

Debate: Why the religious factor has been forgotten in PA studies? (And how to remedy it)

Edoardo Ongaro & Michele Tantardini

To cite this article: Edoardo Ongaro & Michele Tantardini (05 Oct 2023): Debate: Why the religious factor has been forgotten in PA studies? (And how to remedy it), Public Money & Management, DOI: [10.1080/09540962.2023.2264054](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2023.2264054)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2023.2264054>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 83





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Debate: Why the religious factor has been forgotten in PA studies? (And how to remedy it)

Edoardo Ongaro ^a and Michele Tantardini ^b

^aOpen University, UK; ^bSchool of Public Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg, USA

Since Wilson's (1887) 'The study of administration', public administration (PA) has emerged as a field of scientific inquiry focusing on the managerial, political, legal, social, and cultural aspects of governmental institutions. In addition to being an academic discipline, PA is also a profession, practised by millions of people around the world, as well as an art.

However, among the several key explanatory factors employed by scholars in studying PA, one has often been overlooked, if not altogether neglected: religion. While this seems an indubitable omission in the field of PA, at least in the recent times, the re-emergence in the past decades of the religious factor in the cognate academic fields of political science and sociology is unquestionable. This debate article seeks to shed light on this omission by the PA scholarship, by investigating the plausible reasons behind it, and we advocate for the responsible (re)introduction of heedful consideration to the religious factor (where pertinent, of course) into the realm of PA studies.

To better appreciate this oversight, a useful starting point lies in evoking, albeit only by way of hints and certainly not exhaustively, how the religious factor has been studied in two adjacent academic fields: political science and sociology, with which, one might argue, public administration is intimately connected. For instance, in the field of political science, scholars have investigated the role of faith and religious beliefs in shaping political behaviour and political participation; in shaping policy decisions including foreign policy attitudes; and, ultimately, the legitimizing role religion has had and continues to have for political systems. With different emphases but in a similar vein, sociologists have investigated the role of religion and religious beliefs on social norms, on (personal) values, and on identity. They have also investigated, for instance, religious movements, the dynamics of religious communities and congregations, and the role of religion in addressing social problems.

In a review of the English-language literature, Ongaro and Tantardini (2023a) find that the influence of religion, faith, and spirituality on PA is far from being systematically studied, and the results are even more scant if religion alone is taken into consideration; yet, the few studies that encompass also religion in the explanatory framework did find it had—under certain conditions and for certain administrative phenomena—an influence. So, why has the religious factor been largely forgotten in PA studies? We

argue (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023b, 2023c) that there are several plausible reasons for this omission. The first one lies in a narrow interpretation of secularization. Classic secularization theory postulates that, in the face of modernity and scientific rationality, the religious factor is in dramatic decline in every aspect of life from more private to more social and communitarian ones, thus also affecting the role that religion may play on public administration. However, empirical evidence shows that classic secularization theory fails to describe, explain and predict what is observed in the world (Taylor, 2007) as secularization and decline in religious belief is not linear and not homogeneously distributed across places and times. Certain societies are (more) secularized today, but not homogeneously, and other societies are not secularized at all with the result that processes of secularization may ebb and flow, at different periods and in different areas of the world.

The *global*—not *globalist*—approach we argue for in a recent book (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023b) fits this line of discourse, and also tries to remedy to what may be considered the second reason for the omission of the religious from the field of PA: scholars have often focused on secular and Western-centric models of PA, thereby overlooking other existing ones, for example Confucian PA and Islamic PA (Drechsler, 2018a; Drechsler, 2018b), where religion may potentially and more prominently affect key social actors and the overall configuration of the public administrative space.

The third and fourth reasons regard both methodological and interdisciplinarity challenges of the field of PA. The religious factor may fit problematically into certain epistemological approaches, like certain forms of neopositivism, which have been in the ascendancy in recent decades. We consider (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023b) that adopting the perspective of methodological agnosticism (Bell & Taylor, 2015; Porpora, 2006) may help in this direction, because it suspends ontological and epistemological assumptions about 'what there is' and 'what can be known' about God, the world, and the human beings in societal settings to then study how the religious factors as such affects PA. In terms of the interdisciplinarity of the field, PA has perhaps historically been more isolated than other fields of study, like political science and sociology, and PA journals have historically been less attractive to a broader scholarship than the journals in the disciplines of political science and sociology (McGuigan et al., 2021). This insular approach may

have interfered with the cross-fertilization and enrichment of the field from other disciplines, thereby including religious studies and theology, thus leading to a de facto omission or exclusion of the religious factor from scholarly research in the field. By taking up the religious factors into research more systematically, the public administration community and journals may possibly get over a relative insularity, and cross-fertilize more with other key social sciences, like sociology and political science.

In a world where religion persists to shape individuals as well as societies, it is high time to fill this gap and—in a responsible and well-calibrated way—(re-)introduce the religious factor into PA studies. By responsibly bringing religion in its social and public dimension into public administration, public governance and public management, and the relationship of administration to public policy, we can widen our understanding of the role religious factors play in administrative phenomena, thence expanding and enriching PA as both a field of scientific inquiry and as a profession and a (noble) art.

ORCID

Edoardo Ongaro  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4431-1508>

Michele Tantardini  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5667-5734>

References

- Bell, E., & Taylor, S. (2015). Spirituality, religion and organization. In R. Mir, H. Willmott, & M. Greenwood (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to philosophy in organization studies* (pp. 550–58). Routledge.
- Drechsler, W. (2018a). Beyond the Western paradigm: Confucian public administration. In S. Bice, A. Poole, & H. Sullivan (Eds.), *Public policy in the 'Asian century'* (pp. 19–40). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Drechsler, W. (2018b). Islamic public administration in Europe. In E. Ongaro, & S. van Thiel (Eds.), *Palgrave handbook of PA and PM in Europe* (pp. 1031–1047). Palgrave Macmillan.
- McGuigan, G. S., Morçöl, G., & Grosser, T. (2021). Using ego-network analyses to examine journal citations: A comparative study of public administration, political science, and business management. *Scientometrics*, 126, 9345–9368.
- Ongaro, E., & Tantardini, M. (2023a). Religion, spirituality, faith and public administration: A literature review and outlook. *Public Policy and Administration*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095207672211468>
- Ongaro, E., & Tantardini, M. (2023b). *Religion and public administration: An introduction*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Ongaro, E., & Tantardini, M. (2023c). Advancing knowledge in public administration: Why religion matters. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 45(1), 1–6.
- Porpora, D. V. (2006). Methodological atheism, methodological agnosticism and religious experience. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 36(1), 57–75.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, W. (1887). The study of administration. *Political Science Quarterly*, 2(2), 197–222.

Edoardo Ongaro is Professor of Public Management at the Open University, UK. His research focuses on comparative public management, the strategic management of public organizations, and public administration theory.

Michele Tantardini is an Assistant Professor of Public Administration in the School of Public Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg, USA. His research focuses on performance management, social capital, and on the manifold relations between religion and public administration.