

Book Review

Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion by

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Princeton University Press, 2015.

- Mehraj Din

The book under review “*Beyond Religious Freedom*” by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd intends to explore the idea of religious freedom—transcending the territorial boundaries and explore the politics of singling out religion as a basis from which to make foreign policy, international public policy, and conduct human rights advocacy. It historicizes the intense policy interest in religion that has taken hold in North American and European international public policy circles over the past two decades. Exploring the channels through which religion has been, and continues to be, “appropriated by worldly power holders”, it draws to the surface and explores the tensions that emerge between the forms of religion that are produced and governed these projects, and the broader fields of religious practice that they aspire to regulate and transform. What are the consequences when the category of religion becomes an object of international law and international public policy? What are the efforts, on both religious and political practices, when religions are “granted intentionality and importance” and become “shadow players” in global politics?

The introductory chapter contextualizes the overall theme of this book, offering a focused discussion that brings together several questions and concerns that have not been considered together before to develop three related arguments about these political projects and the fields in which they are deployed. First, it shows how particular constructs of religious freedom, religious tolerance, and the rights of religious minorities are being packaged into political projects and delivered around the world by states and others. Second, it contributes to the literature on religion and international relations by historicizing and politicizing the attempt over the past two decades to incorporate a concern for religion into the study and practice of global politics.

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Third, the book embeds the study of religion and politics in a series of broader social and interpretive fields by exploring the relation between these international projects and the social, religious, and political contexts in which they are deployed.

In Chapter 2—Two Faces of Faith, Sherman explores the understanding of religion that underlie this outpouring of academic and public policy production. An impressive amount of scholarship over the past two decades has been presented, and received, as a corrective that is intended to remedy an alleged secularist bias permeating the academy and other elite institutions up until the so-called rediscovery of religion. This reparative and recuperative impulse vis-à-vis religion goes hand-in-hand with the denigration and marginalization of whatever and whoever is identified as “secular” or “secularist.” It is presumed that religion had been excluded, and now that we have come to our senses, it needs to be “brought back in.” Chapter 2 historicizes this narrative and one of its most influential variations, in which the world is said to be witnessing a battle between “two faces of faith”: dangerous religion and peaceful religion. With some help from the domestic and international authorities, the story goes, the latter is destined to triumph over the former. If governments and other stakeholders can be induced to shape religion effectively and engage religious actors properly through advocacy for religious rights and freedoms, religion will serve as what one analyst describes as a “force multiplier.” It will contribute to international peace and security, economic growth, and human flourishing.

The further three chapters (3—5) are the core of this book exploring the politics of international advocacy for religious freedom, tolerance, and the rights of religious minorities, situating these efforts in the broader fields in which they are deployed. Chapter 3—*International Religious Freedom*—examines the politics of protecting and promoting an international right to religious freedom. Describing three consequences of framing social difference through religious rights and freedoms, it shows that these efforts single out groups for legal protection as religious groups, mold religions into discrete faith communities with clean boundaries, clearly defined orthodoxies, and senior leaders who speak on their behalf, and privilege a modern liberal understanding of faith. Drawing on examples from Myanmar, South Sudan, Guatemala, and India, this chapter repositions religious freedom as one among many possible modes of governing social difference in contemporary international relations. Rather than a stable norm or social fact that stands above the fray, the deployment of

religious rights is a technique of governance that authorizes particular forms of politics and regulates the spaces in which people live out their religion.

Chapter 4 turns to the history and politics of US religious engagement. Religious engagement and efforts to promote religious freedom are part of a decades-long project in which the promotion of American-friendly “free” religion in other countries is understood to benefit not only Americans but also the rest of the world by saving them from religious and political tyranny. These religious reform projects are sustained by a powerful myth of American exceptionalism that posits the United States as not only the home of religious freedom, but also the place where both religion and freedom have been perfected. Contemporary religious engagement programs are the latest in a series of American attempts to position the United States as the global guardian of free religion, and freedom in general. These include US attempts to promote “global spiritual health” during the Cold War, a USAID project intended to promote religious tolerance in Albania in the early 2000s, and contemporary religious outreach and liaison activities of US military chaplains stationed overseas. The debate over religious engagement, the chapter concludes, is not a question of whether religion can be separate from government, ignored or contained—as many separationists would have it. The debate over religious engagement is also not about whether “persons of faith” should be included in public life to help achieve collective goals. The question is how these entanglements between the US government and authorities abroad take shape when religion is privileged as a political and legal category: who gets chosen and why, which version of which religion is supported, which authorities are heard, and whose voices are silenced.

Chapter 5 turns away from US foreign policy and toward international political and legal attempts to constitute and govern groups as religious minorities. Proponents of minority rights have called for urgent measures to protect the Copts in Egypt, the Ahmadis in Pakistan, and the Bahá’í in Iran, Egypt, and elsewhere as a means of securing religious diversity, shielding minority populations from discriminatory practices, and preventing religious violence. State governments, international organizations, international tribunals, and human rights advocates promote religious liberalization as the antidote to the violence and discord that is often attributed to these divisions. Enshrined in international agreements and promoted by a small army of global experts and authorities, legal protections for religious minorities are heralded as the solution to the challenges of living with religious diversity.

To wind-up the discussion about the book, this volume “*Beyond Religious Freedom*” draws together and amplifies the findings of a broad and recent body of scholarship that pushes back in different ways against the received wisdom surrounding religious freedom. It draws on a combination of my own primary research—government reports, meeting proceedings, legal decisions, media reports—and secondary research across several academic disciplines to propose a theoretical and conceptual step forward in the study of religion and world politics. If there is a prescriptive thread running through the book, it is to highlight the “objects” of the proliferating number of projects being undertaken in the name of religious freedom, including those who may be indifferent to or chafe against their seemingly limitless aspirations and ambitions.
