

# The dialectic of secularism and religionism

## The presence of religion in the public sphere and its implications for secularism

An interview with Professor Elizabeth Shakman Hurd



Elizabeth Shakman Hurd teaches and writes on religion and politics, the politics of human rights and the right to religious freedom, the legal governance of religious diversity, US foreign relations, and the international politics of the Middle East. Her work pursues an integrative approach to the study of politics and religion that offers insight into dilemmas of national and international governance involving difference, governance, power, law, and pluralism. Hurd is the author of *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (2008) and *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (2015), both published by Princeton, and co-editor of *Politics of Religious Freedom and Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*. She is co-PI, with Winnifred Sullivan, on a Luce-supported collaborative research project "Politics of Religion at Home and Abroad" (2019-2016) and co-organized the "Politics of Religious Freedom" project (2014-2011). At Northwestern, Hurd directs the Buffett Faculty Research Group on Global Politics & Religion, co-directs a graduate certificate program in Religion & Global Politics, is a core faculty member of the MENA Program, and teaches courses on America and the world, religion and international relations, the Middle East in global politics, and religion and law in cross-cultural perspective.

■ What made you focus on religion studies in a discipline (International Relations) which considers religion and religious beliefs to be completely irrelevant and unimportant?

I am interested in the history and politics of the categories of secularism and religion. This requires a dual focus on the study of politics and the study of religion, as well as their complex mutual interrelations. My intention is to move beyond the extremes of both an uncritical secular separationism and a naïve religious accommodationism. This "third way," which to my mind better reflects the complexities and contingencies of

the world we actually live in, offers a path for thinking and practicing difference differently. We can and should continue to acknowledge the power of differences that are organized around the 'religious' and the 'secular,' but without treating them as fixed, inevitable, or universal. I adopt a critical cross-cultural perspective on religion and politics, with attention to their mutual co-implications and transformations.

■ Do you think that religion went into exile (private sphere) and has returned to public sphere recently or do you believe that it never went away at all?

It never went away. As I see it, there are two central and competing storylines about religion, politics and public life that dominate the discussion right now. They are both descriptive and prescriptive. That is, they claim to both describe the world as it is and they also prescribe particular ways of acting. In the first narrative, which is perhaps falling out of style, religion is seen as irrelevant to politics and public life, confined to private affairs, spaces, places, and fields of study that deal with these matters—anthropology, theology, religious studies. This notion—the sense that religion ‘left’ public life—has now been successfully and I think rather definitively debunked. In the second, competing narrative, the pendulum has swung, religion is back, and it has “gone public.” Religion is now everyone’s business. This is a popular narrative right now, but it is also problematic because it assumes that at one point religion had been evacuated from public life, which of course is simply not the case. There is some tension between these two narratives, despite their shared foundational assumptions, but the second one is prevailing in most quarters. In my estimation, most scholars would now agree that religion cannot be ignored, or written off as epiphenomena to the “real stuff” of social and material life. The notion that religion has “gone public” has gathered momentum as an alternative to the conventional story of secularization as religious privatization or decline. I find this shift between the two narratives fascinating. It motivated me to write my book, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. It is fascinating to me that scholars and public policymakers, many with minimal or no background in the study of religion, have been drawn almost magnetically to a stable, transhistorical and transcultural notion of ‘religion’ as a freestanding analytical and descriptive category. This secularist presumption seems to have at least nine lives. It does a lot of cultural and political work.

■ **Some scholars believe that ‘it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories.’ What is your idea? Do you think that secularism has lost its legitimacy and is in crisis due to the global resurgence of religion?**

This is an interesting question because the answer is both no and yes. Secularization and various doctrines of secularism have been and continue to be highly influential both historically and in the present. On the other hand, the historical, legal, religious and political contingencies of secularist settlements, and the normative commitments and theological and political presumptions that underlie and sustain them, make

it impossible to speak of any fixed or final definition or understanding of ‘secularism.’ To move forward, we need to pose a series of new questions about religion and politics. To name a few: What if we were to suspend the assumptions about religion and about politics that underlie separationism? What if we were to avoid collapsing religion into the social or political, making it evaporate, so to speak—but at the same time also avoid treating religion as an ahistorical essence that stands outside of history, law, economics, politics or the natural environment?

This involves continually reassessing and reckoning with the histories of the categories of religion and of politics. It involves deep contextualization. It involves a lot of work. The need for this kind of effort first came into sharp relief for me in writing my first book, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*.

I was struggling with apprehending that which was denominated as “religious” and “political” in non-European, including many colonial and postcolonial, contexts, as well as in Iran and Turkey. What can it mean to talk about secularism as the “separation” of church and state in societies in which there is no “church” in a European Christian sense? How should scholars study religion and politics in such a way so as to avoid merely reproducing the discourses of separation, secularism, disestablishment, free exercise, and religious freedom that often contain nestled within them the very assumptions that are most in need of interrogation? What do we have if we have neither complete religious freedom—in the sense of religion’s total autonomy from the social and political—nor religion’s complete absorption into the political? I am interested not only in rethinking our understanding of the religious but also and simultaneously rethinking our understanding of the political. This is the challenge.

■ **In your opinion why the Western civilization has failed in implementing what Max Weber called “disenchantment of the world”? Was it totally a wrong idea to consider religion as an irrational and obsolete tradition that must be marginalized and finally eradicated in modern era?**

The notion that religion should be marginalized or eradicated requires a very stable and secure definition of “religion” which we simply do not have. We live in a complex world characterized by diverse and shifting ways of belonging, believing, and being. These lifeways both shape and are shaped by legal, economic, political and historical factors and institutions, and cannot be fully separated from the latter in such a way as to

definitively demarcate the 'religious' from the 'political.' The latter, of course, is the defining move of secularism. To challenge the foundations of the assumptions that underlie secularist epistemology does not however mean that secularism was a "failure" but rather that it needs to be carefully contextualized historically and politically. It needs to be understood rather than either celebrated or condemned. One of the aims of my first book was to do precisely this work in the context of the twentieth-century politics of Iran and Turkey, a deep and longstanding interest of mine.

■ **Do you think that we need a mode of analysis in International Relation and foreign policy that attempts to merge the spiritual and the material? What deficiencies do you diagnose in these fields of study in the absence of religion?**

The discipline of International Relations has come a long way in recent years in terms of the level of sophistication of the discussion and debate around religion and politics – with a little help from political theory, religious studies and cultural anthropology. The challenge as I see it now is to strike a balance which involves simultaneously accepting the power of the categories of secular and religious without giving in to their fixity, primacy, or stability in any given context. There is temptation to abandon the terms altogether—to move toward new vocabularies—for a variety of reasons. I don't think scholars should abandon the terms however. Rather I agree with Webb Keane when he observes in his excellent book *Christian Moderns* that "conceptual categories like religion and culture have been let out of the bag, and we are hardly in a position to scoop them back up again. Like 'the modern,' they are part of both elite and everyday discourses and mediate self-awareness just about everywhere; the categories have themselves become social facts.... to accept existing categories demands (at least) considerable self-awareness. It asks us to reflect on (what Foucault would call) their genealogy and explore its implications." David Chidester makes a related point in the concluding chapter of his book *Empire of Religion*. I highly recommend both of these texts to anyone interested in the study of the politics of modernity.

■ **Are the existing theories of International Relations adequate for understanding religion's role in world politics or should there be new theories based on different approaches and meta-theories?**

New approaches are needed. My book *Beyond Religious Freedom* emerged from my own inability to reconcile what I had learned about religion and

politics from the disciplines of Religious Studies and Critical Theory—including the complexities and instabilities of these categories themselves—with the ways in which International Relations and public policy experts were talking and acting with regard to religion. The deep epistemological and disciplinary divides in the politics and practice of knowledge production around 'religion' is crucial to my argument. While religious studies appears to be increasingly skeptical of world religions discourse, building on the work of Tomoko Masuzawa and others, social scientists are living in a different reality: they are drawn to the world religions frame magnetically, relying on it to design sophisticated measures and models to account for (and, as I argue in the book, to realize) the public and political salience of 'world religions'. It is these religions and their spokespersons that are becoming actors and advocates on the global political stage. They are the central players on what the American comedian Stephen Colbert calls the international "faithscape." In political science and policy studies, scholars are working overtime to identify the contribution of religion and religious leaders to world affairs, to control it for political ends. I am continually surprised by the degree of consensus, energy, certainty, and excitement that surrounds the perceived need to identify and manage deviant radical religion, and to cultivate and celebrate compliant, conforming religion. It's an odd preoccupation—what's this about?

This of course led me to more and deeper questions: who gets nominated to be a religion and who doesn't, who speaks for 'religion' and who cannot, who and what is made invisible or illegible in such deeply politicized and 'religionized' global institutional and intellectual fields? Whose religion is being protected in international legal efforts to promote religious freedom? What is the relationship between the legal "religions" that are privileged through these efforts, and the broader life worlds in which they intervene? Who speaks on behalf of the 'religious individuals that populate our faith-based global policy landscape? And whom exactly are those representatives presumed to represent? To address these questions the book examines the specific kinds of religion and religious subjects that are created and protected through three sets of governing arrangements: international religious freedom, protections for religious minorities, and projects to create tolerant religious subjects who practice interfaith dialogue and disavow (whatever the authorities denominate as) extremism.

■ **How do you predict the future of secularism**

### in the West given the fast growth of religious beliefs?

I'm not much for predictions, but I suspect claims to secularism will retain their appeal in many quarters for some time. Rather than focus on the 'success' or 'failure' of secularism, of interest to me, and here I am following the pioneering contributions of anthropologist Talal Asad, is to ask: why are these claims felt to be necessary or even urgent? What is it that those making such claims seek to accomplish? What assumptions about religion or the secular underlie them? And what forms of life are enabled (or disabled) in and through a focus on realizing particular notions of secularization?

In his wonderful book, *Beyond Church and State*, Matthew Scherer has shown that the transformative processes that produced the notion of secularism as separation did not merely separate religion and politics along a clear line of distinction, but rather re-determined the nature of both politics and religion simultaneously. This is important. Modern secularism did not simply emerge "from a religious past with which it had broken." Instead, it should be seen, to quote Scherer again, as both "divided from a religious past and also locked in continuous and shifting patterns of interrelation with religion in the present." Despite these

obvious complexities of the secular-religious binary, which have been acknowledged by scholars around the world for some time now, contemporary US (and other) governmental efforts continue to rely on and also to produce a stable rendering of the 'religious' in order to 'solve' global policy challenges associated with so-called 'religious' sources of violence, and those that require the irenic qualities of religion as a source of community, morality and freedom.

My recent book is critical of these efforts. It destabilizes the category of "religion" as an object of political and legal intervention. This is a familiar move in religious studies, but less so in the study of politics. The challenge as I see it is to communicate with an audience that does not see any problem, or any politics, in defining and 'restoring' religion in international public life. To show the politics involved in this move, I developed a set of heuristics (lived, expert, and governed religion). These categories allow me to show that there are no stable things out there in the world called 'religions' or the 'religious' that stand cleanly apart from their 'secular' or 'political' counterparts, waiting in the wings to be restored to public life. Upending that assumption moves us into a different epistemological field, which I discuss in the concluding chapter of the book and also in more recent writings. ✕

# A Globalized God

## Religion's Growing Influence in International Politics

By **Scott M. Thomas**

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**A**round the world -- from the southern United States to the Middle East -- religion is on the rise. It is growing in countries with a wide variety of religious traditions and levels of economic development, suggesting that neither poverty nor social exclusion is solely responsible. The religious resurgence is not simply defined by the growth of fundamentalism -- rigid adherence to a particular set of rituals and doctrines -- but is occurring through a variety of renewed rituals and practices, both public and private.

Demographics are reinforcing this trend. The global religious landscape in the coming years will be affected by the massive shift in population growth from the

developed countries of the North -- predominantly in western Europe and the former Soviet republics -- to the developing countries of the so-called global South. The North accounted for 32 percent of the world's population in 25, 1900 percent in 1970, and about 18 percent in 2000. By 2050, it will likely account for just 10 percent. Religion has emerged as a driving factor in this redistribution. Religiosity is now one of the most accurate indicators of fertility, far more telling than denominational or ethnic identity, since religious people tend to have more children than their secular counterparts.

Religion will also increasingly be an urban phenomenon.