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Elisabet le Roux and Sandra Iman Pertek, *On the Significance of Religion in Violence Against Women and Girls*, 2023, Oxon: Routledge, 194 pp, isbn 978-0- 367-76949-9.

In *On the Significance of Religion in Violence Against Women and Girls* (2023), Elisabet le Roux and Sandra Iman Pertek explore the ways in which religion and religious actors contribute to and counter Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). Their aim is to help actors in humanitarian, development and fragile settings to identify ways of engaging religious parameters productively in VAWG responses. Together the authors combine academic and practice-informed experience to make this a robust but accessible volume to non-academics, with Le Roux drawing from Christian communities in numerous countries and continents, and Pertek presenting research with Muslim women in fragile and displaced settings.

Recognising the impact of religious beliefs and practices in the experience of VAWG and the double-edged sword effect that these can have on norms and attitudes about VAWG, the authors organise the book into four sections: an introduction that outlines the complex relationship between 'religion' and VAWG, two main analytical sections that explore how religious beliefs and actors can either contribute to the perpetuation of VAWG or help in its prevention and mitigation with reference to Christian and Muslim communities, and a fourth section that spells out clear action principles for practitioners at the grassroots level. In the current review, I focus on the chapters drawing from Christian communities (reflecting my specialisation in eastern Christian traditions) and the synthesis chapters where the authors attempt to draw joint comparative insights.

In their analysis of the difficult concept of religion, Le Roux and Pertek avoid a rigid definition and choose to employ Gerrie Ter Haar's analytical framework that conceptualises religion in reference to four elements: religious ideas, religious practices, religious organisation and religious experience. They nuance their analysis by centring on women's subjective interpretations of VAWG and faith experiences and ensure to discuss how 'religion' can both contribute to VAWG and serve as a resource for victims and survivors. What is perhaps missing from their nuanced framework is a deeper problematisation of the more fundamental tensions that can and often do exist between faith-based understandings of gender identity, womanhood or gender relations and equivalent definitions within mainstream feminist interpretations that have disproportionately reflected western societies' experience with western Christianity, secularism and social sexism. Efforts by international development actors to engage religious beliefs and actors in the struggle against VAWG, with which is preoccupied, would benefit from an open admission that such differences have underlined some of the negative reactions witnessed in religious contexts towards mainstream gender priorities. Pertek refers to this in passing when she describes that most women who were interviewed by her about notions of equality 'were opposed to what they considered the Western concept of gender equality, seeing it as incompatible with their lifestyle as mothers' (p. 73). It is regretful that this point of tension was not given more attention in outlining the intricate intersections between gender, religion and VAWG in the introductory and conclusive sections, as it has comprised a significant barrier to achieving productive synergies between feminist and religious approaches to VAWG.

Throughout the book the authors are careful not to essentialise the concept of religion, which is laudable; still, the chapters that draw from Christian communities are associated with primarily Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches—traditions found in Western societies, even if these developed distinct trajectories and culture-specific expressions in the contexts that are being discussed in the book such as Zambia, Brazil, Nigeria, DRC, Rwanda and Liberia—and centre mostly on the work of western Christian international development organisations, such as World Vision. While the authors are aware of a historically Orientalist mindset in the study of non-Western religions (p. 15), there is no explicit acknowledgement that the same Orientalist mentality has been applied to non-Western Christian communities—for instance, Eastern Orthodox and so-called Oriental Orthodox Churches that have been generally marginalised or misrepresented in western scholarship. While I am not well-placed to comment on Islamic traditions, the analysis in the chapters about Muslim traditions appears to be more nuanced. Still, it would benefit the reader to hear about how women invoked specific authoritative voices in the religious traditions they followed (were these women Sunni, Shi'i, Sufi, other?) and to explore if cross-cultural differences in the sources of authoritativeness that the women invoked influenced in any way their experiences of and responses to VAWG.

These limitations are important for appraising Le Roux's former proposition that depending on the setting, the Bible can be quoted and interpreted to support various forms of VAWG (p. 35) and the authors' collective reflection on the potential of a scriptural approach to VAWG in both Christian and Muslim settings. To a student and practitioner of non-western Christian Churches, Le Roux's former proposition would seem to be underpinned by a Protestant Christian influence, whereby scriptural interpretation has been arguably more variable. Such a statement would not apply in the same way to Orthodox Christian communities as a result of the emphasis that these traditions have placed on a single 'right' belief (ortho-doxa). While Orthodox Christian laities would

not be fully versed in theological matters, they would be familiar with the basic tenets of their faith, limiting the ways in which religious teaching might be (mis)used. The issue in these societies might be rather insufficient religious literacy among clergy and laity alike that blurs the religion-culture boundary. Similarly, a scriptural approach based on specific interpretations of Islamic sacred texts as suggested in the authors' joint reflections might not potentially work in conservative communities that place emphasis on a different authoritative articulation of religious teaching. As Le Roux notes, the intersection between religion and culture in faith communities needs to be understood further in order to find the 'real' culprit of VAWG (p. 37). This would require investigating how different members of faith communities understand authoritative religious tradition and how they invoke religious teachings in relation to what they perceive as culture to justify or condemn practices, norms or attitudes that may promote VAWG (as suggested by Pertek, p. 120).

Such limitations notwithstanding, the authors have identified several crucial points that merit attention and further study. As they note, many secular development actors responding to VAWG on the ground still find it difficult to engage with religious experiences in depth, which would help to move away from a paradigm of merely instrumentalizing religious actors. The religious experiences of believers, including divine revelations, visions, dreams, miracles (Le Roux, p. 49), or trust in God and prayer (Pertek, p. 125)—that might be intangible to secular or external observers—have tangible and material consequences in the lives of the faithful and can shape how they process VAWG and its associated trauma. As discussed in the book, survivors often find strength to cope within their faith, but faith can also foster an enduring attitude that may keep women in an abusive relationship for longer. Hence, the authors correctly propose that '[p]roactive, religiously inspired

tactics are needed to help survivors move on with their lives safely from harmful relationships' (p. 83) and not merely to cope within their existing conditions.

Another important contribution is the authors' proposition that practitioners must not shy away from engaging with controversial or problematic religious understandings (or, rather, harmful cultural understandings presented by laities as religious) and should develop literacy to be able to respond appropriately (p. 81). This ultimately leads to a crucial question that would likely necessitate another book: how should religious literacy be developed among actors who tend to have little or no familiarity with diverse religio-cultural worldviews and limited ethnographic engagements with the communities they work with? Conversely, in engaging religious stakeholders, it would be important to explore the feasibility and merits of an inter-faith versus a faith-specific theologically-grounded response to VAWG. Even in contexts where different faiths co-exist peacefully, recognising the context-specific and embodied manner in which religious authoritativeness is (re)produced raises the question of whether a scriptural inter-faith approach as proposed in the book is feasible and more advantageous over a faith-specific response.

Ultimately, as the authors note, engaging productively with religious diversity requires reflecting first and foremost on one's (religious or secular) positionality, personal biases and level of cultural or religious awareness prior to engaging with the religious 'other' (p. 152).

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