

# Is Religious Freedom a Western Imposition?

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To begin with, five facts:

1. The demand for religion around the world is increasing.
2. This demand has been increasing for decades.
3. It is happening in tandem with a rise in the number of democracies since at least the 1970s.
4. It is affecting global politics in a big way.
5. It is a dynamic story,

encompassing a mix of local, regional, and transnational demands.

If academic theory is any guide, history was not supposed to play out this way.

Religion was expected to die off as humanity progressed into the modern age. Peter Berger, the doyen of the sociology of religion, predicted in the 1960s that only a residual handful of the faithful would be left, cowering in corners, as people moved to cities to labor in factories. No longer would human fates be decided by nature and explained by supernatural forces; science, empirical evidence, and logic would prevail.

Yet we now recognize a global resurgence of religion and a demand, at least since the 1970s, for religion to have a presence in the public sphere. Taking a rare action in the academy, with admirable humility, Berger retracted his secularization claim in the late 1990s. Not only do well over two-thirds of the world's population currently believe in some sort of divine being, and say that God is important in their lives, but their number has been rising over the past four decades.

Moreover, when we consider the increased distribution of democratic states worldwide since the 1970s, we cannot deny the role that religious ideas and actors have played in this trend. The Catholic Church's Vatican II reforms in the 1960s had a profound impact on how Catholics, lay and clergy,

related to their states, autocratic leaders, and the modern world. Throughout the early 1980s, Pope John Paul II provided hope, inspiration, and legitimacy to the opposition that eventually toppled autocratic communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe. Because of the central role of the Catholic Church and its ideas, this "third wave"

of democracy was termed "the Catholic wave" by the eminent political scientist Samuel Huntington.

Was the demand for democratic values, including religious freedom, a top-down

movement coming from the West? A more accurate telling of contemporary history supports an understanding that religion's resurgence is a result of more localized and bottom-up struggles for equality, representation, and justice, working in conjunction with global and transnational, not just Western, dynamics. Religious freedom and human rights protections are being demanded by marginalized and persecuted citizens. These demands are not simply devised and exported by the West.

This version of history is absent from Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's new book, *Beyond Religious Freedom*, which offers a critical account of the advancement of religious freedom. Hurd's central claim is that the driving force is not locals but outsiders, particularly from the United States and its Western allies. According to Hurd, "Today, spearheaded by the United States, the commitment to religious freedom and moderation has become global in scope, encompassing individual European states, the European Union, Canada, the United Nations, and many international and nongovernmental organizations, public and private. Leaders and decision makers have identified the cultivation of tolerant religion as a critical ingredient in addressing the ills that plague collective life in the early twenty-first century."

Hurd's book documents the development of the religious freedom project since it took off in the late 1990s, starting most notably with the enact-

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The New Global Politics of Religion**  
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ment of the US International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 and continuing with the establishment of commissions, ambassadors (from the United States and Canada), and academic and policy programs and institutes devoted to the global advancement of religious freedom. She contends that this movement has seriously undermined people's freedoms, not advanced them.

Hurd's book seems to be part of what amounts to a contemporary fad: beating up on the larger human rights project that emerged in the 1970s. Consider, for example, British international relations scholar Stephen Hopgood's 2013 book *The Endtimes of Human Rights*. Hopgood claims that the advancement and protection of human rights is on the brink of death. His argument is relatively straightforward: He bases it on an empirical survey that highlights the persistence of gross violations, implying the chronic ineffectiveness of human rights organizations. This is despite the fact that there is an immense organizational architecture devoted to the global human rights project, undergirded by universal ideals designed to protect individuals around the world. So disenchanted is Hopgood by this state of affairs that he ends up questioning whether the world would look any different without these efforts.

Why has the human rights regime supposedly been such a failure? Hopgood argues that it became and remains a sham, narrowly defined in Western, secular, liberal terms, and promoted by a narrow-minded few. What we are left with, according to Hopgood, is a vacuous ideology that has failed to deliver on its promises and mission.

Hurd seems to have fallen into the same sort of mindset in her telling of the religious freedom project. In her estimation, the cause of religious freedom is a corrupt and corrupting influence directed by a small cabal of Americans with the help of some allies: "The United States and key allies such as the United Kingdom and Canada have rallied around the notion that the flourishing of free and tolerant religion, increased dialogue between faith communities, and the legalization of minority rights are required to emancipate societies from intercommunal strife, economic deprivation, and gender and other forms of discrimination." As she puts it, "With the United States leading the charge, and others

following suit, advocacy for religious freedom, tolerance, and protections for the rights of religious minorities has 'gone viral.'" In her view, a consequence of this emphasis on religious freedom is that the plight of repressed peoples not properly identified as "religious" is sometimes overlooked.

## THE ALEVI PREDICAMENT

Yet just as with Hopgood's account, Hurd's falls short in a number of critical ways. Here I elaborate on just one: Hurd's own denial of agency to the same groups that she believes the Western project has harmed. Perhaps the most telling example of this is her extended case study of the Alevi community in Turkey, which accounts for up to 20 percent of the national population and has faced a long history of persecution largely resulting from the group's syncretic relationship to the diverse faiths of the Middle East. Are they Muslim? Shia? Sunni? Christian? Pre-Christian? Shamanist? None of these? All of these?

We do not know, in part because the Alevis do not know. Throughout their history as a people, the Alevis have struggled to find their place—always a minority, sometimes acknowledged, but

usually persecuted. Yet in Hurd's telling that did not really start until the Alevis faced persecution under the modern Turkish regime. Although Turkey remade itself after World War I as a laicist republic, this system implicitly assumed Sunni Islam to be a basic part of Turkish identity. The Alevis became victims of the state for not being truly Sunni.

The problem for Hurd is that Alevi identity does not exist separately from Turkish identity. How the Alevi community is defined in religious, legal, and minority terms—a process the Alevis participate in but do not control—has long shaped Turkish identity and the critical questions of who is a Muslim or a minority, and what constitutes religion. This interaction of identities has been going on for centuries, not just since the 1980s, when an Alevi revival began.

True, the effort to fix Alevi identity appears to have accelerated, particularly under the rule of the Islamic-leaning Justice and Development Party, such that some aspects of Alevi traditions—the lived practice of belonging and belief—have

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*Religion's resurgence is a result of localized and bottom-up struggles for equality, representation, and justice.*

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been constrained and challenged from without. Yet so long as states do not openly persecute their minorities, they are allowed to regulate how minorities conduct their affairs, and most do. They catalogue and count peoples and communities within their borders. Why? Because states are responsible for administering their borders and providing basic public goods, including education, housing, and medical and social services. It therefore helps to know which communities live inside those borders so that states can better manage those communities and their needs. Moreover, those same peoples and communities within a state's borders often push back about how they are being counted. It is not just Alevis; we need only consider the Yazidis in Iraq who are demanding constitutional consideration as a community, and recently faced the threat of genocide at the hands of the Islamic State.

What Hurd seems to miss is the iterative and interactive nature of these political identity systems. States (and identities) have been interacting and contending with these systems across both space and time—in Western and non-Western settings, and in ancient and modern eras. Hurd overlooks just how much agency Alevis have had in the process of seeking protections for their community. In her telling, it is a rigid Western definition of religion that is being imposed on the community, and not the Turkish state that is reacting to how the Alevi and other minority communities imagine themselves and press for representation, rights, and freedom within Turkey.

Hurd says, “Neither fish nor fowl, the Alevi exist in a kind of legal limbo.” What is critical to note here is the word “exist.” The Alevis now have legal recourse to make their concerns heard and to be heard as a community. This was not the case prior to the modern era. In fact, because of centuries of massacres and persecution the Alevis adopted and followed a tradition of dissimulation (*taqiya*)—hiding their faith in order to survive in a hostile environment—which is allowed in Shiism.

In the 1980s, dissimulation gave way to activism. Alevis started to mobilize publicly, launching political and legal initiatives to be heard and counted. These initiatives were buttressed by international human rights efforts—including the promotion of religious freedom. It is not clear what Hurd would want as the alternative. A return to dissimulation in order to avoid continued persecution and perhaps massacre?

## BLAMING THE WEST

This attempt to beat up the human rights advocacy tradition—basically blaming the West for the world's ills—is a familiar and not entirely unsupported refrain. Hopgood fell into a similar trap in his critique, but rather than a US-dominated Western interpretation of religion and religious freedom, in his account it is a northern-dominated group that seeks to impose its vision on a wayward global South.

Yet we know that the human rights regime has undergone a systematic diffusion across the world, which Hopgood overlooks for the same reasons as Hurd. Critics point out that academics missed this trend because we were relying on models and theories that circumscribed how human rights were defined and thought to diffuse. Once we expand our thinking beyond our own narrow models and schema, which are largely based on Western experiences, we can see just how widespread human rights norms are around the world.

Similarly, once we see that there are different models or varieties of secularism, we can appreciate the possibility of different forms of state-society relations, and the range of shifting community definitions and demands that may emerge as a result. It is not all dictated from the top down. And this is not entirely or always a Western-driven process. Locals on the ground need to be recognized as willing, capable, and indigenous participants in a dynamic and interactive system.

Why are they willing participants? Because they are in some cases being denied a better livelihood or even their right to live as a result of the religious traditions they follow. Hurd acknowledges this only in passing: “Naturally, many Alevis are also complicit in creating themselves as a minority in order to access these various legal goods.” Again, she deconstructs all the problems associated with defining communities along religious lines, without suggesting what the alternative might be.

The bottom line is that Hurd's book reads like a polemic against the West and the Western concept of human rights. This approach leads her to overstate her case and to miss some critical questions that need to be asked and answered. For example, to what extent are competing definitions of a religious community driven by differences of opinion within the community itself? It is clear from her account of the Alevi case that a fair number of Alevis within Turkey and beyond

perceive advantages in defining their community in ways that could allow them to avoid persecution.

In Hurd's telling, however, Alevis are being forced to fight for their rights, or as she quotes the Turkish scholar Ayhan Kaya, "the institutional context has made them do so." She cites the example of a Turkish citizen who brought a case to the European Court of Human Rights, resulting in a 2007 ruling that mandatory religious classes in Turkish public schools violated minority rights. According to Hurd, the court's decision resulted from "an increasingly influential European expert consensus on the need to protect the rights of religious minorities globally." Since an Alevi Turk brought the suit, however, accepting Hurd's characterization would unfairly deprive the Alevis of agency and, at the same time, responsibility.

Hurd wants us to believe that Western conceptions of religion and religious freedom drove the case to court. In essence, if we were to accept her view, the plaintiff was suffering from a sort of Marxian false consciousness. Had an influential external consensus not existed, she argues, then this challenge over religion, identity, religious practice, and state-society relations would not have surfaced. This is not only logically dubious, but empirically unsupportable. What about the Ottoman Empire? Did it not code and categorize its ethnic and religious minorities, forcing people and communities to choose a single identity in the hope of better (or less repressive) treatment?

The Alevis have a long history. They were repressed under the Ottomans. Although they were initially treated well by the Kemalist regime in modern Turkey, before long they had to go underground again. It was only in the 1980s that they felt they could emerge and fight for their community's right to exist, practice their faith, and reproduce. Would they have been willing and able to do that had Western communities not provided some guidance and outlets that allowed them to challenge the Turkish state? No and yes.

The Alevis recognize themselves as a community. This does not mean that the definition of "community" is simple or fixed. There must always be fuzziness about who the Alevi are and what the makeup of their "proper" practices and beliefs is; and therefore about who and what constitutes their community. But at least now they can publicly start to have that conversation. That is due in part, but in part only, to the protections of legal and institutional structures—yes, in many cases international structures—currently in place to defend their rights, religious or otherwise.

Although initially I thought I would enjoy reading Hurd's critical account of the rise of religious freedom protections around the world, I found it polemical and narrow-minded. Perhaps even more crucially, she offers no alternative. The fact that so many religious minorities continue to be persecuted, prosecuted, and executed for their beliefs and traditions indicates to me that much work remains to be done in this human rights arena. ■