

*Religious Imaginations: How Narratives of Faith Are Shaping Today's World.* Edited by James Walters. London: Gingko Library, 2018. 320 pp. ISBN: 978-1-909942-20-2. \$44.95, hardback and ebook. US distribution through the University of Chicago Press.

This collection of essays began as papers delivered at the Religious Imaginations and Global Transformations Conference, hosted by the London School of Economics in June 2017. With an Introduction and a series of eighteen essays, divided into five topic areas, the book examines the roles of religious imagination in a world of growing secularity. The major divisions are “Engaging the Religious Imagination,” “Crossing Religious Imaginations,” “Re-Imagining Belief,” “Religion and Sustainability,” and “From Imagination to Religious Practice.” If there is an overarching idea from the various essays, which cover a broad range of world religions and some very particular persons and interpreters of those religions, it is that, rightly understood and employed, religious imaginations can aid the economic, social, and ecological dimensions of world culture. Putting this in a very succinct way in the final paragraph of the final essay, Catriona Robertson writes, “By working creatively across differences with other religions, civil society, academic and governmental bodies, religious groups can offer smart, strategic and realistic ways forward on some of the perplexing issues of the day” (269).

The Introduction sets out the reason for the book. At present, schools of economic thought do not consider religion an important matter with respect to “international relations,” because “they begin with the modern Western-European understanding of religion as a private matter” (3). The essays, in each case, suggest in a very direct way that the public face of religion has made and can make a considerable contribution to the postmodern world. From President Trump’s 2017 trip to Jerusalem, Riyadh, and Rome to an “emergence of a global religious consciousness” (4), religious imaginations are reshaping our world by reaching out in old and new ways. Particularly in the Abrahamic traditions, this means the orientation toward the future—the eschatological. The authors’ assumption is that religious imagination shapes our world and that it will continue to do that, particularly through shared partnerships.

Section One, “Engaging the Religious Imagination,” contains essays that reference what religious imagination is, and specifically how it functions in today’s world. In this section, Craig Calhoun’s “Religious Imaginations in a Changing World,” Mona Siddiqui’s “Imagination and the Ethics of Religious Narratives,” and John Casson’s “Diplomacy and the Religious Imagination” provide helpful points of departure. For Calhoun, as a result of globalization, no one world religion should consider itself in isolation, but should note the commonalities with other world religions. Today, through those interactions, religions are “inventing and reinventing themselves” (24). While religions such as Judaism and Christianity may have had a part in developing the concept of the individual in the West, today those religions, along with others, provide avenues for seeking community. Even imagination in the world of the secular today is being shaped by religious ideas, with India as a case in point. Siddiqui argues that religious imagination provides “the sense of possibilities” in the world today (37). Religious imagination provides a forum to stage the struggle for meaning-making, typically shared through the world’s literatures. While European society has long experienced a decline in the role of organized religion, its presence is still widely seen at the deeper levels. In Muslim countries, globalization has been more problematic, but it offers Muslim scholars the opportunity to reimagine religion in light of current situations as more than “fixed parameters” (46). Casson contends that diplomacy and religions must work together, realizing that

modern diplomacy has often pushed religion to the margins when that indeed may help define the nature of the solution to the problem of violence. This may rely on scholars of religion engaging in more diplomatic activity after they have gained more knowledge of diplomacy itself. Other essays explore modern terrorism, the Balfour Declaration, and shared musical traditions across the Abrahamic traditions as keys to imagination. What seems clear in these essays is that the authors believe that active imagination—particularly that sponsored by the scholarly community—must engage the world beyond the practice of the religion itself to solve world problems.

Section Two, “Crossing Religions,” examines the Abrahamic religions and the push for active engagement in light of traditional boundaries. Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour’s “Muhammad abu Zahra’s Muslim Theology of Religion” and John Fahy’s “The Field of Interfaith in the Middle East” provide some important clues against the traditionalist narratives of exclusiveness. Abdelnour’s essay looks at verses in the Qur’an that specifically speak to tolerance for Jews and Christians. He notes that abu Zahra contends there is salvation outside of Islam, but that such a person must be “a monotheist and acknowledge the message of Mohammad in order to gain salvation” (109). His focus is a “theocentric” theology of religion that does not require conversion. The boundaries are important. Fahy notes that many Muslims have been less than enthusiastic in interfaith dialogues historically, but the events of 9/11 required a change. The intentions of such dialogue today are primarily political, but would be strengthened by deeper engagements with the religious tenets of the faiths. It must become more than a “PR exercise” (123) to be helpful in postmodernity. While such dialogues have often been about “dispelling misconceptions about Islam” (125), they can also be helpful in engaging the political dimension of conversations. Both dimensions are important. Both essays in this section provide foundational information on potential challenges to religious dialogue, but suggest ways of moving forward with integrity on all sides.

Section Three, “Re-imagining Belief,” examines how the world’s religions have redeployed traditional concepts in new imaginings. Essays in this section examine more contested areas of belief with imagination and thus suggest that religious imagination is alive and well among the world’s religions. Particularly noteworthy are Kamran Bashir’s “Reimagining the Formative Moments of Islam: The Case of Pakistani Scholar, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, and his New Narrative of Early Islam,” Eileen Barker’s “New Religious Movements as Resources in a Changing World,” and Jenna Reinbold’s “Human Rights as a Narrative of Faith.” Bashir notes that while Ghamidi is often regarded as heretical in his reading of the early stages of Islamic history, he “wants to free Islam of any jihadi spirit and thus align it with Western values of peace and pluralism” (137). While it is in some measure problematic, the recasting of the early tradition may be helpful for understanding origins against firmly held traditional positions. Barker’s essay examines specifically how some new religious movements such as Scientology and Mormonism have been instrumental in bringing change in the worlds of business, healthy living, education, the arts, media, and ecology. The struggle for identity and recognition of these new religions has shaped their vision of religion in light of the traditional forms. Reinbold’s essay examines the connections between “the narrative of faith” and human rights, beginning with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such statements take on a kind of myth-like structure in the social order that can be identified with faith that “aspire[s] in the way of all narratives of faith to engender deep-seated loyalties that are designed to operate on a register well behind mere economic or political pragmatism” (186). Such narratives, however, tend to compete with one another, as we see in our own day.

Section Four, “Religion and Sustainability,” examines, in particular, how the Abrahamic Religions and Sikhism have engaged the lived environment, particularly in the last two decades. Sustainability is rather narrowly defined here and should actually be called “Environmental Sustainability.” Religious imagination, in this section, is a reclaimed version that sees the environment as part of a larger vision of life. Caleb Gordon’s “The Relationship of Ecological Science to the Christian Narrative” and Emmanuel Karagiannis’s “Understanding the Islamic Perspective on Environment: Doctrine and Ethics” are particularly noteworthy. Gordon traces of history of dis-ease that has existed between the Christian religion and the environment, with the observation that Christianity has often been destructive of the environment through its “dominant and exploitative hegemony” (208) of the natural order. At the same time, however, some within Christianity have moved into a “new story” phase with respect to the environment that offers promising results. Key to understanding this new work is the placement of the Resurrection at the core of the work. What must be done for developed countries like the United States is to insert a re-imagined Christianity within the “existing narrative” (216) of responsibility and reformation for the good of the world. Karagiannis notes how Islam has reclaimed cardinal teaching about the environment from the Qur’an in modern ways to assist the decline of environmental degradation. His study is based on a close study of the Qur’an itself, perhaps showing to those outside Islam how the sacred text privileges care of the environment. It seems unlikely this material would be new to Islamic scholars, but would benefit a wider reading public.

Section Five, “From Imagination to Religious Practice,” looks at how religious imagination reshaped South Africa, with the elimination of apartheid and a new re-alignment of religion and public life. Particularly insightful here is Catriona Robertson’s essay “Who Do You Trust?: Enabling Cross-Religious Involvement in Public Life for a Peaceful and Equitable Future.” Robertson contends that religious organizations can prove helpful to communities in light of their work in mental wellbeing, living well together, responding to emergencies, peacebuilding, compassion for difference—including sexual orientation—city development, and the response to terror. Her exemplary stories suggest ways that faith communities, as a part of their own engagement with their local communities, might be able to expand that work more widely in partnership with cities, states, and countries. It is particularly gratifying that she details multiple examples that crossed faith and doctrinal lines to assist to others. Faith does have a place in the community.

As with all collections, some essays are stronger than others, and some break new ground where others simply provide a space to help others gain a beginning level of knowledge relative to the topic. *Religious Imaginations* contains many challenging essays that suggest how vital it is for the world’s religions and faith communities to involve themselves with the world in deep and abiding ways, while respecting diversity and humanity as key principles.

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