

## Review - The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security

Written by Natalia Vlas

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The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security  
Edited By: Chris Seiple, Dennis Hoover and Pauletta Otis  
Routledge, 2012

Up until two decades ago, religion had been peripheral to the concerns of social scientists in general and of political scientists in particular, due to the quasi-paradigmatic status of the theory of secularization. This theory provided the main analytical framework for approaching the relationship between religion and modernity in social sciences. However, recent data and events reveal the increased influence of religion in the public arena of societies throughout the world, leading to a rethinking of the secularization paradigm, which has therefore undergone numerous critiques and revisions. A growing number of scholars emphasize that, instead of disappearing, religion has actually intensified its public visibility and continues to be intermingled with almost all major political events around the world. A series of dramatic events at the turn of the millennium drew public attention to the potentially explosive connection between

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religion and violence at a global scale – with the September 11 terrorist attacks being the epitome. Growing interest in religion predates 9/11. However, these tragic events (followed by similar ones in Madrid and London), corroborated with prolonged religious-based conflict in several parts of the world, have unambiguously shown that it was time for both scholars and policy-makers to become aware of the insufficiencies of secularist views and approaches. Additionally, it was time for scholars and policymakers to admit that religion is an essential element for the calculus of war and peace.

This essential task has been taken up by Chris Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover and Pauletta Otis, who are among the prominent scholars and practitioners concerned with the nexus between religion and security. Their works – both the individual and collective ones – have greatly contributed to raising awareness both on a public level and among those in decision-making positions regarding the need to consider religion as one of the extremely important factors for national and international security. Their most recent contribution in the field of security studies involves assuming the role of editors of the first *Handbook of Religion and Security* whose overall rationale is to provide an up-to-date survey of the interaction between religion and security, with respect to a variety of issues. Seiple, Hoover and Otis have managed to draw together a team of leading scholars and practitioners that have a rich expertise in this field offering an informed, nuanced and balanced assessment of the role of religion in both war and peace. Thus, the contributions included in the handbook transcend simplistic approaches, which consider religion as a source of dogmatism, fanaticism and prejudice, or as an element that lies at the root of many of the world's ongoing civil wars and political violence. Instead, the contributors emphasize religion's ambivalence, its ability to contribute not only to conflict, but also to conflict prevention and conflict resolution, as well as to peacebuilding and reconciliation. This balanced approach is one of the most important merits of the handbook.

The handbook is structured in three parts, each organized around one of the following questions: “What does religion think of security?”; “What does security think of religion?” and “What happens when the two are mixed in real-world cases of religious conflict?” Accordingly, under the title “World religions and security”, the first part includes informed reflections on the approaches and understanding of security issues of nine major religious traditions: Judaism (Stuart A. Cohen), Eastern Orthodoxy (Christopher Marsh), Catholicism (Gerard F. Powers), Protestantism (Robert Joustra), Shi'a Islam (Max L. Gross), Sunni Islam (Qibla Ayaz and Rashid Ahmad), Hinduism (Torkel Brekke), Sikhism (Pashaura Singh) and Buddhism (Iselin Frydenlund). The inclusion of all these religious traditions in the analysis (including ones that are often neglected, such as Sikhism and the rarely made distinction between Shi'a and Sunni Islam) represents another significant achievement of the handbook, which can thus serve as a very useful resource for further comparative inquiries.

The second part of the handbook, “Security studies and religion”, explores the ways in which scholars and practitioners have approached a series of different aspects of the nexus between religion and security, drawing attention to those aspects that have been so far neglected both in theory and in practice, placing emphasis on the consequences of these gaps. Eric Patterson's chapter, for instance, turns the readers' attention to a fundamental shortcoming in traditional international relations scholarship, which may distort the outcomes of IR analysis, namely the neglect of the impact that religious factors have on all the three levels of analysis used in the IR theory: individual, domestic and international. Patterson's chapter also offers several specific examples of how various religious vectors directly and indirectly relate to elements of conflict and peace. Stacey Gutkowski complements Patterson's approach by emphasizing the need for further theoretical innovations on the religion-security nexus. She starts from the observation that no one of the IR theoretical paradigms can fully capture the multiple and complex political manifestations of religion, and suggests possible compatibilities between the realist, liberal, constructivist and critical security theories. In their chapter on nationalism, religion and security, Philip Gorski and Gülay Türkmen Dervişoğlu argue in favor of a re-examination of the myths according to which religion is inherently violent, while secularism is inherently peaceful, and disavow the innate conclusion drawn from these myths: that the privatization of religion is the only solution to the problem of sectarian conflict. The two authors make out a case for the inclusion of the often overlooked so-called “meso-level mechanisms” (religious leaders/elites and teachings/ideologies) in the analysis of religious nationalism and international security.

In other subchapters, various specialists discuss topics such as: Islamic feminism (Isobel Coleman); the role of religion in conflict resolution (Jamie Price and Andrea Bartoli); religion's influence on public attitudes about

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national/international security and about foreign policy in general (James Guth); the links between state establishment of religion and repression of religious minorities (Jonathan Fox); the ambivalent impact of religion on human security (James K. Wellman, Jr.); and the consequences of the interactions between media and religion on security (Lee Marsden and Heather Savigny).

This section is an invaluable source of information and since all the chapters are written in a very concise and accessible manner, it can be a stimulating lecture not only for specialists in these fields, but for the general reader as well.

The third section of the handbook includes five case studies which illustrate specific aspects of the religion-security nexus in some of the most conflict torn areas of the world: Nigeria (John Campbell), India (Ainslie T. Embree), Israel (Dov Waxman), the former Yugoslavia (Paul B. Mojzes) and Iraq (Micheal A. Hoyt). Besides a historical approach to these conflicts, which enables the reader to understand the context and the dynamic of local confrontations, one of this section's major merits is the fact that it sheds light on the specific role and on the actual involvement of religion in these conflicts. This leads to revisiting those often taken for granted assessments that consider religion as a key ideology lying at the root of the bloodiest conflicts between societal groups. The chapter written by Waxman, for instance, highlights the fact that, from a historical perspective, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is actually a struggle for land, and the role played by religion in it is only secondary. Similarly, most of these chapters make it clear that, firstly, none of these conflicts can be properly understood without taking religion into consideration and secondly that, although religion may sometimes be part of the problem, it may also be part of the solution. In India, for instance, Ainslie T. Embree shows that although religious commitments often serve as sources of conflict, they also have the ability to contribute to conflict de-escalation and reconciliation. The author recalls the example of two religious leaders in Banaras, whose efforts to advance interfaith dialogues in the 1990s, after severe communal riots, contributed to finding the path to communal peace in Banaras. Such examples could serve as models for all India as well as for other conflictual areas. Moreover, even when religion itself is not part of the problem, it may become so if religious actors are not involved in peace efforts and negotiations, since most radical movements have the ability to instrumentalize religion in order to mobilize support for their otherwise political agendas. Engaging religious actors in peace negotiations and dialogue would therefore be an important step for the discrediting of such instrumentalization of religion. Religious teachings and practices can also play positive roles in promoting peace and stability. Consequently, policy-makers and practitioners in the IR field should take religion's potential for positive contribution into account.

In the context of a world that is "a highly religious place where communal identity, individual faith, and global religious movements cannot be separated from issues of governance, development, politics, or security" (p.123), the contributors to *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security* fill a serious lacuna in the field of security studies. They respond to the acute need of specialized literature that approaches the complex and complicated relation between religion and security in a professional, well-organized and systematic manner. Overall, the handbook offers readers a broad overview of many of the key aspects of the religion-security nexus, it clarifies many theological themes and concepts encountered in the analyzed world religions that were and could be employed for both peace and war. The handbook also presents a diverse body of historical as well as empirical material, and as such it represents an essential reference source for academics, students of international relations, policy-makers, media professionals and the general reader as well.

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**Natalia Vlas** is a researcher at the Centre for Political Analysis of Babeş-Bolyai University, holds a PhD. in International Relations and European Studies. She has authored *Religia și globalizarea la începutul secolului XXI (Religion and Globalization at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century)* and co-edited several collective volumes. Currently she is postdoctoral researcher at Babeş-Bolyai University, working on a project on political theologies and global order. Her main research interests include ethics, political theology, religion in international relations, and globalization.

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