

Taking seriously religion's role in a connected world

Readings & Meanings

Gerald Schmitz



Much secular scholarship has been dismissive of the role of religion. Although that has changed somewhat in recent years, as the co-editors of this important volume note, religious activists were often “written off as remnants of traditions” destined to disappear under “modernization” processes. Any residual religious activity that remained would be confined to the private sphere. I recall that in 1976 when I decided to do my political science doctoral dissertation on the political significance of liberation theology in Latin America, and specifically the role of Archbishop Helder Câmara in Brazil, it seemed a most unusual subject, one that challenged the dominant narrative in a number of respects.

Of course the forecasts of religion fading away proved to be famously wrong. There was the Islamist revolution in Iran, and the influence of Pope John Paul II in undermining communist rule in countries that had been officially atheist for decades. The resurgence of religion could not be ignored. Alarming, there was also the growing menace of terrorist groups claiming religious motivations however misconceived. And it is these extreme manifestations of a violent reactionary nature that have tended to get the most media attention.

This book is not about them. Rather it examines the role of religion much more broadly in contemporary societies in relation to the “neoliberal” international political economy that has spread across the globe. By “neoliberal” is meant an ideology that promotes market-oriented policies open to international trade and investment. The authors identify and analyze divergent forms of religious activism in relation to the forces of neoliberal globalization. Some are supportive of free markets and individualism. There are even “prosperity gospels” that link personal faith to successful capitalist growth. Some religious activism promotes a communitarian as well as individual ethics, seeking to reform capitalist economies: for example, through “fair trade,” debt relief, implementation of corporate social responsibility principles, redistributive taxation and welfare policies, etc. More radical is the emergence of religious activism that seeks a fundamental social-democratic and ecologically sustainable alternative to the prevailing system of globalized growth-oriented capitalism.

The co-editors find inspiration in the latter movement for change. Dreher in her introduction expresses a “hope that the religious resurgence sweeping through the planet may also support a necessary fundamental transformation of an economy that has taken on god-like features and whose criti-

cism is often presented as blasphemous by the defenders of the free market and private property rights.” This possibility is echoed and elaborated by Smith in his conclusion.

The book's first chapters provide some historical context on the relationship between religion and modern capitalism, and some data on comparative demographic trends of religious adherence in different countries and regions. The next chapters then examine the three main forms of recent religious activism in turn. Chapters four through 10 look at the various ways in which religious ideas have promoted, or at least accommodated, capitalist systems of development. The most assertive and far-reaching are those of the “prosperity gospels” preached by American Protestant evangelical Christianity, which have generally been aligned with the conservative or right wing side of the political spectrum.

As Michael Wilkinson explains: “The prosperity gospel is characterized by themes of abundance, blessing, health, wealth, and victory. These cultural values have translated into specific economic action in the United States and throughout the world among millions of Christians.” That global spread has been facilitated by the influence of multimedia evangelists, “pastorpreneurs,” and the outreach activities of megachurches.

Examples in the Global South include what Asonzeh Ukah terms



Gerald Schmitz

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL — The 2018 Sundance Film Festival Jan. 18 - 28 screened 191 feature and short films from 29 countries. At the opening press conference, from left: Barbara Chai, Entertainment Editor, MarketWatch, and Head of Arts and Culture coverage, Dow Jones Group; Robert Redford, president and founder Sundance Institute; Keri Putnam, executive director, Sundance Institute; John Cooper, director, Sundance Film Festival. “From the beginning, the purpose of the Sundance Film Festival has been to support artists and their stories, and this year, our mission seemed especially relevant. Supporting independent voices, and listening to the stories they tell, has never been more necessary,” said Redford. Watch for highlights beginning the Feb. 15 issue.

Chapters 11 through 13 examine religious activism that advances a critique of capitalism and advocates reforms to mitigate its failings and negative effects. Particularly important have been campaigns for corporate social responsibility, for ethical investing and consumption, for fair trade, fair taxation, and the like. As Michael MacLeod observes: “In addition to the creation of many specific religiously motivated investment funds, faith-based activism has also been leading in the collective mobilization of resources to promote greater social responsibility of business.”

Interfaith ecumenical coalitions have led the way. In Canada the Taskforce on the Churches

and caring for God's creation is seen as a moral imperative, it affects lifestyle and economic choices. Ecological sustainability cannot be sacrificed for profits and growth as the measure of a good economy.

In chapter 14 Peter Smith and Elizabeth Smythe discuss the role of religion in global justice movements that, in putting forward a systemic critique of neoliberal global capitalism, make the case that “another world is possible.” Their main focus is on the World Social Forum which began in Brazil in 2001 as an alternative to the elite gathering of the World Economic Forum (WSF) in Davos. They argue that, while the WSF defines itself as a diverse “non-confessional” space for contesting neoliberal economics, religious actors (notably the World Council of Churches) have played a prominent role from its founding onward, and that, moreover, global social justice movements have made room for “spirituality with its emphasis on affect, emotion, authenticity, relating to others, and interconnectedness with one another and the Earth.” It is noteworthy that one of the originators of the WSF is a Brazilian Catholic, Francisco Whitaker, who “takes his theological inspiration from Archbishop Helder Câmara and Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff.” (He has served on the Brazilian Catholic Bishops Justice and Peace Commission which was among the organizers of the first WSF.)

The book does not neglect the increasing role of indigenous peoples who have been among the world's most oppressed and exploited populations. As they engage in the struggle of decolonization they are recovering their own religious traditions and spirituality, bringing these to bear among the voices of resistance to the juggernaut of neoliberal globalization. A chapter by Marcos Scauso explores the decolonial project of “Indianismo” in Latin America, notably Bolivia where it has given rise to concepts of

“Pachamama” (Mother Earth) and “buen vivir” (to live well). Bolivia adopted a new constitution that included provisions establishing “the right of anyone to take legal action to defend Mother Earth, should practices destroy the precarious natural equilibrium.”

Smith's summary chapter reviews the many ways in which religious ideas and practice have been impacted by economic globalization, as indeed have all aspects of modern life. There are forms of religion and spirituality that are very comfortable with the prosperous development they associate with modern corporate and consumer capitalism. There are forms that can be

comfortably accommodated within a neoliberal ideology of globalization. Religion and spirituality can be privatized and disconnected from broader societal concerns. By limiting the influence of faith to personal choices, in a kind of “religious supermarket” catering to “the individual need for meaning,” it loses any larger socio-critical potential. Religion, so conceived and circumscribed, poses no challenge to dominant ideological narratives.

By contrast, Smith emphasizes the emergence of a “spirituality of resistance” that confronts the inter-related ecological and economic crises facing the planet and that embraces a holistic vision of global justice for all. He devotes several pages to the seminal 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home), which “reverberated around the world” and from which he cites the following passage:

There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm. Otherwise, even the best ecological initiatives can find themselves caught up in the same globalized logic.

As Smith comments: “We need to go much deeper than what the ruling political and economic elites prescribe. . . . the pope's encyclical is clearly political, suggesting the need for systemic change in the economy and in how we live and associate with one another.”

Secularists, including many academics, have tended to discount the role of religion or see it only in a negative light. To the contrary, what the above shows is the power of a religious and spiritual critique to be more relevant than ever in challenging the prevailing idolatries (with respect to money, markets, technocracy) that have characterized economic globalization in our time.

Sabine Dreher and Peter J. Smith, eds.,
*Religious Activism in the Global Economy:
Promoting, Reforming or Resisting Neoliberal
Globalization?*
Rowan & Littlefield, London and New York, 2016

“prosperity Pentecostalism” in Africa. Other religious traditions have also made business-friendly accommodations. A chapter by Surya Prakash Upadhyay looks at “Neoliberal Capitalism and the Emergence of Corporate Hinduism in Urban India.” Several chapters explore the complicated and contested relationships of Islam to neoliberal economic development. In addition to the cases of Tunisia and Lebanon, especially fraught is that of Turkey where the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in a power struggle with the quasi-religious transnational “Hizmet” movement based on the teachings of Fethullah Güllen. (The increasingly autocratic AKP government's sweeping purge of Güllen followers took place after this book's publication. Whatever the pro-development elements in the ideologies of both, a climate of instability is usually bad for business.)

and Corporate Responsibility was created in 1975. (In 2001 it became part of a larger social justice coalition KAIROS.) In the U.S. there is the Interfaith Center on Corporate Social Responsibility and in the U.K. the Church Investors Group. A good deal of Canadian religious activity has addressed foreign mining operations in which Canadian companies and financial institutions are major players. Religious groups in the affected countries have also used “naming and shaming” strategies to draw attention to abuses and lobby for reforms. Papal encyclicals, which have long stressed the social responsibilities of economic actors, have been increasingly critical of a globalized economy that widens the gap between rich and poor. The environmental movement has also had a marked impact on many faith communities, including among young evangelicals in the U.S. When protecting and