

Book Review: The scaffolding is on and Public Administration literature will change

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Religion and Public Administration: An Introduction
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With the attempt to put behind the fallacy of considering the doctrine of separation of religion and state as an ideal for Public Administration (PA) globally, Edoardo Ongaro and Michele Tantardini (2023) have brought out an important book that makes an important contribution to the field of PA. The book not only reinforces the recognition of the significant impact that religion has on the studies and practice of PA but, more importantly, helps to establish a framework that could serve as the groundwork for future research in this field.

The idea of secularization as put forward by Charles Taylor (2007), which the authors also mainly relied on, is not a complete obsolescence of religion in all matters of the socio-political lives of people globally. As the authors also mention, citing various other key scholars who have contributed to the sociology of religion, there is no "inevitability in secularization" (12); if to consider the contexts globally and not get fixated on the Global-West paradigm (Drechsler 2013), there is also often not a desirability of secularization either. The appropriate positionality is put forward by the authors in claiming that their perspective is "Global and not Globalist". The central argument in the book is that "religion is influential on the functioning of PA" – religion is explanans and PA the explanandum (17, 65).

The book is suitably titled Religion and Public Administration: An Introduction, as this is an introductory work, but undoubtedly a solid one to the vast area of potential studies that involve the study of religion within the context of PA. A more detailed discussion of each of the seven major religions included in the book would likely be a book each on its own that would likely involve a diverse collection of authors and scholarly expertise. It is not that there have not been calls for considering the inclusion of religion into the study of PA in the past (see, e.g., Lynch et al. 1997), but such arbitrary calls without the necessary ground works have not been able to bring such shifts. Considering the challenges, a proper introduction to this area of study with a clear framework and set of themes is a Herculean task, one that is highly commendable for having been achieved. The book is foremost an important volume to have for those interested in the subject matter as a foundational reference for analytical and conceptual themes that could be built upon.

The book is divided into 8 chapters. The introduction lays out the theoretical premise of the book and also the methodology employed. The foundational framework is rich and includes some very important theoretical elements that carry the book well. The introductory chapter

also explains the structure of the book and provides a guideline on how to read it. Here the authors accept the shortcoming of the book in being able to present an in-depth presentation of each of the seven religions, categorized as four Asian and three Abrahamic religions in the book. But the point of the book is palpably not about exhaustive descriptive details on the religions discussed but rather about providing these discussions and details as examples to convey the conceptual framing in a more comprehensible way. While the authors themselves suggest maybe skipping chapters for those knowledgeable of the religions, my judgement on the matter is that reading it serially without skipping the chapters will be advantageous for most readers.

Chapter 2 is mainly about the country-specific data on the measures of the placement of religion in the administration of each of the countries – the demographics, religious freedom and religious regimes. The data mapping is based on the framework introduced by Turner (2013) in categorizing religious regimes into the categories of liberalism, Caesarism, Identification of state and religion, and theocracy. The extensive data provided here can be very helpful for researchers who may want to do case studies and surveys of specific countries and are looking for a starting point. The data will also be valuable from a standalone point of view without necessarily linking to the rest of the book as well. The authors have resorted to basing their analysis not on the country specificities that the data presented in chapter 2 but generally focusing on the religious scriptures and theological commentaries, only occasionally coming back to country-specific contexts.

The next two chapters are about the PA-focused introductions to Asian religions and Abrahamic religions: namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism as part of the Asian religions and Judaism, Christianity and Islam as part of the Abrahamic religions. The authors have effectively addressed the theological dimension of introducing the seven religions, a task made challenging by the fact that they do not possess backgrounds in the theology of most of these religions. The chapter will be very helpful in developing a basic understanding of how religions may have implications in PA. As the details here are more to facilitate the understanding of how there can be implications in different ways in the context of different religions, the text is not particularly approached as a structured comparison between the religions and there is more detailed information provided on some religions compared to others. A comparative study among these religions, with constraints of a single framework, would be fruitless due to the diverse contexts, foundations, and PA-related implements associated with each.

In the next three chapters, the authors discuss the implications of religion and its influences on PA from three perspectives – shaping of individual traits like personality, motivation and behavioural elements; organizational level influences; and as an ideational basis concerning legitimacy, accountability, responsibility and power. The set of ten themes presented and the argumentation is highly convincing when taken as a whole. There can be arguments for or against any theoretical framework based on one's own theoretical foundations, but for a rich set of themes that has been presented by the authors, there are going to be a few counterarguments and pitfalls. But such potential pitfalls are mostly well-addressed by the authors; for example, the authors cite Turner (2013) to present the criticism of "lumping together" various developments and also "unwittingly working with a Western – or, more specifically, a Protestant – view of what counts as religion" (70). Within the chapters, the

PA emphasis is at the forefront with theological discussion provided within each of the ten themes, which cover all three micro, meso and macro level analyses for each of the religions included; the micro level referring to the individual personality traits; the meso level to the organizational level themes; and finally, the macro level referring to the ideational basis, such as legitimacy and power.

The analyses provided within each of the ten themes presented serve as highly relevant examples of how elements of each of the religions could provide implications concerning respective themes. The discussions provided are rich and efficacious, but as this is not exhaustive, for many readers who are interested in their research in line with the topic of the book, each of these short discussions can prove to be the basis and the source of ideas for future research which can go much further in depth. The ten themes put together are comprehensive altogether and cover key dimensions of possible studies in PA. All in all the possibilities of future studies are vast, and the final chapter, which posts a series of questions, adds to the efficacy of this book. The authors also link the ten themes with potential research questions that researchers with an interest in the field can adopt in developing their research on the topics concerning the implications of religion in PA. The last four chapters combined will provide both the theoretical foundation for attempting such research but also the agendas that are laid out straightforwardly with examples that help to provide some easy directions. The richness of the literature and the theoretical lenses provided will enable researchers to choose selectively the dimensions presented and build on that.

The book, as the authors put it in the concluding chapter, is indeed primarily a call for "synergies between public administration and religious studies scholars". One cannot stress enough that this book is an important part of a literature void within the discipline of PA that acknowledges the continued centrality of religion in the global context. Human actions tend to get reproduced within structures that both enable and restrict human agency (Giddens 1984), and, as such, the elements of religion that are embedded within the structures that endure should always have been relevant for the study of PA despite the exercise of secularization. Moreover, in the post-secular world that we now live in, the Western idea of secular rationalism and separation of politics and administration seems more of a deviation or a special-case scenario (Habermas 2005). This book will certainly serve as a scaffolding that has now been put on for what will eventually be the building of a comprehensive body of literature which will be significant for the discipline of PA globally for many years to come.

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