

Arbiters of Orthodoxy: Contentious Politics and Epistemological Change

Maria Birnbaum

To cite this article: Maria Birnbaum (2017) Arbiters of Orthodoxy: Contentious Politics and Epistemological Change, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 18:1, 109-112, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2017.1304852](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2017.1304852)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2017.1304852>



Published online: 17 May 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 24



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)


religious affiliations. The strident demands for ‘moderate’ Muslims to counter extremist variants of their religion (and the relative absence of calls for ‘moderate’ Christians, Jews, Buddhists, or Hindus) suggest that Muslims are primarily seen as the target of reform. Consequently, the ‘religious’ violence perpetrated by its adherents receive far more public policy attention than the ‘religious’ violence suffered by its adherents (e.g. the Rohingya or the Syrian refugees). It is important, therefore, to consider the different forms of governance to which different religious traditions are subjected under the new secularism of the West.

While Hurd is primarily concerned with foreign policy, it would also be critical to trace the interconnections between overseas religious reform projects and practices of religious freedom in the West. One pertinent issue would be how the regulation of Muslims in Middle East and North Africa affect how Muslim immigrants to the West are governed. Another issue pertains to the privileges that are conferred onto Christians in the West, given how the new secularism of the West presents Euro-American Christianity as the model that is to be imitated by religious adherents elsewhere. How might, for example, recent controversies in the US over Christian responses to gay marriage and women’s reproductive rights relate to foreign policies on religion?

These questions should be taken as a reflection of the excellence of this book rather than its shortcomings. By mapping out the landscape of the new secularism of the West, Hurd has opened up additional lines of inquiry on a mode of contemporary global governance that will not go away anytime soon. Timely and path-breaking, this book will surely be an instant classic in studies of religion and politics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Nur Amali Ibrahim
Departments of Religious Studies and International Studies,
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA
 nai@indiana.edu

© 2017 Nur Amali Ibrahim
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2017.1304851>



Arbiters of Orthodoxy: Contentious Politics and Epistemological Change

There are no two ways about it. *Beyond Religious Freedom* is an unapologetic attempt to dethrone religion as an analytical category of global politics and a detailed study of the workings of those pushing the ‘religion’ agenda. It is a story about the consequences of modes of government that single out ‘religion’ as their point of reference and the global political projects that embark in its name. The book is well written, well-argued and a welcome contribution to the study of international politics and the study of religion alike. Although its message is unmistakably powerful and controversial, the value of the book is not only in the message itself or in the analytical categories it furthers—the tri-part elite, governed and lived religion or the critical examination of the working pair of good vs. bad religion—but in the questions it raises regarding power and silence. I will address these in a moment.

Propelled into prominence by international violence and conflict, religion's alleged public return spurred an interest in and a craving for 'knowledge about religion' by public media, policy-makers and intellectuals alike. What Hurd calls the global infrastructure of a 'religion industrial complex' has catered to—and nurtured—this hunger for 'knowledge' and fed it with commissions, experts and, of course, religious representatives and leaders themselves. This 'engagement with religion' is more than a marginal development, or isolated incidents, so Hurd, it is what she calls the 'New Global Politics of Religion'. It is heavily invested into, and located at the very centers of many of the world's national, supranational and international governments. It therefore needs a detailed study. This is what Hurd gives us.

Beyond Religious Freedom builds on Hurd's prior work by looking at the governance of religion, i.e. how that which is defined as religion becomes subject to particular forms of governance. The book expands the scope further by analyzing the governance *through* religion 'and the religious and political worlds being realized, in (its) name' (p. 7). In other words, the book asks about the implications of 'construing religion as an isolable entity and causal powerhouse in international relations?' (p. 2). In a global political arena where religion is no longer only seen as a threat to dispose of but as a source of knowledge to be engaged with, what does this 'religion' refer to, who speaks in its name and what are the consequences thereof?

The study of the international governance of and *through* religion shows how particular forms of religious freedom, religious engagement, and the rights of religious minorities are being 'packaged into political projects and delivered around the world by states and others' (p. 6) thereby shaping the range of what or who falls within the lines of the intelligibly religious. In each chapter and with each case, Hurd highlights the various ways in which these different aspects of the 'New Global Politics of Religion' are *both* presupposing and (re)producing religion as an identifiable, isolatable entity. The adoption of religion as a legal and policy category thereby 'helps to create the world that it purports to oversee. It naturalizes religious-religious and religious-secular distinctions as the natural building blocks of social order' (p. 111).

Governing globally through religion incentivizes association accordingly; it 'funnels individuals into discrete faith communities, empowers those communities and their spokespersons, and marginalizes other modes of solidarity (...) Boundaries solidify. Lines between groups become more salient' (p. 48). Elevating religion into prominence both 'presupposes and produces the very divides that it is meant to soften or transcend, creating in the process new forms of social friction defined by religious difference' (p. 41). In combination with this heightening, or 'overcoding' of boundaries (William Connolly) '(t)he new global politics of religion has created new categories of actors in world politics' (p. 110) existing ontologically prior to the state and other forms of collective governance as 'static bodies of tradition and convention that lend themselves to becoming objects of state and transnational legal regulation, and (...) government engagement and reform' (p. 39). Similar to the analysis elsewhere on the productive power of rights, Hurd shows how the 'New Global Politics of Religion' is constructive of new international subjects and the hardening of boundaries around and between them.

Projects to engage with religion carry a constructive aspect and Hurd reminds us of it. 'When governments engage individuals and groups as religious groups they are forced to discriminate regarding who is chosen and which orthodoxies are enshrined as voices of authority' (p. 84). But selecting interlocutors is part of any form of representational government and these problems will reoccur on every level with every single issue involving selectively defined groups. The problem is less one of representation but rather the claim that this representation is apolitical. In a similar manner as Hurd identified the politics in international secularism, she pinpoints the politics entrenched in religious engagement. 'The pretense

that it is possible to identify and engage “religions” neutrally, on equal footing, masks the politics of government-sponsored religious engagement’ (p. 81). Hurd unmasks the claim to neutrality by displaying the workings of the ‘arbiters of orthodoxy’ (p. 36). And she does it well.

While the analysis of these different modes of governance of and through religion is clear and straightforward, I am left wondering about two aspects of Hurd’s argument: the aspect of *power* and the aspect of *silence*. Differing from her work on international secularism, Hurd displays the workings of the ‘Global Politics of Religion’ in a much more top-down fashion. Here, ‘(t)he global promotion of religious rights and freedoms, (...) is a discourse of expert religion and governed religion, defined and authorized by those in power’ (p. 41). In ‘exploring the channels through which religion has been, and continues to be, “appropriated by worldly power holders”’ Hurd sees herself exploring ‘the tensions that emerge between the forms of religion that are produced and governed through these projects, and the broader fields of religious practice that they aspire to regular and transform’ (p. 2). Or, in the terminology of the book, it explores the tension between elite and governed religion on the one hand and lived religion on the other. Assuming that it is possible to neatly separate the governors from the governed, those with access to power and those without, Hurd remains vague as to what the nature of this power is, if it has a direction—she mentions the realization of (American) foreign policy interests at some point—or if it is an end in itself. If religious engagement is a powerful aspect of governing the global, what is the underlying assumption of the nature of this power? This is important since the critique directed at these forms of ‘religious’ governance comes with a diagnosis of its problematic consequences, namely the *silencing* of those failing to align with the recognizable religious.

To rely on the category of religion as an object of foreign policy and human rights advocacy privileges certain forms of expression and ways of life while marginalizing others. It puts pressure on nonestablished, unorthodox, nonconforming ways of being religious, and of being human. (...) are rendered inaudible. (p. 112)

The problem of the ‘New Global Politics of Religion’ is not only that it creates new subjects or heightens tensions along hardened boundaries but that it marginalizes those subjects who do not fit the model of recognizable religion.

Now, if the forms of ‘religious’ governance sidelines established and unintelligible voices, *how are these voices to be accessed?* While Hurd does not claim to offer a solution, she does gesture towards a change in sensibilities on the side of the policy-maker and the academic alike.

To see them (the unintelligible, my comment), however, requires expanding our field of vision beyond authorized legal and political constructions of religion and religious freedom to include a broader field of religiosities, histories, and forms of sociality. This means approaching local practices and histories *on their own terms*, even or especially to the extent that they appear as unintelligible or illegible, rather than seeking to domesticate or assimilate them into conventional legal or normative frames. To fail to do so is to miss or misconstrue a broader field of contentious politics. (49f)

While the question needs to be answered at some point, why the unintelligible needs to become intelligible and why exclusion, as such, is a problem, the question here is first and foremost how to locate the unintelligible. How does one engage with, access or invite that or those one cannot ‘see’, those who are not visible or recognizable? In the end, by analyzing the productive power of projects and discourses on rights, engagement and protection and the way they are shaping the range of recognizable, intelligible religion while sidelining the unintelligible, this is a book about epistemological frameworks, how they expand and contract and


the means by which this change occurs. In other words, it is a question about epistemological politics.

While I agree with Hurd in the undesirability in ‘domesticating’ unestablished and local practices I am not sure if the alternative to domestication is ‘approaching these practices and histories on their own terms’. Local practices are to no extent less power ridden than global or official ones, no less exclusive or susceptible to the governing practices described by Hurd on a global level and she is right to point to the ‘risk [of] reifying and romanticizing lived religious practice’ (p. 16). If the aim is to access the unintelligible, I do not believe the framework of the ‘lived religion’ is the place to start, I do not believe it is the locus of the unestablished. The unestablished and unintelligible exist on every level of government, more or less easily overlooked.

I will end with a more general point, which Hurd touches upon throughout the book, but which is almost intrinsic to work in critical political theory. And that is the difficulty to work, productively, with a deconstructed, historicized concept. How does one demarcate one’s field of study when the marcation sticks are all wobbly? How does one analyze a constantly moving target? One that moves through time? At one point in the book Hurd writes that ‘Religion is not just any category. It has a history’ (p. 121). The truth is that all categories have histories. But in addition to having a history they also carry histories and people’s self-narratives are heavily invested in them. They are therefore utterly hard to change. This, however, seems to be a challenge Hurd is ready to take on. ‘The challenge, then’, Hurd writes ‘is to signal an interest in a category, religion, which is legible to many, while also arguing for a different understanding of “it”’ (p. 6). *Beyond Religious Freedom* is, to me, therefore not only a book analyzing the workings of religious engagement, but actively intervening into it. This is a question of epistemological politics, part of the contentious politics outlined in the book.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Maria Birnbaum
University of Oslo, Norway
 maria.birnbaum@eui.eu

© 2017 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2017.1304852>



REPLY

After Religious Freedom?

I want to thank the contributors to this forum. One of the most gratifying aspects of my job is learning from colleagues who have taken the time to respond to my work. I found very little to disagree with in these responses to *Beyond Religious Freedom* (BRF), including the points of criticism. I would like to take this opportunity to think with the questions raised with attention to what the study of religion and politics looks like ‘beyond religious freedom.’

John Rees emphasizes the intersectional aspects of my argument. I have always found that word dizzying—maybe because I do not much like to drive—but he is right to connect the