Abstract

In her review of Anna Su’s *Exporting Freedom*, Saba Mahmood explores the United States’ promotion of religious liberty domestically and abroad, in the process asking if the two notions are ultimately interdependent and related.

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*Exporting Freedom* is an important contribution to a growing body of critical scholarship on the right to religious liberty produced over the last ten years. Rather than treat it as a universally valid principle whose value lies in its correct or incorrect legal application, this literature draws attention to the messy politics of religious liberty, its checkered history, and varied interpretations.

*Exporting Freedom* tracks the role religious liberty has played in U.S. foreign policy from the nineteenth century to the present. Anna Su focuses on various deployments of religious liberty at key moments in the expansion of U.S. power around the globe. Key to the trajectory she traces is the U.S. colonization of the Philippines, the presidencies of William McKinley and Woodrow Wilson, the U.S. occupation of Japan, Cold War politics, and the post-World War II consolidation of the human rights regime internationally. The book ends with a brief discussion of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the early drafting of the Iraqi constitution, in which religious liberty figured prominently. It is the consistent deployment of religious liberty over the course of these disparate historical developments that holds the book together even as the concept is shown to change over time.

In reading Su’s book one gets a clear sense that religious liberty is not simply a legal instrument for the protection of the free exercise of religion (as is often assumed) but a malleable discourse that has helped secure U.S. imperial and strategic interests globally. In the first few pages of her book, Su provides an attenuated definition of the term *imperial* as “a way of seeing the world from a position of power and acting accordingly,” as opposed to a mode of political organization with expansive territorial ambitions.1 Given that several of the chapters deal with the U.S. occupation of foreign countries, it is unclear how this thin notion of imperialism does justice to Su’s material. While I will return to this point later, here I wish to note the remarkably rich array of examples Su provides to illustrate how religious liberty has served U.S. global power.

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As Su shows, during the U.S. occupation of the Philippines (1898-1946), the promotion of religious liberty went hand in hand with the denial of political rights to the Filipinos, and it was differentially used to reorder Catholic and Muslim life. During the U.S. occupation of Japan (1945-52), religious liberty was deployed both to curtail Japanese monarchical power and to restructure the organization and practice of the Shinto religion. Notably, in both cases religious liberty did not simply expand legal protections to various religious traditions but restructured their practical and institutional life. This inevitably meant that the U.S. deployed a normative conception of religion in accord with which local practices were transformed. As Su shows, following the conquest of Japan, for General MacArthur the cultural regeneration of Japanese life depended upon promoting Christianity, which included authorizing American Christian missionary groups to proselytize in Japan (notwithstanding the terms of surrender spelled out in the Potsdam Declaration) and the importation of over a million Bibles.\(^2\) For MacArthur, these policies did not contradict the principle of religious liberty because at heart it was a Christian principle.

The account Su provides in *Exporting Freedom* challenges the common understanding that religious liberty is a value-neutral instrument that prescribes no particular conception of religion. Rather, as she shows repeatedly, its deployment abroad has been laden with American Protestant values, a deployment that has transformed the religious practices of those the U.S. has conquered and governed. This does not mean that Americans have always imposed an uncompromising Christian ethos on the lands they seized. For example, when the U.S. occupied Iraq, it accommodated the recognition of Islam as state religion in the Transitional Administrative Law even while insisting on the adoption of an individualist conception of the right to religious liberty. While Su does not mention this, it is worth pointing out that the U.S. conquest of Iraq effectively destroyed the long legacy of Iraqi secularism and lodged religious differences into the very heart of the political structure of Iraq. This went hand in hand with the American promotion of religious liberty, a fact that raises the question whether religious liberty is the antidote against religious strife it is often imagined to be, or at times it also serves as an impetus to such strife.

Beyond the context of military conquest and occupation, Su explores how religious liberty has been part and parcel of the moral-political vision the U.S. has projected globally against the European powers of the twentieth century. This comes across most forcefully in chapter 3, on Woodrow Wilson’s efforts to introduce religious liberty guarantees in the League of Nations Covenant. Ultimately, argues Su, the Covenant failed to incorporate religious liberty because it became linked to the demand for racial equality to which Wilson was resolutely opposed. While Su mentions Wilson’s racist views, her account could have benefitted from a more robust discussion of the depth and breadth of Wilson’s support for racial apartheid. As recent student protests against Wilson’s legacy on American campuses have revealed, upon coming to power he reversed the policy of

\(^2\) Id. at 96.
racial integration in federal civil service, authorized his cabinet members to re-segregate public facilities in public buildings, and was a vocal supporter of White supremacists (such as the Ku Klux Klan).³

In Su’s account, Wilson’s strident support for racial inequality stands in tension with his promotion of religious equality (especially for minorities) abroad. Yet it may behoove us to think about how Wilson’s championing of religious freedom internationally might be linked to his commitment to racial inequality nationally. To the extent that racial apartheid was a key expression of Wilson’s vision of the globe divided between social equals and unequals, this division applied to other parts of the world as well. The promotion of equality for religious (or ethnic) minorities within the framework of the League of Nations was meant to apply to nations subordinate to Euro-American powers but never within the internal borders of these nations. Wilson might have championed religious equality abroad but there was little room for Native American religious beliefs and practices domestically. Religious equality, like political equality, was always a conditional principle when applied to those regarded as racial or cultural unequals in the world Wilson presided over in the U.S. or abroad.

I raise this point not to correct a historical error but to draw attention to a more general point regarding Su’s thesis. Her focus on U.S. foreign policy could have benefitted from thinking systematically about how the conception of freedom that America has championed abroad is linked to the one practiced domestically. How have American governments propagated distinctive notions of religious freedom in relation to the Anglo-Christian majority versus the religious minorities within their own borders or subordinate populations abroad? Do these two faces of liberty inform and depend on each other in American history or are they simply incompatible? Here I am inspired by Aziz Rana’s extraordinary book The Two Faces of American Freedom, which argues that the American vision of unrestrictive possibility has always been dependent upon Anglo supremacy and the subordination of various communities both domestically (slaves, Native Americans, Mexicans) and abroad.⁴ Viewed from this perspective, Wilson’s promotion of religious equality abroad and racial inequality at home for minorities might appear not so much as happenstance or a contradiction but illustrative of a broader thematic that characterizes American power.

There is no doubt that despite its origins as a settler colonial state, the U.S. is not interested in governing permanent colonies. Its current global domination derives not so much from its status as a colonial empire (in the old sense) but as a military and economic power that does not hesitate to use its might to secure strategic advantages of various sorts—whether through trade agreements, direct military intervention, or financial aid. For many, the U.S. discourse on religious liberty, like its promotion of democracy, does little more than grant legitimacy to American projects of global domination. Anna Su’s


careful analysis of the shifting contours of religious liberty over the course of various American administrations complicates this assessment. It shows the immensely productive capacity of this discourse, most evident in the transformations it helped foster in the religious traditions of Japan and the Philippines, and the legislation it has inspired internationally. Su’s book delineates the productive capacity of religious liberty far beyond its misunderstanding as an ideological ruse.

In my own work, I analyze religious liberty as a technology of secular liberal governance for the management of religious difference at national and international levels. It belongs, I suggest, to a much wider field of secular political praxis that secures the prerogative of the modern state to serve as the arbiter of religious differences, to remake and regulate religious life while proclaiming its sanctity, in the process transforming how people perceive and negotiate religious identity and inter-faith relations. Under conditions of conquest and military occupation, the U.S. as the sovereign has acted in accord with this understanding of religious liberty; and in the context of indirect geopolitical power, the U.S. has helped foster this paradigm among its client states, often producing mixed results. While Su’s book provides us with rich historical material to track the complex life of religious liberty as realized in U.S. foreign policy, it also invites us to think about the theoretical implications of Su’s analysis beyond the historical material she presents.

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