



Religion and Power in Transition

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

Northwestern University
10 April 2014

“On freedom and persecution”

The US has been a leader in external religious freedom advocacy for decades, particularly during the Cold War when it promoted what was called ‘global spiritual health’ to combat the spread of communism. A few decades later this mandate was revived in a different geopolitical context with the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Today, international religious freedom advocacy enjoys a broad constituency that spans the US political spectrum. Almost everyone is for it, because there is something for everyone. Liberal legal internationalists celebrate religious freedom alongside other universal human rights as a pragmatic global norm of human solidarity and a polite extension of Rawls’ dictum “political, not metaphysical.” In Ben Berger’s felicitous phrasing, in this view law is seen as the curator, rather than a component, of cultural pluralism. Supporters also includes those for whom some form of Christianity serves as the foundation of human rights, democracy and freedom, such as the Berkley Center’s “Christianity and Freedom” project, which describes itself as an attempt to “explore Christianity’s contribution to the construction and diffusion of freedom.” American nationalists for whom the ‘city on a hill’ narrative resonates with a long-standing myth of American exceptionalism also identify with external religious freedom advocacy. European rights activists concerned about the fate of persecuted Christians



Elizabeth Shakman Hurd is Associate Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University with a courtesy appointment in Religious Studies. She is interested in religion, power, and politics, and particularly the ways in which the study of contemporary religion offers insights into current dilemmas involving difference, governance, power, law, and pluralism.

support it, as do missionaries for whom religious liberalization signals an openness to their missions that may not have existed, or was felt and framed differently, in earlier times. National security advocates, human rights activists, advocates for persecuted Christians, and many others, stand for religious freedom and the rights of religious minorities. It is not only evangelicals. It is also not only the United States. Canada, European states, the UK, and the EU are institutionalizing external religious freedom promotion. A year ago Prime Minister Harper launched an Office of Religious Freedom at DFAIT modeled on the U.S. State Department Office. The British and the EU promote religious freedom through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the European External Action Service.

Most of these advocates share a celebratory view of religious freedom as a stable, fundamental human right, legal standard, and social fact that can be objectively measured and achieved by all political collectivities. It is a matter of persuading governments to comply with a universal standard that leads to peace, harmony and prosperity. In this view, states and societies are positioned along a spectrum of progress, inclined either toward the achievement of religious freedom as a social fact, or slipping backwards into religious persecution and violence, caused, we are told, by religious hatred, backwardness, or cultural immaturity. My work seeks to complicate this story. Working alongside a number of others, many of whom have been part of the Luce-sponsored [Politics of Religious Freedom](#) project, it explores the politics of deploying religious freedom as a global political project, and more broadly, of relying on the category of religion as the basis for formulating foreign policy and international public policy. I identify a gap or divide between the religion that is chosen for reform, regulation, and freedom on the one hand, and the rest of the world's religion, on the other. More specifically, I suggest that the deployment of religious freedom as a

“Most of these advocates share a celebratory view of religious freedom as a stable, fundamental human right, legal standard, and social fact that can be objectively measured and achieved by all political collectivities.”

discursive ideal, universal norm, and technique of governance enacts this divide by shaping religion and religious governance in three specific ways: 1) by singling out individuals and groups for legal protection as religions and religious groups, describing and defining them in religious or sectarian terms rather than on the basis of other affiliations; 2) by presupposing and producing groups as discrete faith communities with clean boundaries and clearly defined orthodoxies which lend themselves to becoming objects of government regulation and reform; and 3) by sanctifying a particular, historically

contingent religious psychology that relies on the notion of an autonomous subject who chooses beliefs, and then enacts them. In this post I focus only on the dynamics of privileging religion as a socio-legal category.

Religious freedom advocacy singles out individuals and groups for legal protection as religions and religious groups, describing and defining, often in law, people and groups in religious or sectarian terms rather than on the basis of other affiliations—for example, as groups based on social class, historical ties, neighborhood bonds, kinship networks, or professional associations. Positing religion as prior to other identities and affiliations elevates the salience of whatever counts as religion in different contexts. It naturalizes and normalizes religious difference, and religious/secular difference. Basic categories of social conflict and coexistence are framed in religious terms. Social tensions and conflicts with multiple contributing factors are de-politicized, their causes explained away through reference to intractable religious difference.

This is occurring today in European and North American responses to events in the Middle East. Calls for protection of Christians and other minorities in Syria, Egypt and neighboring countries have been a cornerstone of European and North American rights advocacy in the wake of the uprisings. Policy elites on both sides of the Atlantic have responded with a religious rights mandate that stresses the rights of Christians and other minorities. In a 2013 speech the Religious Affairs Advisor at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Roland Dubertrand, noted that French diplomats had been “shocked” by the Arab spring, which had propelled Christian minorities into the spotlight in France, forcing Europeans to grapple with the question of how to “find policy toward eastern Christians and mobilize more at the European and UN level?” A similar script animates American discussions, with developments in the region read through the prism of minority (often Christian) rights and freedoms.

The primacy of what the US government has called the “religion factor” as a policy priority is driving efforts by North American and European governments to secure equality and justice abroad by recognizing *religious* people and communities in law, and seeking to guarantee their religious freedom. These measures adopt religion as a category to draw together individuals and communities as corporate bodies that are depicted as in need of legal protection to achieve their freedom. Taking religion as a platform from which to make foreign policy sets in motion particular forms of politics in which religion

“The attempt to secure a right to religious freedom in law is one mode of governing social diversity and difference among others”

becomes marked as a matter of difference. In the case of the contemporary Middle East, this obscures the original impetus for the revolts over the past several years, which include calls for accountability, just governance, dignity, and an end to dictatorship. Many factors lead to social exclusion, discrimination, and violence: the aftershocks of colonial displacement, economic inequalities, state persecution, social and racial tensions, and so on. We lose sight of these issues in the focus on redemption through religious rights.

But the paradox of ‘the religion factor’ runs deeper. The structural logic of promoting Christian rights (or Hindu rights or Muslim rights) contributes to the sectarianization of social and political order along the very lines of difference that it is intended to mediate or transcend. It does so by *over-coding* two particular kinds of boundaries: boundaries between religions, and boundaries between religion and non-religion. These boundaries become invested with authority and significance. They become naturalized and normalized—becoming regular features on the landscape. Agency and community take shape around religious, and religious-secular divides. People are compelled to choose a side. Individuals with multiple affiliations, of mixed backgrounds, or those dissenting from recognized religions are uneasily accommodated. Some fall between the cracks, subject to what William Connolly describes as “the violence accompanying these codes.” Like the ideology of pluralism described by Pamela Klassen and Courtney Bender, religious freedom articulates and naturalizes the very boundaries that it purports to diminish, overcome, or mediate.

The attempt to secure a right to religious freedom in law is one mode of governing social diversity and difference among others. While it may serve some individuals and groups in some circumstances, in the long run it raises the profile of religion as a matter of difference and, in many cases, exacerbates the potential for social tension, discrimination, and violence. Promoting Christian rights in Syria or Muslim rights in Myanmar generates what Bruno Latour would describe as a powerful truth about a contingent and fluid set of circumstances. It makes other contributors to conflict less visible. It obscures the potential of alternative, cross cutting non-sectarian projects, authorities and identities. Dissenters, doubters, and those identifying with nonorthodox versions of protected traditions struggle to fit in. Some don’t, because they can’t. Non-sectarian factors contributing to social conflict and coexistence become harder to see, and cross cutting alliances harder to form, with heightened barriers to entry.

The pressure for normative closure—for a ‘solution’ that works—is strong. Powerful forces today, including the law itself, incentivize individuals and groups to articulate their demands and claims in the language of religious freedom and religious rights. Some may perceive that they have no alternative but to seek protections on these grounds. This is understandable. If being a persecuted Christian makes it more likely that asylum will be granted, then it should not be surprising if we see a rise in persecuted Christians globally. The point is not to judge individuals who find themselves in difficult circumstances. But there is a

bigger story here, and as scholars we are in a position to tell it, stepping back from more immediate pressures to understand the world that is being created when religion becomes a privileged category and a basis for making law, conducting foreign policy, and advocating for the rights of both individuals and groups.

One place to start is to be more cautious in selecting our words when describing episodes of violence or discrimination. In a recent lecture at the Council on Foreign Relations, the former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, discussed the causes of the violence in Nigeria. He helpfully warned his audience not to fall prey to the temptation of describing it as “religious” violence: “Are people [in Nigeria] being killed because they’re Muslim, herders, or Hausa? It is often very hard to say.” So we might ask, are Syrians being killed because they are Christian, regime supporters, or employed by or related to a particular leader of the resistance movement? It is often hard to say. Before rushing to the conclusion that religious persecution is the culprit—and religious freedom the solution—it is worth thinking carefully about what it entails to protect religion in law, to posit religion as a stable and coherent category in political and policy analysis, and to privilege it as a basis for making foreign policy and conducting human rights advocacy. We might be surprised by what we find.