

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd: *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, 200pp.

A couple of decades ago religion was of little interest in international relations. The change has been dramatic. According to Timothy Fitzgerald, of about 1,600 articles published in selected IR journals, only six between 1980 and 1999 featured religion as an important influence. Vendulka Kubálková locates the 'turn to religion' in IR to the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century, although she notes that one of the foundational conferences took place in 1998. It is one thing to examine why this took place, but another to examine how religion has been conceptualised. Opting for the latter approach, Fitzgerald argues in his *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth* (2011) that among those who study religion and politics there is a 'tendency to talk about religion as though it is a thing or even an agent with an essentially different nature from politics' (p. 107).

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's approach is related to Fitzgerald's, but it is not identical. While Fitzgerald's study concentrates on scholarly conceptualisations, including some popular non-academic authors, Hurd examines how the category of religion operates in global politics and governance as manifested in state-led policies, supranational courts, the European Union, NGOs, and others. Her argument in *Beyond*

Religion Freedom is that there is a tendency to 'religionise' issues and conflicts in contemporary international politics and use religion as a somewhat unproblematic explanatory category and causal factor. In this sense the study represents an argument against the 'religion made them do it' approach, but it also demonstrates the kind of contemporary global politics enacted when the category of religion is employed.

The opening example is striking. Hurd demonstrates how the numbers of 'Christian martyrs' have been exaggerated, as they have included people who happened to be Christian, rather than being limited to those who have died because of their Christian identity. The problem is that complex, overdetermined situations are reduced to the narrative of religious persecution and that the overall result is a politics defined by religious difference.

The study does not focus on a particular empirical case. Instead, it uses various examples from different parts of the world to make the argument plausible and concrete. It discusses the Alevis in Turkey, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and the K'iche' in Guatemala, among others. The examples vary from brief references to quite detailed explorations of particular situations, the Alevis in Turkey being an example of the latter. While many of the expert statements the book mentions are based on 'the West' (and some supranational organisations), the empirical location of the examples is most often outside the western

world, without neglecting, however, the involvement of the United States. This combination justifies the concept of 'global politics' in the subtitle of the study.

The first chapter is an introduction. In addition to laying out the parameters of the argument it introduces three concepts which organise the whole study. These are expert religion, lived religion, and governed religion. Expert religion is 'religion construed by those who generate "policy-relevant" knowledge about religion' (p. 8), whereas lived religion is the more diverse and multiform 'religion as practiced by everyday individuals and groups' (p. 8). Governed religion is what is identified as religious for the purposes of law and governance. Experts' constructions of religion (as governed religion) are typically coherent entities which are used in analysing complex situations and by which economic, historical, and political contexts are obscured. It is rarely – if ever – capable of representing the instability and incoherence of particular 'religious' entities, and it lacks the proper means to represent non-orthodox versions, doubters, and dissidents. In this way it can be said that governed religion, as constructed by experts, is a simplified version of the huge variety inherent in lived religion.

The second chapter, 'Two Faces of Faith', deals with contemporary politics' distinction between good and bad forms of religion. 'Good religion' refers to the idea that religion contributes to the common good

(much better than secular organisations), and takes the wind out of the sails of extremist movements. 'Bad religion' refers to the 'rotten apples' sometimes labelled as fundamentalists or terrorists. It is not simply that this discourse divides religions into good and bad – that would not be an original insight – but that the former is offered as a solution to the latter in contemporary global politics. When I asked my students to read a couple of interviews with senior international politicians like Tony Blair and John Kerry, who have recently been commenting on religious issues, and reflect on what they have said on the basis of Hurd's analysis, they were convinced that Hurd had a point. What remained unclear for them was how to go beyond the distinction. It is obvious, however, that this discourse tends to marginalise those who identify as secular or secularist.

Chapters three to five explore expert constructions of religion and their policy implications by shifting the focus from one chapter to another, from freedom in 'International Religious Freedom' (Chapter three), to religion-related US foreign policy operations and bodies in 'Religious Engagement' (Chapter four), and rights in concentrating on minorities in 'Minorities under Law' (Chapter five).

Chapter three argues that rather than seeing religious freedom as a fundamental human right, it should be understood as an 'historically situated form of governance' (p. 38). According to this view religious freedom singles out groups for le-

gal protection as religious groups, pushes them to clearly defined orthodoxies, and privileges a modern, liberal understanding of faith (i.e., religions are seen to be based on beliefs). Chapter four suggests that American religious engagement programmes, including attempts to export a model, are evidence of the continuing promotion of the idea that the United States is the best model for religious freedom. The main difference in recent decades has been that the target has changed from strategic moves against communism to reshaping religion everywhere to match the ideals of the United States. Chapter five's focus is on the Alevis in Turkey, asking what happens when religion becomes an operative category in the protection of minorities. Hurd demonstrates admirably what there is to gain and lose, depending on whether Alevis are classified as part of the Sunni tradition, a non-Islamic community, or even as having a non-religious identity.

The sixth and final chapter, 'Beyond Religious Freedom', presents conclusions. While it repeats the main ideas expressed in the previous chapters, it is here that Hurd explains most clearly the study's subtitle. The new global politics of religion is something which 'intervenes by inviting individuals and groups to self-identify as religions' (p. 112) and makes 'religion the point from which social relations are enacted and institutional policy' developed (p. 113). Furthermore, she points to a path for future studies by suggesting

that instead of reproducing normative religion-related discourses 'one can study the ways in which religion is delimited and deployed in specific legal, institutional, historical, and political contexts, by whom and for what purposes' (p. 121).

The overall aim of Hurd's argument is to provide 'a glimpse of what the world would look like after religion is dethroned as a stable, coherent legal and policy category' (p. 7). This reminds me of Winnifred Fallers Sullivan's claim, presented in *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), that religion cannot be satisfactorily defined for legal purposes and that it might therefore be a good idea to drop the category from legal use.

One problem is that although she powerfully – and correctly, in my opinion – criticises the political salience of state-sponsored 'expert religion', Hurd leaves the category of lived religion intact. This is also true of Sullivan's study. While it may not be either's intended message, it is possible to read them as suggesting that lived religion is authentic (as opposed to a less authentic, politically salient, and conceptually problematic expert religion). It is significant that in the above quotation Hurd does not write about dethroning religion as an analytical category but about dethroning religion as a coherent legal and policy category.

Furthermore, it is intriguing that she makes no mention of Fitzgerald, although his *Religion and Politics in International Relations* contained a

lengthy commentary on her earlier book. Fitzgerald's critical point was that while Hurd's analysis of the historical construction of separation between religion and (secular) politics was useful, she still – contrary to Fitzgerald's own preference – keeps religion in her analytical vocabulary. This criticism applies to *Beyond Religious Freedom*. While she masterfully challenges the rationale behind the production of 'religion' for the purposes of law and governance, she does not find it problematic to write about religious practices throughout the study.

Furthermore, if there is a danger in 'romanticizing lived religious practice' (p. 13) in using the opposition between governed and lived religion, as Hurd herself points out, why not simply write about people's messy and complex practices rather than about lived religion? At least it should be obvious that it is not only expert religion that involves power relations. What she calls lived religion is not really any different, as everyday life is also full of negotiations about social positions and struggles over scarce resources, and religion is a category which operates in such processes in an equally problematic manner, even when experts and officials are not involved.

Hurd's study indicates that there is great potential in furthering the conversation between international relations and the study of religion, since both have great interest either in religion or in what people deem to be religion. Despite her references to scholars in the study

of religion, there are still gaps which need to be bridged. One such gap is the approach between those who are critical of using religion as an explanatory category in global politics, but keep religion in their analytical vocabulary (like Hurd), and those who agree with the criticism concerning governed religion, but see little value in any analytical definition of religion, including lived religion.

Overall, Hurd's contribution is an excellent and highly useful reminder that there are good reasons to be critical of the explosion of discourse on religion in governmental practices and global politics, and that there are equally good reasons to conclude that religion is a category which is actively involved in how power relationships are organised in the world.

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