

New book argues international efforts to 'get religion right' are making things worse

August 26 2015, by Hilary Hurd Anyaso

Policymakers have pushed an unprecedented array of international initiatives in recent years to get religion "right," but in doing so they have contributed to the very divisions they meant to overcome, according to a new book by a Northwestern University political scientist.

In "Beyond Religious Freedom" (Princeton University Press, September 2015), Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, an associate professor of political science in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern, questions how policymakers have rallied around [religious freedom](#), interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance and protections for religious minorities as the best ways to combat persecution and discrimination.

"In the field of [religion](#) and international affairs there has been a gold-rush mentality lately as scholars scurry to 'get religion right'—but I find many of these efforts to be confused and even troubling," Hurd said in an interview with Princeton University Press.

Hurd makes the case that international relations got religion—but got it wrong, in a recent piece in the Washington Post blog "[Monkey Cage](#)."

Hurd said this new attention to religion is, at its base, predominantly about Islam, and that religious freedom, particularly with regard to Islam, has evolved into a major policy arena.

The religion has been divided into "good" and "bad" forms of Islam.

"'Good' forms of Islam are celebrated as sources of morality, community and discipline, while 'bad' ones are criticized as the root of all global instability and insecurity," Hurd wrote.

Religions, Hurd said, including Islam, do not cause violence. Nor do they cause peace.

Religion is better understood as an intersected category similar to gender, race, ethnicity and class, Hurd said. "It is also deeply enmeshed with law and other forms of collective governance in complex and context-specific formations."

Religion, law and politics have always intermingled—and it cannot be otherwise, she said.

"'Beyond Religious Freedom' develops an alternative that neither celebrates religion for its allegedly peaceful potential nor condemns it for its allegedly violent tendencies," Hurd said. "It proposes a new framework for the study of religion, law and governance."

"The book brings together conversations from a range of sources, including on the politics of international human rights and the European Court's jurisprudence; the study of contemporary religion; law and the legalization of religious difference; Turkish and Alevi studies; and debates over religion and religious freedom, and the politics of religious outreach and toleration programming in U.S. and European foreign policy," Hurd said.

"These are topics that haven't been brought together before in this way, and I think together they contribute in important ways to an effort to understand the intersection of religion, law and global politics today."

Provided by Northwestern University

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