



## Intersectionality, International Relations and the Possibility of Religion Policy

John A. Rees

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## REVIEW FORUMS

**Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion**, by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015, 200 pp., \$29.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780691166094

### **Intersectionality, International Relations and the Possibility of Religion Policy**

There are numerous and significant points at which one could engage the arguments presented in *Beyond Religious Freedom (BRF)*, a testament to the rapidly growing status of one of the most challenging and important contributions to the study of religion and global politics in recent years. I shall do so by situating *BRF* as a type of analysis, within this categorization suggest the significance of Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's thesis to the study of religion in international relations (IR), and raise the possibility of an alternative trajectory one could take related to religion and the policy process.

From the opening pages *BRF* calls for an unmaking and remaking of religion as a type in the study of global politics. The unmaking process has two principle components: to challenge the idea that religion is a 'stable, coherent legal and policy category' (p. 7), and to critique contemporary efforts in international law and public policy to 'define and shape forms of religiosity that are understood to be conducive to particular regimes of governance' (p. 4). The remaking of religion likewise has two aspects: to highlight religion as comprised of 'evolving and contested sets of traditions' (p. 15), and to emphasize religion and religious belonging as always embedded 'in other forms of human sociality and activity' (p. 20). Three heuristics of 'expert', 'lived' and 'governed' religion are employed as a means of 'interrogating the singular, stable understanding of religion' (p. 9) in order to see more complex interactions at play in the domains of international policy and law.

The core analysis in *BRF* resonates with intersectional theory that has antecedents in critical race and gender studies. Intersectionality emphasizes 'interdependent and mutually constitutive relationships between categorical dimensions of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, class or sexual orientation'.<sup>1</sup> I shall draw on the insights of an important recent essay exploring intersectionality as a field of study in order to frame several arguments to follow.<sup>2</sup> According to Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, intersectional scholars contest the interests of 'single axis thinking'<sup>3</sup> embedded in institutional processes of knowledge production in law and public policy. Moreover, they seek to engage a struggle for social justice via 'subjecting existing doctrines to trenchant critique' for the purpose of 'uncovering rationalisations that reinforce social power'.<sup>4</sup> The key problem addressed by Hurd is that the singular/stable categorization of religion 'from which to formulate foreign policy, pursue rights advocacy, and govern internationally' is determined by governing authorities themselves (p. 122) and is thus a mere extension of

<sup>1</sup>Lena L. Kruckenberg, 'Intersectionality' in Lee Yoke-Lian (ed.) *The Politics of Gender* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010), pp. 290–291.

<sup>2</sup>S. Cho, K. Williams Crenshaw, and L. McCall, 'Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, And Praxis', *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture & Society*, 38:4 (2013), pp. 785–810. Crenshaw is credited with having a foundational influence in the field of intersectional studies.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 787.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 790.

state-sponsored interests. Intersectionality is carried in *BRF* via a trenchant critique of this categorization of religion ‘as an isolable entity’ (p. 29) employed by a stratum of international policy experts in an ‘exercise of civilising power’ (p. 26) that is set against more ‘complex varieties of contemporary religious practice’ (p. 30) which are ‘entangled in and shaped by specific sociohistorical, economic and political contexts’ (p. 31).

Religious freedom could thus be read in *BRF* through what Cho, Crenshaw and McCall see as ‘the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness’<sup>5</sup> and understood in turn by Hurd as a mechanism whereby governance regimes authorize ‘particular understandings of what it means to be religious, and what it means for religion to be free’ (p. 64). The burgeoning agenda of states and international organizations (IOs) to produce ‘policy-relevant knowledge about religion’ (p. 123) stands in opposition to Hurd’s view that religions and religious actors are not clearly identifiable in these terms (p. 29). Thus, this central critique at work throughout *BRF* reflects the intersectional assumption that categories are not distinct, but are ‘always permeated by other categories ... always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power’.<sup>6</sup>

Although the study of religion in IR has grown sixfold since 9/11,<sup>7</sup> the theoretical drivers in the field have largely reflected a realist-liberal nexus thereby legitimizing religious actors and interests as part of the problem-solving agenda of states and IOs. However, as Dunne, Hansen and Wight have argued, paradigmatic conflict in IR has been replaced in the past decade with a dominant logic concerned instead with ‘considering the prospects for various forms of pluralism’.<sup>8</sup> To this end, intersectional studies opens the way for new critical frontiers in the discipline,<sup>9</sup> and importantly, new critical models for religion scholars in IR and cognate disciplines to work with and develop.<sup>10</sup> A more robust critical tradition would confirm the comparative aspect of religion study as a field that encompasses the full range of theoretical postures.

This is relevant because *BRF* could, in my view, be situated at the forefront of a critical religion corpus that has employed intersectional method. One obstacle is Hurd’s surprising distinction between religion and ‘other forms of group identity such as gender, ethnicity, culture, and race’ (p. 121) as a point of emphasis in the final chapter. Noting the sustained intercontextualization carried through the case studies, it seems unnecessary to argue that religion ‘is not just any category’ (p. 121) casting it, in effect, as an isolable entity. One might alternatively suggest that whilst religion has a particular and unique genealogy in relation to regimes of governance (Hurd pp. 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’<sup>11</sup>—which creates broad-based intersectional connections between these elements. *BRF* brings such intersections to light in vivid technicolour, and in so doing becomes a model of analysis for a new generation of critical religion scholars to follow.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 787.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 795.

<sup>7</sup>R. Hassner, ‘Religion and International Affairs: The State of the Art’ in Patrick James (ed.) *Religion, Identity, and Global Governance: Ideas, Evidence, and Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup>T. Dunne, L. Hansen, and C. Wight, ‘The End of International Relations Theory?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), p. 406, cf. pp. 405–425.

<sup>9</sup>For example, see E.M. Simien and A.-M. Hancock, ‘Mini-Symposium: Intersectionality Research’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 64:1 (2011), pp. 185–186.

<sup>10</sup>For example, E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, ‘The Faith-Gender-Asylum Nexus: An Intersectionalist Analysis of Representations of the “Refugee Crisis”’ in E. Wilson and L. Mavelli (eds) *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*. Critical Perspectives Series on Religion in International Politics (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), pp. 207–222.

<sup>11</sup>James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 7.

A political ethic implicitly sustained throughout *BRF* is that the cooption of religion, and of single axis agendas such as religious freedom now at work in the international system, is ineffective in preventing violence, persecution and discrimination, and more often ‘reinforces the very lines of division that make the violence seem possible, and in the worst cases, unavoidable’ (p. 119). As such, *BRF* presents a seminal challenge to the conceptual and instrumental renderings of religion in the domains of international policy-making. This is a definitive critique for Hurd, who rejects the possibility of ‘a more encompassing, new and improved “International Religious Freedom 2.0”’ because such a shift ‘will serve to (re)enact a modified version of the same exclusionary logic’ (p. 63). More could be explored here about the ways this assumption can be historicized and politicized more in relation to US foreign policy engagements with religion than international policy-making more broadly.<sup>12</sup> However, my focus briefly turns to divergent methodologies that exist *within* intersectional studies and the possibility of incorporating the salient critique extant in *BRF* into the international policy-making enterprise towards religion which remains a messy work in progress.

Cho, Crenshaw and McCall consider two alternative processes at work in intersectional studies, described as ‘centrifugal’ and ‘centripetal’. Centrifugal intersectionality moves ‘from its groundings in Black feminism’ towards ‘different discursive and research protocols’ extant in a range of disciplinary contexts to create a more formalized theoretical and methodological schema.<sup>13</sup> Centripetal intersectionality, by contrast, is more ‘insurgent’ whereby analysts ‘strike out mainly at the margins of their disciplines and are often sceptical about the possibility of integrating mainstream methods and theories into their intersectional research’.<sup>14</sup> Whilst acknowledging the vital role played by centripetal approaches, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall caution against this as an end point for intersectional studies because ‘critical analysis of institutional and discursive power is rarely a sufficient prophylactic against its reach’.<sup>15</sup> For these authors a better outcome would instead be that centripetal studies across multiple disciplines be ‘built into the centrifugal forces of intersectionality’.<sup>16</sup>

There may be a valuable parallel to be drawn between the centrifugal and centripetal processes of intersectionality and the heuristic significance of *BRF* for the study of religion in IR. As a ground-breaking critique of powerful agendas concerning religion within international law making and foreign policy, Hurd models centripetal analysis with clarity and insight. However, a larger significance opens up for this work when it is heeded by those engaged within policy domains that require such a critique be fed back into a centrifugal process of formalization. This will be possible in some contexts and not others. The centripetal analysis of *BRF* may find no wider traction within US foreign policy circles, at least for now. But away from US hegemony undergirded by an innately religious self-conception and the missional imperative that this creates,<sup>17</sup> the critical insights of *BRF* may find a place in other policy

<sup>12</sup>In the case of international development policy, for instance, in the same period when the US International Religious Freedom Act was passed and an Office of International Religious Freedom was established in the State Department, efforts to incorporate religion into the core operations of the World Bank as an isolable entity distinct from wider civil society engagement remained marginal. World Bank President James Wolfensohn explained the outright defeat of his proposal brought to the Executive Board in 2000 for a ‘Directorate on Faith’ as follows: ‘national governments do not give homes to faith-based organizations typically in their administrative set-ups, and [the Board] are just not prepared to do it’. See J. Rees, ‘International Financial Institutions and Religion’, in M. Clarke (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Development and Religion* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013), p. 282, cf. 268–285. For a critical analysis of religion in international development that resonates with much of Hurd’s analysis, see D. McDuie-Ra and J.A. Rees, ‘Religious Actors, Civil Society and the Development Agenda: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion’, *Journal of International Development*, 22 (2010), pp. 20–36.

<sup>13</sup>Cho et al., ‘Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies’, p. 792.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 793.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 794.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 795.

<sup>17</sup>See E. Wilson, *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pp. 118–146.

domains. One example relates to middle secular powers such as Australia, where suspicion of religious agency is deeply entrenched in expert and governed organizational contexts.<sup>18</sup> In such a policy space the critical posture becomes a reassurance that potentially *opens* the policy discussion with operatives that must work always within a complex and contested policy landscape. When placed in a centrifugal process, the centripetal deployment of a variegated conception of religion such as Hurd has constructed creates the possibility for more nuanced policy analysis. If this can be shown to have an instrumental consequence, then appeals within *BRF* to a lack of effective outcomes will hold resonance for state and regional actors with peace and stability concerns. I doubt this is at all Hurd's intent, but it might be argued that without this possibility one is left with a salient critique that can only reside outside of the realm of power, ultimately as a form of anti-politics, rather than one that incessantly pushes and provokes towards a transformed and more just policy agenda that includes religion without misjudging the dangers and possibilities that such an engagement entails.

John A. Rees

*The University of Notre Dame Australia*

 john.rees@nd.edu.au

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## One Step Further Beyond the Religious-Secular Paradigm

In the European 1880s, Génévieve Halévy, daughter of Fromental Halévy, the composer of the opera *La Juive*, reportedly replied to an interlocutor who had asked her about her religious affiliations: 'I do not have enough religion to change it'.<sup>1</sup> In 1813 still, her grandfather Élie Halévy had fiercely criticized the French State for having forced him to call his daughter Mélanie instead of being allowed to give her the name of Sara. Élie had come to France from Bavaria, after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the acquisition of citizenship rights for the French Jews.<sup>2</sup> The bias in favor of the Christian Calendar, more than 20 years after Emancipation, was a disappointment to him. His granddaughter Génévieve could not have surmised that the transformation of 'being Jewish' into 'having a religion or none', would soon be so tragically and complexly intertwined with 'being of a specific race' in the European context.

Elizabeth Hurd's *Beyond Religious Freedom* is a contemporary American contribution to the longstanding but regretfully still marginal insight that the ideal of 'freeing' religion from politics in modern nation-states is based on a fraught and deeply problematic abstraction of religion from its worldly entanglements, and from minority-majority relations in the first place. The current global context that Hurd discusses is very different from the nineteenth-century context of experimentation, hope and disillusionment. Freedom of religion has been institutionalized to a large extent, homogenizing partialities and majority biases have

<sup>18</sup>See D. Cappo and T. Verhoeven, 'Religion and Foreign Policy' in D. Baldino, A. Carr, and A. Langlois (eds) *Australian Foreign Policy: Controversies and Debates* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 270–290.

<sup>1</sup>Cited in Michael R. Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 61.

<sup>2</sup>Henri Loyrette (ed.), *La famille Halévy 1760–1960* (Paris: Bibliothèque Arthème Fayard, 1996), p. 54.