



Questioning the New Secularism of the West

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Questioning the New Secularism of the West

Elizabeth Hurd's new book, *Beyond Religious Freedom*, is a much-needed intervention in the field of religion and international relations. At the heart of this brilliantly argued book is the evolving career of secularism in North American and European nations. Older practices of secularism in which religion was conceived as private and largely irrelevant to global governance have been displaced. Today, Western democracies are singling out religion as a basis for making foreign policy decisions. The main actors in this new secularism are government officials, academic experts, and foreign policy pundits. They are most concerned with 'bad' religion in non-Western societies, or the sorts of religious practices that produce group conflicts, gender discrimination, and the exclusion of minorities. Subsequently, they design religious reform programs to create 'good' or 'moderate' religion that supports democratization. Underpinning these projects is the assumption that the practices of religion and freedom have been perfected in the West and hence worthy of emulation.

According to Hurd, the emergence of this new global politics of religion could be traced to the policies of Western democracies during the Cold War. An important aspect of the anti-communist propaganda pursued by the US, for example, is the promotion of religion to global citizens who risked falling prey to communism (such as when a Buddhist advisor was sent to politically fraught Southeast Asia to promote a form of Buddhism that was endorsed by the US). Importantly, these efforts have accelerated after the terrorist attacks on New York City in 9/11. Apart from the swift expansion of an academic publishing industry on religion, contemporary concerns on 'bad' religion have also resulted in the proliferation of new government agencies in North American and European nations that spearhead religious reform projects. In the US alone, units for religious engagement have been established by the Departments of State and Homeland Security, the military, and United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Hurd challenges the notion that government officials, academic experts, and foreign policy pundits know what religion is, provocatively arguing that they are in fact quite uninformed about religion. A real strength of this book is the conceptual framework that Hurd offers in her critique. She describes the religion of the international relations domain as 'expert religion,' where it is seen as a discrete and stable entity containing latent potential for both good and bad. The expert understanding of religion is often based on 'governed religion,' or the religion construed by religious and political leaders who claim to speak on behalf of believers. But these two heuristics of religion are quite different from 'lived religion' or the practice of religion in everyday life. Lived religion may converge or diverge from politically and religiously authoritative scripts on how one ought to be religious. It is tangled up with multiple domains of social life as

people use religion to pursue religious and non-religious aims. It is situational and improvisational as people adapt religious idioms to the continually changing contexts in which they live. In other words, if we look closely at how religion operates on the ground, we should appreciate that it is far too unstable to be useful as a policy platform. This is a stern and on-the-mark indictment of the new secularism of the West.

In contrast to experts who are convinced that religious reform projects can resolve violence and inequality, Hurd is doubtful about the outcomes. She offers an insightful analysis of undesirable consequences. Treating religion as the primary source of violence creates a blind spot that conceals other important factors that lead to violence. Labeling victims of human indignities as 'persecuted religious minorities' results in the privileging of religious identities over other affinities, which mutes people who want to speak against inequality but not on the basis of religious identities. 'Religious' freedom projects do not offer protection in cases where violations of ritual practices do not count as religious, such as the women imprisoned for witchcraft in the Central African Republic, or the K'iche' of Guatemala whose ancestral land has been dispossessed for development projects.

The case studies that Hurd uses to bolster her arguments open up valuable space for reflection and discussion. One imperfection of this otherwise stellar book is that there are too few case studies, mostly from journalistic sources, and that they are examined all too briefly. This suggests that the book can be most productively read alongside ethnographies such as Thomas Blom Hansen's¹ and Patricia Spyer's² analyses of the causes of 'religious' violence in India and Indonesia, respectively, Kabir Tambar's work on the governance of religious difference in Turkey,³ and Mayanthi Fernando's study on the regulation of Islam under French secularism.⁴

As a scholar of Islam, it is striking to me that the most substantive examples Hurd discusses in her book pertain to Muslims. With the exception of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims who face persecution by the Buddhist majority, the rest of the case studies are about how Western democracies attempt to deal with the 'bad' behavior of Muslims. Hurd discusses, for instance, the USAID-administered RelHarmony program aimed at promoting religious pluralism in Muslim-majority Albania, the role of US military chaplains in supervising Quran lessons and providing training on religious tolerance in Afghanistan, and the programs to protect the religious rights of Alevis and Copts from the Sunni Muslim majority in Turkey and Egypt, respectively. These case studies are a good reflection of how preoccupied Western democracies have become in the post-9/11 period with the governance of Islam. As Joseph Massad has recently argued, Islam is the one religious tradition that is consistently regarded as standing outside of the secular liberal ideals celebrated by the West.⁵

Is the new secularism of the West predominantly concerned with 'bad' Islam? This would underscore the bitter irony of the Cold War context of its emergence given that, as Mahmood Mamdani has pointed out, the radical Islamists that the US are fighting today in the name of religious freedom are progenies of the radical Islamists it cultivated in its anti-communist efforts.⁶ It also implies that, in addition to the other biases Hurd has identified, the protections offered by Euro-American religious freedom projects also discriminate people by their

¹Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²Patricia Spyer, 'Fire Without Smoke and Other Phantoms of Ambon's Violence: Media Effects, Agency, and the Work of the Imagination', *Indonesia* 74: (2002), pp. 21–36.

³Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁴Mayanthi Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁵Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁶Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

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

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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.