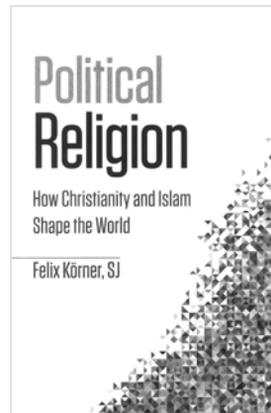


**Felix Körner, *Political Religion: How Christianity and Islam Shape the World* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2020). 978 0 8091 5496 8, pp.240, \$29.95.**

In this original and thought-provoking study Felix Körner, a Jesuit theologian and scholar of Islam, explores various forms of presence that religions can take in different societies. Körner presents his wide-ranging reflections in a clear structure. Chapters 1 to 6 are divided into three pairs, each exploring two contrasting models of the relationship of religion to society. Thus chapter 1 considers religion as culture: in this model people do not choose their own religion, but simply accept the givenness of the faith they have inherited. In stark contrast, chapter 2 focuses on religion as new identity: here authentic



religion is a matter of individual decision rather than mere inheritance. Körner notes the limitations of each model but particularly emphasizes how the 'new identity' model can lead to the ideologization of religion and rejection of culture in both Christian and Muslim forms of Puritanism.

The focus then shifts to violence and political power, looking first (chapter 3) at how these are endorsed by religion and then (chapter 4) at how religion can relativise and critique them. Chapters 5 and 6 consider religion as 'representation of weakness' (for example the voice of the poor and deprived) and as 'inspiration in a plural society'. Finally, in chapter 7, Körner moves beyond the sociopolitical concepts of chapters 1–6 and defines religion as 'acknowledgement of the other', concluding that 'religion is only faithful to itself when it brings to bear its power to shape the world, not by using its power violently, but in acknowledgement of the other' (p.238).

To appreciate the kind of book this is, and especially the type of engagement with Islam that it offers, it is helpful to understand that it arises from Körner's experience of teaching alongside a prominent Turkish Muslim scholar, Ömer Özsoy, a pioneer in new approaches to the interpretation of the Qur'ān and a leading figure in Muslim intellectual life in Germany today (p.xii). This gives a specific character and context to the book and helps us understand both what it does provide and what it does not.

Körner's aim here is to be a Christian interlocutor in exploratory, adventurous conversation with the kind of progressive, open Muslim intellectual discourse exemplified by Özsoy, and to do so in the context of contemporary Germany. Although the book moves through the carefully structured stages

noted above, it at the same time has a surprisingly unsystematic, eclectic character. The argument often moves fast from point to point, sometimes handling complex ideas very briefly before moving to something new, and also occasionally throwing in engaging personal anecdotes and historical asides. So the reader often feels in the midst of a lively and demanding intellectual conversation. My own experience was that while this approach can be very stimulating, Körner's multidisciplinary sophistication and the brisk tempo of his writing sometimes left me struggling to keep up, and wondering how the multitude of insights he offers ultimately hold together.

So although Körner writes with master's level students in mind, the reader should not expect a systematic, textbook-style overview of the most influential ways in which the relationship between religion and politics has been understood and practised. This clarification applies especially to the book's engagement with Islam, and explains what would otherwise appear to be very surprising omissions in a book concerned with how Islam shapes the world. For example, we hear virtually nothing of Islamic law (Shari'a) or of debates among Muslims about whether they should be seeking to create Islamic states. It is also striking that very few Muslim thinkers are mentioned at all; the occasional exceptions tend to be of the same broadly progressive outlook as Özsoy. A related aspect of Körner's approach is that for his frequent expositions of Qur'anic perspectives he draws not on the work of Muslim exegetes but of Angelika Neuwirth, the doyenne of contemporary German Qur'an scholarship.

In a key passage towards the end of the book, Körner quotes Benedict XVI's acknowledgement (at Assisi in 2011) of the critique of religion as promoting violence and intolerance. Benedict posed to his multireligious audience the challenge of addressing 'a fundamental task for interreligious dialogue': how to so understand and present the 'common nature of religion' that this widespread critique is adequately addressed (pp. 221–222). Körner explicitly accepts this challenge as the task for his final chapter, asking 'Can religion be defined in such a way that its definition already shows how violence runs counter to its essence?' (p. 219)

As we have seen, Körner's response is that the true, non-violent essence of religion lies in 'acknowledgement of the other'. The tenfold exposition of this concept which follows is the book's finale. It is also what Körner has been working towards from the outset, where he notes the impact on him of a journalist's question about why religions can be used to justify violence (p. vii). One could say that the book as a whole is Körner's extended response to Benedict's question, developed during the pontificate of Francis and shaped in many ways by the approach Francis has adopted to interreligious relations.

While this book is concerned with how both Christianity and Islam shape the world, it approaches the two religions in very different ways, with significantly more space allocated to Christianity than to Islam. Körner's own account is that it 'is not a comparative study but a Catholic ecclesiology seeking to benefit from Islamic testimonies' (p. xii). In the midst of the book's details, it may not be immediately apparent how any one particular 'Islamic testimony' has shaped Körner's thinking. However, the bigger picture to which he refers here is that it is precisely his deep engagement with Islam that has prompted Körner to frame a work of Catholic ecclesiology largely in terms of political theology. In doing so, he has provided an unusual, rich and challenging contribution to a vital area for Christian reflection today.

*David Marshall*