

***RECONCILING RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: FAITH IN MULTILATERALISM* BY  
IBRAHIM SALAMA AND MICHAEL WIENER (EDWARD ELGAR PUBLISHING, 2022)  
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The reconciliation of religion and human rights is an increasingly complex and present issue. To some, religion, whilst being a source of moral guidance and ethical principles, has been used to justify human rights abuses, violence, discrimination and persecution.<sup>1</sup> For others, human rights, as a traditionally Western concept, are incompatible with certain religious beliefs, and therefore the inclusion of religion and human rights can give rise to serious cultural tensions and unrest.<sup>2</sup>

In their book, *Reconciling Religion and Human Rights: Faith in Multilateralism*,<sup>3</sup> Salama and Wiener argue, however, that there is no inherent conflict between religion and human rights. They agree that it is important to promote and protect human rights based on universal principles, rather than that on any religious or cultural perspective.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the need for cooperation and understanding between religious and cultural communities is essential for the universal implementation of rights. International and interfaith cooperation is thus crucial to protecting human rights while setting a shared standard and expectation of values across varied religions and institutions. Multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, and regional organisations including the African Union, can provide greater and more specific frameworks for dialogue and cooperation between religious and cultural groups.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between religion and human rights can be traced back to its roots in the Enlightenment period, with many then and now arguing that religion is inherently incompatible with human rights and modernity.<sup>6</sup> The book rejects this 'simplistic' view and instead takes a 'multilateral' view to prove their compatibility. Specifically, the authors cite the works of foundations such as the Tony Blair Faith Foundation,

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<sup>1</sup> See eg Madhavi Sunder 'Keeping Faith: Reconciling Women's Human Rights and Religion' in John Witte and M. Christian Green (eds) *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2012) 281-298; Susan Moller Okin (ed), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton University Press 1999).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the tension between human rights norms and religious legal pluralism, see eg Helen Quane, 'Legal Pluralism and International Human Rights Law: Inherently Incompatible, Mutually Reinforcing or Something in Between?' (2013) 33(4) *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 675.

<sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Salama and Michael Wiener, *Reconciling Religion and Human Rights: Faith in Multilateralism* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 20-21.

which seek to promote interfaith understanding and cooperation in the promotion of human rights.<sup>7</sup> They further cite examples of successful multilateral initiatives that have united people through the use of religion. Examples of the United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week and the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities affirm the authors' analysis and offer practical material to reflect on the reconciliation methodologies between religion and human rights.<sup>8</sup>

Salama and Wiener then examined ambiguities surrounding human rights law and religion. One such example is the ambiguous status of non-State actors in the religious sphere (such as churches) in international law, which ought to be clarified in order for them to play a positive role in reconciling religion and human rights. Another area of law that requires clarification is the normative gap that exists in the context of faith and human rights law, such as the perceived conflict between women's rights and religion. Questions therefore arise in the interpretations of such ambiguities and the credibility and political acceptability of such interpretations when considering complexities and sensitivities.<sup>9</sup> The book provides answers to the above beyond just a textual analysis of international legal instruments, but also by exemplifying UN resolutions and examples of the positive impact faith actors had on the ground in promoting human rights.

The ambiguity and dynamic nature of international law often give rise to more questions than answers. However, the book addresses not only the specific questions these laws create, but also the reason for their imperfection. Because political negotiations create international laws, they can often be questioned for lacking effective enforcement measures.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the need to clarify hard law norms and promote soft law standards on religious matters, particularly in the international realm, is important for clarity on behalf of religious instruments and human rights.<sup>11</sup>

The book's aim for a holistic conceptualisation and reengineering of the interaction between faith and human rights as a progressive development centering around multilateralism entails both positives and negatives. Whilst the approach presents a hopeful vision bridging religion and rights, the authors themselves note that uniting religions together across cultures with the aim of promoting and protecting human rights requires sustained and serious efforts. Political and cultural leaders have many times criticised religions of other cultures and nations, and it has long been the case that religions hold human rights to varying standards and have differing views on the status, roles, and responsibilities of their adherents. It is therefore important to note, that while a multilateral approach and cooperation in this area of interfaith dialogue would be significant and theoretically appealing, in its practicality, it would likely prove challenging. Nevertheless, the book provides useful insights as to how the reconciliation of religion and human rights can take place moving forward.

To conclude, the book provides useful ideas and examples of how multilateralism and increased understanding of all stakeholders and institutions can lead to an enhanced connection between faith and human rights. The book also notes potential doubts about these ideas, such as a lack of synergy in interfaith dialogues.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 251.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 252.

Nonetheless, there may potentially be deeper doubts still to the rising tensions that may be faced in the acceleration of multilateralism.