Johannes A. Van der Ven: Human Rights or Religious Rules? Brill, 2010. 397 pp + appendices & index. Hardcover: $192

This intensely creative and learned book will be of great interest to scholars of human rights and of secular and religious ethics. Van der Ven poses the question: Where do we best find the ideals, principles, values, and norms with which to deal with the world’s many problems. Out of the myriad of possibilities, he explores two. One collects the human rights standards that defend human dignity (mostly against the state) as they have evolved over the last 100 years. The other arises from what he calls “religious rules”: not just doctrine but the whole constellation of teachings, guidance, everyday ethics and so on, by means of which the various religious traditions and their adherents generate a good life. He does not seek to choose between these approaches. Rather, he seeks to clarify their interconnections through detailed historical, theoretical, and empirical examination.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One explores religions, because—Van der Ven writes—too many human rights theorists have an impoverished sense of what religion is all about. On my reading, he is largely correct. Many rights advocates think that religion is inevitably conservative, perhaps even fundamentalistic, and certainly opposed to the humane values for which they stand. To correct this, he provides three learned chapters about the factors causing religious growth and decline, about the source of religious identity, and about the parameters that make comparative religious research possible.

Some readers of this journal will be tempted to skip these chapters, thinking that they know enough about religion already. This would be a mistake. American sociologists, particularly, should reflect on Van der Ven’s approach, precisely because he is a non-sociologist and a European who has read widely in our discipline and much else besides. Though his attempt to integrate current social–scientific
approaches to religion by sorting (a modified) secularization theory to the macro level, rational choice theory to the meso level, and cognitivism at the micro level ultimately fails, the reader encounters enough gems along the way to justify a close reading. Van der Ven’s fluency in matters theological makes his road unusually rewarding. Chapter 3, written to justify comparative research on religions, shows this particularly well. Indeed, this chapter could be used as a stand-alone text to deepen methodological reflection in a number of fields.

Part Two turns to an analysis of human rights. The chief question is whether human rights are universal or whether they are so grounded in secular Euro–American philosophy that they amount to moral imperialism. After an insightful history of the development of Western rights ideals—deeper and more nuanced than that found in standard human rights texts—Van der Ven explores the Christian foundations of the enlightenment values on which human rights are based. In this, he turns to the Dutch enlightenment (Grotius and Coornhert) rather than the French, because the Dutch vision of rights was built on a religious universalism. Elaborating on them, he grounds human rights in principles abstract enough to encompass any religious view.

This reverses the usual argument, which starts from religious or philosophical foundations and deduces specific rights or practices. Here rights and practices are “open to a multiplicity of foundations, including religious ones” (p. 166). As Van der Ven points out, the 1948 Universal Declaration is such an “open-foundation document”. It contains no references to basic principles and, indeed, was explicitly written to contain none. It can, however, be justified retrospectively by various (even conflicting) religious and philosophical approaches. To make this point, Van der Ven gives us three such justifications: one each from the Christian, Islamic, and philosophical traditions. He follows this with a long chapter on natural versus positive law, which his deep familiarity with religious history, and particularly Catholic ethical reflection, brings to a surprising conclusion. His discussion of the rights of religious minorities similarly takes us in a novel direction; it is here that he fruitfully brings back in Part one’s analysis of the factors shaping the contemporary religious world.

Part Three is more empirical, focused on three groups of Dutch youth: Christian, Muslim, and non-religious. Van der Ven asks whether the official Dutch respect for human rights has created a human rights culture among these youth. His answer is complex and nuanced; his exposition is well-grounded in theological and philosophical history. The short version is that these groups’ affirmation of human rights depends on particular elements of their own religions (or non-religions). Put otherwise, Dutch human rights culture exists not independently, but rests on the particular religious or philosophical base that its various citizens hold dear.

The situation is, of course, more complicated than I can summarize here, just as this short review can at most provide a flavor of a very rich book. Van der Ven’s work deserves dedicated study by specialists in many fields.

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William L. Sachs: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicism. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. 256 pp. HB $90.00

The crisis within the Anglican Communion expressed by the issue of homosexuality, author William Sachs contends, is rooted in underlying historical tensions over how theological beliefs should be lived out morally and socially. Differing cultural contexts arising from globalization processes embedded in colonial and postcolonial eras exacerbate the dilemma of developing a coherent denominational identity. He applies James Davidson Hunter’s *Culture Wars* (Basic Books, 1992) thesis of two broadly differing factions, progressive and Orthodox (which Sachs relabels Traditionalist), contending to dominate how, in this case, the Anglican Communion’s identity is to be articulated. These two perspectives form a dialectical relationship upon which the book’s argument is developed.

The historical analysis of how various movements representing these two perspectives have interplayed throughout early Christian history and Anglican tradition form the heart of the book. Struggles over moral rigorism and cultural accommodationism, and church tradition as comprehensiveness and moral holiness, are vividly discussed as well as the emergence of personal spirituality and reform movements that contributed to the historical basis underlying the contemporary conflict over homosexuality. Sachs views the rise of global Anglicanism as key to the current conflict, and depicts the development of Anglicanism as contributing to distinctly different cultural contexts having contending understandings of what a global Anglican identity should involve, and the extent to which it should—or can—reflect localized cultural understandings yet retain a core identity.

The latter chapters focus on the development of what the author calls contemporary progressivism and traditionalism. He argues that progressivism arose out of a failed liberalism while diverse AngloCatholic and Evangelical strains found alliance within traditionalism, with the basis for identity arising from the experience of opposition to a dominant, culturally accommodationist perspective. The final chapter focuses on the contemporary conflict emerging through the issue of homosexuality, summarizing arguments made earlier in the book: the homosexuality conflict is developed from contextualized views of Christian belief and practice articulated by traditional and progressive expressions through religious movements that share many similarities despite different ends, including moral indignation over the other’s perspective and the desire to triumph in grounding Anglican identity according to each’s view. Thus, homosexuality becomes the occasion for a tug-of-war in a larger struggle over Anglican identity where the weight of Anglicanism’s center has shifted toward the two factions at the periphery, to the potential detriment of the denomination’s future.

The strength of this book lies in its detailed, well-documented historical analysis of tensions within Anglican tradition and its relation to colonial cultures. Sachs’ comprehensive ability to cover and integrate a vast sweep of historical, theological, and sociopolitical currents over nearly two millennia into a manageable framework, combined with an artful use of story-telling to make historical and analytical points, careful definition of terminology and concise chapter summaries, makes an
informative contribution to understanding the theological depth and cultural breadth underlying this contemporary conflict.

Despite the book’s title, which is misleading, the topic is far less about homosexuality than the historical basis of conflicting perspectives and movements. Other than an occasional mention in brief passages, the homosexuality conflict is only substantively discussed in the final chapter. The author is at his best when delving into historical context, although the account of the situation since the mid-20th century is far less satisfying. While the contemporary discussion of religious movements and their surrounding social context could benefit from a sociological framework, more troubling are assertions made in the final chapters without supporting evidence or argument, frequently resulting in disputable overgeneralizations. The traditionalist–progressive dialectic overwhelmingly collapses a complexity of interacting perspectives and movements into labels that give names to opposing factions for the sake of argument. This exemplifies the paradox of historically contending factions in a denomination that has built an identity of centrum grounded in establishment, but it also ignores broad sectors of the church and communion that don’t identify strongly with either faction. Although the author does acknowledge these and other generalizations, dualistic terminology continues to be prevalent without nuance.

The final chapter is disappointing, especially given the careful historical analysis of earlier chapters. The concluding tug-of-war analogy of two contending factions assumes a zero-sum outcome over the struggle for denominational identity, suggesting that there is no definitive center within Anglicanism around which both identity and conflicts can be addressed. Part of this may be the result of an overreliance on sources solidly grounded in the two contending factions rather than involving a wider spectrum of references that also represent middle ground, with the consequence that it ignores a significant sector of Anglicanism. The book, despite its problematic aspects, nonetheless offers important historical background for social science or religious studies scholars interested in the conflicts within Anglicanism but who do not have a fluent background in Anglican history and missiology.

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Alexei Krindatch (ed.): Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Churches. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011. xiii + 221 pp. $19.95 (paper)

With its focus on Protestant and Catholic groups, American religious researchers have only haltingly begun to include Christian Orthodoxy as a significant component of the religious landscape in North America. The Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Churches, edited by the Research Coordinator for the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in North and Central America, Alexei Krindatch, provides a valuable resource full of information about the various Orthodox churches, their structures and congregations, monastic groups, parishioners and activities. Krindatch has been working for several years with the predecessor to the
Assembly, the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA), to develop and disseminate reliable data about Orthodoxy in the U.S. and Canada, and he maintains a website, www.orthodoxreality.org (hosted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research), that is devoted to statistics and other data about Orthodoxy. Selected material from the Atlas can be found on this website, as well as additional information that may be helpful to those seeking further understanding of Orthodox clergy, parish life, social values and similar topics.

The Atlas is comprised of four chapters plus an appendix that lists websites and publications related to American Orthodoxy. The main text is preceded by a preface, an acknowledgements essay, a description of the data presentation, methodology and terminology, and a list of maps and tables. Chapter 1 provides historical background on Orthodoxy in America. A timeline of major events in American Orthodoxy is followed by an instructive essay that demonstrates the fascinating dynamics of Orthodoxy, with their imperial, theological, ethnic identity and immigration contexts. Interest is further piqued by a review of “Ten Interesting Facts about the History of Orthodox Christianity in the USA.” The chapter concludes with an overview of the historical and current distribution of Orthodox Christians in the United States portrayed on maps. These maps and those found for each jurisdiction profiled in Chapter 2 are dramatic representations of the condition of Orthodox Christians in the United States.

Chapter 2 is the longest and most detailed chapter of the book, and it is devoted to profiles of all the Orthodox Churches in the U.S., including those which are not considered canonical by the Assembly (i.e., the Macedonian Orthodox Church: American Diocese and the Holy Orthodox Church in North America) as well as the Oriental Orthodox or “Non-Chalcedonian” churches. In all, Chapter 2 includes profiles of 21 Orthodox churches ranging from the largest (the Greek Archdiocese) to the smallest (the Albanian Diocese). Each profile includes a brief essay either by the editor or by another authority describing the specific background of the church and its current status. Though varying in substance covered, the individual essays give essential orientation to each church and explain its reasons for separate existence in the U.S. The profile also provides the address of the headquarters, the church’s administrative structure, the identity of its head, website, number of parishes, monasteries, adherents and estimates of the level of regular church attendance. Finally, each profile concludes with a map of the distribution of parishes by state and a map of adherents by county in the U.S. These maps show the clear imprint of the patterns of historical settlement, migration over time, and conversion for these churches.

Chapter 3 begins with a brief essay on Orthodox monasteries in the U.S., reflecting the centrality of monastic traditions in the spread and maintenance of the Orthodox faith. Also included in the chapter are a map and a table of the distribution of monastic communities by state, and then a full directory with contact information about each community, its location, affiliation, website (if one exists), characteristics of accommodations for pilgrims or other visitors, and other relevant information.
Chapter 4 is comprised of data without commentary from the 2010 U.S. National Census of Orthodox Christian Churches which was carried out by Krindatch under the overall rubrics of the “2010 Religious Congregations Membership Study” of the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. Data on monasteries, parishes, adherents, and attendees at services are provided by state and county and by Orthodox jurisdiction. As such, the data are parallel with that for U.S. congregations that have been collected on a mostly decennial basis across five decades. In earlier iterations, the study was overseen first by the National Council of Churches and then by Glenmary Research Center before ASARB took over. Both the empirical assessment of the state of Orthodoxy and the comparability of the data with that for other Christian groups are great assets of this Atlas. We look forward to critical comparative analyses based on these datasets.

The Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Churches gives a broad audience a window into the state of Christian Orthodoxy in America today. As a premise for the research, however, the editor and other contributors acknowledge that there is great dynamism among the Orthodox faithful now as there has been all along. The oldest Orthodox churches in America date from the late-1700s and early-1800s. They accompanied the expansion of the Russian Empire into Alaska and the West coast of North America where missionaries ventured into largely unknown territories and cultures. From the late 1800s onward there have been several waves of Orthodox Christians coming to the United States, and each wave has defined a new configuration for American Orthodoxy. However, the most recent dominating processes seek to transform Orthodoxy in the Americas from a faith of numerous diasporas, each tending to be animated by the politics of its homeland, to a unified branch of universal Christian Orthodoxy fitting into the global Church. Movements forwarding this agenda and resisting it in various ways can be assessed only with data like that of this Atlas. The Atlas is an informative resource for the general public and an essential foundation for further research. Its contents make the case convincingly that Christian Orthodoxy is an important constituent part of the American religious landscape.

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Nocole Janz. 2010 “And No One Will Keep that Light from Shining”: Civil Religion After September 11 in Speeches of George W. Bush. Lit. Verlag

The major premise of this book challenges the U.S. and European media portrayals of former president George W. Bush as pushing his own Christian agenda in the lead up to the 2003 Iraqi invasion, such as a February 2003 Der Spiegel article which labeled Bush as more priest than president. Janz argues Bush’s seemingly overly religious language was no different than the way past president’s had evoked American civil religion to support their foreign policies. The only difference, she contends, is that the world noticed and reacted.
Janz’ analysis of Bush’s post-September 11 rhetoric, with comparisons to how other presidents have appealed to a Judeo-Christian belief in a higher power and American conceptions of freedom to unify the nation, is a helpful and timely study. She relies heavily on sociologist Robert Bellah’s controversial definition of American civil religion, but I concur with her contention that no one else has found a better description to represent the sacredness in which U.S. presidents uplift democratic values. The rise of the Tea Party, with its underlying emphasis on calling America back to God and reclaiming a Christian America, makes analysis of American civil religion more pertinent than ever. Further, in an effort to show democrats believe in God too, Obama’s presidential speeches have evoked American civil religion in more explicitly Christian terms than any prior president. Janz’ effort to put Bush’s rhetoric in perspective is based on her master’s thesis, so it is a very slim synthesis, and clearly written to explain the strangeness of American civil religion to Europeans. However, it is an easy-to-read, excellent synopsis of how Bush tapped into American civil religion to make his case for war.

In Bellah’s terms, Janz defines American civil religion as a “set of values and beliefs that is shared by the majority of the Americans” (p. 20). Based on myths such as the puritan conception of the chosen nation and historical facts about the country’s origin, American civil religion is dominated by Protestant ideas and a generic view of God, but is separate and apart from traditional religion. “In everyday life, the shared beliefs of Americans are reflected in sacred scriptures such as the Declaration of Independence, sacred people like Abraham Lincoln, sacred places like national cemeteries, and sacred holidays like the Fourth of July” (p. 20). She analyzes Bush’s rhetoric using the terms Bellah laid out in his seminal “Civil Religion in America,” first published in Daedalus in 1967, including God and mission, freedom, sacrifice and rebirth.

Janz demonstrates how Bush’s language on God, mission, freedom, sacrifice and rebirth in the aftermath of 11 September mirrored past president’s usages of American civil religion, and she illustrates how Bush tapped into these same ideas to make his case for the war on terror. The quote that inspired her book title comes from Bush’s imagery of America as a shining city upon a hill, used in his speech on the day of the attacks. “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining” (p. 31). Under Bush, America’s new mission became the War on Terror to support America’s cause of protecting and expanding human dignity and freedom. Bush evoked ideas of sacrifice to console citizens after the attacks, unite them around their shared values, and later to gird them for the war in Iraq, calling Americans to make sacrifices for their beloved freedoms. He spoke of a rebirth of character and service in the United States following the attacks as good coming out of evil. Together these ideas helped unify the nation and rally support for Bush’s foreign policies.

Janz compares Bush’s rhetoric with past presidents, such as John F. Kennedy’s evocation of duty to God, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s four freedoms, Harry S. Truman’s discussion of sacrifice during World War II, and Bill Clinton’s discussion of rebirth after the cold war. Janz is correct in asserting that all U.S. presidents have utilized American civil religion to unite the country and support domestic and
foreign policies. However, one aspect her slim analysis does not address is the extent of Bush’s rhetoric compared to that of past presidents. Bush hammered home ideas of God, mission, freedom, sacrifice and rebirth over a two-year time period, often illustrating a black-and-white absolutist view of the world, in which his administration fostered a for us or against us mentality, labeled Iraq, Iran and North Korea as part of an ‘axis of evil’ and attacked internal political opponents as unpatriotic. This is the dark side of civil religion, which Janz only haphazardly touches upon in her summary of Bellah’s work.

In dispelling the view that Bush was pushing his own evangelical agenda, Janz correctly notes that Bush spoke in generic Judeo–Christian terms, restricted himself to Old Testament quotations and carefully worded his remarks so to appeal to people of all faiths. While his language resonated with evangelical Christians, it was not unique to their faith. She does not address how much his own faith fueled his policies, a point in need of further study.

Janz’ position as an outsider to American civil religion makes her analysis more interesting in illustrating how the United States is perceived in Europe, but also lends itself to flaws. For instance, her distinction between an evangelical and a born-again Christian in describing Bush lacks nuance. While she contends Europeans must understand how U.S. presidents evoke American civil religion in foreign policy she fails along with other scholars to recognize how Judeo–Christian thought undergirds democratic values throughout Western Europe. After all, the puritans were not alone in believing God chose their nation for a special mission, the chosen nation myth was just as dominant in English, German and Dutch imperialism. It was a British missionary, David Livingstone, who propagated the idea of spreading Christianity, civilization and commerce to Africa, and a British poet, Rudyard Kipling, who urged American expansion in the Philippines with his infamous poem “White Man’s Burden.”

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