Interview - Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

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Elizabeth Shakman Hurd is Professor of Political Science and Religious Studies at Northwestern University. Professor Hurd's latest book *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton, 2015) has attracted international attention by framing important debates around what the author believes is a problematic intersection of policy, religion and political interest in global affairs today. In this interview she discusses the implications of her scholarship and where she believes the study of religion in IR is headed.

What motivated you to write your latest book *Beyond Religious Freedom*?

Beyond Religious Freedom is my response to what I see as a need to rethink how we approach the study of religion and politics in the field of international relations. There's been a gold-rush mentality lately as scholars scurry to 'get religion right' – but many of these efforts are confused, or even troubling. The problem, as I discuss in more detail elsewhere, is that international relations 'got religion' but got it wrong. *Beyond Religious Freedom* encourages scholars to step back from the political fray. It neither celebrates religion for its allegedly peaceful potential nor condemns it for its allegedly violent tendencies. Instead, I propose a new conceptual framework for the study of religion and public life. It accounts for the gaps and tensions that I perceived between the large-scale international legal, political and religious engineering projects undertaken in the name of religious freedom, toleration, and rights, and the realities of the individuals and communities subjected to these efforts.

This disjuncture is reflected on the cover, in a photo taken by Samia Errazzouki of the desert with a sand berm in the distance and hand-made flowers sticking out of the sand in the foreground. The Moroccans built the berm in the 1980s during the war against the Polisario in an effort to divide Western Sahara, which they control, from the free zone controlled by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The flowers are a project by a Sahrawi artist named Moulud Yeslem called For Every Mine, a Flower. He plants them in the desert as a protest against landmines. The visual contrast between the 'high' politics represented by the wall, and Yeslem's protest movement, are suggestive of the current global politics of religion. The unbridgeable distance between the berm and the flowers echoes the gap between constructs of religious governance authorized by states and others in power, and the lived experiences of those these projects seek to govern, reform, and redeem. It's the disjuncture between these projects and the realities of the individuals and communities subjected to them that drives the argument forward. Like the wall in Morocco, which was built to divide and control the Sahrawi population, today's forms of global religious governance also divide and discriminate, often in the interests of those in power.

***Beyond Religious Freedom* has been acclaimed as a ground breaking work, with several special edition studies dedicated to its contents. Why do you think it has attracted such attention?**

Thanks! I think the book captures something important about our contemporary moment. 9/11 and the rise of counterterrorism led to new, though not entirely unprecedented, levels of state-sponsored foreign religious interventionism. By religious interventionism I'm referring to government-led efforts to support "moderate" religion and suppress "intolerant religion." The good/bad framing, or the "two faces of faith" as I call it in the book, is a discursive framework that organizes how experts and scholars think and talk about religion and global politics today. It goes without saying for the US and most of our allies that the flourishing of free and tolerant religion, interfaith

dialogue, and protections for minority rights are basic requirements to free societies from violence, economic deprivation, gender discrimination and other social ills. In this view the right kind of religion, supported by states, has emancipatory potential. Moderate religion is seen as the treatment for social and political problems, failed states, lack of development, and so on. Religiously free states and societies are said to naturally oppose terrorism, support the free market, and incline toward democracy.

This consensus is shaping our religious and political worlds. Governments see it as their job to help produce good religion and discipline bad religion. Religious and social ways of being in the world are being nipped and tucked to meet a global demand for tolerant religious subjects who enjoy their 'freedom' under law. States are committing money and gathering expertise to achieve these objectives. Experts have appeared to satisfy a growing demand for knowledge about how to 'manage' religion, particularly Islam.

People see and sense these developments. They are wondering what to make of it, looking for new vocabularies that make it possible to talk about this in new ways. That's where my work fits in. The book opens conceptual and political spaces that lie outside, beyond or after religious freedom. As I've noted elsewhere, to situate these powerful discursive frameworks and their materializations in a longer historical trajectory parochializes, historicizes and de-dramatizes them. It's a reminder that there are other ways of living together, both past and present.

You identify three types of religion in global politics: expert religion, governed religion, lived religion. Why are these distinctions important?

I'd like to see us, as a field, let go of the presumption that we know what we're talking about, (and that we're all talking about the same thing) when we talk about religion in contexts of politics, law, and governance. The categories of expert, governed and lived religion are an attempt to move in that direction. They provide an "on ramp" to a more complex and nuanced field of political-religious-legal-governmental understanding and practice. We can't talk about these things as if they aren't deeply, even constitutively, inter-related.

Expert religion is religion as construed by those who generate what is understood to be "policy-relevant" knowledge about religion, including scholars and other experts, secular and not. *Lived religion* is religion as practiced by ordinary individuals and groups as they interact with a variety of religious authorities, rituals, texts, and institutions and seek to navigate and make sense of their lives, connections with others, and place in the world. Official or *governed religion* is religion as construed by those in positions of political and religious power. This includes states (often through the law), national and supranational courts, international and nongovernmental organizations, and churches and other religious organizations, hierarchies and authorities.

This framework encourages scholars and others to grapple with the power dynamics that shape both religion *and* politics. It helps us see the limitations of attempts to establish once and for all whether "Islam" is compatible with "democracy," to give one example, and other like-minded normative projects made possible by an unwarranted degree of certainty about what "religion" is and does.

We cannot ignore religion by collapsing it into other domains of social life or reducing it to social, economic, or political variables. Nor can we rely on a singular, trans-historical, and transcultural notion of religion as a freestanding descriptive and analytical category; religion cannot be treated as if it were a differentiable quantity that can influence society and politics without being merged into it and shaped by it. We need other ways between and beyond these two extremes. The challenge is to neither absorb religion fully into the political nor allow it to stand apart from history. The best work in the field does this well.

You offer a very strong critique of state-led agendas on issues such as religious freedom and countering religious extremism. In light of this critique, how *should* states approach human rights and security challenges that involve religion?

As I've said, religion is not an isolatable entity and we cannot treat it as such. It cannot be imagined as a variable or

as an agent segregated from other dimensions of human sociality. Religion is better understood as are other intersected categories such as gender, race and class: deeply enmeshed and entwined with legal and other forms of collective governance in complex and context-specific formations.

In policy terms, this means that state bureaucracies do not need independent offices predicated on the notion that religions are entities set apart from the world requiring special treatment. To create separate offices and to offer separate courses for diplomats and bureaucrats in religion, religious literacy, or religious toleration deepens and institutionalizes the presumption that religion is an entity that can be segregated from other aspects of collective life. It can't. Rather than training in religious literacy, diplomats and bureaucrats should be trained in the languages, histories, politics, and ways of life of the communities in which they will serve or provide expertise. Attention to religion, language, history, gender relations, class, racial and ethnic relations, among other concerns, all should be part of the training. This shift in emphasis toward an integrative rather than segregated approach to the religious field is not merely academic: it leads to different policy prescriptions and outcomes. The book illustrates this point in an analysis of the international community's response to the plight of the Rohingya people of Myanmar.

This approach to religion also requires a shift in how policymakers and experts talk and write about global situations and conflicts that are portrayed as essentially 'religious' in nature. This descriptive move misses or misconstrues complex socio-political situations that cannot be reduced to problems of religious difference, violence or discrimination. Instead of asking, "why are Burmese Buddhists persecuting Muslim minorities such as the Rohingya?" we need to ask, what factors—economic, political, social, religious, geographical, and so on—are enabling the comprehensive exclusion of the Rohingya from Burmese society? What's the role of the state and other interests, including powerful monks' organizations such as 969, in these exclusionary practices? Who benefits from framing this situation as a matter of *religious* difference, as a problem of (a lack of) *religious* freedom or toleration, and what precisely do we lose sight of in that framing? What does reframing the question in the way that I propose approach enable us to see differently, and how does that perspectival shift impact how the international community responds to the crisis?

Policymakers need to adopt a cautious and critical sensibility when they encounter terms like religious conflict, religious minority, religious violence, religious freedom, and even religious diversity and religious pluralism. They need to take a step back and think about what it means to describe a conflict or a situation as 'religious.' They need to ask whether it might be advisable to broaden the lens to capture a bigger picture in which religious histories, authorities, traditions, and practices are entangled in, and partly constitutive of, a series of economic, social, national, ethnic, political, and legal formations.

Last year you also co-edited a compendium titled *The Politics of Religious Freedom* (Chicago). What do you see as the defining characteristic of this book?

I'll be teaching that book for the first time next quarter to Northwestern undergraduates, and look forward to seeing how they respond. I'll be able to give a better answer after I've heard from the students.

Politics of Religious Freedom is an ambitious collective attempt, made possibly through the generosity of the Luce Foundation, to reconsider the received wisdom which suggests that securing religious freedom will result in peaceful co-existence and ensure individual and associational flourishing vis-à-vis the state. It challenges the assumption that a deficit of religious freedom is the motivating condition behind—if not the proximate cause of—insecurity and violence. An exclusive focus on religious freedom, as a universal and achievable standard and cosmopolitan ideal that must be globalized at all costs, distracts from, and arguably makes it impossible to see, a series of histories, practices and processes that are not captured under this ideological rubric but are crucial to an understanding of these issues. As some of our contributors suggest, in India, for example, framing problems of inter-communal relations in terms of religious freedom often obscures far more persistent and ongoing forms of discrimination and co-existence that are not reducible to religion.

The volume also challenges the notion, nearly hegemonic in international policy circles today, that the right to religious liberty is a universally realizable ideal, a kind of measuring stick that an impartial observer can pick up, to

measure its implementation or violation. Official American and UN reports on religious freedom, for example, tend to conceive of freedom of conscience in individualist terms, often assuming that religious freedom understood in this way is universally valid and can be objectively assessed. We tell a different story, showing that the meaning and practice of a right to religious liberty varies and shifts depending on the model of state-religion accommodation and the impact of other historical and transnational forces. Is the source of instability today really a lack of religious freedom, or are the causes of social scapegoating and discrimination located elsewhere? What might constitute persuasive evidence concerning the presence or absence of religious freedom and any resulting expansion or diminution of violence? What can it mean to practice religion freely without constraint, particularly given that liberal notions of freedom are foreign to many religious traditions? If indeed religious freedom is not one thing, then is the variety of forms it takes commensurable with a global project that seeks to implement standardized shared protocols and norms for its adjudication? What sorts of institutional and practical structures would such implementation require? For whom, under what conditions, and under which terms? These are the questions explored in the volume.

Do you believe that the study of religion in international relations has hit its peak or will it continue to grow?

I see a new field taking shape around the study of the intersections of religion, law, society, and politics, including global politics. There are a number of very important books recently published or in the pipeline in this emergent field. Some examples are: a theoretically rich study of how religion became recognizable as a differentiable category in international relations through two distinct yet not unrelated historical processes: the partition of South Asia and the foundation of the state of Israel (Maria Birnbaum); a meticulously researched legal ethnography of the perilous politics of constitutionalizing Buddhism in postcolonial Sri Lanka (Benjamin Schonthal); an ambitious attempt to decouple tolerance from liberalism to illuminate Indonesian politico-religious history and to challenge strands of mainstream political science and democratic theory that insist on the necessity of liberal forms of toleration to pave the way for democratization (Jeremy Menchik); a brilliant ethnography of the lived realities of the 25-year long experiment in Islamic state-building in Sudan (Noah Salomon); a study of the politics of secularism, assimilation, and the crisis of multiculturalism in France that draws deeply on literary, political and philosophical sources (Yolande Jansen); an exhaustive study of the constructions of religion in four United Nations Human Rights committees across several decades (Helge Årsheim); a new history of the transnational politics of religious freedom in the Allied Occupation of Japan at the close of World War II (Jolyon Thomas); and a genealogy of the making and transformation of the contemporary category of Islamic law in India, Malaya, and Egypt during the British colonial period (Iza Hussin).

A signature and strong characteristic of all of these works is a shared commitment to understanding political-religious realities and histories while resisting the urge to prescription and normative closure. Each wrestles, in different ways, with the question of how to remain open to epistemologies and ontologies that cast doubt on modern certainties such as the supremacy and inevitability of secular law, the indispensability of international human rights and freedoms, and the primacy of the so-called free market. It's an exciting moment to be part of the conversation.

If I were setting out to investigate religion in IR for the first time, what three works would you encourage me to read?

Any or all of the books I've just mentioned. And then look in unexpected places. Three recent books I've found helpful for thinking about religion and the international are Bethany Moreton's *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*, Jason Ānanda Josephson's *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, and Matt Scherer's *Beyond Church and State: Secularism, Conversion, Democracy*. And by all means pick up something by Winnifred Sullivan (*Impossibility of Religious Freedom*) or Talal Asad (*Formations of the Secular*). You can't go wrong.

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This interview was conducted by John A. Rees during a symposium on 'The Politics of Religious Freedom in the Asia-Pacific' hosted by the Religion and Global Society Program, an initiative of the Institute for Ethics and Society at the University of Notre Dame Australia. John is the curator of The Religion Gap blog on E-IR.