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Religion and identity. Political conditions, hg. v. Ryszard MICHALAK. – Paderborn: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 2023. 284 S., geb. € 65,00 ISBN: 978-3-525-30220-0

Religion and Identity: Political Conditions explores 15 case studies from across Europe that investigate the significance of political forces in shaping religious communities and identities. Drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks, the vol.'s contributors address critical issues such as the influence of state structures on religious life, the tension between religious freedom and national security, the role of religion in fostering social trust, and the legal and political challenges faced by religious organisations operating within secular or semi-secular state institutions.

The vol.'s thematic coherence lies in its sustained inquiry into how religion becomes both a site of political contestation and a tool for political mobilisation. While various European contexts are discussed, a considerable portion of the vol.—chap.s 9 through 15—is dedicated to Poland. This concentration on Poland not only reflects its unique political-religious landscape but also serves as a detailed case study for understanding broader dynamics across Europe.

A recurring thread throughout the chap.s that deal with Poland is the instrumentalisation of Christianity in constructing national identity. While Christianity is affirmed as central to Polish cultural identity, its invocation by political actors often lacks theol. depth. This dynamic is particularly evident in chap. 11, where *Piotr Pochyły* analyses speeches delivered by four Polish foreign ministers between 2016 and 2019. Pochyły demonstrates that although Christian identity is frequently referenced to legitimize political decisions, such references are rarely grounded in doctrinal or theol. reasoning. Rather, religion is reduced to a symbolic resource—emotionally potent but conceptually hollow.

This tendency to invoke religion without engaging its theol. substance is a prominent theme across the vol. The impression conveyed is that religious identity is being harnessed for political action without sustained engagement with its ethical or doctrinal dimensions. This hollowing out of religion as a vehicle for nationalistic ends is a growing global phenomenon, and the book makes a valuable contribution to this conversation. In particular, chap.s 11 and 14 offer accounts of how far-right movements in Poland deploy religious identity in support of exclusionary political ideologies. Pochyły shows in this in relation to the Law and Justice party in chap. 11, whereas *Marcin Pisarski*, in chap. 14, discusses the enduring “Pole-Catholic” myth and illustrates how right-wing groups appropriate Catholic symbolism while simultaneously promoting xenophobic narratives such as the “Islamization of Europe” and racial-nationalist ideals like “blood and soil” (263).

Concerns about Islam also arise in chap. 7, where editor *Ryszard Michalak* explores the views of Swedish Islamosceptics advocating for what they term “deshariatization”. These figures argue that

Islamic practices are incompatible with democratic norms, and they express scepticism about the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims in Sweden. While Michalak attempts to present these views as legitimate concerns rather than outright Islamophobia, his position warrants critical scrutiny. For example, he cites unverified statistics—such as the claim that 30% of Malmö’s residents are Muslim—and references anecdotal reports from police about “no-go zones” (138). These claims lack robust evidentiary support and risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Rather than reflecting justified political concern, they may indicate deeper currents of racial and cultural anxiety and risk promoting homogenising or xenophobic narratives. In this respect, the chapter illustrates how easily secular states can fall into patterns of religious and racial exclusion under the guise of cultural preservation.

The question of where the boundaries of religious tolerance lie and how the state should respond to religious diversity is a recurring tension throughout the book. *Rafał Proszak* addresses this directly in chap. 1, which examines the widespread bans on face coverings in various European countries. Despite the legal protections afforded by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which enshrines the freedom of religious expression, many states have instituted policies that curtail the visibility of minority religions, particularly Islam. Proszak’s analysis underscores the selective application of toleration, wherein dominant religious traditions are accommodated while others are marginalised. This dynamic suggests a latent hypocrisy in Western liberal democracies: tolerance is granted conditionally, and only when religious expressions conform to culturally dominant norms.

Proszak’s contribution is particularly insightful in demonstrating how legal frameworks, while ostensibly neutral, often reflect the majoritarian biases of the societies in which they operate. His chap. also raises broader theol. questions about the role of the state in adjudicating between different religious expressions. If, as the book suggests, political structures inevitably shape the boundaries and possibilities of religious life, then the ideal of a purely secular, neutral state must be re-evaluated. This insight aligns with the view, long held in political theology, that the secular realm is itself constituted by theol. presuppositions—whether acknowledged or not.

Another perspective on church-state cooperation is offered by *Beata Springer* in chap. 12, where she discusses the collaboration between local governments and religious organizations in Poland. Springer argues that such partnerships can foster social cohesion and community resilience. While this view is persuasive within the Polish context, it may be overly optimistic when generalised to broader European or global settings. As Michalak’s chap. demonstrates, state-religion cooperation can also be co-opted by exclusionary politics and used to entrench nationalist ideologies.

A central limitation of the vol. is its geographical scope. Although the book claims to address European political conditions broadly, the dominant focus on Poland makes it difficult to assess whether its conclusions can be applied more widely. The Polish case is undoubtedly significant, but a more balanced selection of case studies from other national contexts—particularly Western European democracies with more pluralistic religious environments—would have strengthened the book’s comparative value.

Nevertheless, *Religion and Identity: Political Conditions* offers a substantial contribution to the study of religion and politics in contemporary Europe. It provides valuable insights into how religion functions not merely as a private conviction or spiritual practice, but as a powerful political symbol subject to manipulation. For scholars of theology, political science, and religious studies, the vol. serves

as both a warning and a call to engagement: religious communities must remain vigilant against the instrumentalization of faith for political ends, and theol. discourse must respond to the evolving political contexts in which religion is practiced and represented.

In sum, this vol. reinforces a central claim of political theology—that religion and politics are not merely overlapping spheres but mutually constitutive domains. By illuminating the ways in which political conditions shape religious identities, the contributors to this vol. have provided a timely and thought-provoking intervention in debates surrounding secularism, nationalism, and the future of public religion in Europe.

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