either—or view of hierarchy and equality in IR to theorize about the relationship between the two, (2) theorizing simultaneously about the social and material dynamics that underpin hierarchy, and (3) avoiding “the presentist bias in much of the IR literature … by taking a longer view of the development of the international system” (p. 22). The book accomplishes the first and third of these goals well. The chapters tease out the interdependence between sovereign equality and hierarchy, drawing our attention to political domination within institutions that IR scholars typically associate with equality. In addition, Viola’s wide-ranging applications cover formative moments in the development of the international system, highlighting alternative forms of political organization that were gradually winnowed out.

The book is somewhat less effective in accomplishing the goal of integrating social and material factors into the study of hierarchy. Viola’s choice to focus on the institutionalist and materialist dimensions of hierarchy (p. 11) has two implications. First, from a materialist perspective, matters of inclusion or exclusion become struggles over redistribution. This move leaves little room to examine those distinctive processes that characterize struggles for recognition. Second, from an institutionalist perspective, international outcomes derive from the intentionality of powerful actors. As Viola asserts, “Powerful members are in the structural position to determine the terms of inclusion and exclusion” in the club (p. 81). This move leaves little room to examine the processes of legitimation that sustain international order and neglects the structural constraints placed on all actors. As a result, Viola’s analysis privileges material or strategic factors over social or symbolic ones. But, overall, the book’s provocative argument and wide-ranging applications provide fertile ground for studies of hierarchy in international relations, like its author intended.


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Recent years have witnessed a renewed focus on questions of religion in the social sciences; in particular, there has been a call for closer examination of the relationship between religion and the state, both at the domestic and international levels. These two recent books do precisely that: they engage important questions of what religious freedom looks like around the globe, and how religion and religious freedom have developed as a part of US foreign policy.

In *Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today*, Daniel Philpott explores why Muslim-majority countries seem to embrace the principle of religious freedom at lower rates than other countries. Philpott challenges skeptics of Islam who argue that Islam is inherently antithetical to religious freedom. Although Philpott notes that Muslim-majority countries tend to perform worse on religious freedom measures than Christian-majority countries, he shows that the relationship between Islam and religious freedom is less straightforward upon closer look. Using detailed case studies, Philpott illustrates that there are in fact a number of Muslim-majority countries that embrace religious freedom, including several countries in West Africa such as Senegal, Mali, and the Gambia. Moreover, a number of the Muslim-majority countries that lack religious freedom have what Philpott terms “secular repressive” governments, including countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Syria. These case studies indicate that religious freedom can exist and be supported by Islamic teachings in the Muslim world (as in West Africa) and that, in places where religious freedom does not exist, the repression of religion is often justified on secular rather than religious grounds (as in Turkey).

There is, however, a third category that Philpott identifies: “religiously repressive” states. These countries use government policy to promote a conservative form of Islam and use religion as a pretext to limit the rights of religious minorities or punish those who do not adopt the dominant religious ideology and practice. These religiously repressive states include Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Some of the policies adopted in these countries seem to support Islamoskeptics’ fears about Islam’s relationship to religious freedom. Thus, in the second half of the book, Philpott turns to the question of whether Islam has the potential to promote religious freedom. He argues that the seeds of religious freedom already exist in the Quran and hadith, as well as in the historical practice of Islam and contemporary support for liberal Islam. What is needed is for the principle of religious freedom to be rooted in these religious teachings and traditions, rather than for it to be perceived as a Western value.

Philpott makes several important contributions to the study of religious freedom. First, through the careful selection of cases, he shows that political reforms and democratic institutions are not necessarily linked to increased levels of religious freedom. Muslim-majority democracies like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia place many of the same limits on religious freedom as autocracies like Iran and Saudi Arabia. And, with the exception of Tunisia, the Arab Uprisings of 2010 and 2011 seemingly only heightened polarization between secular and religious forces in the region and did not advance a broadly shared conception of religious freedom.
Second, Philpott’s argument successfully complicates the relationship between religious freedom and secularism. Where many scholars focus on how secularism (or at least certain forms of secularism) promotes religious freedom, Philpott shows that it is often used as a pretext to repress religious expression, including individuals’ dress, and control religious institutions such as mosques and institutions of religious education.

Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today raises several important questions and highlights productive avenues for future research on religious freedom. Philpott uses several indices to measure religious freedom. It is not clear, however, that we should treat all of the measures comprising these indices equally. For instance, hostility and discrimination on the basis of religion seem meaningfully different from the government having a ministry or office dedicated to religious affairs. Which of these state policies do the most harm to the exercise of religious freedom? Do the types of restrictions on religion differ among secular repressive and religiously repressive regimes? The key difference between these countries, Philpott argues, is that the states promote different interpretations of Islam: moderate Islam (secular cases) and conservative (religious cases). However, in future research, I am interested in seeing more about the relationship between these distinct interpretations of Islam and the various restrictions on religious freedom. Additionally, Philpott refers to cases in the non-Muslim world, but does not explore in depth what precisely these patterns look like outside of Muslim-majority countries. What do restrictions on religious freedom look like in religious and secular repressive states globally?

Gregorio Bettiza, in Finding Faith in Foreign Policy: Religion and American Diplomacy in a Postsecular World, examines recent changes to the operationalization of religion in US foreign policy. With great clarity, Bettiza traces how religion has become an organized component of the US foreign policy bureaucracy since the end of the Cold War. The book chronicles the emergence of four distinct religious foreign policy regimes since the early 1990s: the international religious freedom regime, the faith-based foreign aid regime, the Muslim and Islamic interventions regime, and the religious engagement regime. Each of these regimes develops as a result of activists’, experts’, and policy makers’ desecularizing discourses, which contest the secularism of the US foreign policy community in four ways: institutionally, epistemically, ideologically, and state normatively.

Through detailed case studies, Bettiza follows the emergence and evolution of each of these religious foreign policy regimes. Although the international religious freedom regime emerged under President Clinton, the faith-based foreign aid and the Muslim and Islamic interventions regimes under President George W. Bush, and the religious engagement regime under President Obama, these regimes did not replace each other. Rather, as a result of changes to the foreign policy bureaucracy, they persist and build on each other, representing the growing and diverse ways that religion is operationalized in international affairs. For instance, it is notable (and a testament to the forces of desecularization) that the Obama administration deepened rather than dismantled the faith-based foreign aid regime initiated under George W. Bush with the strong support of the evangelical Christian community.

Like Religious Freedom in Islam, Finding Faith in Foreign Policy broadens our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. The case studies offer a systematic analysis of how desecularizing actors have been able to upend the secular discourse of US foreign policy and create new religion-oriented institutions within the government bureaucracy. Notably, Finding Faith in Foreign Policy offers a framework for understanding works like Philpott’s Religious Freedom in Islam. To Bettiza, the religious freedom research agenda carried out by experts is part of the overall process of religion’s ascent within the foreign policy realm and contributes to desecularizing discourses that have led to this transformation. This context is important: it shows how research on religion can both reflect and simultaneously influence world politics.

Bettiza’s book opens up several exciting areas for future research. First, though the emphasis varies from administration to administration, the process of desecularization of foreign policy that Bettiza describes has largely been bipartisan. A critical question going forward is whether the bipartisanship of desecularization will continue as issues like religious liberty and religious exemptions become increasingly polarized along partisan lines domestically. To what extent will these domestic debates and disagreements affect foreign policy? Second, this book argues that there has been diffusion from the United States to other countries, but highlights that more work is needed to understand the process of and limits to that diffusion. In other words, what do the foreign policy regimes regarding religion look like in comparative perspective, and what historical and political factors shape variation in those approaches?

Together, these two books highlight the theoretical and empirical richness of the study of religion and politics. In particular, these works underscore the importance of the rigorous interrogation of the concept of religious freedom, both as a domestic policy and as a component of a foreign policy regime. Theoretically, one important question for future research is the role of nonstate actors in challenging or reinforcing the existing religion–state relationship. In addition to the advocacy role played by activists and academics in Bettiza’s account, how else do nonstate actors shape the practice of religious freedom? From a policy
perspective, both of these books highlight some of the pitfalls of US engagement with the Muslim world, particularly around issues of religion and religious freedom. Philpott wants the United States and Europe to promote religious freedom abroad but does not want religious freedom to be viewed as a Western value imposed on Muslim-majority countries. Bettiza questions whether the US foreign policy establishment can build credibility in the Muslim world if it intervenes in the region to promote certain Islamic institutions or interpretations of Islam that align with the US agenda. The clear relevance of this current policy question underscores the continued importance of this research agenda.


Transnational NGOs are a huge phenomenon. There are thousands of them all over the world; they play a notable role in the ecology of the global political system and have an impact on policy and outcomes. This valuable book helps us understand them.

NGOs, transnational or local, are institutionally less formal than both governments and businesses. Their influence comes from the role they play in our civil society in the space between these actors. They claim legitimacy from not being “bought” or corrupted by interests as is alleged to be the case on the government side and by the profit motive on the businesses side. They claim legitimacy from the virtue of their cause—whether it be child labor, human rights, climate, or numerous other issues. Yet do these virtues produce efficacy? How do we evaluate NGOs’ influence and effectiveness? To what degree do they attain their goals? Do they operate outside the political sphere, as substitutes for the failure of governments and businesses, or is their impact made through the political sphere, as substitutes for the failure of governments and businesses on these matters of value, to whom are the NGOs themselves accountable?

To understand NGOs, the strategy adopted by the authors of this volume Between Power and Irrelevance, George E. Mitchell, Hans Peter Schmitz, and Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken, is to think of them as organizations and study their properties as such. Their 12 chapters provide huge amounts of information on a vast array of organizational properties that transnational NGOs possess: “strategy, power, governance, leadership, soul, measurement, mergers and acquisitions,” and so on. Its chapter titles read like ones that might come from a business school management course or book.

That is a virtue of this book, not a criticism: NGOs should indeed be seen as organizations and analyzed as such. We should not be blinded in our inquiries by their idealism or their goals, however virtuous. To achieve aims, even lofty ones, NGOs have to hire people (we hope effective ones), and fire them (when incompetent), raise money, create authority structures, carry out tasks, and pay some staff more than others. Some will do this well, others not so well. In some cases, the management process may distort the mission, eating up its funding or rewarding NGO bureaucrats at the cost of achieving the goals. Welcome to the real world, as many of us teach our students, while encouraging them to take courses in accounting, financial management, quantitative analysis, program design and evaluation, and other practical things that virtuous organizations need.

How do we know in the end whether the NGO, transnational or local, achieves its mission? This is a complex issue. Chapter 7, “Measurement,” one of the best in this volume, explores it in some detail. Measuring performance is very difficult even with lots of resources. Donors want such evaluations, as do voters and legislators. But the organization fears its mission could be altered by the tasks of producing that kind of information, or that it could be punished if there are poor results. Many of us have encountered NGOs that do not want to conduct a particular measurement study because it will reveal bad outcomes.

Entrepreneurs have correctly sensed a market for evaluations; Charity Navigator is one of the most well known. It provides a number, which readers take to mean a quality standard, for a very large number of nonprofits. Yet what is that standard? It is the percentage of money the NGO spent on overhead. That information is interesting, important, and useful: no one wants money wasted on overhead. But it can also be most misleading. Organizations know the smaller the percentage, the higher the rating, so they game their figures. Moreover a low number is not necessarily proof of the quality of output. For many tasks, overhead may be central to effective mission attainment. A significant reason this measure is used is cost: low-skilled, hence low-paid, people, can be hired to go through publicly available tax forms and find the numbers. Defining goals and actually measuring output quality to match it to the level of that attainment would be vastly more labor intensive and expensive. There are organizations that do evaluations, but they cost much more than Charity Navigator. What you get is connected to what you are willing to pay for. The chapter titled “Power and Irrelevance” provides no simple answer to this problem because there is none: these organizations are very complex and deal with multidimensional situations. Evaluating performance is simply not simple!