



## After Religious Freedom?

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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.

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### 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

book's argument with new methodologies in intersectional studies. One of the book's central aims is to provide an alternative to the conventional attempts to segregate religion and politics as analytical categories.

Given these aims, Rees expresses surprise regarding what he perceives as my 'distinction between religion and "other forms of group identity such as gender, ethnicity, culture, and race" (121) as a point of emphasis in the final chapter.' It was not my intention to suggest that religion can be cleanly distinguished in this way but rather to push back against the insistence that religion is just like any other identity category. Not only is religion not just any other category, with its own genealogy, but it also has a very complex history and phenomenology, and a distinctive kind of social embeddedness, that to me is poorly captured with the notion of identity. So Rees reads me correctly when he concludes that

whilst religion has a particular and unique genealogy in relation to regimes of governance (121–122), categories such as race and gender have their own (uniquely) coopted histories and thus it is the state itself—that which Scott called 'the vexed institution that is the ground of both our freedoms and our unfreedoms'—which creates broad-based intersectional connections between these elements.

Like Rees I also hope that the arguments of the book will be extended and brought to bear in a range of non-US contexts. It may be the case, as he suggests, that the arguments of BRF will find policy traction in Australia, Canada and other states where practitioners are open to new ways to frame and respond to the challenges surrounding the politics of religion. At the same time, readers of the book will not be surprised that despite the benevolent intentions that underlie many of these efforts I remain deeply skeptical of any policy agenda that sets out to 'include religion.' Such agendas confine us to the problem-space of secularism, which is precisely what needs to be critically interrogated and perhaps, at times, displaced entirely in favor of other interpretive rubrics, following Yolande Jansen's suggestion. It is in the spirit of the former critical interrogation of secularism that I interpreted Nur Amali Ibrahim's approving description of my 'stern and on-the-mark indictment of the new secularism of the west.' Perhaps also in accord with Ibrahim, though less so with Rees, I do not think that a critical and genealogical stance places me necessarily or exclusively in the domain of 'anti-politics.' There are constructive moves in the book. It advocates explicitly for an approach to religion and politics in which both of these fields and their complex interrelations in specific times and places become part of the object of critical inquiry. The study of religion and politics, I suggest, needs to be embedded in a series of broader social and interpretive fields. As I wrote in the Introduction, the book draws attention to a series of more encompassing social and interpretive fields than that which is afforded by an exclusive focus on religion as construed by secular power.

Maria Birnbaum expresses a well-founded concern that the government selection of interlocutors, 'religious' or otherwise, is part of all forms of representative government, and therefore problems of representation recur across domains. Having posed the 'is religion really different?' question, she then addresses it herself, observing that, 'the problem is less one of representation but rather the claim that this representation is apolitical.' I agree. While often acknowledged as a political process in other domains, there is something about what Ibrahim compellingly describes as the 'new secularism's' politics that is stubbornly resistant on this front, remaining deeply ensconced in separationist presumption and practice. It is interesting to consider why this is the case. Elizabeth Povinelli and others have offered eloquent critiques of the politics of representation, but these critiques have failed to gain the public traction they deserve in the social sciences and adjacent policy discussions. As

Birnbaum recognizes, it is precisely the naïve restorative claim that recuperating religion is or ever could be apolitical that motivates the book.

Birnbaum also underscores that there is no clean separation between the governors and the governed. While I agree that there are no ‘local practices’ that stand pristinely apart from history and politics, the concern she voices here is important and suggests that a clarification may be helpful to some readers. On one hand, BRF offers a set of heuristics (lived, expert, governed religion) that takes apart the assumption that there are things called ‘religions’ or the ‘religious’ out there in the world that stand cleanly apart from their ‘secular’ or ‘political’ counterparts, waiting to be restored to international public life. On the other hand, as Birnbaum astutely points out, upending that presumption moves us into a new epistemological field, one explored in a preliminary way in the concluding chapter of the book and also in a number of discussions since, including a post on *The Immanent Frame*, ‘Religion and Politics Beyond Religious Freedom.’<sup>1</sup> These two moves, the deconstructive and the reconstructive, need to be clearly distinguished and explained.

The first, disaggregative move is intended to help the reader see that the restorative narrative is itself a form of politics that creates, reifies and empowers *particular* politically acceptable ‘religions’ and religious leaders while contributing to the exclusion of a range of alternative forms of both politics and religion. The heuristics of lived, governed and expert religion are designed to do that work, and no more. Let me make the point more strongly. In his short and provocative book *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, James Scott disaggregates modern politics in ways that parallel my attempt to destabilize modern legal and political constructions of religion. Echoing my distinction between expert/official and lived religion, Scott describes the past three centuries of the rise of the modern state as the triumph of ‘standardized, official landscapes of control and appropriation’ over ‘vernacular order.’<sup>2</sup> Like Scott’s official and vernacular politics, my expert, official and lived religion are all mixed up with each other, and with institutional religion. They cannot be fully disentangled or disaggregated. The distinctions between these categories are always, to an extent, arbitrary and porous—themselves the product of law and governance.

My intention, then, is neither to romanticize lived religion as outside of history, standing ontologically prior to structures and relations of power, nor to identify ‘authentic’ forms of it. There is no pure religion that stands independent of elite, orthodox, institutional or legal religion. These heuristics are useful not because they have sharp boundaries but because they offer a glimpse of the complex and shifting religio-political fields and formations that shape the worlds we inhabit and create. Birnbaum is right that to go out on a field mission to locate or lift up ‘lived religion’ would miss the point. Instead we need to hone interpretive strategies that upend all attempts to stabilize religion as a category of law and governance, and to resist the assumption that lived religion –or *any* religion—exists prior to and outside of politics, law, economics and history. This speaks to Jansen’s query as to whether I see any room for lived religion that stands cleanly apart from politics, or whether this is impossible as long as religion and religious freedom exist under what she calls ‘the ordinary, worldly sign of religion under law.’ It is the latter.

Birnbaum’s understandable hesitations about the category of lived religion also resonate with Jansen’s call to go beyond the construct and step outside of the religious-secular binary altogether. While I sympathize with the impulse behind this suggestion I think we need to proceed with caution before jettisoning these categories. I agree with Webb Keane in *Christian Moderns* when he writes that

<sup>1</sup>E.S. Hurd, ‘Religion and Politics Beyond Religious Freedom’, *The Immanent Frame*, 3 August 2016. <http://bit.ly/2aJ0lDk>.

<sup>2</sup>James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 35.

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 ... But 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.<sup>3</sup>

We need to use these words, but to use them differently, recognizing the tensions in doing so, and explaining them as we go. This requires toggling back and forth, striking a balance, relying on them while also acknowledging their instability and refusing attempts to reify them.

Of course Jansen is also right that there are moments when it makes sense to move beyond the religious-secular frame. Not everything can or should be reduced to it. This brings me to the second, constructive move of the book: to call attention to forms of sociality and religiosity that would escape our field of vision absent the disaggregation and destabilization of religion as a category of law and governance. I am thinking here of the unintelligible, silenced, or marginalized forms of agency, authority, community and solidarity that are, for the most part, left in the shadows in the book, alluded to but (as Jansen and others point out) never fully explored. How should we think about that which had been invisible but begins to enter our line of sight as a result of this critique? What does the religio-political landscape look like after we have adjusted our lens to bring into focus a postseparationist epistemology that reflects the constant and mutual imbrications and transformations of the religious and the political?

There is no single answer to this question. One example I have found interesting to think with recently is Pinar Kemerli’s work on Turkish Islamist conscientious objectors (COs), discussed in more detail in my article in a recent special issue on secularization of *Intellectual History Review*.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Kemerli’s work in that piece, I argue that religious and political subjectivities such as those represented by Turkish Islamist COs are illegible to attempts to ‘restore religion’ to foreign policy and international public life. Turkish Islamist COs, their dissenting interpretations of Islam, and their critique of the Turkish state’s (mis)-appropriation of Islam, are imperceptible in a world of state-sponsored religious engagement in which only religions and religious authorities that conform to authorized political and religious normativities qualify for engagement and also, in many cases, material and political support. Those that do not meet the standard become invisible both politically and religiously because they fail to conform to the Turkish government’s criteria for legibility and legitimacy. In other words, they fail to qualify politically as religious actors. No government outreach program will be permitted to engage them. Unsympathetic to the Turkish nationalist and militarist rendering of Islam, they do not qualify as a group meriting engagement.

This is one example of the forms of solidarity, agency and subjectivity that uneasily inhabit, cautiously or energetically contest, or reject entirely the religio-political modes of subjectivation through which they are governed in the contemporary state system. Nur Amali Ibrahim is right, then, that much work remains to be done studying the ‘different forms of governance to which different religious traditions are subjected under the new secularism of the west.’

On a related note, both Ibrahim and Jansen criticize BRF for its lack of detailed information on local cases and contexts. I agree, at least in part. There is an occupational hazard in taking on constructs as ambitious and unwieldy as international religious freedom in a volume of this length. While there are days when the project seems quixotic, my intention was never to offer

<sup>3</sup>Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Missionary Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 86.

<sup>4</sup>E.S. Hurd, ‘Narratives of De-secularization in International Relations’, *Intellectual History Review*, 27:1, special issue on ‘Narratives of Secularization’, edited by Peter Harrison (January 2017): 97–113.

an exhaustive account of all of the local contexts and cases but to give illustrative illustrations that convincingly convey the stakes of the argument. A larger and more complex series of stories is waiting to be told. I hope the book catalyzes them.

Finally, Jansen calls for more attention to the European construct of ‘Freedom of Religion or Belief.’ This gives me an opportunity to clarify my argument about the role of religion and/as belief in the context of contemporary global religious freedom advocacy. The argument that in religious freedom discourse ‘belief’ is assumed to represent the core of religion is often misunderstood or misconstrued by critics who accuse me of dismissing or denigrating religious freedom as a Protestant imposition. It is not that simple. I am not indicting religious freedom as a Protestant/Christian, neo-imperial imposition—the story is more complex than that. As I argue in BRF, and in more detail in my chapter in the collective volume, *Politics of Religious Freedom*,<sup>5</sup> contemporary protections for religious freedom *do* protect certain forms of belief (and unbelief), in particular, a faith-based life that accords with modern liberal understandings of faith.

My interest is in the historical particularities of the rise of this particular economy of belief and unbelief, and its close ties to particular modern notions of religion and the free market. This historically contingent economy of belief/unbelief, which could be considered simultaneously Protestant and not Protestant, not only protects and privileges particular kinds of religious (believing and unbelieving) subjects but it also produces subjects and faith communities for whom choosing and believing—in the sense described by Ian Hacking, historicized by Talal Asad and lionized by Malcolm Evans—is seen as the defining characteristic of what it is to be religious, and the right to choose to believe (or not) as the essence of what it means to be free. This is a particular, modern understanding not only of what it means to be or become religious but also of what it means to be or become free. Without ignoring the power of this discourse, scholars of politics and religion also need to attend to the many ways of being and belonging that lie outside of the modern economy of belief and unbelief, in which religion may be lived relationally as ethics, culture and even politics, but without, necessarily, belief.

### Disclosure statement

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<sup>5</sup>Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood and Peter G. Danchin, *Politics of Religious Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 2015.