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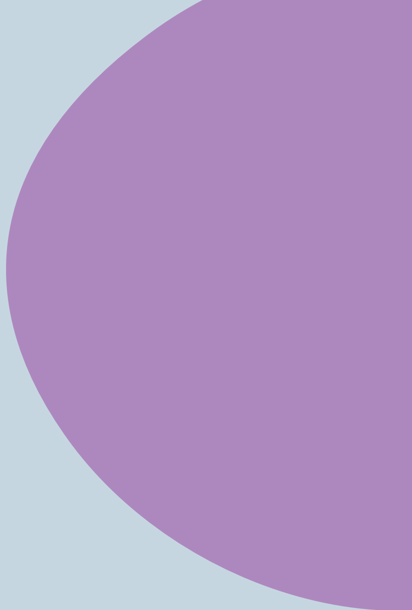

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It has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Preface

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit globally, *Otros Cruces* began a virtual training program studying two books on secularism and religious freedom written by the outstanding scholar Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, a Professor at Northwestern University. We interviewed her, and she shared with us her main contributions in the disciplines of political science, religious studies, and the social sciences based on her research on global religion and politics.

This booklet consists of the transcription and translation into Spanish of the interview conducted in English. It is a valuable work because, on the one hand, it is a pioneering unpublished work of Elizabeth Shakman Hurd in Spanish. In addition, we expect that this book will be the first of a series of writings delving into her contributions. On the other hand, this book represents the beginning of a dialogue about the problematics of religion and politics in the context and history of Latin America, because Hurd's work has focused mostly on other continents and regions of the globe. Therefore, we also decided to publish this book in English to broaden the audience into the English-speaking world with the added contributions of Latin American perspectives.

Hurd is a critical voice within political science, a discipline that commonly studies religion as something to measure or operationalize through variables, to then analyze from perspectives driven by prejudices, stereotypes, and reductionisms. Unlike these mainstream

accounts of religion, Hurd's work encompasses an intellectual richness based on her deep erudition, epistemic originality, international scope of her study cases, and experience working in foreign policy and consulting with multilateral organizations. Thus, her research fulfills a dialectic where normative theories from the academic world are challenged by the plurality of experiences on the political. At the same time, she builds a theoretical framework that systematizes and connects the ups and downs from the religious studies discipline with broader conceptualizations of political theory and international relations in their different expressions.

We can highlight three main contributions in Hurd's thought. First, her research on international relations and religious worlds, which is a topic of analysis barely studied in our Latin American continent, as well as globally in the discipline of political science. The author introduces a critical and interdisciplinary approach of how religious affairs are examined in international relations, particularly in a sphere which privileges Western and Christianized perspectives on religion without acknowledging their tensions and diversities. In that sense, Hurd questions and deepens the Western definition of secularism by dividing it into two varieties: the Judeo-Christian tradition and the laicist tradition (Hurd 2008). This implies, secondly, a critical perspective on conceiving the relation between religion and the public. In doing so, Hurd suggests three categories to study religion: expert religion, governed religion, and lived religion (Hurd 2015: 1-21). Finally, her conceptualization answers a call to inquire into religious fields from a *contextualized, histori-*

zed, and politicized standpoint. Therefore, the universe of beliefs is inscribed within a plural, diverse, and conflicted scenario, away from the structural, hierarchical, and institutional views that prevail in the analysis of the political field.

Regarding this particular piece, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd discusses in an interview format her main contributions on the themes of secularism and religious freedom globally. Furthermore, she explains her motivations to propose a critical reading that includes narratives of religious minorities. Finally, she offers a preview of her upcoming book and research about the theologico-political aspect of borders.

We hope that this book is a productive introduction of Hurd's work to Latin American readers as well as the beginning of a fruitful discussion between the Global North and Global South about these themes.

Nicolás Panotto and Ely Orrego Torres
Otros Cruces

Biographies

ELIZABETH SHAKMAN HURD is Professor of Politics and Religious Studies and the Crown Chair in Middle East Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She teaches and writes on religion and politics, the politics of human rights and the right to religious freedom, the legal governance of religious diversity, the American border, US foreign relations, and the international politics of the Middle East. Her work pursues an integrative approach to the study of politics and religion that offers insight into dilemmas of national and international governance involving difference, governance, power, law, and pluralism. Hurd is the author of "*The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*" (2008) and "Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion" (2015), both published by Princeton. She also co-edited with Winnifred Fallers Sullivan *At Home and Abroad: The Politics of American Religion* (Columbia, 2021) and *Theologies of American Exceptionalism* (Indiana University Press, 2020), and is co-editor of *Politics of Religious Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) and *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (Palgrave). She is currently working on a book on religion and politics on the US American border.

ELY ORREGO TORRES is PhD Candidate in Political Science at Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois) and Mellon Cluster Fellow in Critical Theory (2019-2020). Previously, she studied B.A. in Political Science at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (2011) and M.A. in Philosophy and Contemporary Thought at Diego Portales University (2018). She is the research coordinator at *Otros Cruces*. Her topics of research and teaching intertwines political theory and international relations to address questions on religion and politics in the global context. Her interdisciplinary approach relies on critical theories and liberation theologies to account for narratives of religious freedom, political theologies, and secularisms in the history of the present. She focuses on the global and transnational relations between north-south and south-south with a particular interest in the Americas and India. Her dissertation traces discourses on religious freedom and secularism at the regional and transnational level in the Americas focusing on international organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS).

> ELY ORREGO (EO): In your first book *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), you analyze the commonly discussed notion of "secularism," which has been understood as the assumption that religion is a private affair and as the narrative in which religion is strictly separated from politics, especially in the theory of international relations. Can you explain to us how you define secularism?

ELIZABETH SHAKMAN HURD (ESH): Thanks Ely. The short answer is that I do not define secularism outside of a specific historical context. Secularism is a language of politics. It is a language of politics in which, very specifically, people discuss and debate the proper place of religion in public life, in our laws, in our institutions, and so on. So the question of secularism requires going to a specific time and place, and saying, who is making claims in the name of this political idea, what groups are claiming to be secular, and for what reasons. And oftentimes you will see common threads or family resemblances between languages of secularism in different contexts, in different countries. You often see a claim, as you said, that religion is a private affair. You see claims that religion is something that with modernization is overcome or left behind. You see claims that religion is something that should be kept apart from public life and forms of governance, such as law and other collective forms of governance, and from public institutions. All of these claims are made in the name of secularism and secularization.

What I was trying to point out in my notion of secularism is, first of all, how historically contingent it is and how much these definitions and claims change depending on where you are and the context in which they are being made. For example, in France, *laïcité* is a very strong, anti-clerical claim that comes out of a very particular antipathy towards the Catholic Church that was and remains embodied in French Republicanism. This goes back to the Revolution, and of course, the 1905 law when it became formalized legally in France. Thus, to talk about *laïcité* in France is to talk about a very specific church-state history.

I am interested in those specific histories in my first book. You can see on the cover that there are different definitions and translations of the word secularism, in some of the languages that are spoken in the countries that are discussed in the text. My intention was to tell the reader or give them a signal or a hint: "Look how different these words are and each of them could be translated in many ways into English". For instance, the word in Arabic could be translated as "worldliness," and that is oftentimes how secularism is translated which has kind of a different inflection than the word secularism or *laïcité* in French or *laíklík* in Turkish, which has this very powerful association with Atatürk, the founding of the Republic in the 1920s, and so forth. So my intention was to say: "Look, we have hardly even begun to grasp how complex, how historically contingent, how rich, and how politicized, deeply politicized, this language of politics is, this language that in English we are calling 'secularism.'" Because secularism is a language in which we speak about

religion. It is a language in which we define religion, we say it should be here, it should not be there, it should be this, it should not be that, it is something that belongs to him but not to her, and so on and so forth. It is a very deeply political process to determine where those lines should be drawn: what counts as religion and what counts as culture, what counts as religion and what counts as politics, what counts as religion and what counts as fanaticism; where do you draw that line? And who draws that line? What is their presumption to authority and how do they relate to institutions of power? Those are the kind of questions I was hoping to put on the table.

I also had a strong emphasis, in that book, on the global aspect of secularism, which is to say that secularism is not simply something that falls out of the sky, but rather it is deeply embedded in global politics. To the extent that, for example, you cannot really understand European colonialism in North Africa and the Middle East, which was one of the areas I focused on, without understanding the ways that secularism was presented as a solution to the problem of being pre-modern, or not modern enough for political independence. The ideas in Tunisia, for example, that you need to secularize, you need to go through these processes that Europeans went through in order to become a modern state, in order to become capable of

Secularism is not simply something that falls out of the sky, but rather it is deeply embedded in global politics

self-governing, as opposed to having a colonial authority looking over your shoulder.

Now, all of those processes are wrapped up in the history of European colonialism and European assertions of power and authority over other peoples and societies, and there is a sense in which this is also a global discourse that is used to assert authority, to lay claim to modernity, and to lay claim to the privilege to decide for other societies how they should organize their public laws and institutions. I do not want to suggest that there is only one way in which that operates because it varies from one context to another, and obviously the local people in these societies also have their own understandings of the relationship between majority and minority, church and state, religion and politics, mosque and state, and all of those histories are very rich and need to be a part of the conversation that we are having.

So the second idea of the book is to suggest that this question needs to be considered globally rather than exclusively as a Western European Christian invention that solves the problem of religion, which is certainly the story that it might tell of itself, but is not the reality that we are seeing lived out when we study what's going on in the world.

> EO: In Latin America and the Spanish-speaking world, we use the concept "Estado Laico" and "Estado Secular," which seems to have different meanings in our context. While you suggest the existence of a "Judeo-Christian secularism". Can you explain to us what you mean by it and what it involves?

ESH: First of all, this book was written 20 years ago, so I think these concepts need to be refined and can always be improved upon. There was a lot of misunderstanding about what I meant by "Judeo-Christian secularism". People seem to get the laicist piece, namely, this separationist, Jacobean, allergy to religion as the driving impulse.

Judeo-Christian secularism is harder to explain. It is a concept that I was using to access something rather different, which is a discourse that is related to what I was just talking about in the European colonial context. I was describing what I saw around me, which is an understanding that the West because of its Christian, and then Judeo-Christian tradition –the "Judeo" was an add-on after the Second World War with a lot of hesitation, and there's still a lot of hesitation about that hyphen– but essentially that the West produced a particular kind of secularism that emerged naturally out of Christianity and that therefore is always indebted to and in relation with Christianity.

There is an element of truth to that narrative, and I think that Charles Taylor, for example, in *A Secular Age* Taylor, Charles (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), tells that story quite convincingly and with historical nuance. But there is also a sense in which the Judeo-Christian claims to a secularism founded in our culture, in our civilization, reproduces theories and forms of exclusion. Exclusions, for example, of indigenous people in the US, exclusions of Muslims, exclusions of atheists or those who claim no religious identification, among others. Those exclusions and the claim to this foundation, to this Judeo-Chris-

tian secular supremacy, this sense that "We have achieved it", has been a very powerful language in which we have spoken about religion and politics in the US. Perhaps to a slightly lesser extent in Europe where the laicist discourse –perhaps also in Chile, although I am not sure– has been quite powerful.

These two models suggest that we need to unpack different trajectories of secularism, different ways in which this discourse has taken shape, and the kind of resonances that it gathers, in a particular context, how does it justify itself, what claims does it make, how are they made? In some cases they are made in an anti-clerical mood, and in others they may express a more triumphant Judeo-Christian aspiration to supremacy. I think both of those moments are very powerful.

> EO: You mentioned the idea of the influence of civilization, especially the Christian civilization in the construction of a secular discourse. In your book, this idea of Judeo-Christian secularism is mostly influenced by the Protestant inheritance, especially in the United States. You analyze how the United States has been built upon principles of democracy, freedom, and a "shared adherence to a common religious tradition." How can we understand the link between religion and democracy? To what extent does the Judeo-Christian tradition lead to democratic principles?

ESH: Right, so this is exactly the point where the argument requires clarification. In the mythical self-pre-

sentation of Judeo-Christian secularism, or this claim to the Christian origins of secular liberal democracy, is a story that needs to retold. There are a number of research projects that have attempted to show or to prove that, indeed, Christianity leads to democratization. Or that there are particular proclivities built into Christianity that spurred or sparked the Reformation and led to these processes that we now associate with liberal democracy.

This is a story that needs to be put into context. There are many different ways that different societies –not just Christian ones, or Christian majority ones– have found to coexist democratically. The relationship between democracy or democratization and religion is not one that we can map or model; it is too complex.

To suggest that religion either leads to or obstructs democracy, is to try to reduce these very complex histories into a simple formula, and then stir them up and serve them to the public. I think that does an injustice to history and to the public. People know intuitively that religion is not one thing and neither is democracy. You cannot simply say, religion does or does not lead to democracy, you have to look at the context. Take the example of foreign intervention. Look at Chile, look at the role of foreign intervention, in terms of democratization, or lack thereof. Think about the complex ways in which various religious actors and traditions have been mobilized for all kinds of different purposes. We cannot say that it does or does not lead to democracy. I am very hesitant with anyone who wants to peddle a theory that religion does x, y, and z, and that we can plug in the variables, get our outcome and map it cleanly onto different societies

in different times and places. I think that people deserve more nuance and more fidelity to the complexities of human social life.

Although I do not focus on democracy, then, it is crucial to question those who want to posit an easy relationship between these concepts, and to challenge those who claim that "if a society modernizes or becomes Christian majority, then it is more likely to become democratic." I disagree.

> This claim to the Christian origins of secular liberal democracy, is a story that needs to retold

> EO: **Let us delve deeper into your second book titled *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2017). In this book, you discuss the construction of religious freedom discourse in world politics. What do you mean with "Beyond" Religious Freedom? It seems that the word "beyond" makes a difference? What does "beyond" suggest in this context?**

ESH: That is a great question, Ely. The title *Beyond Religious Freedom* is an attempt to gesture towards one of the central arguments of this book, which is that if we focus exclusively on religion, or on what we define as religion, or on whatever gets defined as religion by those who have the power to define these things, then we lose sight of a much larger context in which the promotion, advocacy, and legalization of religious freedom is taking place. I

have a series of examples in the book that describe what it looks like to take this perspective and to relocate religious freedom, not as a stable, singular, unalloyed good that can simply be exported from the United States, which understands itself as the source and fount of religious freedom, but as a deeply political and politicized language –when it becomes globalized, but at home as well– in which certain interests are inevitably privileged above others. There are gaps between the "religious freedom" that gets promoted, legalized and becomes a part of public life and government advocacy and the broader fields of human solidarity and sociality in which the concept comes to life. The "formal religion" and "formal religious freedom" that gets protected may be very different from the forms of spirituality, sociality, and solidarity on the ground –what I call "lived religion", a term from Robert Orsi, my colleague at Northwestern (Religious Studies and History).

What I tried to do in the book was to disaggregate the term "religion", and for that matter, "freedom." And to tell a different story about what we actually mean when we say we are going to promote something called "religious freedom". It turns out to be –although I don't say it quite so baldly in the book– a colonial language, an imposed language of politics that carries within it the assumption that the US has found the answer to the problem of how to live together in peace. Now we (the U.S. government) are going to show others how they should live. That colonial impulse is quite similar to the impulse around secularism and secularization that I described earlier, where we have societies who claim the mantle of

civilization, authority, and righteousness, and then seek to export it to others. That may sound good at first. But when you situate it in the context of imperialism, you understand immediately that there are a lot of interests involved in these assertions of power. Religious freedom and its globalization is a power laden discourse.

Religious freedom and its globalization is a power laden discourse

This book tries to unpack those power dynamics, and get people to say: "Look, what if we were to look beyond religious freedom? What if we were to consider, just for a moment, leaving it behind? What would that be like? What would it look like to organize ourselves as a society, as a community, without religious freedom? Is there another language of politics that we could imagine that would allow for pluralities of ways of life, of ways of being in the world, understandings of human relations with each other and with the gods? Or is religious freedom language the final solution?" I think it is not. Anything that claims to be the final solution is dangerous. I find many advocates of religious freedom dangerously self-assured and self-important, presenting themselves as having solved the problems posed by religious diversity . I think legalizing religious freedom generates the very problems that it purports to resolve.

> EO: **You mentioned the concept of "lived religion," but you also developed two other concepts, that is "expert religion," and "governed religion". Can you explain those categories? And what do you mean, when you**

> **say that religion "should be dethroned as a singular and stable category"?**

ESH: This is the central thrust of the book. I would like readers to pick up the newspaper in the morning, and if they see that there is a story about *religious* violence – for instance in Myanmar– the reader says, "what do they mean by religious violence?" "how can we understand what is really going on in this situation?" It is not by excluding religious factors, institutions, or authorities, because of course, they are part of the picture, and are intermingled and interwoven with other social realities, but rather, by understanding all of the factors involved.

One of the things we need to do is to "dethrone" and "disaggregate" religion. We often do not really know what we are talking about when we talk about religious violence, or religious reconciliation, because it is very unclear. One way that I tried to develop this point was through these three different aspects or modalities of the category of religion: "expert religion", "lived religion", and "governed religion".

Whenever you develop heuristics like these it is risky because people say: "I think there is more overlap between these". And I say: "Yes, yes, there is overlap". Then they say: "Well, I don't know if you can even have such a thing as 'lived religion', because 'lived religion' is itself shaped by 'expert religion' and 'governed religion'". "Yes, of course." Let me say at the beginning that all of these categories have porous boundaries, and they all shape each other. The idea is simply to point the reader toward the enormous amount of work that we make the

category of religion do for us, and to say: Look at all these different aspects of life that get dumped into what we call "religion". For example, "lived religion" encompasses all of the everyday experiences that ordinary people have in their communities relating to what we call religion, as catalogued by religious studies scholars including Nancy Ammerman and Robert Orsi.

We also have "expert religion", where you have judges, policymakers and religious authorities talking about religion and making decisions about who, for example, possesses religious rights in a particular situation. In the case of the United States, these experts decide who benefits from a religious exemption, for example, through the ministerial exception. You have these bureaucrats, judges, and officials speaking about religion in different ways, and that's a very different thing from what is happening at the kitchen table.

Then, we have "governed religion", which overlaps in part with the "expert religion" category, but with a focus on the ways in which religion is produced as a category through practices of governance. There's a new book by a Norwegian scholar, Helge Årsheim, that speaks to this so well. Årsheim is looking at religion at the United Nations, at four different UN committees and the extent to which religion is created as a category through their negotiations, discussions, and deliberations. As he shows they produce a particular understanding of what religion is, legally, then try to regulate it internationally.

Thus, we have this enormous array of human practices, assertions of authority, and forms of governance that fall under this rubric of "governed religion". We also have,

of course, all of the religious authorities who are speaking on behalf of their communities and who are asserting their positions in various hierarchies to speak on behalf of their followers. It is a complicated field. And my point is to say: What does it mean in this context to promote religious freedom when religion is itself an immensely complex construct, a complex reality and element of human sociality? It is very, very difficult. And the outcome is going to depend on who gets to define religion, and who gets to define freedom.

I spell this out through a series of case studies in the book in, for example, the ways in which communities nominate leaders, or leaders self-appoint to be the representative of a community, thereby leaving out other voices. So who has freedom? And who does not? These are political questions. The book encourages readers to ask more of these questions in other contexts, including in the Chilean context. I know from having talked to Mexican colleagues, like Roberto Blancarte, for example, that there's a vigorous and vibrant debate in the Spanish language literature around these questions.I think that this debate has not been reflected adequately in the English speaking conversation. Therefore, it is important to ask some of the same questions and expect to get different answers in the Chilean context, and I am looking forward to that conversation.

So who has freedom? And who does not? These are political questions

> EO: There is an interesting observation in your book that the public and political discourse on religion show two polarized faces of faith. On the one side, there is "bad religion," which is understood as the dangerous and violent side of religion, but on the other hand, there is "good religion," the side that promotes peace, justice, solidarity and so on. How does this discourse work in the relationship between religion and politics?

ESH: This is another thread running through *Beyond Religious Freedom* that is important. I am glad that you picked up on it, Ely. I was studying and reading, and also traveling and attending conferences, where religion and religious freedom were the main questions on the table. And I found over and over, in different and diverse contexts, that the dichotomy between "good religion" and "bad religion," was powerful in shaping how people understood religion and politics. The way that it works is a simple formula and because it is so simple, it became very powerful and compelling. It is easy to understand for policymakers. who don't think about religion, who never thought about it, and maybe don't want to.

Here's the formula: We identify "good religion", and then the government supports it. We boost it up, we give it financial support and the energies of our various government offices, we create programs and policies to support "good religionists". We also find the "bad religionists", and we either reform them through programs that turn them into "good religionists", or we push them out, we get rid of them. That is how people often get categorized as terro-

rists. Everything gets put in the religion category in terms of causation. People who are terrorists are bad because their religion is bad and therefore they need to be obliterated or reformed, rather than stopping, stepping back and saying: What are their complaints? What is their story?

The "good religion", "bad religion" binary is a simple way to understand the world, to try to divide it up, and it ends up creating an oversimplification. It creates a situation in which it becomes too easy to "solve problems" by having the government step in and give money to people and groups whom they decide are moderates. In many cases, of course, the "moderates" are the pro-Americans, or the people who want a pipeline to go through on behalf of the Chinese, or the people who won't say anything at the UN about the Uighur camps, and so on. Political, economic, and geopolitical interests are all at play. And so the "good religion" versus "bad religion" dynamic is a mask. It is not reflective of the realities that are just beneath the surface.

The "good religion" versus "bad religion" dynamic is a mask. It is not reflective of the realities that are just beneath the surface

> EO: **This is like a follow-up question, because at *Otros Cruces* (ex-GEMRIP) we are working with civil society organizations in international fora like the OAS (Organization of American States). We have seen religious discourse in contention with international politics, mainly driven by the United Sta-**

> tes. In this respect it is significant that, over the last months, a resolution on religious freedom has been reviewed at the OAS. Nevertheless, from the start the debate has been trying to introduce a particular notion of religious freedom determined by Evangelical and Pro-Life groups that lobby against gender rights. In other words, they promote a certain Judeo-Christian morality under the flag of religious freedom. When religious discourse creates gaps among civil society groups, how can we construct bridges among the different voices discussing religion and politics? Particularly, in those spaces where "government" or "expert" religion prevail?

ESH: This is a great question. And you are getting to the heart of the argument. What I hear you asking is: this is interesting, but how do you apply it in order to pluralize the conversation, and to take the sort of monopoly over these questions away from a singular constituency that wants to use the discourse of religious freedom to advance a specific agenda. We can call it political, or religious, it does not matter, but let's say a very specific set of norms about how people should live together, which may involve the exclusion of those who identify in different ways in terms of gender and sexuality, or some other issue.

To construct bridges, the work has to start at the level of civil society and groups like *Otros Cruces* (ex-GEMRIP), who as I understand it are trying to open a space for a new conversation, and provide tools to educate the public. We need to explain that groups coming into the OAS under the flag of religious freedom do not represent ever-

yone. Some will counter: "but religious freedom is a good thing. Of course, we should always support it and these groups are drawing on the Bible, for example, how could we oppose them?" The idea is not to push too hard, but rather to explain what you mean by "under the flag", that is, to explain that there are alternative understandings of how to live together that also treasure solidarity, freedom, community, and human life, diversity and flourishing, but that are not traveling under the flag of religious freedom. How do we find the words to express those alternatives? How do we bring people together around them? How do we say to those who are flying that flag of freedom, that they may actually be using this discourse in ways that harm others. It's got an incredibly powerful history, let's face it, right? It is evocative to many people, people love to talk about religious freedom, and many will tell you they support it automatically. The people who are flying that flag, are evoking a powerful history, and many of the religious authorities (the "expert religionists") stand behind them. So many will say: "Well, I guess I will follow them".

What if groups like *Otros Cruces* (ex-GEMRIP), and others, created a space where a different set of flags are flown, maybe not just one, but several, that are creating spaces for all kinds of diversity, human flourishing, forms of sociality, and solidarity that connect people in meaningful ways with each other, with their god(s), etc.? This is not a secular or non-theistic or atheistic discourse, this is a space that is open. Can we create an attraction to those spaces among ordinary people, among "lived religionists"? We can ask: "Look, do those people who

carry that religious freedom banner, do they really speak for the people that you admire? The ways of life that you want to pass on to your children? Societies that are caring and supportive of the vulnerable? . If you can create that space, I think that is where the action is. To break down the monopoly, chip away at the sense that it is either religious freedom, or it is nihilism, or atheism, or communism. We need to create other spaces.

I think it is important to come at this not with a top down attitude, but an approach that says"we are all equals on this playing field". Let us try to understand what is actually being called for by the various groups before we rush either to support or denounce them. Let us take into account people's experiences who may not normally get to speak at the OAS. What about your cousin? or your friend? or your grandmother? your auntie? Who may never have a chance to speak at the OAS, but may have lots of ideas about what it means to live together as a society in a way that is meaningful, and hopeful, and expresses forms of solidarity--whether in a Christian register or not. The challenge is to welcome those views, and to really listen to them, rather than rushing to get in line behind those who are speaking in the name of "expert religion".

That is a short answer to a very rich question.

> EO: Indeed, it is a challenge to integrate all of these voices together. As you say, to empower a wide range of people, not only a monopoly of some voices. Let's talk about your next project. You are currently working on a new book about American political theology concerning the issue of borders. Can you tell us more

> about that? What are the borders you are interested in? And how can boundaries/borders be reinterpreted in these pandemic times?

ESH: Everything is in flux right now. The pandemic is an affliction for so many, particularly first responders, medical workers, and those who have no choice but to leave their homes to do their jobs. It is also a moment of enormous potential for transformation. Yesterday, I did some reading for my project, which is about how Americans think about the border, and how it influences American politics and foreign and immigration policy. I was reading an article about a group that has self-organized in one of the border towns in Sonora, in northern Mexico. This is in a very poor community, they do not have medical care, they have no hospital, there's nowhere for women to give birth. As people are falling ill, they have to be sent as far away as Nogales, which is on the northern border with Arizona, between Arizona and Sonora. This group, mainly composed of women, started to self-organize, and they have taken down the roadblocks that were preventing them from moving into one of the other communities nearby that has better medical care. They also have succeeded in preventing American tourists, who may be carrying Covid-19, from coming down from the United States. In this case, the Mexicans are closing the border to us, to the Americans.

These kinds of civil society groups are often led by women who are speaking out and saying "this is not right, we don't want COVID positive people coming down, to go to parties and pass through our town, which is very modest

and doesn't have any tourist attractions. We are going to stand up for ourselves, we are going to fight". There is a sense in which humans live with borders, that is who we are, we are not going to get rid of borders. But it is also the case that borders can be navigated and negotiated differently, depending on context. This particular context of the pandemic is presenting some of the communities of northern Mexico with a very interesting opportunity to turn the tables on the Americans and say: "Well, this is a taste of your own medicine. Why don't you stay home? Because our numbers are lower here and we don't want you to come here, even though you may have tourist dollars to spend".

Obviously, I am looking at larger questions too. To name an example, I am studying the United States' support for Israel, and how in particular it is as if the American border were suspended when it comes to Israel, making Israel part of the United States. How does a particular political theology, or border theology, as I am calling it, facilitate this understanding? There is a sense in which, and this is a central paradox of the book, the US has a strong and fortified border. However, it is also at times borderless when it comes to certain economic actors, the wealthy, and when it comes to support for Israel. There are different moments in the bordering process in the United States. There is a presence and an absence of the border simultaneously. I do not think it is only material interests. I think there is something bigger that I am trying to get at by wrestling with political theology and questions of sacrality that are inherent to the American project and that require the border to be an ambivalent and even paradoxical space.

> EO: We are looking forward to reading it soon. This is my last question, because we were supposed to welcome you at a conference and share other academic events with you in Chile next September (2020). Unfortunately, that is not happening because of the pandemic that changed everything and our plans. Nonetheless, when time permits, hopefully, we are going to welcome you in Chile. I know this is going to be your first time to travel there. What are you expecting of the visit? Well, what would you like to learn about religion and politics in Chile? Or perhaps such as food, museums, people?

ESH: I am so excited to come on this trip, I cannot tell you how grateful I am to *Otros Cruces* (ex-GEMRIP) for making it possible. I have traveled all over the world, but I have never been to Chile. I have never really traveled in South America with the exception of two brief trips to Brazil. I am very much looking forward to learning more about Chilean history and politics. Of course, religion is a part of that and I always have an ear for thinking about the ways in which religion, culture, history and politics played out historically in Chile's colonial past. . I would be curious to learn Chilean perspectives on United States foreign policy in the region, as I have never engaged substantively with Chilean scholars about their perspectives. I look forward to learning and listening.

Also, I am a *gourmande*, as the French say. I love to try the local cuisines, so I am looking forward to tasting the local dishes. I like to come home afterward and try to

make them with my daughters. During the pandemic, we did a lot of baking. I am looking forward to meeting everyone and experiencing all that Santiago has to offer.

> EO: **Great. We are expecting that too. Let's hope that is happening soon. Thank you very much for your time, Beth. It was a really good conversation.**

ESH: Thank you, it was my pleasure.

Experiencias
Espiritualidades
Saberes