

BOOK REVIEW

Religion and Place. Landscape, Politics and Piety

Peter Hopkins, Lily Kong and Elisabeth Olson (Eds.)
Springer, Dordrecht, 2013, 222 p, ISBN: 978-94-007-4684-8,
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In 2013, Springer published a series of texts reunited under the name of 'Religion and Place. Landscape, Politics and Piety'. The editors, Peter Hopkins, Lily Kong and Elisabeth Olson, all of them renowned scholars in the field of geographic studies, gathered another twelve ones, belonging to the Anglophonic cultural and linguistic culture (with one exception, N. Luz from Israel).

Obvious from the very beginning is the fact that the editors were not only concerned with the attempt to reach diversity and complexity through the studies reunited under their coordination, but especially a certain geographical equity among the 'locative' distribution of themes. Despite the geographic diversity, Europe, Middle East, South Africa or South America face in a proper manner the tensions implied by religion and religious beliefs and act in social-political contexts.

Structured in eleven chapters, introduction and index section, the 222 pages of the book I hereby treat presents a noteworthy collection through the diversity of approaches of the nowadays religions and their new or traditional *topoi*. Moreover, despite the diversity, all the texts possess a certain common *noyau* – the geography of religion. It would most certainly be a mistake to neglect the fact that all the scholars involved in this collective editorial project are affiliated to departments of Geography. This apparently insignificant detail offers a valuable key to understand the core of this book and the main theoretical domain to which they are affiliated. In my opinion, the reader does not witness a mere collection of studies on the religious life and practices. It is, in fact, about the inextricable relation between religion and space. In this context, the space should not be interpreted in its decorative or 'objective' meaning, but especially as the social, political and spiritual context in which the human life is organized.

The methodological architecture of the eleven studies presented on this editorial occasion reveals its particularities. The reader will appreciate the methodological composition between the classical approach of certain domains and the instruments used in producing the scientific 'offspring'. It is rather common in treating subjects such as religion, secularization, sacralization, expressions of religiosity, spirituality and so on, to pursue qualitative analysis, gravitating around theoretical approaches. Instead, the scholars construct

empirical analyses, by using methods such as structured and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus-groups or narrative constructions. In this respect, their researches are valuable not only through their scientific conclusions, but also through their interdisciplinary potentialities to establish bonds between Social or Political geography, Anthropology, Ethnology, Sociology, Cultural studies and Theology.

My interpretative strategies regarding precisely this collective work will mainly focus on what I shall call 'the struggle with prejudices'. In this respect, my considerations regard its two relations with prejudices. On one hand, I have the impression that the book as a whole and some studies in particular attempt to criticize some prejudices; on the other hand, it falls under 'the spell' of other prejudices. To sum up, in its struggle against a prejudice, it is accidentally entrapped in a new one. The prejudices I refer to are: a) the contemporary Western world is a secularized one; b) from a religious perspective, the world is divided between Christianity and Islamism.

The prejudice against which the studies pose concerns is the so-called secularization of Western societies. In an explicit manner, L. Kong, in the second chapter, L. Staeheli, C. Nagel, in the seventh one, D. Conradson, in the eleventh one, and J. Holloway, in the twelfth one prove in different discourse contexts that the secularization of spiritual Occidental life invoked ever since the 18th-19th centuries and admitted even nowadays is nothing but a false track. In her study, L. Kong's attempt consists in highlighting how a Christian evangelical program originated in UK has been successfully reproduced in Singapore, on the impact of religious globalization. The seventh chapter written by Staeheli and Nagel surveys the life of Arab immigrants in UK and US, while demonstrating that the cohabitation of religious and cultural differences can be respected and encouraged in democratic societies. Moreover, the backstage idea of their article might be that non-secular societies are democratic and tolerant. On the contrary, these secular societies are a mixture of religious communities and their interactions increase the chances of enforcing democracy. The study signed by D. Conradson concentrates on the position of retreat places in UK between religion and spirituality. The collective life and the spirituality observed in two such places confer them a distinctive atmosphere and significance from the usual Christian congregations and Churches. As for J. Holloway, he proudly announces the dawn of the secularization by exploring the sites of engagement, the ethos of engagement.

Inextricably linked to the supposition that Western societies are not as secular as it has been worldwide shouted is the idea that Church adapts to new social-political realities. In this respect, we might believe that the mission and active involvement of the Church in day-to-day activities should be understood as symptoms of an anti-secular diagnostic. The thesis of the re-signification of the Church is to be found not only in the three articles mentioned above.

In his analysis from the eighth chapter, B. Bompani concentrates on the role of the Church in the South-African public sphere. In the context of the severe humanitarian and political crisis deepened by xenophobia, conflicts,

corruption and poverty in 2008, the religious organizations and Churches succeeded where political authorities failed. Without setting itself to do so, the Church offered people a reliable and practical alternative to the services which should have normally been provided by the state. The next chapter whose authors are D. Ley and J. Tse captures the relation between Church and immigration. They observe that by being in a liminal period (far from home and not integrated in the new society, in a stage of passage and transformation), the immigrant (for instance the Chinese immigrant in Canada) has the tendency to put aside his socio-economic evolution and affiliate to immigrant Churches in order to achieve spiritual aid through religious practices. By this, the Church plays the role of the therapeutic place which intermediates between the abandoned world of the initial home and the recently faced one which should provide what the prior did not succeed in doing (usually the socio-economic comfort). At the same time, the Churches are not only successful recipes for adaptive qualities to the contemporary challenges. A constant accusation to the Christian dogma regards the discrimination of women in sacerdotal and ecumenical practices. In the tenth study, G. Vincett offers an inciting analysis on religion and religious life through the feminist critique.

Despite presenting the importance of the Church in contemporary societies, the book treats the problem of secularization through the 'territorialization' and 're-territorialization' of religion. The four studies belonging to S. Moser (the third chapter), N. Luz (the fourth one), E. Olson (the fifth one), B. Gökariksel and A. Secor (the sixth one) underline the tension between space and religion in the urban-rural circumstances. Moser points out the different manners in which Islamism has been expressed in three cities in Malaysia, Chechen Republic and United Arab Emirates. Luz offers an opposite perspective on Islamic religious or cultural expressions through the situation of Muslim minorities in Israel. Moser presents the urban projects as the reflection of Islamism (the dominant religious and cultural values), while Luz marks out how the encounter with the sacred sites spurs on the Palestinians (the minority) and Israeli (the majority) to cohabitate. The sixth chapter highlights the meaning of wearing the veil in contemporary cities of Turkey which faces the challenges of modernity with regard to clothes and their signification in respect to religious beliefs. As for Olson's study, it explores the religious transformations in two rural districts in Peru as the reflection of the link between religion and development.

As I already affirmed, the collective works reuniting 'religion and place' seem to refute almost unanimously the prejudice of the secular Western society in expansion. However, in their struggle to demonstrate that religion is still active in people's life, they fall in the trap of another prejudice: the 'old school' Christianity-Islamism disjunction. Except the ninth and the twelfth studies, all the others can be easily situated either on the Islamic side (chapters 3, 4, 6, 7) or the Christian one (chapters 2, 5, 8, 10, 11). In my opinion, this marks the editors' leak – the almost unanimous voice of the Occidental thinking. At the same time, it is obvious that the anti-secularization perspective is not to be proven only

through Christian or Islamic lenses. There are others religions like Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism and so on which are ignored along these pages. But, this would certainly transform this book in a treatise of religion in contemporary societies and would beggar the editors' expectations. After all, the reader will witness a sincere, well documented and provocative collective works clustered around the geography of religion, an interdisciplinary approach which should deserve more attention also from other scholars.

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