

# Politics and piety

by [Stephen Healey](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

*God's Rule: The Politics of the World Religions*. Edited by Jacob Neusner. Georgetown University Press, 281 pp., \$29.95.

Years ago, Max Stackhouse taught me that the comic riff on the medieval question about angels and physical space--Can more than one angel sit on the head of a pin?--conveys a significant spiritual and political question: Can people with different beliefs live together without violence?

Jacob Neusner's goal is to help answer this question by illuminating the political views stemming from the world religions. In brief but surprisingly detailed accounts, all the authors Neusner includes in his book (luminaries such as Neusner himself, Martin Marty and Charles Curran, as well as newer lights such as Todd Lewis and Mark Csikszentmihalyi) discuss the politics of the world religions from five perspectives: classical sources, political theory, medium of expression, message about politics and relationship to nonbelievers.

James Luther Adams once quipped that "good teaching is knowing which lies to tell," and the authors here occasionally simplify to the point of telling lies. Nonetheless, generalizations confer readability, and this volume is very readable. Journalists and pastors can learn here how to write and teach about a wide range of traditions, making only those "errors" sanctioned by leading experts in the field. George Bush's cabinet also could profit from going to school here.

Some of us are well acquainted with the religious views represented by Marty (Protestantism), Curran (Roman Catholicism) and Neusner (Judaism). We may find the less-familiar terrain covered by Petros Vassiliadis (Eastern Orthodoxy), John Esposito and Natana De Long-Bas (Islam) and Csikszentmihalyi (Confucianism) more provocative. Insights from these less well-known traditions can be used to challenge and improve the liberal consensus--the separation of religion and politics.

Vassiliadis argues that the Eastern Orthodox approach to politics is essentially sacramental. In the classic formulation, prayer, devotion and practice legitimate

belief. Vassiliadis argues, however, that Orthodoxy also views theology as an act of contemplation, rendering it more experiential and less rationally deductive than Western Catholicism tends to be. Orthodox Christians see politics through the eschatological drama offered in the liturgy, from which they are sent in peace to deal with society's politics. Esposito and De Long-Bas set forth the deeply nonsecular assumptions and theology of classical and modern Islam. Islam seeks a society ruled by divine law. For Islam, liberalism's separation of politics and religion is a non sequitur. Csikszentmihalyi sets forth the riches of Confucianism, which of all the religions (with Islam as a close second) has spent the most time dealing directly with politics.

Confucianism articulates a secular theory of politics that retains a notion of transcendence. The idea of *tian*--an order that legitimates rule so long as rulers inscribe its reality on their hearts through wielding power virtuously--can be translated as heaven, but this is not the heaven that granny goes to when she dies. More natural than that, the concept is also more integrative and more humanistic than rational principles and maxims.

In short, Confucianism speaks a language that should be learned by those who think about politics and religion. Whereas Orthodoxy provides grounds to question secular time, Islam questions secular place, and Confucianism questions the secularity of the secular. Taken together, these three traditions, along with the others treated in this volume, raise questions about liberalism as a whole.

Should the title of a book on the world's religions really be *God's Rule*? What about nontheistic Confucianism and Buddhism? The editorial orientation comes from a Western religious framework. Except for a brief introduction by William Scott Green, an even briefer conclusion by Neusner, and terse references within the essays to how nonbelievers are viewed by the traditions, the authors engage in no comparative reflection.

I hope there will be a companion volume that engages in such comparison and dialogue. Such a book will be harder to produce, since it is easier to set forth the political theories within individual religions than it is to maintain a dialogue between them.

We do learn here about the individual traditions in surprising depth. As to whether countless angels can sit together on the head of a pin, my answer is yes--so long as they agree not to talk about religion and politics at dinner. The Eucharist calls all,

but it nourishes only some.