The topic of women’s oppression or freedom in countries of the Middle East and Africa is one that my students love to explore in their final papers. This collection of case studies would likely satisfy their thirst for reliable, factual information on a specific form of gender-based violence in a particular country (namely Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey, Jordan, Morocco). Particularly useful from my perspective as a university teacher are case studies such as the ones presented by Moha Ennaji (‘Violence against underage girl domestic workers in Morocco’) and Heba M. Mamdouh and Ibrahim F. Kharboush (‘Gender and violence in Egypt: problems and factors exposing women to the risk of domestic violence in Alexandria’). The former presents a multi-faceted description of the use of underage girls as domestic labourers, while the latter seeks to identify factors contributing to domestic violence in Alexandria (factors such as family income, occupational differences between husband and wife, and the husband’s education and habits are found to be significantly related to specific forms of spousal violence). Cases like these help students see that blanket statements about ‘Islam’ are not a useful explanatory category when it comes to understanding the complex nature of people’s lives, which is rarely shaped by religious factors alone. As an anthropologist trying to nuance students’ understanding of Islam, one might indeed wish for more attention to be paid to the lived experience of women and men in the volume’s other case studies.

In sum, this book offers a useful collection of case studies on the various forms that gender-based violence takes in a number of specific countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Its value lies in the variety of cases and approaches, which together can be seen as a counter-argument against any facile linkage between violence against women and Islam. Finally, the authors’ work should have deserved a better copy-editor to correct some strange turns of phrase and unfortunate typos.

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There are indeed ‘wicked’ problems in the world and trying to define human security and religion are two of them. This admirably nuanced volume, however, doesn’t blink in the face of these problems. If anything it dares to compound them by exploring the relationship between these two domains, and thereby help policymakers develop security-promoting policies that take religion into account. The text’s editors and authors, in other words, seek to trace the dynamics of a relationship that they see as pervasive, varied and always context-specific.

Religion and Human Security has its roots in a series of workshops that were conducted under the auspices of the Henry Luce Foundation and the University
of Washington’s Jackson School of International Studies. The text includes a comprehensive introduction, a theoretical chapter on the ‘dance of desire’ between religion and human security, thirteen case studies, and a postscript that provides lessons learned for policymakers – i.e., lessons that are more generic warnings and reminders than concrete prescriptions.

The case studies are indeed the heart of the book. They explore the way specific religions or ‘religious’ organizations have affected the human security of people in various parts of the world. The first five studies focus on Islam – i.e., on the human security-centred competition between the Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptian government; the welfare-providing roles played by religious groups in Turkey, which both polarize and protect people; and the public’s relationship with violent religious groups in Pakistan. (In the last case, the chapter’s authors argue that since most Pakistanis don’t understand the agendas or activities of the radical Islamist groups in their midst, their heightened commitment to Islam doesn’t work at cross purposes with human security. Their piety, in short, doesn’t correlate with a premeditated support of violence.) Finally, there are two chapters on India, where the picture is indeed mottled – increased communal violence has facilitated religious violence, but responsible actors in Malerkotla, for example, have harnessed religious vocabularies and organizations to create effective ‘religious’ arguments against violence.

If you’re starting to see a pattern here, you’re right. A core purpose of this text is to try and answer a little-inspected question in the social sciences, at least thus far – does religion promote or retard human security? The answer, of course, is that it does both these things, and that’s confirmed in the remaining eight case studies, six of which focus on the relationship between Christian groups and human security. One study, for example, questions religion’s putative role as the handmaiden of inequality and the status quo in Brazil, while another looks at the self-insulating behaviour of Pentecostal Protestants in Guatemala, who have done little to ameliorate the country’s ills. Two other studies focus on the accommodating behaviour of religious actors in Zimbabwe and Angola, particularly when it comes to their ‘soft’ engagement with corrupt state officials and warlords on human security issues. The chapter on Northern Ireland, in turn, argues that religion first contributed to The Troubles and then turned right around and played a major role in resolving them. Finally, we have studies on the relationship between human security and Christianity in post-war Eastern Europe, the religious struggle for human security in Poland and Algeria (yes, it’s a comparative analysis), and the role of Japan’s Soka Gakki Buddhist movement in this domain.

With an overarching description of Religion and Human Security’s purpose and structure now in place, let me now cite three reasons why this text is a worthy and needed addition to human security studies.

First, it represents an honest, trailblazing attempt to fill a gaping hole in the literature. It amply illustrates that religions and religious actors do play ‘a decisive
role’ in shaping the human conditions of a society. Their impact, however, can be complex, ambivalent and even counterintuitive. Religion’s impact on human security, in short, is multifaceted and defies easy characterization. It is invariably particular and contextual. There is no meta-theory one can apply to this dual relationship, as the thirteen case studies in the book repeatedly demonstrate.

Second, Religion and Human Security provides a helpful, historically based primer on what have long been acknowledged to be two definitional brier patches. In the case of ‘religion,’ the volume’s contributors ultimately define it as ‘a socially enacted desire for the ultimate, embodied in practices that have ultimate significance.’ Yes, the definition seems slippery, but it also has its virtues. It avoids, for example, the common pitfall of overvaluing belief while downplaying practice. It also acknowledges and accounts for the prism-like nature of belief systems – systems that provide trust-building rituals; that formalize moral laws and ethical systems; and that promote cultural practices and group processes. (These are indeed a collection of attributes that help reinforce people’s mental and emotional security.)

This last point then links directly to the text’s expansive definition of human security – a three-part definition that is familiarly concrete and also uncomfortably vague. As the numerous contributors have it, human security has 1) a physical part (which is designed to blunt threats to basic human welfare), 2) a juridical part (which is designed to protect human rights) and 3) a more elusive, culturally conditioned factor that seeks to preserve a sense of personal autonomy and freedom (or even protect individuals from feeling ‘alienated, psychologically distressed, or sociologically oppressed’).

The first two parts of this definition are compatible with traditional state-centric ones. Part three, however, is the problem. It assumes that national or institutional security is not possible without first establishing a more basic form of individualized human security, which depends, among other things, on fulfilling one’s own potential. It is in this third part of the definition that religion and human security most prominently intersect – people continue to rely upon religion to provide mental, emotional and social welfare, which then gives it the opportunity to act as a communal actor.

Finally, Religion and Human Security provides a number of lessons learned for policymakers, although in the form of broad warnings and desired ‘tilts.’ One of the most challenging of these tilts is for policymakers to take advantage of religion’s security-enhancing roles while minimizing its security-harming tendencies. Unfortunately, the social-science work on this requirement remains obviously limited.

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