

Hamilton and Griffin on Rights

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Why I Wrote This Book

[Why I Wrote This Book](#) Oct 07, 2015 | [Professor Elizabeth Shakman Hurd](#)

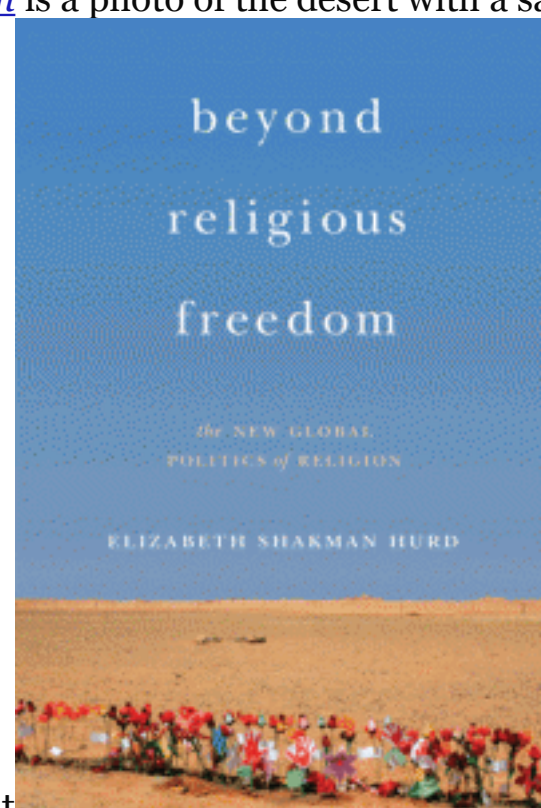
Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*



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On the cover of [Beyond Religious Freedom](#) is a photo of the desert with a sand berm in the distance and, in the foreground, a line of colorful hand-made flowers sticking haphazardly



out of the sand. The Moroccan government built the berm in the 1980s during the war against the Polisario to (literally) draw a line in the sand dividing Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara from the free zone controlled by the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. At 1,600 miles long, it is not surprising that the Sahrawis refer to the berm as *al-Jidar*, the wall. In stark contrast to the desolation and isolation of the wall, in the foreground of the photo is a row of flowers with cheerful decorated notes attached to their stems. This is a project by Sahrawi artist [Moulud Yeslem](#), Por Cada Mina Una Flor, or For Every Mine, a Flower. Yeslem collects and “plants” the flowers in the desert in peaceful protest against the estimated seven million landmines that are scattered throughout the “no-man’s land” bordering the wall. Each flower has a note attached with a message of solidarity for the Sahrawi people.

The sharp visual contrast between the form of politics represented by the wall and Yeslem’s modest popular protest movement sets the stage for the book’s analysis of the contemporary global politics of religion. Echoing the seemingly unbridgeable distance between the berm and the flowers, I wrote *Beyond Religious Freedom* to draw attention to the gap between the powerful constructs of religious governance—religious freedom, religious outreach, disestablishment, and interfaith dialogue—authorized by states, experts, and others in positions of power, and the lived experiences of the individuals and communities that they aspire to govern, reform and redeem. The book charts the disjuncture, exclusions, and tensions between the large-scale social, legal and religious engineering projects that have come to dominate the global ‘religion agenda,’ and the lived realities and responses of the individuals and communities that are subjected to these utopian—and often dystopian—efforts. Like the wall, which serves to [divide and control](#) the Sahrawi population by reducing their mobility, these projects also divide and discriminate, often in the interests of those in power.

To access this complex field of religio-politics, I present an analytical framework distinguishing between religion as construed by those in positions of legal and political power (“official” or “governed religion”); religion as construed by experts who generate policy-relevant knowledge about religion (“expert religion”); and religion as lived and practiced by ordinary people (“lived religion”). Opening up the study of religion and politics challenges the prevailing assumption in elite academic, legal and policy circles that the legalization of freedom of religion, engagement with faith communities, and protections for religious minorities are the keys to emancipating society from persecution and discrimination. Rather, these efforts exacerbate social tensions by transforming religious difference into a matter of law, enacting a divide between the religion of those in power and the religion of those without it. This leads to forms of politics and public order defined by religious difference, favors forms of religion authorized by those in positions of authority, and excludes other ways of being and belonging, both individually and communally. The book considers a series of pressing questions at the intersection of religion, law, and governance from this angle, including the politics of ‘good religion’ and ‘bad religion’ in international relations; the religion jurisprudence of the European Court; the politics of religious freedom and religious ‘minoritization’ in Turkey, with a focus on the Alevi communities; the politics of sectarianism; and the debates over religious freedom and religious outreach programming in US and European foreign policy.

Beyond Religious Freedom challenges the presumption that academic experts, government officials, and foreign policy experts know what religion is, where it is located, who speaks in its name, and how it should be incorporated into foreign relations. Uninformed assumptions about religion have enabled academics, practitioners and pundits to jump without a second thought into the business of quantifying religion’s effects, adapting religion’s insights to international problem-solving efforts, and incorporating religion’s official representatives into international political decision-making and institutions. Governments, international organizations, and much of the academic literature on religion and international relations treat religion as a relatively stable, self-evident category that is understood to motivate a host of actions, good and bad.

Religion is not however an isolable entity and should not be treated as such, whether in an attempt to separate it from law and politics, or to design a political response to it. Efforts to single out and stabilize religion as a platform from which to develop law and public policy inevitably privilege some religions over others, leading to what Lori G. Beaman and Winnifred Sullivan have [described](#) as “varieties of religious establishment.”

One way to access this field is to explore the disjuncture between the forms of religion that are produced by expert knowledge and authorized through legal and governmental practice, on one hand, and the forms of religion lived by ordinary people, on the other. While these fields always overlap, intermingle and shape each other, including institutional religion, they cannot be collapsed entirely.

Discriminating analytically between religious freedom and toleration as construed and implemented by those in positions of power and the life ways of ordinary people provides a unique vantage point on the politics of international religious rights and freedoms. It asks us to consider the lived practices of ordinary people who may have complex and ambivalent relationships to the institutions, orthodoxies, and authorities—both political and religious—that claim to speak on their behalf. What is the impact of legalizing religious freedom on those who dissent from “faiths” as defined by “interfaith” leaders, on those who practice multiple traditions, on those whose practices fail to qualify as a ‘religion’ that merits protection? What are the effects of an expert lobby that insists that states and other authorities construct a legal regime around ‘religious freedom’ and a discursive world around that? Do such projects advance or impede efforts to mitigate violence, discrimination and inequality? Advocates of religious freedom presume that the answer is self-evident and affirmative. Together with a number of [others](#), I find it to be much less certain, and the outcome much less utopian.



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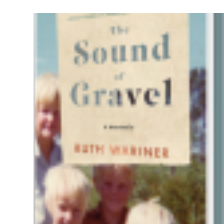
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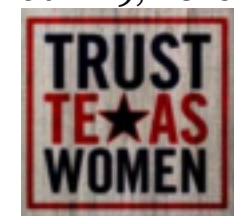
Elizabeth Shakman Hurd is Associate Professor of Political Science with a courtesy appointment in Religious Studies. She teaches and writes on religion and politics, secularism and international relations, law and religion, US and European foreign relations, and the politics of the Middle East. Hurd is the author of *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, co-editor of *Politics of Religious Freedom and Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*, and co-organizer of the research project, “Politics of Religious Freedom: Contested Norms and Local Practices.”

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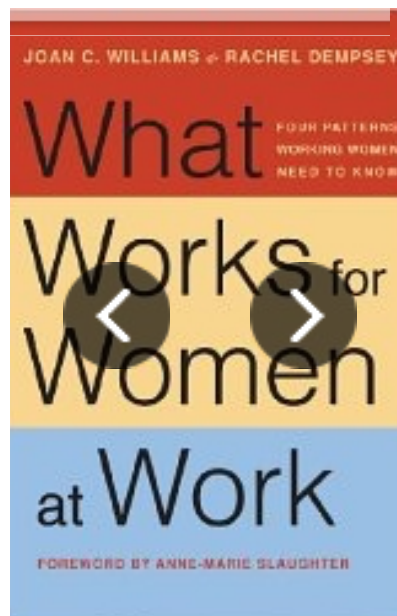
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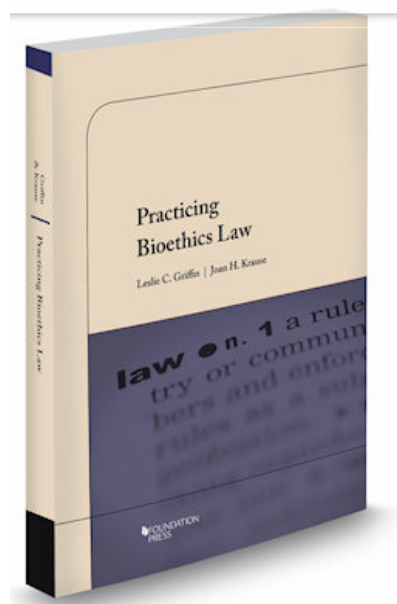
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