

Religious Nationalism: A Reference Handbook

Atalia Omer and Jason A. Springs. *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013. 328 pp. \$58.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781598844399.

ABC-CLIO's Contemporary World Issues series offers reference books that fall into six main subject categories: Criminal Justice; Environment; Gender and Ethnicity; Politics, Law and Government; Science, Technology and Medicine; and Society. About 180 volumes have now been published as part of this series whose titles range from *World Sports* to *Virtual Lives* to *Rainforests of the World*. In other words, the series is very diverse and is not specialized in religious or theological areas. The books in the series are targeted mainly at the late high school and early university student, and this includes the title under review.

The authors of *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Handbook* are Atalia Omer, professor of Religion, Conflict, and Peace at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, and Jason A. Springs, professor of Religion, Ethics and Peace Studies, also from the Kroc Institute. Both have PhDs in religious studies and teach in the field, but their book is focused on religion in the political context. For example, one will not learn how a Sinhalese Buddhist practices or what her beliefs are by reading this book. However, one will come to appreciate how the Sinhalese Buddhist majority of Sri Lanka has interpreted a sixth-century Theravada poem to mean that they should consolidate political power within the Buddhist population of Sri Lanka, effectively rendering the majority Tamil Hindus powerless and socially isolated (164). Therefore, the handbook is not a descriptive or analytical work of any particular religion or religious behavior; rather it focuses on how religion has been used as a tool (often by non-religious people and groups) to achieve political gains and how it is used to justify discord and promote conflict. It also endeavors to explain, in non-accusatory language, conflicts that are often characterized as being religiously based, by debunking the "religious" stories or myths used to perpetrate these conflicts.

This reference work is a hybrid, combining both a short monograph and a handbook, and is organized into eight sections. The first four sections outline the authors' arguments including appropriate citations to political theories while the last four are clearly more what readers would recognize as "reference," including a chronology, biographical sketches, data and documents (including primary sources), a directory of organizations, a section on related print resources, and a glossary. This structure allows the book to elucidate important arguments around the subject of religious nationalism while also providing basic factual information and case studies from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Where a student might normally need two different works — one providing argument and theory (i.e., a monograph or article discussing the subject at a high level) and another to provide a diverse variety of examples to illustrate the arguments (the reference work), this book provides both. Another positive attribute is that it refers to current and recognizable examples that are more within reach for undergraduate students (such as Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine), but does not ignore less well-known cases such as Hindu nationalism in India.

The authors state that one of their central aims is to challenge the notion that religious nationalism is anti-modern because of its religious nature. It counters common notions that religion necessarily contributes to violence between people of different faiths and examines religion as part of a set of complex elements that make up modern societies. The authors do not characterize religions or practitioners of religion as the vile culprits that contemporary scientific discourse tends to; they go to some lengths to demonstrate that religion is very often used as a political tool by those with aggressively political goals and how religion itself is blamed for the damage done by those who use it this way. A case in point elaborated in the text is that of Serbian Christoslavism, which theoretically fuses Christianity (including specific religious practices), history, and Slavic ethnic identity. Christoslavism was used as the foil for the mass slaughter of Slavic Muslims in Bosnia in the early 1990s by political elites and had nothing to do with the Christian Church or Christian teachings (17-26). The authors' second objective, and counterpart to the first, is to demonstrate that secular

nationalism is neither more humane, scientific, or politically stable than religious nationalism (xiii). In order to argue this, the authors examine secularism as a type of fundamentalism that is potentially as harmful as any extreme religious movement or group.

In order to achieve these two goals, the authors systematically address the essential elements of religion in society, including:

1. The links between organized religious traditions and institutions;
2. How religiously motivated actors might potentially use religion as a tool to achieve political ends;
3. Manifestations of national identity insofar as they are also concerned with a religious identity (xiv).

Does the book achieve its goals? One does not usually read a reference work from cover to cover or in order to be persuaded of an argument; one normally uses it as a tool for checking facts such as names, dates, and other basic information. However, since this book is not a standard reference work, when read in sequence like a monograph, there is space for the authors to make their arguments and, yes, the authors achieve their goals. They do so through the many examples they draw on, and the way that their argument is slowly built over the first four chapters so that by the time readers are in the second half of the text, they are ready to understand the case studies in the way that the authors intend. It is helpful that the book begins with highly recognizable examples: Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and Zionism, Serbian nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo and the “Serbian Jerusalem,” and some pre-modern examples including the Spanish Inquisition and sixteenth-century France. Drawing readers in early to cases that they have probably heard about in the news gives non-subject-matter experts a fairly smooth entrée. As the early chapters progress, examples involving Egypt, India, and Sri Lanka are introduced. For American readers, there are also many recognizable references to the United States peppered throughout the book, and an especially interesting section on the religious underpinnings of American exceptionalism.

A second way the text succeeds is in its references to secondary literature. At some points, the book reads almost like a literature review, which can be exceptionally helpful for undergraduate students or anyone looking to connect these arguments with the broader scholarship on nationalism and religion. For example, Edward Said’s important theories on orientalism, Peter Berger’s sacred canopy, Emile Durkheim’s and Max Weber’s theories on religion, and José Casanova’s critique of historicism and public religion are all important for undergraduates to learn and become familiar with. Through a gradual introduction, readers are exposed to many of the most important thinkers in the area of not only religious nationalism, but religious studies in general.

Finally, the book is recommended because it offers unique content. Glancing at neighboring titles in the general BL65 section (Religion in relation to other subjects), this volume complements works such as *Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present* (edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross, 2011), *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion* (edited by Robert Wuthnow, 2007), and *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* (edited by William H. Swatos, Jr., 1998). Monographs on the topic are generally quite specific to particular places or specific religions; general works in English are not terribly current or prevalent. Therefore, whether purchased as a reference work or as a general monograph, this book does add value to a library’s collection.

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