



Article

The Politics of Religious Freedom

December 5, 2023

A project that explored the histories and genealogies of religious freedom

The Politics of Religious Freedom project explored the concepts and practices that collect under the global rubric of *religious freedom*. Directed by [Elizabeth Shakman Hurd](#), [Winnifred Fallers Sullivan](#), [Saba Mahmood](#) and [Peter Danchin](#), it led to several published outputs between 2012 and 2015; these works have reshaped the study of religion and international politics in important ways.

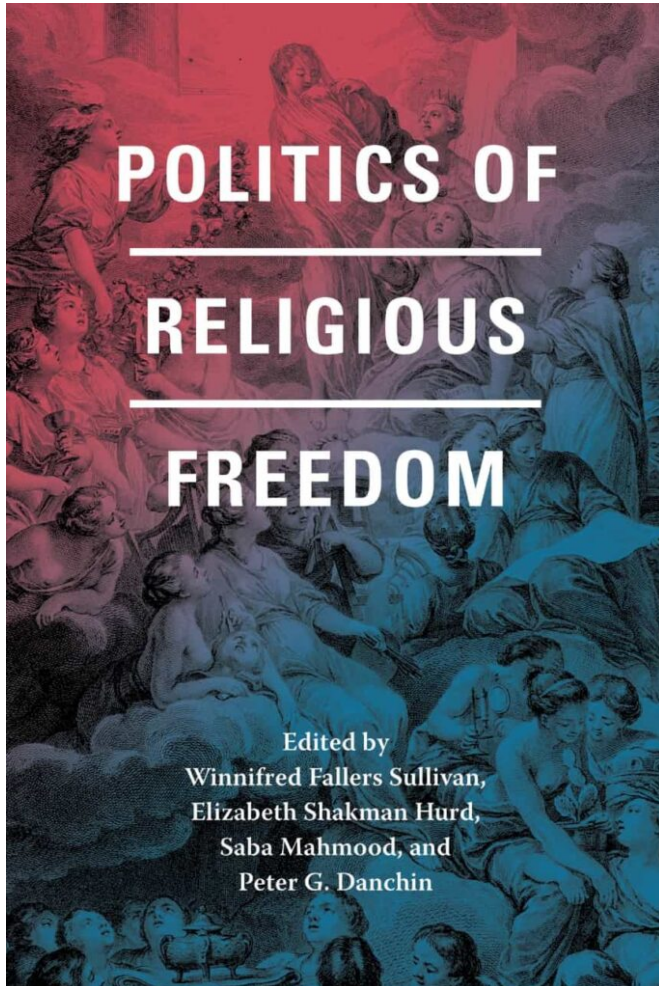
Unpacking the Politics of Religious Freedom

In *The Politics of Religious Freedom*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2015, editors Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter Danchin presented a thought-provoking collection of essays that examined the complexities and contradictions inherent in the concept of religious freedom. This scholarly work challenged conventional narratives and offered a critical perspective on how religious freedom was understood and practiced globally.

The *Times Literary Supplement* lauded the book for its rigorous analysis and

multidisciplinary approach. It highlighted the editors' success in bringing together diverse voices that scrutinized the concept of religious freedom from historical, legal, and political viewpoints. The review commended the book for "exposing the varied and often conflicting interpretations" of religious freedom, underscoring the importance of context in shaping these understandings.

In a detailed review essay for *Middle East Law and Governance*, the book was praised for its comprehensive examination of religious freedom across different cultures and legal systems. The reviewer noted that the essays collectively challenged the assumption that religious freedom was a universally understood and accepted principle. Instead, the book revealed how religious freedom was often shaped by specific political agendas and cultural contexts, making it a contested and dynamic concept.



Daniel Liechty, writing in *Religion*, emphasized the book’s relevance to contemporary debates on human rights and religious liberty. He appreciated the editors’ efforts to highlight the tensions between universalist claims of religious freedom and the particularities of local practices and beliefs. According to Liechty, the book “illuminated the power dynamics at play in the promotion and implementation of religious freedom,” making it an essential read for anyone interested in the intersection of religion and politics.

The book’s insights were further validated by discussions in the [Hearing on “The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe,”](#) held by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on July 13, 2021. The hearing underscored the precarious state of religious freedom

worldwide, revealing how the concept is often manipulated by political entities to serve specific agendas. Testimonies highlighted that while some nations promote religious freedom as a fundamental human right, others use it as a tool for political leverage, suppressing minority religions under the guise of maintaining social harmony.

The Politics of Religious Freedom went beyond merely documenting instances of religious persecution or tolerance. It critically examined how the language of religious freedom was used and manipulated by various actors, including states, international organizations, and religious groups. The book's essays revealed that religious freedom was not a neutral or self-evident good but a complex and often contested political project.

By integrating perspectives from law, anthropology, history, and political science, *The Politics of Religious Freedom* invited readers to reconsider simplistic notions of religious liberty and to appreciate the intricate ways in which it is embedded in power relations and cultural struggles.



Source: Sasan Rashtipour via Unsplash

Contested Genealogies

The project also led to the production of a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* in 2014 which probed the intricacies of secularism and religious freedom in contemporary society. In the inaugural essay, Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin elucidated the overarching agenda of the issue, asserting, "We aimed to critically interrogate the concepts and institutions that govern the relationship between religion and state." This set the stage for a thought-provoking exploration of the tensions and negotiations inherent in secular governance.

Throughout the issue, contributors delved into various facets of religious freedom and secularism. For instance, Anushka Pinto examined the historical roots of secularism in postcolonial India, revealing how state policies shaped religious identities and practices. Additionally, Johnathan van Antwerpen analyzed the legal frameworks governing religious freedom in Western democracies, illustrating how constitutional protections interact with social and political realities.

Each essay challenged conventional paradigms and fostered critical reflection on the complexities of contemporary religious and political dynamics.

[Click here to read the full special issue](#)

Re-thinking Religious Freedom: Further Discussions

The Politics of Religious Freedom project also motivated two additional collections of essays. The Social Science Research Council's *The Immanent Frame* (TIF) curated the essay series "[The Politics of Religious Freedom](#)" from 2018 to 2020. This fostered critical reflection on the intricate dynamics of religious liberty. For example, Sarah Barringer Gordon, in "Navigating the Tensions," highlighted the constitutional struggles between religious liberty and other rights. In "Minorities Within Minorities," Winnifred Fallers Sullivan underscored the importance of protecting minority religious rights. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, in "Global Challenges, Local Contexts," emphasized the need for international cooperation on religious freedom issues.

In contrast, the Journal of Law and Religion published [a symposium issue](#), edited by Marie A. Failing and Elizabeth A. Clark, in 2021. Scholars explored the intersection of law and religion, covering diverse topics such as religious freedom and legal pluralism. Contributors

like Alan Brownstein delved into the legal complexities of religious accommodation, examining its implications for societal cohesion. Additionally, Silvio Ferrari addressed the challenges of reconciling religious norms with secular legal systems. Through rigorous analysis and interdisciplinary dialogue, this symposium offered invaluable insights into the evolving relationship between law and religion.

Both discussions grappled with the challenges posed by legal pluralism and the tensions between religious norms and secular legal systems. Scholars in both collections examined how legal frameworks accommodate religious beliefs while maintaining societal cohesion. Moreover, they critically analyzed the implications of legal decisions and policy interventions on religious communities, highlighting the critical need for more nuanced approaches to religion, religious freedom and the law.