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Religious Freedom and the Politics of Empire

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Religious Freedom and the Politics of Empire

BEYOND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: THE NEW GLOBAL POLITICS OF RELIGION

By Elizabeth Shakman Hurd
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015
Pp. 216. Paper, \$22.95

EXPORTING FREEDOM: RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND AMERICAN POWER

By Anna Su
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016
Pp. 296. Hardcover, \$41.00

POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Edited by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015
Pp. 344. Paper, \$35.00

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: THE CONTESTED HISTORY OF AN AMERICAN IDEAL

By Tisa Wenger
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017
Pp. 312. Hardcover, \$34.95

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On July 4th, 2017, the *New York Times* reported that over one hundred Iraqi-origin Christians in the Detroit area were facing deportation under the Trump administration's "national clampdown on illegal immigration" (Yee 2017). Having entered the United States legally, these Chaldean Christians had had their green cards revoked after criminal convictions rendered them "criminal aliens" in the eyes of the state. Despite their sentences having been served years prior to the clampdown, Iraq's unwillingness to issue the men with travel documents had resulted in their de facto tolerance as residents of the United States. All this changed, however, when President Donald Trump came to power. In exchange for being dropped from the list of (so-called) "Muslim-majority" countries affected by the new administration's travel ban, Iraq agreed to accept deportees from the United States. Three months later, 114 Iraqi men in the Detroit suburbs awoke to find immigration agents on their doorsteps.

In a context of rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States (and elsewhere), the targeting of these men

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by the authorities might appear unsurprising. After all, a President who had won support by calling for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" and who continues to advocate for the building of a "big, beautiful wall" to deter irregular migration on the country's southern border is an unlikely advocate for those deemed "criminal aliens."

For the men themselves, however, the fact that they were caught in the dragnet came as a shock. Many of those affected had backed Trump's campaign, supporting not only his conservative stance on issues such as abortion, but his commitment, as they understood it, to religious minorities in their country of origin. In January 2017, for example, Trump had tweeted "Christians in the Middle-East have been executed in large numbers. We cannot allow this horror to continue!" Indeed, it was anxiety over their minority status that had led many of these Chaldean Christians to leave Iraq decades earlier. Soon after the deportation raids, the *Times* reports, "a local Chaldean noted the disconnect between tweet and deed. 'Then why are you deporting them?' he wrote on Twitter, bracketing the question with a snarl of English, Aramaic and Arabic that would be unprintable in any language" (Yee 2017).

Given the contemporary salience of religious identity politics (and identity-based policing), this anger is understandable. "Persecuted religious minorities," and the ostensibly unique challenges they face, have never been so high-profile. Nor have efforts to "protect" such vulnerable persons through legal instruments designed to recognize and uphold their right to religious freedom. As the leader of a nation committed to Madison's first freedom—"Nowhere, as Americans understand it, is religion so strong and so free" (Sullivan 2005, 1)—Trump's failure to safeguard the rights of a religious minority (and particularly a *Christian* minority) struck many as indefensible (Zlatopolsky 2017; Jackson 2017).

Protections for religious liberty have long been enshrined in national and international law. Alongside domestic provisions such as the United States' First Amendment, multilateral instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights all affirm the importance of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. That signatories to these treaties are often unwilling or unable to protect religious liberty in practice is typically read as a failure on the part of

national governments, not a fundamental problem with the idea of the right itself. The citizen's right to religious freedom is, it seems, equal parts *assumption* and *product* of the liberal democratic order.

But as the media outcry over the plight of the Chaldeans shows, religious freedom is not solely a domestic concern. A state's duty to promote free religion no longer stops at the border. The United States' International Religious Freedom Act (1998), for example, codifies the promotion of religious liberty as a central aim of American diplomacy, while 2016 saw the appointment of the first European Union Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside of the EU (European Commission 2016). This suggests, as Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin argue in their introduction to *Politics of Religious Freedom*, that "[i]n a remarkably short period, religious freedom has been naturalized in public discourse worldwide as an indispensable condition for peace in our time, advocated across the world and across the religious and political spectrum" (1).

What are the practical outcomes of these efforts to promote religious liberty through foreign policy? How should scholars of religion understand the coterminous rise of "religious freedom talk" (Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal*) and state-sanctioned hostility towards minority groups, such as Detroit's Chaldeans? This review article discusses a number of important titles in this burgeoning field of study, focusing on the relationship between and the results of both contemporary and historic efforts to "export" freedom of religion. For the authors of the books under review, internationalized "religious freedom talk" has complex and contradictory outcomes that are difficult to separate from the logic and politics of empire; and yet, in a context of markedly unequal power relations, the language of religious liberty can also be creatively instrumentalized by marginalized groups.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's much discussed *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* forms a crucial part of this debate. A staunch critic of both the assumptions behind and the results of the desire to harness and remake religion in the service of Euro-American interests, Hurd argues that policies seeking to manage sectarian disputes are as likely to fuel violence as to quell it. This is due, in large part, to the understanding of "religion" mobilized by governments and NGOs in their efforts to promote religious liberty. By approaching religion as "an isolable entity and causal powerhouse," such policies posit it as either "good" or "bad"—"moderate" or "fanatical"—and thus the target of either promotion or suppression (2–4). This Manichean vision cannot account for the messiness of

religion as it is "lived," that is, religion as it is "entangled in all domains of human life, forms of belonging, work, play, governance, violence, and exchange" (7). Instead, it privileges religion as a site of difference that transcends the political and historical realities inhabited by flesh and blood human beings, transforming complex persons into representatives of isolable, coherent religious traditions. This tendency to classify (and then govern) groups according to their presumed religion (or non-religion) works to highlight tension rather than subdue it, ultimately "[diminishing] the possibility of crosscutting, non-sectarian forms of politics" (42).

Beyond Religious Freedom is inspired, in part, by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan's seminal work in the field of law and religion. Sullivan's *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), which provides a fine-grained ethnographic account of a First Amendment "free exercise" case, highlighted the difficulties involved in defining religion for the purposes of law. "Legal religion," *Impossibility* argued, might bear only a fleeting resemblance to its lived counterpart. While Sullivan's work focuses on the United States, Hurd takes this domestic argument and applies it to international affairs. To this end, she distinguishes between three heuristics: "expert religion," "governed religion," and "lived religion." Expert religion is religion as it is imagined "by those who generate 'policy-relevant' knowledge about religion in various contexts," including academics, professional associations, think tanks, security experts, and so forth. Governed religion is religion as it is imagined by those "in positions of political and religious power," such as states, international courts, churches, and supranational governing bodies such as the European Union. Lived religion may not fit within the parameters of either expert or governed religion, although the boundaries between the three are porous (8–19). Hurd acknowledges that these categories are "imperfect," but hopes that their conceptual differentiation will allow readers to move beyond a binary understanding of religion in international affairs, in which it is approached according to such oppositional pairings as "establishment/disestablishment, freedom/unfreedom, and separation/accommodation" (9).

Hurd argues that the pursuit of freedom of religion as a policy goal has worked to produce, reaffirm, and/or reify various forms of difference, both between Euro-American nations and the recipients of their cultural imperialism, and between legally specified religious (and non-religious) "communities" throughout the world. Chapter 3, for example, discusses the harrowing situation facing the Rohingya people in Myanmar. As with Christians in the South West Asia and North Africa region, including the Iraqi Chaldeans reported on by the *New York Times*, the Rohingya are typically framed as a religious minority at risk from

their religious majority neighbors (in this instance, Muslim and Buddhist, respectively). But as Hurd points out, “the Rohingya are not excluded from Burmese society exclusively with religious slurs, but also with racist and other dehumanizing terms” (43). In a context of political and military instability, the Rohingya are treated as illegal Bengali migrants, ethnic outsiders, and economic threats. They are scapegoated by the political class, who stoke inter-ethnic tensions as a “useful distraction” from the power struggles occupying the governing elite (43–45).

While religious difference is one aspect of their exclusion, the power attributed to the category of “Muslim minority” cannot be understood in a vacuum. British colonial officials, who managed Muslim–Buddhist relations under a “divide and rule” policy, reified and aggravated the ostensible differences between these communities as part of their governing strategy (44). Contemporary Euro-American depictions of the plight of the Rohingya as “fundamentally religious in nature” work to reaffirm the problematic notion that this *particular* difference is of greater existential weight than any other. As such, international campaigns to ensure the Rohingya’s religious freedom play into the hands of their oppressors: “By reinforcing their status as Muslims rather than as Burmese citizens or as human beings, lobbying for the religious rights of the Rohingya makes it less likely that the Burmese government—or the democratizing monks—will include the Rohingya in Burmese state and society as citizens and humans, rather than as Muslims” (46–47). Further, and to go slightly beyond Hurd’s account, presenting this conflict as the result of a primordial religious struggle that can only be solved by the exportation of religious freedom allows Western nations to ignore their historic role in cementing and politicizing these lines of difference, thereby absolving Euro-American nations of their colonial guilt.

Beyond Religious Freedom gives a bird’s eye view of a global phenomenon, offering a smorgasbord of examples without fully unpacking their political or historical context. The book jumps quickly from continent to continent, discussing, *inter alia*, Sahrawis in Algeria, the K’iche’ in Guatemala, Copts in Egypt, Orthodox Christians in Albania, and Alevis in Turkey. Some examples are explored in pages, while others are discussed in paragraphs. As such, and given the sweeping nature of the claims made, the evidence offered in support of them—while, from the perspective of this reviewer, highly convincing—remains somewhat surface-level. This is not necessarily a criticism: manuscripts have word limits, and it would be impossible to combine both the international breadth of the thesis with substantial ethnographic texture. Indeed, the scope of the argument is the book’s core strength. Readers trained in participatory research methods, however, may find

themselves calling out for greater ethnographic flesh to be put on the theoretical bones of Hurd’s work: how do those affected by policies that reflect “expert” and “governed” religion understand their situation? How do they resist, acquiesce, challenge or succumb to the identitarian boxes into which they have been put?

It is here that the contributions to *Politics of Religious Freedom* come to the fore. The result of a collaborative research project funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, this edited volume brings together anthropologists, historians, lawyers, political scientists, and scholars of religion to discuss (and “unsettle”) the assumption “that religious freedom is easily recognized and understood, and that the only problem lies in its incomplete realization” (2). The collection is divided into four parts, each of which is prefaced by one of the four editors: Winnifred Fallers Sullivan on “Religion”; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd on “History”; Peter G. Danchin on “Law and Politics”; and Saba Mahmood on “Freedom.” These introductions usefully contextualize the thematic links between the essays in each section, each of which contains an example of the “crazy quilt of local solutions” by which conflicts over religion are managed (6). Many of the chapters touch upon the historic experience and ongoing effects of empire, European and otherwise. Given the concerns of this essay, it is to (a selection of) these contributions that I now turn.

Waheeda Amien’s chapter, “Postapartheid Treatment of Religious Freedom in South Africa,” argues that the South African state’s willingness to tolerate religion in the public sphere “is a direct result of its discriminatory-laden history under colonialism and apartheid” (179). In addition to instituting racial hierarchy, both European colonialists and the architects of apartheid discriminated on religious grounds, penalizing non-Christian South Africans for their supposedly “uncivilized” lifeways. Given this history, the founders of the fledgling rainbow nation sought to protect religious freedom as an aspect of “human dignity” (182). It is for this reason that Section 15(3)(a) of the South African Constitution permits the enactment of legislation to recognize religious and traditional marriages in law. In the wake of the new Constitution, African customary marriage was quickly legislated for. The legal recognition of Muslim marriages, however, has proved more problematic: while the Constitution’s “inclusive secularism” ensures religious freedom, this freedom is not absolute (182). Discussing fifteen years’ worth of deliberations over how best to recognize Muslim marriages in law, Amien shows that the debates have exposed lines of conflict within communities identified as “Muslim,” bringing together strange bedfellows in their wake. Conservative Shi’a Muslims, for example, who are opposed to current proposals on the grounds that they pay insufficient attention to their tradition, find

themselves “locking arms” with secularists who favor the absolute separation of church and state (184). Section 15 (3)(a) was supposed to undo an historic injustice, restoring to South Africa’s Muslim citizens the dignity and recognition they were denied under colonialism and apartheid (183). As Amien’s account shows, however, ongoing efforts to ensure religious freedom are, at best, an ambiguous corrective to this colonial legacy.

The specter of empire also haunts Noah Salomon’s essay, “Freeing Religion at the Birth of South Sudan.” Salomon begins with a provocative question: if the reader were to find herself the founder of a new nation, how would she choose to manage the relationship between church and state? “While such a scenario may seem like a far-fetched fantasy, [this was the question] many South Sudanese were asking themselves in the summer of 2011, elated at the possibility of starting anew after a history of brutal civil war and colonial (African and European) occupation” (280). If the situation offered possibilities, it also offered challenges. This was particularly the case for South Sudanese Muslims, who—despite violent efforts on the part of British colonialists to prevent the spread of Islam from north to south—“had gone from being part of a national majority, to being a ‘minority group’ literally overnight, and without travelling anywhere” (282).

Drawing on fieldwork carried out in the immediate aftermath of independence, Salomon argues that the level of significance to be accorded religious identity/ies (as opposed to class, regional, or tribal affiliations) had yet to be determined in the national imaginary. (The possibility of “-ies” is crucial. As Salomon points out, many South Sudanese follow multiple traditions, and Muslims, Christians, and adherents of what the government calls “African traditional religions” may all live under the same roof.) While some Muslims emphasized their African (as opposed to Islamic) credentials, seeking to shape a South Sudanese Islam distinct from the “cultural stamp of the north,” others worried that the creation of an explicitly secular South Sudan might translate into sectarianism (282). Indeed, the model of secularism trumpeted by the government seemed to contain a paradox. In the months following independence, South Sudanese politicians espoused a vision of secularism modeled on the American ideal of non-establishment, in which the separation of church and state is thought to guarantee freedom of religion. Yet they also “understand the secular as a *historically specific* device through which they can erase a painful and violent past in which the political space was forcibly ‘Islamized’ through the actions of conquerors from the north” (286). Salomon’s piece reminds us that, even for the world’s youngest nation, religious freedom is always the product of history.

Contributions to *Politics of Religious Freedom* tend to highlight the messy, ambiguous, and unstable aspects of religious freedom as both concept and practice. Its editors state that they do not take a position “for or against religious freedom” (2). Yet they also argue that “to continue to use the word [*religion*] in law is to invite discrimination” (7), suggesting that they are, at least, opposed to efforts to legally protect the category. This possible disconnect is indicative of a tension that runs throughout the scholarship in this area, which seeks to problematize the assumptions underlying religious freedom even as it is slow to suggest alternatives. For some readers—and particularly those whose research is supplemented with “practice”—the failure to offer “policy solutions” might appear as an abdication of responsibility on the part of seasoned scholars. For those wary of the normative assessments of interventionist academics, however, this may be the only approach available to the responsible scholar. Regardless of one’s position, I suggest, the tension remains: given the simultaneous existence *of* and problems *with* these legal instruments, how should critical scholars proceed? Is it possible to flag up a concept’s ambiguities without being accused of declaring religious freedom “bad” (Lloyd 2016)?

Tisa Wenger’s *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* does an admirable job of navigating this line. Wenger explicitly engages with the question of American imperialism, “[retelling] the story of American religious freedom as an illuminating lens into the intersections of race, religion, and empire in US history” (1). A work of historical scholarship, *Religious Freedom* focuses on the decades between the Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American War of 1898 and the outbreak of the Second World War, a period Wenger suggests has been under-examined by scholars of religious freedom. Yet “[i]t turns out that Americans of every description—and with them many unwilling subjects of U.S. empire—appealed to religious freedom for all sorts of purposes in this period” (11). Wenger traces the complex—and sometimes contradictory—deployment of “religious freedom talk” over these four decades, arguing that although references to religious liberty served, in most respects, to frame the American nation as white, Protestant, and secular, they also offered avenues of resistance for the many marginalized groups who existed outside of these categories.

Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Wenger treats identitarian categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion as both “interlocking assemblages” and aspects of “civilizational assemblages,” by which she means “the complex interplay of ideological and institutional processes that work together to define who and what counts as civilized and

thus as fully human—and by contrast, who and what does not” (3). Assemblages may involve the interplay of individual creativity, dominant ideology, and material factors in the designation of in- and out-group identity, meaning that although they “shape the life prospects, perspectives, and experiences of everyone they touch,” they are also open to contestation (3). While racial and religious assemblages are critical to the story told in *Religious Freedom*, perhaps the most important civilizational assemblage to which she refers is that of empire. Her emphasis on empire is particularly important given an ongoing unwillingness, on the part of policymakers and the broader American public, to acknowledge the United States as an imperial power. Yet, just as “freedom had little meaning without the figure of the slave,” Wenger convincingly shows that the rhetorics of liberty upon which religious freedom talk depends emerged hand in hand with American imperialism: “ideologies of freedom . . . [worked] powerfully as a rationale for imperial conquest, grounding assertions for *this* empire as a benevolent one, uniquely designed to bestow the blessings of freedom, democracy, and civilization” (5). Wenger provides a powerful rebuke to those who would take Donald Rumsfeld at his word when he declared “we don’t do empire” (cf. Brown 2004, 460).

While other work in this field can present a somewhat hegemonic picture of state power, Wenger showcases the capacity for resistance contained within “religious freedom talk.” In her account, even government employees and representatives of the state use the language of religious liberty to challenge, destabilize, or undermine the goals of the powers that be. This is evident in the book’s third chapter, “Making Religion on the Reservation,” which builds on Wenger’s (2009) earlier research on settler-colonial efforts to suppress Native American ceremonial dances. Her discussion of the Ghost Dance—a movement based on the prophetic revelations of a Paiute prophet named Wovoka, who taught that the performance of a new dance and adherence to a strict moral code would cause God to “usher in a new world and restore their dead relatives and the buffalo of the plains to life,” and which “terrified many white Americans” (109)—shows that, while many government officials rejected the claims that the Ghost Dance represented a religion (and was therefore entitled to the privileges of the First Amendment), others found ways to subvert government decrees precisely on the grounds of religious liberty. In one such instance, an interpreter working with an anthropologist explained to the latter that although the Arapaho people continued to practice the dance, “That’s something I have never reported, and I never will.” Despite his status as an employee of the Board of Indian Affairs, the interpreter justified his subterfuge according to the logic of the First

Amendment: “It is their religion, and they have a right to it” (112). Such details highlight the ways in which legal discourse can subvert—or at least complicate—the dominant racial-religious assemblage, even as the ideological ascendancy of religious liberty is affirmed by those doing the subverting. This emphasis on ambiguity, contestation, and the possibility of resistance is one of the book’s core strengths.

This is not to suggest that Wenger is a romantic. The book details the way that religious freedom talk was used to justify colonial expansion, including by those who had only recently been accepted as legitimate members of white American society. When migrant European Catholics used the language of religious liberty to expand the concept of whiteness, for example, they did so by pushing racialized Others to the margins: “they identified Catholicism as an all-American religion and implicitly claimed for Catholics the civilizational status of white Americans, equipped to manage the non-white subjects of imperial rule” (17). In other words, Catholics claimed the privileges of Anglo-Protestant whiteness by expressing their desire to take part in the brutalities of empire. Nor is Wenger naïve as to the problems involved in co-opting the language of one’s oppressors, noting that minority groups seeking to avail themselves of First Amendment protections had little choice but to shape and alter their practices until they fit dominant notions of appropriate “religion.” Yet Wenger is unwilling to criticize those who are forced to make such concessions to strategic essentialism, for whom religious liberty has proved (and continues to prove) “a vitally useful ideal” (14).

Similarly, Anna Su’s *Exporting Freedom: Religious Liberty and American Power* engages critically with American imperialism without reducing religious freedom to a “floating signifier” (Asad 2003, 158). As with Wenger’s work, *Exporting Freedom* takes an historical approach, albeit with a longer reach: while both authors begin with the annexation of the Philippines, Su continues up to the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003. The examples in between—including the advent of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration, the U.S. occupation of Japan, and the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998—all illustrate “the ambitions and the limits of what religious freedom promoted as law by an external power can achieve” (10). The content of such ambition is key for Su, who is interested in religious freedom as a value or ideal as much as she is in its more nefarious uses. Its exportation served both “material and moral interests,” with “aspirations of political morality” and “naked national interest” two sides of the same coin (159). Indeed, in her account, the two cannot be separated: “Great Power thinking animated [the drafting of the documents under review], whether as part of an American

civilizing mission or part of exporting democratic values” (5). More than political control of periphery territory, it is this “Great Power thinking” that defines American imperialism in the twentieth century: “a way of seeing the world from a position of power and acting accordingly. That is only conceivable within the particular context of unequal relationships in terms of the availability of various modes of political action” (5).

The significance of “unequal relationships” and their impact on relative bargaining power is made clear in Chapter 4, “Spiritual Disarmament.” Focusing on the prominence given (an American understanding of) religious freedom in Japan’s post-war constitution, Su shows that the U.S. military personnel involved in its drafting viewed religious liberty—and particularly the separation of church and state—as essential to the creation of a democratic Japan, one “more closely aligned with American international security goals” (91). Key to this democratization process was the dismantling of State Shinto. Since the late nineteenth century, imperial rites and Shinto rituals had been “deliberately fused.” By casting State Shinto as a civil—rather than “religious”—obligation, the Meiji government could require all Japanese persons, regardless of religion, to participate in an ideology that regarded the emperor as a deity (98). The idea of emperor worship proved profoundly uncomfortable for the Americans on both political and theological grounds: such devotion, they felt, “bordered on the blasphemous” (92). Thus, despite the Mastumoto Committee (a national committee on constitutional reform) determining that there was no need to rewrite the Meiji constitution, American anxieties over the merging of religion and politics meant that these recommendations did not stand. Taking matters into their own hands, the U.S. delegation produced a draft constitution that enshrined the separation of church and state and stripped the emperor of religious significance. That the Japanese accepted the new constitution is proof of the “palpable asymmetry of power” between the two parties: “The constitutional autocracy of the Meiji order had given way to a democratic constitutional monarchy. With that transformation, the American spiritual disarmament of Japan was complete” (107–08).

As with Wenger’s work, Su highlights the connection between America’s imperial exploits abroad and ongoing debates “at home.” Her discussion of the annexation of the Philippines suggests that disputes over its legitimacy were as much about (re)negotiating the relationship between Catholics and Protestants on the mainland as they were attempts to reconcile the United States’ ostensible commitment to self-government with its newly acquired empire. Under (Vatican-influenced) Spanish rule, the Philippines had been off limits to missionaries. American Protestants,

who viewed “the Roman Catholic legacy of Spanish rule as a defective form of Christianity,” hoped to change this, “advocating for the imperial turn” and the strict separation of (Catholic) church and state (14). Congregationalist leader Josiah Strong, for example, “exhorted his fellow Americans to accept [their] civilizing mandate” in their primarily Catholic colonies, while holding up “Romanism” as one of the “ten perils” threatening Americans at home (15). Although such sentiments “rankled” American Catholics (17), some of whom suggested that “the war in the Philippines was generally a war against the church,” others embraced imperialism as a means of demonstrating national loyalty (22). Politicians walked a fine line, attempting to assuage Catholic anxiety without being seen to endorse the authority of the Vatican.

Similar issues arose regarding the colonial government’s negotiations with the Philippines’ non-Catholic populations, particularly the Muslim Moros in the South. The Bates-Kiram Treaty (1899), which recognized both slavery and polygamy as part of the Moros’ religious practice, “seemed to contradict the stated *raison d’être* of the American colonial enterprise, which was the spread of liberty and progress” (28). This raised uncomfortable questions for a nation still coming to terms with the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and where the Supreme Court had recently refused to recognize religion as a legitimate justification for polygamy among Utah’s Latter-Day Saints (see also Wenger. *Religious Freedom*, 82–100). The Treaty’s architects, by contrast, argued that it was through bestowing (a limited amount of) religious freedom on the Moros that they would eventually be Christianized. In the end, and although “the guarantees of religious liberty were deployed in different ways for [the Philippines’] Catholic and Muslim inhabitants, its grant was always accompanied by the withholding of political independence” (34).

Of the books under review, Su’s is, perhaps, the most optimistic about the emancipatory potential of religious freedom talk. As she states at the outset, “to recognize the imperial provenance or the double-edged nature of religious liberty promotion is not a reason to leave it for dead” (9). Citing statistics that might make the editors of *Politics of Religious Freedom* squirm (“33 percent of 198 countries and territories currently have high levels of religious hostilities”), she declares that “there is no doubt that religious freedom presents a genuine and continuing dilemma in a variety of cultural settings” (9). Su’s willingness to accept these terms sits uncomfortably with the evidence marshalled by the other scholars under review, who—while certainly not denying that people throughout the world face violence at the hands of their governments, peers, and neighbors—have argued that framing such conflicts in religious terms may well escalate the very crises

they seek to prevent. For Su, however, it is by becoming attuned to the historicity and contingency of religious freedom that policymakers might more fruitfully deploy it; rather than rejecting the promotion of religious liberty outright, she seeks to urge greater caution in its use (161–62).

This essay has sought to draw attention to recent scholarship on the relationship between religious freedom and the politics of empire. That the contributors to the books surveyed come from such different scholarly backgrounds—international relations, history, law, anthropology, religious studies—shows the vibrancy of this emerging field of study. While a brief review cannot hope to do justice to the subtleties of the works under discussion, a common thread is the ever contested (and ever contestable) nature of “religious freedom,” an historical product that, although shaped by global powers, cannot be separated from local context. Perhaps it is this interplay of local and global that explains the plight facing Detroit’s Chaldeans, whose votes reflected a concern with violence beyond U.S. borders, but whose immigration status rendered them vulnerable to local ethno-nationalism. Yet their case, too, reveals the presence of Su’s “aspirations of political morality,” the possibility for dissent contained in Wenger’s “religious freedom talk.” At the time of writing, the American Civil Liberties Union is fighting the immigration order. Their argument—at least in part—turns on the importance of religious freedom (ACLU 2017).

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