

## *Edoardo Ongaro & Michele Tantardini:* Religion and Public Administration: An Introduction

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UDK: 35.07:322(048.83)  
3.07:322(048.83)

Last year's book "Religion and Public Administration: An Introduction", written by two distinguished scholars in the field of public administration, Edoardo Ongaro (Professor of Public Management at the Open University, UK) and Michele Tantardini (Assistant Professor of Public Administration at Penn State Harrisburg, USA), addresses an innovative and still under-researched topic: the (co)relations between religion and public administration. The book was published by Edward Elgar Publishing. In the following pages, I will briefly outline the content of the book, highlighting the parts I consider the most important and providing remarks where I find it necessary. The aim of this review is not, of course, to reveal all the main conclusions of this book – nor would that be possible – but rather to invite the reader to appreciate this great research and gain insight into its relevance.

Firstly, some technical details. The book consists of eight chapters, lists of figures and tables, and at the end, a very useful index list and references (more than 200 bibliographic units). In total, the book has 254 pages.

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The book begins with a chapter titled “Introduction”, in which the authors provide general remarks about definitions of religion, public administration, and other terms important for understanding the subject matter. As the authors explain, they adopt a broad definition of religion as “the relationship of the human to the divine” focusing primarily on institutionalized and traditional, organized religion and faiths. In this part of the book, the authors also discuss the matter of secularity, drawing on Charles Taylor’s three types of secularities (“the retreat of religion in public life”, “the decline in belief and practices” and “a move from society where belief in God is unchallenged to one in which is understood to be one option among the others”). Furthermore, the book presents key insights from great authorities in the field of (sociology of) religion and public administration, including Max Weber, and Bryan Turner. The authors argue that their starting point in this inquiry lies in the religious nature of religion, in the roots of sociological theories of religion, and Weber’s approach to the sociology of religion.

It can be said that religion exerts a twofold influence on public administration: first as a motivational/behavioural influence (religion can motivate a person, i.e. individual, to act), and second as an ideational influence (religion as an institution can affect other social actors in public administration – from public decision-makers to users of public services).

In their study, Ongaro and Tantardini include both the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and the so-called Asian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Shintoism). As they explain, this distinction is based on the fundamental difference between these two categories of belief systems. Abrahamic religions emphasize “correct belief” over ritual practice and community, while Asian religions are more commonly understood as a collection of wisdom, practices and rituals that bind a community in its quest for the divine and spiritual. Additionally, Abrahamic religions are always universalistic in its nature, whereas Asian religions are more contested in terms of their universality. Likewise, the authors have identified ten main themes in their inquiry into the relations between religion and public administration on “micro-, meso- and macro-level”, such as person-organization fit perspective, religion and public service motivation, religion as a source of legitimacy and accountability, etc.

Finally, the end of the first chapter presents the methodology of the study (the authors have adopted the approach of the so-called methodological agnosticism), which will be further elaborated in the second chapter.

Additionally, what I find particularly useful and interesting is that the authors offer several tips on how to approach reading this book.

In the second chapter, “Religions and religious regimes across the world”, Ongaro and Tantardini introduce key concepts and data for a comparative study on the influence of religion on public administration. They do this by mapping and analysing the religious composition of various countries and examining how religious regimes are related to the configuration of public administrative systems. This chapter discusses the trends in the number of religious people worldwide and the geographical distribution of religion, which is accompanied by numerous tables based on relevant sources. Besides that, authors have grouped countries based on the values of the Freedom of Religion Index (which is determined by several indicators, e.g., religious organization repression and government restrictions on religious practice). As the authors argue, this book posits that religion influences the functioning of public administration, and their main hypothesis is that this relationship is mediated by the religious regime in each country.

The third and fourth chapters focus on particular religious systems. In these chapters, the authors introduce general concepts regarding, as previously mentioned, both Asian and Abrahamic religions. As the authors said in the introduction of the book, these chapters are primarily intended for readers who are not sufficiently familiar with these religions. However, I am assured they can be very useful even for those who think they already know a lot. In addition, the third and fourth chapters contains some of the implications of the mentioned religions for public administration in comparative perspective (e.g., the Hinduist model of the individual and its influence on the conception of public governance; the Buddhist ideal-typical monarch and issues of legitimacy in public governance; the Confucian influence on the recruitment of civil servants based on the merit principle; the Christian concept of love and care for each person in the building of the welfare state and social services, etc.).

“Religion as a personality system and individual’s motivation and behaviour in public services” is the title of the fifth chapter, which deals with religion as a driver of human behaviour, particularly of the elected and tenured officials and other actors engaged in the provision of public services. In this part of the book, authors present five themes of this analytical study: person-organization fit perspective, religion and public service motivation, the influence of religious beliefs on public managers’ and employees’ behaviour, religious beliefs and bureaucratic discretion, and

finally, religion as a moral and belief system affecting behaviour of citizen/users of public services.

Furthermore, the authors present the results of various research studies, such as that of Houston and Freeman (2022), who conclude that public employees are more likely to be religious than those employed in private organizations. One could find their conclusion on the influence of religion on street-level bureaucrats (SLB) very intriguing, particularly the relation between religiosity of public servants and their decision-making in interacting with users. However, what I found especially interesting in their discussion is how they draw parallels between the concept of a career in public service as a “calling” and the religiously significant concept of a “call from God”.

In their analysis, they frequently and effectively reference Max Weber’s work (e.g., types of rationality, particularly value and instrumental rationality, or the six value spheres: religion, economy, politics, aesthetics, the erotic, and intellectualism).

At the end of this chapter, the authors offer a few conclusions, among which I would like to highlight the mediating influence of the religious regime on the five previously mentioned topics.

In contrast to the previous chapter, which takes an individualistic perspective (micro-level) on the book’s central topic, the sixth chapter, “Organizational Level Themes”, addresses the relationship between religion and public administration in a more general sense (meso- and macro-level). In this chapter, Ongaro and Tantardini discuss four main topics: religion as a factor shaping an organization’s mission and values, as well as its management practices and performance; Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) and their implications for public service delivery; government funding of external providers and religious affiliation; and faith organizations’ and leaders’ participation in public governance and co-creation, along with the dynamics of social cohesion and interculturalism. Among these themes, the authors explore the role of religion in shaping organizational values and its influence on employees’ motivation and performance. Likewise, they discuss whether and to what extent FBOs and faith leaders are included in public governance and public decision-making, particularly at the local level.

The seventh chapter, titled, “Religion as ideational basis: reflections on religion as source of legitimacy and basis of accountability, exercise of responsibility, and power in (politics and) public administration”, again from a macro-level point of view, addresses the following four (sub)top-

ics: legitimacy, accountability, political power and institutional quality. Regarding legitimacy, the authors' starting point is Abhulof's theory, through which they elaborate on four ideal-type models of religion and nationalism: secular nationalism, civil religion, auxiliary religion and "chosen peoples". When discussing accountability and political power in the context of religion, one of the main highlights is the influence of the majority religion within a given state and its effects on state (public administration) dynamics, as well as the potential 'dark side' of that influence.

Finally, the last chapter summarizes some of the key notions from authors' inquiry and presents their proposal for future research studies in the field of public administration and religion (titled "A research agenda on religion in public administration: in dialogue with theologians").

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As the reader of this review can see, Professors Edoardo Ongaro and Michele Tantardini have tackled the complex interplay between public administration and religion. This task is not easy at all. Firstly, it requires extensive knowledge across various fields of social sciences, namely sociology (of religion), law, political science, theology (and philosophy), and, of course, administrative science. Secondly, it is challenging to manage such diverse religious systems in one book – not just handling the differences between Abrahamic and Asian religions, but also their internal distinctions. Thirdly, synthesizing all of this into one coherent, clear, and scientific text with accurate methodology and adequate analysis presents the greatest challenge. However, they have successfully navigated these challenges and presented the content in a way that is interesting and captivating for both scholars and a wider audience.

One more thing should be emphasized: the book has an excellent didactic form. Each chapter (and almost each section within the chapters) includes well-defined introductions, allowing readers to approach each chapter as a paper *per se*, which can be (and is) very useful.

At the end, it should be noted that, although it can be challenging to find literature in English on this specific field – particularly regarding Asian religions and their systems (as the authors acknowledge), the authors did not fall into the common trap of a "Eurocentric" (or "Americentric") perspective in their research. Instead, they successfully provide a comparative perspective that encompasses all the main belief systems to a maximum extent. The authors utilized over two hundred sources in their research, including books, articles, laws, and primary sources.

This book could be considered a kind of a sequel to another notable work by Ongaro – “Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction” – which has also been reviewed in this journal.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I can conclude this review in a similar manner. I am sure that this book will inspire other scholars to pay greater attention to this topic and continue exploring the relationship between religion and public administration. This book is an excellent starting point – and so much more.

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<sup>1</sup> See Koprić, I. (2020). Edoardo Ongaro: Philosophy and public administration: An introduction. *Croatian and Comparative Public Administration*, 20(4), 795–798.