Book Reviews


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Keywords
urban planning, post-secular, spirituality, religion

This sizeable collection of twenty papers arose from a 2008 conference at Groningen, where the editors work. Thirteen are by men, seven by women; nine from the Netherlands and seven from the UK; five by planners/geographers, three by theologians, and ten by sociologists, political scientists and philosophers of religion.

The first two chapters introduce theories and the literature. Beaumont, from an urban studies viewpoint and as a leader of an EU project on Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) in cities (Beaumont and Baker 2010), speaks of a “growing resurgence of faith, belief and spirituality,” citing Habermas on the limits of the secularization thesis, with FBOs filling gaps left by the retreat of state and secular agencies, for poor and ethnic communities. He identifies

• the re-emergence of the sacred, in urban and community planning
• towns, as where the dynamics of religious and secular changes are strongest
• the language of virtue returning to public life, with a search for the common good
• a connection between Pentecostal Christianity and neo-liberal globalization
• the re-engagement of faith politics, especially in contentious services, sometimes sought by the state
• contests over the understanding of multiculturalism, sparked by issues like wearing the Hijab or a crucifix, or Rowan Williams’ suggestion that a secondary line of Sharia law might function in Muslim communities.
In religious studies, Knott (Leeds) identifies:

- tensions within each of the religious (R), secular (S), and post-secular (PS) camps, and between R and S, R and PS, and PS and the undecided groups

- quoting Lefebvre, sites are perceived (sometimes “in the air,” as with “the city of God”), conceived, and lived out, and in lived or “worldly” multicultural cities, such as Liverpool and Leicester.

In Part 2 five authors try to conceive the post-secular city. McLennan (Bristol) uses the themes identified by Randall Collins (1998) and others of a secularist standpoint, characterizing Charles Taylor’s work for instance as “immanent Transcendentalism.” Taylor (Royal Holloway) disagrees, strongly comparing a pacifist and voluntarist Pentecostalism, now encompassing 250 million people, as a manifestation of an inspired Latin America. He does this while contending that over-strong secular arguments delayed the recognition in Europe of the continuity of religious themes in public life (even in works such as Terry Pratchett’s and Philip Pulman’s novels), and of the rise of multi-faith urban movements, in an “exceptional” disenchanted Europe. Leezenberg (Amsterdam, an Islamic specialist) uses semiotics to ask how ethnocentric post-secular debates are, drawing attention to elements of the secular in the banning of Sufi lodges in 1920s Turkey, and the various factions arising in contemporary Iraq and elsewhere. Grab (Berlin) speaks of west German churches still being asked to pronounce on basic issues such as bioethics, and of religious elements to be found in the novels of Terry Pratchett and Philip Pulman. Zoch, a philosopher of religion from Groningen, in “Voicing the self,” uses Hermann’s (2004) concept of the dialogic self, who suggested that inner psychological and outer cultural processes interact (“culture and self, identity and society cannot be separated,” 297).

Part 3 comprises eight papers regarding urban thinking and the religious. Molendijk takes Cowper’s aphorism, “God made the country but man made the towns,” to counteract 200 years of critical theological reflection on towns as centres of immorality, drunkenness and criminality, and uses Simmel’s idea of them as centres of freedom, and Cox’s seeing God at work in the secular. In similar vein, de Haardt (Nijmegen and Tilburg) seeks a “theology of everyday life,” drawing on the recovery of realities of space (by Lefebvre, Soja, Massey and Tuan), and suggesting that we need a “topophilia” (love of place), including provision for women and other oppressed groups. (She instances 150,000 Philippino house servants mak-
ing their own churches in buildings or in open spaces in Hong Kong.)

David Martin (LSE) reflects on the symbolic power of religious buildings, monuments and spaces in the heart of capitals, peripheral cities (such as Frankfurt, Venice, Edinburgh and Dublin), and those on boundaries or transitions (e.g. Brussels, Strasbourg and Geneva), or those with historic niches. What Europe does not have, he says, are the pietist bastions of the southern USA, but Pentecostalism is generating a new set of churches (whether small neighbourhood or mega churches) in Latin America, the USA, Korea, Eastern Asia, and elsewhere.

Bretherton (King’s College, London, theology and politics) uses understandings from his AHRC project, “Christianity, politics and pursuit of the common good,” with its case-study of London Citizens, a broad-based community organization modelled on 134 similar groups in the USA (for one of which Barack Obama worked in Chicago), aiming to generate social capital in Putnamesque terms by combining over a hundred religious and secular groups, and avoiding being seen as theocrats, grant-chasers, or servile service providers.

Cloke (Exeter, geography) describes how religion has moved from being seen by secular interests as a mere relic of superstition, to being demonized by such aggressive atheists as Dawkins, Hitchens and Dennett, as the source of the world’s worst ills. He shows how, as state-run welfare has been hollowed out, FBOs have stepped in to fill the gap via both traditional and emergent churches, and radical groups such as Philadelphia’s Simple Way.

Sonmez (Ankara) describes three phases in Turkish history: first, establishing the country and the new capital as secular agents; then the Democratic Party in the 1950s followed tolerance of religion, and after 1980 by the military junta anti-secular discourses; and, lastly, the two groups’ polarization since 2001 with the rise of the Justice and Development party. In 1984 huge squatter suburbs, many with rural/Islamic backgrounds, were legalized and given ownership/development rights (58% of the population still live in such areas.) But little actual public redevelopment occurred, and pro-Islamic interests exploited discontent among the city’s poor; moreover, many new mosques, which can include shops and business, were built, often on public land, so that by 2006 there was a mosque for every 2,300 citizens. The secular-religious struggle continues.

Following Baird’s (2000) idea of late rather than post secularism, Dias and Beaumont look at two Mennonite churches in Philadelphia, whose tradition has been to promote reconciliation in transition zones. The one (poor
Black, Latino, and East European) having invited newcomers to church, created a successful community festival, and then a Community Development Association. The other, in a gentrifying area, has focused on getting citizens to worship, and then, realizing that they were abetting processes that dispossessed blacks, have sought to develop affordable housing.

Oosterbaan (Groningen) studied two evangelical Brazilian diaspora churches in Amsterdam and Barcelona, both known as “global route arenas.” One offers the only Portuguese services in Barcelona but welcomes the new migrants, as a place to belong, when many find the city of gold is a city of exclusion. In Amsterdam many work in the informal economy, sending money home and hoping themselves to return after a few years. Two means of communication are essential: the Google-powered Brazilian facebook, Orkut, with 16m homeland members, to keep in touch with home, and a cellphone for work and community. The Amsterdam pastor, funded to go to Holland to evangelise Portuguese speakers, uses an empty Protestant church and sees his role as re-evangelizing Europe. In Barcelona the pastor wants to develop Spanish and Catalan-speaking Orkut websites. Oosterbaan sees this as a re-territorialization of Christianity (Hervieu-Léger 2002).

Part Four’s five papers debate the public uses of religion. Jedan (Groningen, Ethics) speaks of disenchantment with the idea of secularization, but what will replace it? After looking on the one hand at Rawls’ (1996) and Audi’s (2000) “public reason” liberalism, and on the other hand at radical orthodoxy (Milbank 2006; Cavanaugh 1999), he finds no solution, for what he calls “an irreducible plurality of world views” (326). Sanders (philosophy of religion, Gröningen) uses Rawls’ question: how those of religious belief can also hold “reasonable political conception,” supporting a democratic regime? As Schuster also discusses, Rawls and others of “contractarian” views would want both religious and secular reasons for a position i.e. a cool, diffident rationality, and the mild, pervasive scepticism expected of someone from the academy (Fish 1999).

This is an engaging and fascinating set of insights about tensions between, and the co-existence of, religious and secular ideas, discourse and practice, from different disciplines and philosophies. But it is long, and there are repeated and extended references to the work of a dozen authors, including Habermas (29), Taylor (10), Rawls (9), and Lefebvre (7). While I can understand the reluctance of editors to ask authors to retrospectively reduce or change their papers, I think as an alternative and easier duty they themselves should then provide cross-references in introductory
chapter(s) to both supportive and combative stances, or else help to guide readers, especially those new to the field, in a commentary at the end of papers. To leave it to readers to plough through the whole text, or a page list in an author index, is a bit of a cop-out.

References