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Polak, Regina/Tosun, Aybiçe/Jödicke, Ansgar (Hg.): Religious and Non-Religious Narratives on Migration. Interdisciplinary Perspectives. Leiden: Brill 2025. 238 S. (Religion and Transformation in Contemporary European Society 38), geb. € 118,00 ISBN: 978-3-506-79795-7

This edited volume anchors itself in the confluence of three big and interconnected ideas: migration, religion, and narrative. These ideas are not singularly defined at any point—the volume’s editors, in fact, state an explicit preference not to provide overarching definitions—yet readers are unlikely to experience this as a problem. Not only do the contents and contributions across the volume convey a consistent understanding of what migration, religion, and narrative mean, but the volume also captures a coherent perspective on how these ideas relate to each other. This perspective seems to be: If religion is an important aspect of the experience of migration, then narrative is an important way to unlock the religious aspect of migration and place it within a wider sociopolitical context. This is a convincing and widely resonant thesis, one that is undoubtedly true in general terms. It is not just this thesis that makes the volume unique, however. The uniqueness of the volume comes, rather, through its geographic anchoring (in central, eastern, and especially southeastern Europe, as well as Anatolia), its institutional context (as an output from the European Cooperation in Science & Technology, specifically COST Action 2017), and its foregrounding of a novel research practice (the Narrative Cafés—more on these below).

The volume is the work of twenty-seven authors across nine chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion). The most important chapters are undoubtedly four and five, on the Narrative Cafés. As for the other chapters, these are organized by way of the “religious and non-religious” distinction in the volume’s title—a framing which does not really work, but which nevertheless does not prevent individual chapters from making valuable contributions in their own respective ways. These chapters can be sketched as follows. Ch. one provides a very broad survey of the respective narratives on migration among the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ch. two compares and evaluates efforts to promote interreligious dialogue in Austria, Croatia, and Serbia. Ch. three highlights the perspective of the Alevi migration from Turkey to Western Europe since the 1960s. Ch. six analyzes two films from the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki in terms of the liminal situations experienced by non-European refugees in Europe. Ch. seven discloses the religious dimensions of the commitments of the human-rights-based work of European NGOs that work with migrants. Ch. eight undertakes a rich and detailed analysis of narratives on migration across Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Finally, ch. nine interrogates the implications of the commitment—emphasized across the whole volume—to foreground the perspective of migrants. The authors here take the nuanced position that,

in an environment in which the dominant narratives on migration are those that emphasise threat and invasion, it is necessary to foreground narratives that allow migrants to represent their own experiences, not for the sake of excluding or eliminating alternatives but simply for the sake of comprehensiveness and accuracy.

As noted, the focal point of this volume is its description and evaluation of the Narrative Cafés. These were focus-group interviews for refugees who shared their narratives of migration. They took place across three specific events in 2023: Ankara on 29 April (featuring a group of Syrian women), Belgrade on 26 September 2023 (featuring a group of Iranian men and one Afghan man), and Vienna on 7 October 2023 (featuring a group of Syrian women, as well as one from Somalia). With an aim “to delineate thematic content within conversational discourse” (94), the Cafés faced certain unavoidable challenges, including language barriers, difficulties in recruitment (only 23 people participated in total, all of whom had legal residency status), and potential distortions in the discussions because of the presence of the interviewers and subtle biases to avoid conflict. Despite these issues, the Narrative Cafés do come across as valuable resources for migration research. Although the authors expend considerable effort in grounding the Cafés in existing research, with Meredith McGuire’s work on lived religion emerging as a particularly valuable reference point, what comes across most clearly—and appropriately—is the simple fact that religion is an important part of the phenomenon of migration into and across Europe, and narrative is an important means of bringing out this religious dimension with both sociological nuance and also empathy.

There are, however, two drawbacks to the project as a whole. The first is a relative absence of an actual migrant perspective. Out of the entire volume, only on pages 98–109 is there an actual discussion of what was said in the Migrant Cafés. This is unfortunate, not just because of its undermining of the volume’s oft-repeated claim to foreground migrant perspectives, but also because the material generated in these conversations seems to have been quite rich on subjects ranging from religion to race and ethnicity. The second problem is the unwarranted and self-contradictory binary (religious/non-religious) at the level of the title. This is self-contradictory because it is not actually reflected in the content of the volume, in that the so-called “non-religious” chapters feature religion, and vice versa. And it is unwarranted because it is enough simply to highlight, as the book does, that religion is an important aspect of both the migrant experience and the way in which migrants are received into European societies.

Nevertheless, if the volume does not always add up to a coherent forest, it nevertheless contains its share of worthwhile trees, especially since, as the editors note, eastern and southeastern European perspectives are not always foregrounded in discussions of migration in Europe. Particularly impressive is the detailed taxonomic work in ch. eight, which analyses the political landscape across four Eastern European countries in terms of religion and migration. There are also plenty of complementary projects alongside which this volume would make a good companion. The work from Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith on religion and the European refugee crisis comes to mind. Also relevant is the work in Germany of scholars associated with “postmigrant” approaches to the sociology of migration, such as Naika Foroutan or Regina Römhild, which seeks to foreground migrant experiences and expand sociological categorial frames in ways that can be sympathetic to religion. For Christian social ethicists, in particular, the volume fits well with the work of Daniela Lucia Rapisarda on Italian Protestants and trans-Mediterranean migrants and Eunil David Cho on Korean-American DACA recipients, both of whose projects similarly combine narrative approaches, migration, and

religion. Altogether, to highlight perspectives from eastern and southern Europe that combine these emphases, as this volume does, is to perform a valuable service.

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