



Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

BEYOND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The new global politics of religion

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A Rohingya Muslim woman, near a camp outside Sittwe, Burma
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Losing our religion

JONATHAN BENTHALL

The word “religion”, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s guidelines to its posts and desks concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief, is commonly, but not always, associated with belief in a deity or deities. The word “belief” denotes “a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance. So not all beliefs are covered by this protection. For example, if someone believed that the moon was made of cheese, this belief would not be likely to meet the test above”. The guidelines continue: beliefs that are considered by the European Commission and/or Court of Human Rights to fall under the protection of this freedom include druidism, pacifism, Scientology and atheism. In her admirably combative *Beyond Religious Freedom: The new global politics of religion*, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd of Northwestern University, Illinois, applies the tools of political science to tease out the assumptions underlying such a policy. An example of more active intervention, this time by the US government, was the payment of \$144,000 in 2005 by a Pentagon contractor to Sunni religious scholars in Iraq. The contractor itself, the Lincoln Group, was paid to identify religious leaders in Anbar Province who could help persuade Sunnis to take part in elections and reject the insurgency.

The rapid growth of interest in religion among political scientists over the past two decades, reacting against simplistic forms of secularization theory, might lead one to infer that Western foreign policy was secularist in its bias until recently. But Hurd shows convincingly that during the early Cold War the US government undertook what was called a “religious

offensive” against Communist secularism, a campaign for “global spiritual health”. The US Supreme Court has refrained from ruling on whether the First Amendment to the Constitution, which in effect prohibits the government from preferring one religion over another, applies to US actions abroad as well as domestically. Religion has now come to the fore in North American and European public policy circles, especially in the drive to liberate the social capital of tolerant religion from the bad kinds of religion that are threats to peace and harmony.

Hurd’s starting point is that, according to a near-consensus of social scientists today, the boundaries of religion are blurred and contentious: it is invariably embedded in other aspects of life, and the pinning down of “belief” is particularly elusive. What would the world look like, she asks, “after religion is dethroned as a stable, coherent legal and policy category”? Three errors result, according to her, when it is still roped off. First, religious differences are amplified as causal factors, while complex historical inequalities are obscured. Second, the established voices and institutions of protected “faith communities” are privileged at the expense of laypeople who may include dissenters and doubters. Third, authorities are ascribed the power to pronounce on which beliefs deserve special protection or penalization. Hurd sets out to expose these errors in a succession of case studies.

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The Rohingya provide an example of the first error. About a million Rohingya live mainly in western Burma, claiming Burmese citizenship but effectively stateless, classified by the government as “Bengali immigrants” and severely oppressed, though many can claim forebears

who lived in Rakhine (formerly Arakan) state for generations. Hurd criticizes international commentators for describing the Rohingya as a “persecuted Muslim minority”. A strong sense of territorial identity distinguishing Rakhine state from the rest of Burma dates back to the eighteenth century. Muslim–Buddhist antagonism was fanned during the British colonial era by divide-and-rule policies, then during the Second World War, and finally after independence by an elite that tried to impose ethnic purity by marginalizing non-Buddhists. Today the plight of the Rohingya is aggravated by military concern for the security of Burma’s borderlands, by competition for resources, and by dehumanizing practices reminiscent of South Africa under apartheid. This is all true, but Hurd is unfair to “international commentators”. Most of the leading human rights organizations make clear that the Rohingya suffer from a comprehensive persecution that is not confined to religious discrimination. The fact that they are Muslims may be emphasized for a special purpose: whether by the Dalai Lama with a view to shaming his fellow Buddhists (and indeed maltreatment of the Rohingya undermines the contention that Buddhism is an invariably non-violent creed), or by Muslim aid agencies seeking to rally humanitarian support. The main problem for the Rohingya is not that they are described in some circles as a religious minority, but that the new liberalizing leadership of Burma, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, is too weak to defy popular prejudice and recognize them as a Burmese ethnic group. Hurd’s discussion of the Rohingya arouses the suspicion that she is liable to overstate her case.

One example of the second error that Hurd decides to highlight concerns the Copts of Egypt, who amount to perhaps 10 per cent of the nation’s population and suffer from widespread discrimination. She explains how they have long been divided between those who seek protection as a minority and those who want to play down doctrinal differences, supporting equal citizenship for all and opposing communitarian divisions. The current Egyptian constitution vests power over personal status in the Coptic Orthodox Church, so that anticlerical Copts who want a meaningful say in their community’s and the nation’s prospects could in future be tempted to become apostates or insurgents. Some of the overseas Coptic diaspora’s lobbying on behalf of Egyptian Copts may have the effect of inflaming, rather than calming, Christian–Muslim tensions in the country itself. But Hurd’s coverage of Egyptian Copts is thinly sourced, omitting the vital information that the present Patriarch, Pope Tawadros II, has expressed strong support for Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’s coup in 2013 (as his predecessor, Shenouda III, supported Hosni Mubarak), though the Copts seem to have received only modest practical benefits in exchange.

Hurd's treatment of the Alevis in Turkey, about 25 per cent of the population, is far better sourced and argued. Alevism is classed by the state as a heterodox, mystical interpretation of Sunni Islam: hence its adherents are denied recognition as a religious minority on a par with the Christians and Jews, but are also excluded from the privileges granted by the state to mainstream Sunni institutions. Some Alevis claim that Alevism is distinct from the Islamic tradition, or not a religion at all. The European Court of Human Rights has ascribed minority rights to the Alevis, a decision which assumes that majorities and minorities are static, well-defined groups. In practice, the court's decision reinforces particular understandings of Alevism while marginalizing others. Designation as a minority could expose Alevis to worse discrimination as incomplete Turkish citizens than they suffer from anyway. Hurd cites some historians who argue that past European interventions in the religious politics of the Middle East, such as the French backing of the Maronites and the British protection of the Druze, had violent consequences for the region. The European project of cementing Alevism in the name of protecting diversity obscures the fact that Alevism is "a heterogeneous and contested set of lived practices and traditions that may fade away at the margins [and] shift depending on time and locale".

As for the third error, Hurd targets it with complete success. Most anthropologists will agree that ethnic groups such as the K'iche' Maya of Guatemala deserve to have their traditional belief systems given the same recognition as established religions insofar as recognition confers legal protection. Likewise, women prosecuted for "witchcraft" in the Central African Republic do not count as a religious minority in the eyes either of their government or of advocates for religious freedom.

Yet Hurd's choice of case studies is skewed. She contends that the Western rhetoric of religious freedom includes protection for unbelief only as a "token". She completely ignores the persecution of dissenters, including liberal intellectuals, in such countries as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, let alone the monstrosities of ISIS – though challenging these practices is an important part of Western foreign policy (however tempered by realpolitik). Her preoccupation is with the dangers of fixing religious affiliation. She asks herself a pertinent question: do the complexities inherent in the category of religion resemble other objects of legal and political regulation such as "race", gender or sexual orientation? She observes acutely that the gay movement tends to reify boundaries in a comparable Eurocentric way. But one could adduce here the concept of "strategic essentialism" first formulated by Gayatri Spivak. LGBT stakeholders differ hugely among themselves in their orientations and priorities, but it can seem to their advantage to unite in a common cause:

this can then result in a political backlash. Likewise, there are “persecuted religionists” – Hurd writes rather critically of their motives – who by accepting an essentialized minority status take advantage of legal protections, development aid, or trade deals, but with some likely adverse consequences.

Hurd concludes: “Religion is not just any category. It has a history”. I suggest that one contested category which would bear a close comparison is indigeneity (or autochthony). It originated in European settler societies. A broad definition of indigenous groups might specify residence in a certain area, linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, non-dominance, and lack of control of their own histories. But in some political contexts, any group whose leaders represent it as indigenous is accepted as such. Indigenous movements in many countries have produced leaders who engage in “strategic essentialism”. A fixed indigeneity is vulnerable to being manipulated by ideologues, as in Hendrik Verwoerd’s founding of the Bantustans in South Africa. Or it can shade into a territorial primordialism wherein the oppressed become the oppressors, one example being the Alawites of Syria who were formerly persecuted by the Sunnis but became the ruling elite from 1970 – both an indigenous group and an Islamic sect. Indigeneity and religion are alike in being two-edged swords.

Hurd disavows any intent to offer policy prescriptions. But while criticizing advocates for religious freedom as careerists, she herself sometimes seems to have been writing inside a campus bubble. Ought a discussion of religious freedom worldwide to pass over China’s persecution of the Falun Gong? Or the predicament of heterodox religious enclaves in the Middle East such as the Yazidis, treated by ISIS as Satanists who can be enslaved and their women made concubines? Or the brutal suppression of religion in North Korea, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was the most evangelized region in Asia after the Philippines? Elizabeth Shakman Hurd’s case is consistently thought-provoking, but would be more persuasive if reformulated as a warning about the built-in political hazards attending all forms of essentialism. The social sciences have a public duty to underline the importance of cross-cutting loyalties, so that there is no excuse for taking religion, ethnicity, class, citizenship or any other single identity marker as the be-all and end-all.