective. The sociopolitical influence of the country's majority church was found to be decisive for respondents' evaluation of church-state relations, with Greeks showing higher levels of frustration regarding the Greek Orthodox Church. Nikitaki connects her findings with earlier research, such as that of Petra Klug, who argues that indifferent people particularly criticize religion when it infringes on their own or other people's lives. In conclusion, Nikitaki notes that "there is no such thing as a monolithic 'European secularity,'" and she calls for attention to contextual differences, in line with the publication's overall aim.

Katharina Neef describes the decline of German organized freethought in the 20th century. The century started quite well for this group, with strong growth between 1914 and 1928, including a shift in membership from white-collar to blue-collar participation. Growing Marxist sympathies led, however, to the abolition of associations and activities in 1933 and to outright Nazi persecution. After World War II, neither the (religion-friendly) Federal Republic of Germany nor the (atheistic) German Democratic Republic offered fertile ground for the revival of freethought. In the FRG, the remaining freethinkers remained potential suspects of communism and they suffered from brain drain to the east. In the de-religionised GDR, there was limited space for alternative forms of sociability and more

interest in promoting a scientific worldview than in anti-religious discourse. Neef argues against direct and universal causal relations between secularization and the blooming of organized irreligion.

Some chapters in this volume demonstrate more academic rigor or more original insights than others. Yet overall, the volume achieves its aims and makes a valuable contribution to the study of its chosen topic – which is not always the case with collected volumes based on conferences.

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Compact Atlas of Global Christianity

Kenneth R. Ross, Gina A. Zurlo and Todd M. Johnson (eds.)

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025, 432 pp., ISBN 978-1399550079, US \$200

The *Compact Atlas of Global Christianity* represents the capstone of the 10-volume series *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity* (2017-2025). Whereas the earlier nine volumes were organized around geographic regions, this concluding work provides a synthetic and global perspective, offering readers a comprehensive overview of world Christianity in the early 21st century. The scale of this undertaking is impressive: 261 color graphs, 98 charts, 131 maps, and contributions from 28 authors.

The book also updates and expands upon the earlier *Atlas of Global Christianity* (2009) by Todd Johnson and Kenneth Ross. One key difference is in scope: while the 2009 atlas emphasized historical trajectories alongside demographic patterns, the new *Compact Atlas* foregrounds the present realities of global Christianity with a contemporary, data-driven focus. The editorial team has evolved as well, now including Gina Zurlo alongside Ross and Johnson as co-editor. The demographic data underpinning this volume come from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, an academic research center based at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Massachusetts where Johnson and Zurlo work. This institutional context ensures both continuity and reliability in the presentation of demographic trends.

The table of contents reveals a tripartite structure: continents and regions, ecclesial traditions, and thematic explorations. Each continent is analyzed with maps and charts, including innovative visualizations such as “North Africa as 100 Christians” or “Europe as 100 Christians,” which enable readers to grasp proportional realities at a glance. These visualizations break down the Christian population not only by continent and region, but also by ecclesial tradition, language, age, and many other topics, making demographic realities readily perceptible and memorable.

The section on Christian traditions differentiates four broad ecclesial families – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant (including Anglicans), and Independents – while also tracing two major global movements: Evangelicalism and Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity. An additional layer of analysis covers “Christian families,” such as Baptists, Lutherans, Reformed Presbyterians, hidden or cell churches, and other Christian groupings. Each Christian tradition is described by “critical insiders” (viii), that is, scholars who personally identify with the tradition they analyze.

The thematic chapters address 10 cross-cutting issues: faith and culture, theology, worship and spirituality, social and political contexts, mission and evangelism, gender, religious freedom, inter-religious relations, migration, and climate change. The first eight of these themes recurred across the earlier nine volumes of the series, but the editors have now added migration and climate change as new topics of growing importance.

The conclusion offers reflections on the “Future of Global Christianity” (262ff.), with projections up to 2075 indicating that the numerical center of gravity of world Christianity may continue to shift decisively to the Majority World, particularly Africa (also 11). The authors propose that the Democratic Republic of Congo or Nigeria could eventually surpass the United States as the country with the largest Christian population. Appendices, including a comprehensive one on “Religion by Region” (370ff.), round out the volume.

Compared to similar works, the *Compact Atlas of Global Christianity* distinguishes itself through several features. First, it is not primarily historical but contemporary, offering data for 2025 rather than a retrospective narrative. Second, it is not confined to regional perspectives but seeks a genuine global synthesis. Third, it benefits from local authorship, thereby incorporating voices from the regions under analysis. As the editors themselves note, “While resting on preceding scholarship, this volume breaks new ground through its genre as an atlas, its reliable demographic analysis, its contemporary focus, the local authorship of its essays, and the originality of the analyses” (ix). The result is a hybrid reference work – neither a standard demographic report nor a traditional historical survey, but a visually engaging, research-based atlas of contemporary Christianity.

Among the thematic contributions, the chapter on religious freedom (320ff.), authored by Elizabeth Lane Miller and Helene Fisher, deserves special mention in the context of this journal. The chapter presents visual data on global restrictions, including a “religious freedom index,” maps of “governmental restrictions,” a “social hostilities index,” and statistics on Christian martyrs by decade from 1900 to 2020. Particularly valuable is the attempt to correlate martyrdom with ecclesial traditions and to identify major perpetrators of persecution. These empirical tools provide researchers and practitioners with both comparative in-

sight and concrete evidence, underscoring the relevance of the atlas for ongoing discourse in religious freedom studies.

The atlas also illustrates wider structural shifts in global Christianity. It highlights the southward shift of Christianity's demographic center. Whereas in 1900, 82 percent of Christians lived in the Global North, by 2025 the proportion is described as 31 percent, projected to decline further to only 17 percent by 2075. In line with this trajectory, the editors emphasize their intention to "prioritize voices that have been historically marginalized" (7), thereby reflecting the lived realities of world Christianity.

As the concluding volume of the Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity, this book succeeds in providing both a synthesis and a fresh agenda for research. Its combination of reliable demographic data, thematic exploration, and accessible visualizations make it a unique resource for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike. For those particularly interested in religious freedom, the atlas offers a balanced mix of statistical evidence and interpretive commentary that will enrich both academic study and advocacy. At the same time, some questions remain open for reflection. The classification of Christian traditions, while necessary for clarity, inevitably simplifies complex and hybrid identities, particularly in rapidly evolving regions (cf. methodological reflections on 385ff.). Likewise, quantitative indicators such as martyrdom counts or religious freedom indices provide valuable insight but require careful interpretation, as they rely on contested definitions. Future work might explore how more granular qualitative analysis or local narratives could complement these metrics, offering an even richer understanding of global Christianity's dynamics. Together with the nine regional companions, the *Compact Atlas of Global Christianity* forms a landmark achievement in the study of world Christianity, while also inviting ongoing dialogue about methodology and interpretation in this rapidly changing field.

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On the Dignity of Society: Catholic Social Teaching and Natural Law

F. Russell Hittinger (edited by Scott J. Roninger)

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This book is divided into three main parts: Catholic social teaching, natural law, and "first truths." In the first part, Hittinger refers to an interest in the social

virtues of charity and justice by which a person can be right with God and neighbour. This includes being rightly ordered within a community and how especially the popes, since the 18th century, have contributed to insights in this regard. The basic principles of Catholic social doctrine are the dignity of the person, solidarity, subsidiarity and the common good (the last three having a social aspect). The dignity of society (including societies other than the state) presupposes the dignity of the individual and the existence of social persons distinct in dignity, reducible neither to the individual nor the state. Hittinger points to the distinction between subsidiarity and other models that view civil society as an important facet of society, and it accentuates an anthropological understanding of the societal aspect as well as the Church, which relates to the *imago Dei* as well as the *imago Christi*.

From the late 18th century to the late 20th century, the inaugural encyclical of every pope confronted the problem of the state as part of coming to come to terms with the new state-making regimes that emerged after the Napoleonic Wars. Consequently, a concerted effort was made to call attention to the importance of social pluralism, which included a defence of civil society.

The onslaught of the sexual and moral revolution beginning in the 1960s resulted in Pope John Paul II's *Humanae Vitae*, which aimed to defend marriage and family. According to John Paul, the crisis of the 20th century was anthropological, in that the spirit of the times was not merely in opposition to institutions. Rather, it was essentially an affirmation of what man was not – in other words, that the family and marriage, as well as the political and ecclesial realms, were not viewed as the perfection of nature but rather as platforms for self-revision. Pope Leo XIII (who focused on where we stand regarding these realms) framed the revival of Christian philosophy and developed the idea of participated authority, which is similar to Abraham Kuyper's ideas on sphere sovereignty. In this regard, social spheres such as the family or religious associations do not owe their existence to the state. In contrast, the state should preserve these communities and not become involved in their peculiar concerns and organisation. These insights were also developed by Pope Pius XI (to whom the teachings on subsidiarity, also as a derivative of social justice, are attributed).

In the book's second main part, Hittinger focuses on natural law, including related teachings emanating from the relevant papal encyclicals. Here one is reminded of the irrepressibility and eternal return of this topic. We do not need a specific command regarding the ends of being, living and knowing, because these enjoy our natural assent and obligation in natural law, which is not qualified unless the natural law exists in a prior state that is ultimate in the order of discovery. This in turn denotes an aspect of God. As Hittinger comments, "Once we

see the need to appeal to some standard of action other than those rules posited by the human mind, we are poised to ask questions about first things.” Pope John Paul XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris*, which Hittinger describes as “the first papal encyclical to treat natural law in general terms for a general audience and, even more significantly, for the express purpose of instigating collaboration along a wide front of moral, social and political issues,” receives considerable attention, and Hittinger also elaborates on John Paul II’s contribution to social doctrine vis-à-vis anthropology, against the background of the *imago Dei*. *Dignitatis Humanae*’s contribution to developing the doctrine of recent popes on the inviolable rights of the human person and the constitutional order of society is also presented, including the importance of protecting religious associations and families as well as a moral-juridical teaching on the natural-law source of religious acts.

The third and final part of the book, “First Truths,” offers valuable insights into how the Church should be understood. It is argued that the Church should be associated with the governance of souls, an area in which political powers have no share. This discussion covers references by Pius XII to the distinction between the polity (*populus*) and ecclesia (*Holy Spirit*), which differ in their respective origin and end. In this regard, Leo XIII referred to the “faith embodied in the conscience of peoples rather than restoration of medieval institutions as the way to final victory.” Jesus inaugurated a non-political messianic kingdom, which entailed a separation of the religious from the political. Hittinger further elaborates on the meaning of this “separation” and points to the neglect by Christians of the fundamental theme in the Bible, stating that “we need to aim towards the city which is to come and not the one we find ourselves in.” This implies the supernatural presence here and now, in history, of the ultimate reality of the kingdom of God, which will be consummated upon Christ’s return.

Hittinger concludes with a chapter on the significance of Pope Benedict’s teachings on how to live during very challenging times. It is important in this regard to avoid concentrating on worldly success; rather, one must pursue “human success” by perceiving what makes life worth enduring – which includes a life of prayer, labour and rest.

Dignity of Society (which is comprised of a selection of Hittinger’s previously published scholarship) brings together Hittinger’s thought on the Catholic Church’s teaching on moral and social philosophy as well as theology, including in particular the insightful and foundational thinking of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Hittinger writes against the background of the Enlightenment’s bolstering not just of reason and individuality, but also of the idea of the state, something that the Catholic Church was compelled, by means of its social theory, to address. *Dignity of Society* also contributes to discourse on the challenges related to the

plurality present in liberal democracies, by elaborating on the idea of subsidiarity. Related to this, the common good implies the protection of the common goods of societal entities (as well as the participation of societal entities in a social order), as well as an understanding of man as essentially a relational being (as opposed to the distorted view of individualism) and that man is not only a citizen. *Dignity of Society* presents insights into natural law, anthropology, solidarity, subsidiarity, social justice, structured pluralism, human rights (including freedom of religion), political theory, the importance of the individual, the Church and God's Kingdom, and how all of these are interconnected with one another.

I expect that this work will be frequently cited in the years to come, in discussions of Christian social theory, natural law, freedom of religion, and the intersection between law, religion and the state. Dictatorial regimes and the ever-increasing encroachment upon religious rights and freedoms in democracies around the world – or, to put it more generally, the reality of sin in this world – will ensure the ongoing importance and relevance of this book.

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