



Michael Cook

Ancient Religions, Modern Politics

NJ, Princeton: Princeton Uni. Press, 2014, ISBN-13: 978-0691144900, 541pp, £22.00

Ancient Religions, Modern Politics examines the role of religious heritages in modern politics. Michael Cook proceeds from the conjecture that today many Muslims utilize Islamic heritage to construct their politics. That is, in modern Muslim politics Islam plays a substantial role. Yet, it does not seem to be the case in Hinduism or Latin American Catholicism, Cook argues. To address why Islamic heritage plays an important role in modern Muslim politics, and why it differs from Hinduism and Latin American Catholicism, he develops a comparative analysis, and offers tremendously rich and nuanced information about early and modern Islam, Hinduism and Latin American Catholicism. *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics* is a significant contribution to the scholarly debates on the dynamics behind the modern Muslim, Hindu and Latin American Catholic politics.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on political identity and the role of religious heritages in the formation of modern Muslim, Hindu and Catholic political identities. Following the first migratory movement (*hijrah*) of Muslims to Medina, not just a religious but a political community was constituted. Being a member of a religious community was associated with a membership of a polity. This prevailed for centuries. Cook claims that “Muslim solidarity has not displaced nationalism, but it has established itself as an alternative to it” (p. 46). Overall, Muslim identity still makes more sense for its adherence than the Christian or Hindu identity to theirs. The main argument of the part one is that Islam has been more resourceful than Hinduism and Catholicism in terms of engendering a sense of community.

Cook argues that although Islam has been playing a relatively accommodative role, it has not been able to “override ethnic division, but [...] it can easily disrupt ethnic unity” (p. 35). He, for instance, notes that “Turkish Islamists have been able to make less hostile view of Kurdish ethnic sentiment than Turkish secularists. Likewise the Pakistanis saw merit in Islamism as a prescription for Afghanistan [...] but overall, there is no evidence that Islamic solidarity can provide inoculation against ethnic conflict” (ibid). Nevertheless, one could argue that Cook’s analysis is not sophisticated in the sense that it does not question whether, say, the conflict between Kurds and the Turkish state is an ethnic conflict. One might argue that it is a political conflict that has been taking place between the secular state and Marxist/Leninist PKK. Moreover, one might argue that it has been the Islamic brotherhood and solidarity discourse that prevent a mass conflict between two “ethnic” communities, as it were. And finally, it was after all the Justice and Development Party, which has its roots in Islamism, which did the most important political attempts to resolve this conflict. In this sense, although it is true that Islamic solidarity has not been the panacea for ethnic conflicts in the Muslims world, it is an overstatement that Islam has no impact in reducing ethnic conflicts.

In the second part, Cook examines the relevance and importance of ancient religions in shaping modern social and political values such as society, warfare, divine jealousy and polity. Cook investigates and addresses questions such as how Islamic heritage affects modern Muslims’ perspective regarding equality, how the concept of *jihad* resonates in modern Muslim politics, or why the Hindu law (i.e., the Vedas) does not enjoy the same attention that Muslims show to their *sharia*. With regard to egalitarianism, for instance, Islamic heritage has much more to offer than Hindu tradition due to the latter being characterized by the caste system. Regarding cultural control, Cook illustrates, both law and medicine is derived from the heritage in the case of Hinduism, whereas in Latin American Catholicism either law or medicine does not directly come from heritage. Islam, however, falls in between these two,



that is, in Islam law cannot be negotiated, it is a divine category, but medicine is more of an ordinary matter. (p. 307).

Part three focuses on fundamentalism. Cook does not take fundamentalism for granted. He defines it as “the choice to return to the original foundations of one’s faith and take one’s religion from its earliest sources” (p. xiv). He, for instance, uses the term Islamic fundamentalism by distinguishing it from Islamism. For him, Islamic fundamentalism refers to “the choice to return to the original foundations of Islam” (p. xviii). Thus, for Cook, people like Mawdudi and Qutb can be labelled as fundamentalists because they make “disproportionate emphasis on the foundations” (p. 386). Fundamentalism, Cook argues, helps contemporary Islamists to “enhance the appeal of Muslim identity and highlight its political dimension”, on the one hand; and to demonize its enemies (i.e. Christians, Jews), on the other (p. 387-388). As with the other cases, fundamentalism has different affects in Islamic, Hindu and Catholic cases. In the case of Hinduism, unlike Islam, fundamentalism has little to offer with regards to social and political values, i.e., equality, warfare (p.411-412).

Overall, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics* concludes that the Hindu heritage has very little to contribute to the modern Hindu politics. Hindu heritage does not provide (i) a strong political identity; (ii) support for militancy against external enemies; (iii) a unified Hindu state; and (iv) an egalitarian vision of society. (p.452). In the case of Latin American Catholicism, the heritage even contributes less to the modern politics. It has “little role in political identity, it is ambivalent with regard to militancy, and it lacks a vision of proper shape of either society or politics.” (p.453). In the case of Islam, however, the heritage has a lot to contribute to the modern political ideology (i.e. Islamism) and Muslim politics per se. Thus, Islamic heritage is more attractive and more resourceful than Hindu and Catholic heritages in terms of shaping the modern politics; and this is why the idea of returning back to the foundations appeal to increasing number of Muslims.

One could see the robustness of the argument set by Cook. Yet, still, some of the shortcomings, such as the selection of cases and exclusive focus on some specific writers, need to be addressed. First, one could argue that selection of Latin American Catholicism evokes a regional perspective, in which particularities of a region, Latin America in this case, might have significant implications in generalizing the main argument. Thus, it could have been more convenient if Cook focused on Christianity as a whole, or Islam in South Asian or Middle Eastern contexts. Moreover, one could see that Cook draws exclusively on Mawdudi and Qutb when he articulates on modern Islamism. He poorly engages with some other influential Islamist thinkers such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Hassan al-Banna, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

Despite these shortcomings, *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics* is an intriguing and welcome contribution to the scholarly discussions on and can be a seminal text for understanding how religious traditions relevant and important in modern politics. I would recommend this book to those who are interested in comparative religions and the role of religion in modern politics.

Dr. Erdem Dikici

School of Sociology, Politics and International Relations, University of Bristol, UK

ed0407@bristol.ac.uk