

2008

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Gregory J. (2008) "Gregory J. Moore on The U.N. Secretary General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership. Edited by Kent J. Kille. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press. 2007. 370pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol8/iss1/15>



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Abstract

A review of:

The U.N. Secretary General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership. Edited by Kent J. Kille. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press. 2007. 370pp.

Keywords

Ethics in religion, United Nations, Human rights, Moral authority

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The U.N. Secretary General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership. Edited by Kent J. Kille. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press. 2007. 370pp.

In his edited volume about the moral authority of the United Nations Secretary General, Kent Kille posits the question of whether there has been a clear connection between the personal moral codes of the first seven secretaries general (SGs) and the policies they pursued during their tenures in office (1946-2006). If so, which particular religious and/or other ethical principles have guided these seven SGs? The authors find that generally-speaking, the religious and/or ethical orientations of these SGs did shape their roles in office and the policies they pursued, and a detailed case study is offered for each of the seven former SGs. At the same time, the editor humbly concedes that “one must be cautious about tracing a direct connection between an ethical framework and specific decisions made by a secretary general” (346).

Trygve Lie, the first U.N. SG, in office from 1946-52, was a Norwegian social democrat. Despite his Lutheran background, author James Muldoon concludes that Lie’s values in his role as SG were fundamentally secular, shaped primarily by his experience as a labor lawyer. He was best known for keeping the U.N. together as the Cold War emerged, and for managing the U.N.’s robust response to North Korea’s invasion of South Korea in 1950. *Dag Hammarskjöld* (SG from 1953-61), a Swedish Lutheran, was one of the most spiritual and popular SGs—one who tragically died in a plane crash over Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) while on a U.N. mission. His Christian belief system and his understanding of Swedish neutrality led him to believe that the office of SG was that of a “secular pope,” with “an emphasis on a neutral secretary-general promoting peaceful internationalism” (Alyssa Lyon, in Kille: 122). Burmese Buddhist *U Thant* (SG from 1961-71) was also profoundly spiritual. Thant’s Buddhist philosophy contributed to his passive and peaceful demeanor, and his experience as a citizen of a colonized country gave him a strong belief in an impartial but proactive U.N. role in matters of peace and security (A. Walter Dorn, in Kille: 166). Despite his own personal passivism, Thant oversaw one of the most militarily robust operations ever undertaken by the U.N. – its Congo operation. Austrian *Kurt Waldheim* followed Thant (1972-1981), and his term in office is in retrospect a controversial one. After serving his term, Waldheim was accused of lying about his military service during the Second World War and of possible war crimes. Author Michael Kuchinsky concludes that Waldheim’s ethical framework was rather situational, shaped more by pragmatism than by his Catholicism or any other moral influence. The next SG, Peruvian *Javier Perez de Cuellar* (1982-91), came to office in difficult times but left on a high note as the Cold War ended, the Western powers sought U.N. support for the 1990-91 Gulf War, and the U.N. played an active role in this war. Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan and David P. Forsythe conclude that his Catholicism did not play a visibly important role in his ethical framework, but rather it was shaped by his strong commitment to international liberalism. *Boutros Boutros-Ghali*, a Coptic Christian from Egypt, followed as SG from 1992-96. Anthony Lang, Jr. argues his background as a lawyer played a more fundamental role in shaping his outlook and preferences as SG than did his Coptic faith. Lastly, Ghanaian *Kofi Annan*, a practicing Anglican serving from 1997-2006, proved to be one of the strongest moral presences as SG. While he has not been very forthcoming about his faith or his values, author Courtney Smith concludes that they were an important part of the ethical framework that guided Annan as he stood up to the U.S. over the Iraq War and facilitated the passage of the Millennium Development Goals.

This volume fills several important niches in various literatures, including studies of the U.N. Secretaries General; the roles of ethics and religion, and their relations to moral authority, leadership, decision-making, diplomacy, and international relations; and most specifically, the relationship between religious and ethical frameworks and SG policy-making in the U.N. Some of the chapters are stronger and more systematic than others in both painting an effective picture of the SG's ethical framework, and connecting that framework to the decisions the SG made in office. Overall this is an excellent volume and should prove useful and intriguing for students of all collegiate levels, as well as for researchers, diplomats, ethicists, persons of faith, and anyone generally interested in the U.N. and international peace and security.

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