



**Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson, and Teemu T. Mantsinen (eds):** *Handbook of Leaving Religion*. Brill, 2020, 358 pp.

Edited by religious scholars Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson, and Teemu T. Mantsinen, the anthology *Handbook of Leaving Religion* is divided into three parts: the first focuses on historical and major debates, covering antiquity and the major world religions in six chapters; the second, consisting of thirteen chapters, on contemporary case studies; the third, consisting of seven chapters covering a variety of disciplines, on theoretical and methodological approaches.

The anthology appears to be framed in line with areas of religious studies interested in secularization theory, given that it begins by introducing Peter Berger's seminal work and later rebuttal of religious decline. In recent years we have seen a marked increase of studies on populations presumed to be 'secularized', such as work on atheist, agnostic, and humanist organizations, as well as quantitative studies on the growing presence of the 'nones', especially in the United States, as well as the breakdown of religiously indifferent majority populations primarily in Europe. The name of the anthology – *Leaving Religion* – implies that the aim is to associate itself with this body of work. However, Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen are quick to specify in their introduction that the

concept of leaving religion – while often associated with irreligiosity, agnosticism, and atheism – 'can very well be about leaving one religion from another' (Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen, 2020, p. 1). That is, in this volume they have aimed to collect historical overviews of world religions, contemporary case studies, and theoretical and methodological aspects on the topic of leaving religion, focusing on various forms of religiosity, as well as on cases of *switching religion* based on the Pew projection that the total number of religious adherents worldwide is unlikely to decline.

This is an interesting approach. It attempts to bridge research on the borderline of studies on avowed irreligiosity – such as studies on new atheism, for example – and borderline cases of unclear allegiances that have previously been studied as the 'fuzzy middle', believing without belonging, diffused spirituality, and banal religiosity, and combines the two from a distinctly religious studies perspective. However, this paves the way to a good deal of conceptual confusion, and the editors do indeed spend a good portion of the introduction trying to nail down the concept of leaving religion, drawing on work from nonreligious and secularity research, as well as cult studies, thus connecting the concept with theories on deconversion and apostasy. Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen conclude that it is difficult to define what 'leaving' entails, arguing that a conversion or 'switch' of religious identity like-

wise entails leaving or a ‘shifting’ position similar to a deconversion. Their introduction thus highlights how shifting one’s religious identity has been associated with significant social costs in certain contexts, and that the social cost of leaving religion has not been a focus of nonreligious and secular studies generally. This volume therefore seeks to contribute to this lack by examining the complex emotions surrounding the adoption or discarding of dietary restrictions connected to particular religious traditions, for example.

This focus on the social cost of deconversion and conversion alike clarifies why it may be fruitful to combine both processes within the concept of ‘leaving religion’. The anthology takes a broad approach, encompassing historical debates on topics of conversion, contemporary case studies from a range of traditions, including established institutions like Catholicism, new religious or spiritual practices like Vipassana meditation, asylum seekers leaving Islam for Christianity, and chapters approaching the topic from a range of subfields within religious studies. It will therefore doubtless be a welcome addition to many introductory courses in religious studies. However, while devoting time to conceptualizing exactly what is and should be meant by ‘leaving’, the editors fail to define exactly what is meant by ‘religion’, thus skirting a major theoretical debate within religious studies – critical religion studies – which has irrevocably affected the contours of religious stud-

ies and deserves space in a volume used in undergraduate courses, as well as compounding the conceptual argument they make about leaving religion. If leaving religion both encompasses deconversion – which in this case would mean disavowing a religious worldview *in general* – and switching religious traditions, where ‘religion’ seemingly remains a constant, how is the latter a case of leaving *religion*? As Michael Stausberg points out in his chapter in the volume – ‘Leaving Hinduism: Deconversion as Liberation’ – leaving religion ‘is not the same as *leaving a religion*’ (Stausberg, 2020, p. 99).

Regardless of this conceptual confusion, the anthology offers a berth for studies that are topical and important. I am especially thinking of Nora Stene’s chapter ‘Leaving Islam for Christianity: Asylum Seeker Converts’, which explores the effect on the politics surrounding refugees on the individual’s faith, and how it relates to the tradition they have left in complex ways that are not necessarily highly critical or outspoken. For researchers from the field of nonreligion and secularity research lured by the title, there are some chapters in the second part of the volume that contribute especially to the emerging field of nonreligious and secular studies, given that it includes traditions that tend to be ignored in the field, which in its focus on outspoken atheism in the US and the UK tend to capture mainly former Christians, or people whose primary cultural reference is Christianity. While various forms of

Christian tradition comprise most of the case studies in this volume, there are some notable exceptions. A striking example is Masoumeh Rahamani's chapter, which focuses on New Zealand disaffiliations from the Vipassana movement, examining what it means to leave a religious movement in the West that is surrounded by a low level of tension with its societal contexts, and indeed benefits from the 'positive sociopolitical discourse surrounding meditation' in contemporary western societies (Rahamani, 2020, p. 131).

The volume's third and final part should be particularly useful for undergraduate teachers introducing the topic of religious studies as an empirical field to their students, while wishing to instil the breadth of methods and theoretical traditions that are available within the field. This includes historical, social geographical, anthropological, psychological, and sociological approaches. Of particular importance in this section is Teemu Taira's chapter 'Media and Communication Approaches to Leaving Religion', because it highlights the role of various forms of media in processes of leaving religion, a focus Taira points out is lacking in research on leaving religion and conversion, and provides the reader with a crash course in mediatization theory.

While the framing of the volume is somewhat inconsistent in that it is unclear if leaving a religion is indeed the same as leaving religion, compounded by the lack of a definition

of religion and engagement with critical religion theory, I would still recommend this book to religious studies scholars looking for a work dealing with the complexities of religious identity in historical and contemporary contexts, who are also interested in a handbook for undergraduate students introducing the available methodological and theoretical approaches within religious studies.

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