IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies

Volume 8 Issue 1 2025

International Islamic University Malaysia

IIUM JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND CIVILISATIONAL STUDIES

(E-ISSN: 2637-112X)

Editorial Correspondence:

Editor, IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies (IJRCS)

Research Management Centre, RMC

International Islamic University Malaysia

53100 Gombak Campus

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: (+603) 6421 5002/5010

Fax: (+603) 6421 4862

Website: http://journals.iium.edu.my/irkh/index.php/ijrcs

Comments and suggestions to: alwialatas@iium.edu.my

E-ISSN: 2637-112X

Published by:

IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia

P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Phone (+603) 6421-5018/5014, Fax: (+603) 6421-6298

Website: https://www.iium.edu.my/office/iiumpress

CONTENTS

IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies (IJRCS) **8:1 (2025); 93-95.**
https://doi.org/10.31436/ijrcs.v8i1.395

Book Review

Ongaro, E. & Tantardini, M. (2023). *Religion and public administration: An introduction*. Edward Elgar Publishing. 262 pages. ISBN: 9781800888029

by Makmor Tumin[1]

Edoardo Ongaro (Professor of Public Management, The Open University, UK) and Michele Tantardini (Associate Professor of Public Administration, Penn State University, USA) mark a much-needed intervention in the study of public administration, where religion is often marginalised or approached with hesitation. This interdisciplinary volume offers a careful and insightful study on how religion manifests across state systems, institutional structures, and individual motivations—an inquiry highly relevant for Muslims who believe that governance is not only a worldly matter but also one tied to divine accountability.

Rather than portraying religion as a disruptive force, Ongaro and Tantardini regard it as deeply embedded within many administrative settings, particularly in pluralistic societies where the ideal of secular neutrality often diverges from reality. In Chapter 1, they present a multi-layered framework that allows for a nuanced analysis of religion—whether as a systemic influence, an organisational ethos, or a personal moral compass.

Chapter 2 examines global religious regimes with sensitivity and clarity, moving beyond binary distinctions between secular and theocratic states. They explore how religion undergirds legitimacy in diverse contexts such as France, India, and Iran. For Muslims, the section on Iran resonates with familiar ideas: religion is not merely an external belief system but one that lends legitimacy, shapes legal frameworks, and permeates the administrative culture. These discussions are commendable for their refusal to simplify complex arrangements.

The authors' treatment of Asian religious traditions in Chapter 3 is respectful and perceptive. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism are presented not as abstract systems but as active contributors to public service ethics. For instance, Confucian rituals are linked to hierarchical values in East Asian bureaucracies, while Buddhist compassion underpins policy practices centered on public welfare. The book refrains from romanticising these traditions, a methodological discipline that Muslims will appreciate, especially given the Islamic emphasis on balance and justice in evaluating others.

In Chapter 4, the authors compare Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They explain the Jewish covenantal tradition, the Christian ethic of vocation, and, most relevantly, the Islamic concept of trust and stewardship. These are not superficial observations; the authors genuinely engage with how Islamic principles motivate administrative accountability. Muslims will recognise in this analysis the deeply rooted ethos of being vicegerents on earth, tasked not only with efficient governance but with ethical and moral responsibility.

Chapter 5 explores religion as a personality system that shapes individual moral behavior. Drawing on thinkers like Victor Frankl (Austrian neurologist, founder of logotherapy)

[1] Makmor Tumin is a Professor at the Department of Political Science, Public Administration and Development Studies, Faculty of Business and Economics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

and Alasdair MacIntyre (Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame, USA), the authors argue that religious identity helps public administrators form moral narratives for their roles. Muslims will find echoes of this in the principle of intention—a concept that orients not just personal life but also public duty. Civil servants, when grounded in a moral tradition, are not merely performing tasks but carrying out a trust before God.

The book turns to organisational dynamics in Chapter 6, addressing how institutions navigate religious pluralism. From accommodating prayer breaks to handling dietary laws, the examples provided show how modern bureaucracies—like those in the U.S., Nigeria, and Malaysia—must manage religious diversity. For Muslim-majority societies, this chapter is particularly instructive. It reminds us that while Islamic governance has historically incorporated other faiths under formal systems, the modern state requires renewed creativity to uphold justice, inclusivity, and principled leadership.

Chapter 7 represents the philosophical core of the book. Here, the authors challenge the idea that legitimacy stems solely from procedure or rational-legal authority. Instead, they argue that moral narratives—many of them religious—undergird public trust. The Qur'an itself describes governance as a matter of promoting good and preventing wrong, suggesting that a purely technocratic vision of administration is insufficient. Referencing scholars like Charles Taylor (Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, McGill University, Canada) and Talal Asad (Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, City University of New York, USA), the book shows how secular language often borrows from religious ethics, reinforcing the idea that religion is not necessarily a relic but a reservoir of public meaning.

Chapter 8 outlines a thoughtful research agenda for future exploration. The authors call for more dialogue between public administration scholars and theologians to examine themes such as spiritual leadership, moral exhaustion, and faith-driven innovation. For Muslim researchers, this chapter is a call to action: to contribute to administrative theory not only through empirical data but also through Islamic intellectual traditions, ethical jurisprudence, and prophetic models of governance.

Despite the book's intellectual richness, three areas would benefit from further development. First, the book does not meaningfully engage with dominant administrative paradigms such as New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG), or digital-era governance (DEG). A dialogue between these paradigms and religiously inspired ethical frameworks could have added valuable theoretical depth, particularly in relation to concepts like transparency, equity, and accountability within modern governance models.

Second, the intersection of religion and gender is underexplored. In many cultures, religious interpretations affect gender roles within both households and bureaucracies. Islamic discourse is no exception. While classical jurists discussed gender within governance, contemporary Muslim scholars—especially women—are pushing for re-readings rooted in the higher objectives of Islamic law. The absence of such perspectives misses an opportunity for a more rounded analysis.

Finally, the book argues for integrating religious values into public discourse but does not fully address the challenge of conflicting moral claims in multi-faith societies. Islam, as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad, often resolved such tensions through dialogical ethics and principled coexistence. A deeper exploration of how pluralist societies can navigate competing religious imperatives—perhaps through frameworks like coexistence jurisprudence—would enrich the discourse.

Despite these limitations, Religion and Public Administration is a pioneering text. Ongaro and Tantardini succeed in reintroducing religion into the conversation about governance—not as a private sentiment but as a public ethic. For Muslims committed to

excellence in both spiritual and civic life, this book is a reminder that public administration, when informed by faith, can become an act of worship, justice, and mercy. It deserves a wide readership among scholars, civil servants, and anyone interested in the ethical foundations of governance in an age of religious plurality.