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Recent years have seen increasing interest in the intersections of religion and international relations. Volumes such as Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft’s *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (Oxford University Press, 2012) revisit existing theories of foreign policy to explore the role of religion in spaces where it was thought to be relevant no longer.

In this new volume in De Gruyter’s *Religion and Society* series, Helge Arsheim makes an important contribution to this conversation, exploring a specific and underexplored element in the role of religion within an institution where it may often be an afterthought: the United Nations (UN). *Making Religion and Human Rights at the United Nations* provides a thorough exploration of the complexity of the UN’s human rights committees’ dealings with religion. Despite being a part of an organization which technically “does not ‘do’ religion,” Arsheim argues the work of these committees is actually resulting in the generation of “concepts and definitions of religion” (4, 13).

This is not a book concerned with religion, but with the mechanisms of “religion-making” (20). After a close examination of the reports of four committees, Arsheim offers his proposal for a joint statement on religion to rectify present inconsistencies in the ways these committees construe religion.

Arsheim makes clear from the outset that this is a non-legal work, but he believes the concerns addressed ensure its relevance to readers with or without a legal background. The committees in focus are structured and guided by international law, but the aim of this book is to provide an “external” view. Rather than seeking to assess the legal content of the committees’ work, Arsheim focuses on the disconnected and murky nature of approaches to religion by legal professionals, policymakers, and scholars. The determination of what constitutes the religious by legal or political actors has far-reaching consequences, both for society and the academy, and such an intervention can provide valuable perspective to ongoing debates regarding the meaning of religion.

This work opens with a brief review of the literature addressing religion and the UN. Arsheim notes that he is entering relatively uncharted territory. In spite of emergent research on the genealogy of religion and human rights broadly, and some investigation into early UN protections of freedom of religion, little work has been done on religion and the UN. Even this “incipient literature” has for the most part focused on the growing role of religious NGOs at the UN (11). Arsheim proposes a different path by approaching the place of religion at the UN through a critical and constructivist lens (13). He not only views the place of external religious
actors interacting with the UN but purports to determine the way in which the UN itself “makes” religion.

By acknowledging that religion is, using Kirsten Haack’s term, an “essentially contested concept” in the realm of international relations and the UN, Arsheim argues we can only fully understand the depth and breadth of religion’s presence at the UN through an etymological and genealogical study built upon engagement with empirical data (13). He explores this making of religion through the reports of four committees dedicated to human rights: the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Human Rights Committee (HRC), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Through extensive analysis of two decades of records (from 1993 to 2013), Arsheim makes his case for the unique processes of religion-making taking place at the UN. When these committees engage with religion, the decisions they make about what is discussed have a real impact on what is legally understood to be religious. A challenge highlighted here by Arsheim, however, is the stark differences between each committee’s interactions with religion.

Given the inherent complexity of religion as a concept, and the relative recency of these committees’ increased engagement with religion in their work, this inconsistency is to be expected. Arsheim notes as much, and the expectation of such difference and disagreement was in fact a motivation to conduct this research in the first place. Even though inconsistency is a natural result, he nonetheless pushes for a means of common understanding. In order to prevent inconsistencies, Arsheim proposes the committees should produce a “joint general comment of recommendation on their approaches to religion” (253). This joint statement would seek to clarify such matters as the social role of religious communities, emphasis on intersectionality, and the impact of state favoritism for a particular religious tradition, among others (253–54).

*Making Religion and Human Rights at the United Nations* offers a fascinating intervention into conversations about the intersection of religion and international relations, as well as the genealogy of religion and discourses of human rights. This volume is thoroughly researched and eminently accessible in spite of its complex subject matter. Arsheim set out to present a non-legal work dealing with legal matters in a relevant way for a broad readership, and he has succeeded in this regard.

While the proposal of joint statement on religion by CERD, HRC, CEDAW, and CRC is sensible and likely an effective solution to present confusion, I would argue the most valuable product of this work is his framework for understanding the concept of religion in world affairs. He makes a convincing argument for the “making of religion” at the UN and spares little detail in explaining the methodology he deploys. His assertion of the “utter normality” of religion is equally convincing but will also no doubt lead to the larger conversation and debate Arsheim seeks (252). The definitional specificity and empirical rigor he has brought to bear on the role of religion at the UN are valuable as well, providing a welcome addition to the literature on religion in international affairs.