Religion and International Security

Reviewed by Abhishek Choudhary

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has undergone a major renewal in recent decades. The ambit of security has expanded to include non-traditional threats. Scholars have sought to deepen and widen the concept by including newer arenas and actors that remain beyond the domain of mainstream IR. The move towards the sub-systemic level of explanation, however, does not penetrate deep enough to provide deeper ontological engagement. The idea of security, specifically, remains preoccupied with traditional conceptualisations that undermine the furtherance of such conceptualisations that challenge the immutability of states. In this regard, the book under review provides a deeper engagement with the concept of emancipation. The central – and novel – claim of the book is that religion carries emancipatory potential.

Tracing the deliberate marginalisation of religion in IR, the book begins by assessing the tendency of mainstream theoretical traditions towards secularisation. It provides an overview of Habermas's post-secular discourse and assesses other theoretical traditions that seek to include, albeit peripherally, religion in their approach. The next two chapters engage with the link between religion and conflict - a point that would interest even mainstream scholars. These chapters pro-

vide a lot of detail on variations within and among religions and serve as an excellent primer. The inter- and intra-faith conflicts are examined in short, yet adequately, to provide a foreground for assessment. The debates around jihad and just war are also addressed, debunking mainstream constructions. The fourth chapter addresses the issue of peace-making and the potential role of religion in it. It examines sacred texts of different faiths along with the use of such texts by practitioners and activists. The problem, however, begins when the state begins to choose sides and declare one religion as good while the other as bad.

The fifth chapter engages with faith-based diplomacy and the use of military chaplains that the US has adopted to fulfil political goals by co-opting religion. Faith-based humanitarian assistance has also gained prominence owing to its efficacy. A problem, as with the case of peace-making, arises when assistance is provided on a partisan basis and certain communities are excluded from the benefits. The sixth chapter addresses the issue of religious persecution and advocates for enhancing human security. It lists the declarations on religion and human security and then provides a brief overview of countries that have high levels of social hostility and where specific minority communities are harassed routinely.

The concluding chapter reiterates the social construction that 'makes' a particular religion violent or non-violent, emancipatory or otherwise. The book points out the fluidity in the meaning of religion, that is dependent on time, space and context. Though there are some basic tenets of every religion, no religion can be attributed with fixed features. The bidirectional impact of politics on religion is what makes it an interesting variable to address issues pertaining to international security. The role of religion in legitimising political authority and the role of politics in preferring one religion over others is an obvious reality that can hardly be ignored. This point is brought out when the issues of diplomacy, humanitarianism and conflict are addressed.

The author points out the need to move beyond the secular paradigm and that there is no need to have a separate international relation of religion. While the point carries merit, it would typically go beyond the presumptions of mainstream IR theories that are based on parsimony. By including a new variable, howsoever relevant, the claimed explanatory potential of mainstream IR would be lost. The book provides hope through an appeal to replace norms of intolerance

and violence with that of tolerance and compassion. The book is very informative and mixes descriptive elements with normative aspects in a very balanced way. It is a must-read for scholars of international security who, in general, tend to ignore the intersections that are produced by the practice of religion across the world. The religion of politics and the politics of religion is essential in understanding the international implication of religiously induced peace, violence, emancipation and conflict. Rather than being biased as a supporter or a critique of religion, the book opens up multiple avenues where nuances pertaining to religion and security can be examined.