

Review

Politics of Religious Freedom

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin (eds). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 344pp.

Amanda Ryan *

When tackling the topic of “religious freedom” what are policy-makers and academics trying to define? Is religious freedom a universally defined set of liberal human rights from a secular state, or is religious freedom also seen in religious states? *The Politics of Religious Freedom* goes into the depths of complexity that is “religious freedom.” The book explores what religious freedom is in a variety of settings: South Asia, North Africa, Middle East, Europe, the United States, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Brazil.

This book is a collection of blog posts and essays submitted to the Immanent Frame website (hosted by the Social Science Research Council) dedicated to interdisciplinary discussion on religion, secularism, and the public sphere. Overall, this collection of blog posts and the larger Immanent Frame website, are part of the Politics of Religious Freedom research project, a three-year study funded by the Henry R. Luce Foundation. In beginning the research for this project it became clear the project extended beyond the dialogue of the four editors and even setting the discourse of “what is religion?” needed to be expanded, let alone trying to define religious freedom in an overarching, universal approach. The book is divided into four sections: religion, history, law/politics, and freedom. The variety of essays forces the reader to examine religion and

* Amanda Ryan is a M.A. Candidate at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her research interests include religion in public life and politics, human rights, social justice, education, and intersectional feminism. She currently works at the Institute for Holocaust Education (IHE).

religious freedom out of the western Eurocentric framework, and challenges the assumption that religious freedom is universally valid and a social fact.

The first section: “religion,” attempts to define religion and religious freedom in the above-mentioned countries and areas. The main question tackled in this section is: “identifying precisely what counts as religion for both domestic and international legislation” (13). Even as religious scholars, policy-makers, and lawmakers with the ability to critically think and discuss religion, Christian history and phenomenologies are still engrained as the standard for religion in our discourse. As pointed out throughout the course of this section, it is essential that we move past that narrative and mindset. In this discussion on religion, there is little mention of theorists, such as Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and others that lend their voices to the construction that is religion. However, these essays pull from the historical and lived experiences of religion throughout the world.

One example from this section is Robert Yelle’s “Imagining the Hebrew Republic: Christian Genealogies of Religious Freedom.” This essay discusses the development of religious freedom in Europe and the separation of the religious life from the secular. In this chapter, Yelle discusses how religious freedom has developed out of a place of anti-Judaism during the Protestant Reformation (19). The religious freedom genealogy Yelle is exploring is one in the separation of the internal and external; belief and religion being something that is sacred and personal, while law and government is that of the public realm and profane.

The second section, “History,” expands upon the understanding of religious freedom being multi-faceted and there is no single model to which all can strive. This section of the book contains essays focused on Sri Lanka, India, Egypt, the United States, and Europe; bringing a diversity of histories and examples of religious freedom in those states. The essays examine the fluidity of religious freedom in these contexts. In “Religious Freedom, Minority Rights, and Geopolitics,” Saba Mahmood questions the viewpoint of religious freedom being the pinnacle of achievement for countries. Mahmood questions the general assumption that religious freedom is squandered in areas plagued by illiberal governments and fundamentalism (142). Many in our societies see the Middle East as an area with a lack of religious freedom due to the governments of the countries and the strong influence of Islam. However, Mahmood reaches beyond that surface level analysis of Middle Eastern history to examine the geopolitical history that

has surrounded the area. In doing so, Mahmood encourages the reader to examine religious tolerance beyond the Western narrative.

The “Law and Politics” section further provides evidence of the mistaken ways in which current policy- and lawmakers discuss religious freedom as a singular right that remains constant despite the various cultures, genealogies, and power relations in each context. Some of the essays in this section question the subject, scope, and justification of religious freedom. As stated by Peter G. Danchin, religious freedom is understood in the term of the “subject of the right is the *individual*; the scope of the right is *conscience* or *belief*; and the justification of the right is either apodictic *reason* . . . or some form of natural reason that yields an object right to conscience in accordance with natural law” (174).

In previous discussions throughout the book, religious freedom is discussed in ensuring the separation of religion from the public sphere, but as Waheeda Amien discusses in “Postapartheid Treatment of Religious Freedom in South Africa,” the government wanted to ensure greater accommodation made for religion in the new constitution adopted in 1996 (179). Amien discusses how the racial and religious discrimination that was rampant in apartheid South Africa—stemming from colonization and Christian proselytizing—led to the adoption of more tolerant and inclusive laws. According to Amien, the laws of religious freedom were solidified by four cases in South Africa: *S v. Lawrence, Negal, Solberg* (1997); *Christian Education South Africa v. Minister of Education* (2000); *Prince v. President, Cape Law Society and Others*, (2002); and *MEC for Education, KwaZulu-Natal, and Others v. Pillay* (2008). These cases allowed the religious institutions the right to conduct religious observances and practices at state institutions (181). This is in a stark contrast to the context of the United States where something as a monument of the “Ten Commandments” cannot be displayed at state-run institutions. Further proving that religious freedom is not universally defined or institutionalized by all countries.

The last section of the book, “Freedom,” further tackles the difficulty for an objective definition and implementation of religious freedom that the reader has encountered throughout the book. Who gets to decide what religions are allowed to be protected by the state, by what definition of religion is the state using to protect certain rights, is religion even the correct modifier to discuss these rights? This section brings together the previous topics to solidify the complexity, subjectivity, and fluidity of

religious freedom. Through religious and secular states, we see differences of what constitutes religious freedom and how this right has developed in a number of contexts.

This book is important for all to read in order to further their understanding of the complexity of the world around us and to challenge the normative, almost colonial view that many in the United States and Western Europe have regarding religious freedom and what this right should look like in all contexts. It pushes the reader to view this concept through the lens of intersectionality of the peoples of various countries, while remaining cognizant of the histories and politics each country went through to get where they are today.