Book Reviews


Brian Grim and Roger Finke have long been pioneers in identifying the nexus of religion and social conflict and its significance. In past works they have contended that repression of religious freedom leads to religious persecution, violence, and conflict. They have argued persuasively that measuring and understanding the restrictions imposed on religion by governments and societies yields a more coherent explanation of religious conflict than does Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory. Employing the “religious economies model,” they have hypothesized that societies will profit more from free religious competition than from regulating religious ideas and actors.

In The Price of Freedom Denied, the authors deepen and extend these contentions, testing them anew with sophisticated analyses of data culled from the growing numbers of reports and indexes on religious persecution worldwide. Their conclusion is persuasive: the price of denying religious freedom is unacceptably high. No society that seeks stable democracy, social harmony, economic prosperity, or the defeat of religiously-motivated terrorism can avoid the hard work of constructing the institutions and habits that yield religious liberty. Henceforward, the burden of the argument about religion and society falls on those who continue to insist that, notwithstanding the evidence adduced by Grim and Finke, religion must be managed, privatized, or otherwise removed from the political life of a nation in order to protect the common good.

The twin problems of religious persecution and violence are critical ones—not only for scholars but also for policy makers, journalists, and anyone else interested in the issues raised by religion in public life. A separate study led by Grim concluded that 70 percent of the world’s population lives in nations (most of them Muslim-majority nations, but also India, China, and Russia) in which their religious freedom is either highly or very highly restricted. Millions around the world are subjected to violence—torture,
rape, unjust imprisonment, “disappearance,” and the like—because of their religious beliefs and practices or those of their tormentors. Even in the West, religious groups are increasingly vulnerable to discrimination. In a revealing discussion of France, the authors describe the attempts of French officials (largely supported by the public) to regulate new, unpopular, but peaceful religious groups.

All this signals a humanitarian crisis of the first order, one that is too little remarked upon in Western media, academia, and policy circles and is virtually ignored outside the West. For that reason alone, the book is worth our sustained attention. In case studies from a broad variety of cultures and religious traditions, the authors explain in illuminating detail the positive results of religious freedom (Japan and Brazil, for example) and the negative effects of its absence (Nigeria, China, India, and Iran). In one of history’s major success stories, Japan has moved from a nation in which religion was highly suspect to one in which a commitment to liberty has benefited the common good. By contrast, Japan’s neighbor, China, has moved generally in the opposite direction, seeking to control religious ideas and actors. The result—in regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang province—has been violent persecution, increased unrest, and calls for more restrictions.

But Grim and Finke argue that the price exacted by religious repression is even higher than the statistics and case studies suggest. One of the major international scourges of the twenty-first century has been what the authors call “religion-related terrorism” or “a calculated use of unlawful violence to sway governments or societies to succumb to [the terrorists’] religious objectives” (p. 195). The evidence here is powerful. While more than one factor contributes to religion-related terrorism, societies seeking to restrain its incubation must reject repression and involve religious actors in the civil and political life of the nation. In short, they must embrace religious freedom.

While *The Price of Freedom Denied* makes a major contribution to the field, it is not without its shortcomings. For one, the authors deliberately employ the plural “religious liberties,” rather than the traditional singular “religious liberty,” apparently in an attempt to capture the multiplicity of rights implicit in the term. But this usage has the opposite effect. Rather than reinforcing the profound richness of religious liberty—which includes rights of belief, assembly, expression, and the like—and its status at the heart of human dignity, the phrase “religious liberties” suggests that the right is derivative rather than unique, constructed from other rights rather than pre-political.

Oddly, the authors’ discussion of “the [intellectual] groundwork for our thesis” begins with Voltaire, Adam Smith, and David
Hume. These Enlightenment luminaries, to be sure, feared religious monopolies, which helps illustrate part of the argument. But Voltaire (as Grim and Finke acknowledge) reviled all religion. Indeed, to locate the intellectual roots of religious freedom in the Enlightenment is, to paraphrase George Weigel, to assume that, between Marcus Aurelius and Robespierre, nothing happened.

Notwithstanding such flaws, *The Price of Freedom Denied* sets the standard for further study of religious persecution and the value of religious freedom. It should be read by anyone interested in those issues or their implications for democracy, peace, and economic prosperity.

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**Thomas F. Farr**
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.

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**The Death of Secular Messianism: Religion and Politics in an Age of Civilizational Crisis.** By Anthony E. Mansueto. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010. 314pp. $35.00 cloth; $28.00 paper.

While mistitled, this book is well worth reading for general, theological, and sociological purposes. The text goes far beyond the much heralded death of secular messianism and offers a panacea for everything those “religions” ever promised yet failed to realize. Anthony Mansueto’s book takes on the entire human experience, past and present, economic and social, religious and philosophical, explaining why we are in a “civilizational crisis” and even a possible “breakdown.” The rationalist creed of salvation by science and progress, classical liberalism, and the antistatist neoliberalism of Hayek and market liberalism, whatever their success in technology, outsourcing, recovery, and growth, are just as “messianic” as Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, Mansueto argues, but have done little more to meet man’s transcendent aspirations. Both hypostasize production at the expense of humanity.

Epitomizing complex phenomena, Mansueto soars to Han China, Confucianism, and the Classical Axial Age (which could have been fleshed out in more detail) as his norm. Medieval Islamic Aristotelianism is credited anew, as is Aquinas. But Mansueto is decidedly not a scholastic or occidentalist. His frame of reference is global.