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Ani Sarkissian, *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion*. Oxford University Press: New York City, 2015. 245 pp.

Michigan State Assistant Professor of Political Science, Ani Sarkissian, has produced an impressive and useful piece of work – dense, highly wrought, and thought-provoking. Sarkissian tells us what she is about directly: “The central question of this book is why some countries choose to repress religion while others do not.” (4) To her credit, Sarkissian says flat out that all governments restrict religion. Fine. Yet, no historian of Western politics or political theory would find this to be news. The State has ruled, at least since 1651, when Thomas Hobbes wrote *The Leviathan*, or even even earlier, when Luther reshaped the politico-religious landscape of the West, or when the Erastian model of the church’s inferiority to the state became the rule in 16th century Western Europe. Our world has been that way ever since. Further, all polities, conceived in terms of Westphalian principles – that is to say, all “nation-states” -- presume the same hegemony of the State over what is variously called, “religion.” But, Sarkissian does not stop there, even though she skirts questions such as why religion seems to invite repression, or why religion deserves protection from repression by the state .

Sarkissian’s interests lie elsewhere, in sketching the layout of the macro-picture of the variations of gross kinds of religious repression. Therefore, she concludes that “higher degrees of political competition do not necessarily result in greater religious freedom” nor, that “differences in level of authoritarianism” are enough to explain religious repression in a particular society. (19) In layperson’s terms, the appearances, at any rate, of democratic processes, like elections, do not guarantee there being high degrees of religious freedom in a particular country. Instead, she argues that the whys and wherefores of religious repression can be better explained by attention to the gross structural constraints created by “religious divisions” in a society and how they

“interact with the strategic interests of politicians” in a whole range of different types of settings. (181) (Point to note: when Sarkissian uses the word, “countries,” she only means those she names “non-democratic countries” – 101 in all -- everything from Albania, through Haiti and Peru, to Zimbabwe.) Sarkissian, thus, argues that the structural nature of the target society constrains the results as well. Is religious identification and/or differentiation strong or weak there? Or, to what degree are religious groups embedded in civil society, and so on? Sarkissian’s book thus details a series of cases studies, showing how exquisitely calibrated the strategic purposes of government may collide with the structural character of the target society in question. Consider the case of Albania – a case of non-competitive polity, but with little religious repression. Sarkissian says *why* – proposes to have *explained why* -- this should be so: “Politicians fail to impose repressive religion policies because religious divisions have historically been low in the country.” She explains that this lack of repression is *caused by there being* “few conflicts politicians could exploit to obtain greater support.” (168) Or, take Sarkissian’s discussion of Singapore, and its use of the rhetoric of “harmony.” These neo-Confucian values are deployed as effective devices of repression of religions by Singapore’s authoritarian government against those religions falling outside the charmed circle of the Confucian world. (156ff)

I must recommend Sarkissian’s stunning assembling of a list of the actual ways governments restrict religion – a catalogue that would send Hobbes’ or Thomas Hooker’s heads spinning. We begin by preventing individuals from participating in religious services, or restricting certain groups from participating in religious services, then move on to restricting the location of, or architecture of, places of worship. Not enough, limiting the hours that religious gathering places may be open to the public helps repressive policies, as does coercing conversion, restricting proselytizing directly, or the formation of religious communities through discriminatory registration or monitoring requirements. Then, there is always the control over clerical appointments,

restricting religious speech, banning religious political parties, and so on and so on. (27ff) But, Sarkissian claims that these examples of repressive regimes reflect the character of the target, not solely the level of authoritarianism. Both governmental strategies and nature of the target society must figure in the mix. One “size” of repression does not fit all.

Accordingly, Chapters 1 and 2 introduce key concepts like religion, rights and repression, ending in an exposition of the varieties of religious repression. Then, in chapter 3, Sarkissian treats state repression of all religious groups, without exception. Four of the former Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, plus Azerbaijan, are Sarkissian’s targets. The interesting conclusion drawn from this chapter is that religious repression can occur in such a country, no matter what level of political competition there (such as the holding of elections). Not surprisingly, civil society is also under serious scrutiny in these places. Chapter 4 bring us 14 countries where all religions, except a single favored one, are repressed. Russia’s policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox church, at the expense of all others, models this style of repression. Other examples of the same style of repression are Turkey, Indonesia, Georgia. Commonplace in these cases are the innumerable annoying, bureaucratic demands, the often petty civil legal restrictions, and plain neglect. Taken together, they can make a religious, or any other, life excessively burdensome. Chapter 5 deals with state targeted repression of particular religious groups. Nigeria and Singapore come in for special mention as countries repressing those *particular* religious groups that are deemed to threaten social harmony. (129) The message in these countries is that if one wants to enjoy religious freedom, then they should avoid riling political leadership. (159) Once again, an independent civil society, of its very nature, creates potential anxiety for a wary political leadership. Controlling it can become an obsession. For civil society actors to retain freedom requires them to keep their political heads down, lest they lose them in a proud assertion of quixotic autonomy. Finally, in chapter 6, Sarkissian confronts the apparent paradox of non-democratic states (39, in all, by her count) where no

governmental repression of religious groups occurs. Religious majorities were not favored, neither “did the government seek to control it.” Similarly, religious minorities were free of repressive restrictions. (161)

Why? Sarkissian answers here seemed to me marred by language hard to distinguish from tautology – a needlessly mystifying kind of social science jargon. For instance, Says Sarkissian, “in countries that continue to experience non-democratic rule, the lack of perceived political threats from religious groups explains why leaders refrain from attempting to repressed them.” It is hard to resist a thunderous, “duh....” Of course, religious groups are unlikely to be repressed, if they do not constitute political threats! What is being learned or “explained” here? What “causes” have really been uncovered? Or, consider other statements that seem obvious or practically tautologies. The case of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, shows a lack of religious repression, despite there being little political competition, that is, despite many regimes there being autocratic. The reason for the lack of religious repression? A sudden burst of tolerance or civic virtue on the part of local autocrats? Or, perhaps, a surge in rational choices for religious liberty on the part of religious groups? No. Sarkissian believes, instead, that more attention should be devoted to whether politicians are motivated to use religious restrictions to coerce political opponents. Fine. Accordingly, in sub-Saharan Africa, where societal divisions follow ethnic lines, not religious ones, little is to be gained by exploiting religious distinctions. (179) But, something just smells a tad fishy about such a claim. Ought we be impressed by it? Doesn’t this putative *explanation* of the sub-Saharan case boil down to saying that the reason there is little religious repression there is that, in effect, little or no *marked* religion is to be found there? Again, what is being learned or “explained” here? What “causes” have really been uncovered?

One thing to watch, therefore, are Sarkissian’s uses of the word, “why.” In using the word, “why,” Sarkissian, in effect, signals her assurance of having discovered “causes.” But, one wonders whether she may be closer to having only made *statistical correlations*,

instead of *causes*. In crude terms, the difference is something like that between noting the *coincidence* of cases of lung cancer with cases of tobacco smoking, on the one hand, over against the discovery of the biological and chemical *mechanisms* by which tobacco smoking *actually brings about* the growth of cancer cells, on the other. I would submit that the enduring value of the book depends more upon Sarkissian's giving successful answers to questions about "causes," rather than whether her statistical correlations stand up to scrutiny. But, readers will need to decide for themselves whether Sarkissian's success at answering it outweigh the great data she has amassed and the suggestive lines of inquiry they provoke.

As a doubtless fine example as modern, Big Data social scientific study of religion, this book exemplifies very useful work of high quality, tidily written and formally rigorous. But, seen from the viewpoint of a critic of the scientific ambitions of mainline social science, I would counsel caution about its claims to have "explained" religious repression. Like good social research, it tells us where to look. But, it still leaves unanswered questions like why religion seems to invite repression in the first place?

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