

BOOK REVIEWS

***Religion and Public Administration: An Introduction*, by Edoardo Ongaro and Michele Tantardini**

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Since my time as an undergraduate, I have been fascinated by the relationship between religion and the state. Unfortunately, my own academic discipline, the study of public administration, does not typically engage this subject. Therefore, I had to turn to disciplines like theology, philosophy, sociology, and law. Fortunately, times have changed. Edoardo Ongaro and Michele Tantardini recently launched their book *Religion and Public Administration: An Introduction*. A new generation of students in public administration (PA) can only benefit from this excellent scholarly introduction.

Ongaro and Tantardini deserve commendation for addressing the gap in the literature on religion and PA. A book like this was long overdue. The authors rightly argue that context matters in PA (the discipline that studies the functioning of governmental organizations, the development and implementation of public policy, and other modes of public governance). Public administration scholars have studied changing contexts like individualization, globalization, digitalization, and its implications for PA. It is about time that PA scholars acknowledge that religion also “is part (and parcel) of the societal, cultural, political and administrative context which shapes PA, its functioning and its reform, in a given polity” (1). Throughout their book the authors convincingly demonstrate this claim, based on ample theoretical and empirical literature.

Ongaro and Tantardini comprehensively map the field. They analyze the role of religion in PA on several levels: micro level (individual civil servant, public manager, street-level bureaucrat); meso level (government organizations, religious nonprofit organizations); and macro level (legitimacy and accountability of the state). Furthermore, they present the viewpoints of seven world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. At each level of PA, Ongaro and Tantardini demonstrate how these world religions have influenced administrative practices, public policies, and attitudes of civil servants.

Inevitably, their global approach results in an impressionist painting of the influence of world religions on government and public policy. One can hardly criticize the authors for that, since the book is an introduction. What one might critique is the imbalance between the chapters on the world religions. Ongaro and Tantardini present each world religion by providing some general entry points, followed by a section on implications for PA. The implications of Asian religions and Islam on PA are laid out in multiple pages, while the authors pay comparatively little attention to the implications of Judaism and Christianity. Ongaro and Tantardini tend to reduce the influence of Judaism to the contemporary State of Israel, and only briefly mention the influence of Christian *caritas* on the rise of the welfare state. I would have expected, for example, an emphasis on the Christian influences of European political history.

Ongaro and Tantardini argue that the influence of religion on PA appears to two (related) modes. The first mode is “motivational influence.” Religion shapes the personality of public officials. Religious ideas inspire them to behave compassionately and to devote their time to the common good. Religion is an explanatory factor of public-service motivation. The second mode is “ideational influence,” which means that religion as a body of thought shapes the worldviews of public officials and the broader administrative system. In this mode religion can contribute to the legitimacy and exercise of state power. Think for example of the rise of Christian political parties in Europe in the twentieth century.

The book finishes with some proposals for future research directions. Ongaro and Tantardini suggest, for example, studying issues like public leadership, work-life balance in civil service, and climate change from a religious viewpoint. Together with theologians, PA scholars could study religious texts, traditions, and beliefs in order to improve the implementation of policy programs. While their suggestions are commendable, religion easily can become an instrument for state activity. Given that PA already is driven by instrumental rationality, there is a real risk that religion could be used as a tool to further the state’s agenda. This instrumentalization of religion can undermine the authenticity and true essence of religious beliefs and practices. Advocates of research in religion and PA must constantly emphasize the intrinsic and noninstrumental dimension of religion in public life.

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