

Review: *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal*

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Religious freedom has been a celebrated ideal throughout American history. Although not every religious group has evenly profited from it, it is nevertheless generally considered to be ‘universally beneficent’ (Wenger 2017, 4). In her book, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal*, Tisa Wenger, associate professor of American Religious History, challenges these ‘easy assumptions about religious freedom’ (Wenger 2017, 14). On the one hand, she recognizes that in some cases it has provided religious and ethnic minorities with a discursive mechanism through which they have claimed a better societal or political position. On the other hand, through a historical analysis of America’s early twentieth century, Wenger convincingly argues that freedom of religion has mainly served as a tool for legitimizing imperial, racial, and coercive policies. Wenger’s *Religious Freedom* can, therefore, be placed in a wider trend within American Religious History, whereby religious freedom has become a contested ideal (Sehat 2011).

What makes *Religious Freedom* stand out in this field is, firstly, the fact that Wenger also provides in-depth historical analyses of cases in which religious freedom worked as a coercive or emancipatory force within areas under US imperial rule—for example within the Philippines. Secondly, Wenger shows how religion and race often intersected and that hereby religious freedom served as a means to resist or enforce both these categories. Nonetheless, as will be discussed below, the ethnic and religious groups within *Religious Freedom* that embody this intersectionality are often portrayed as being rather static. Wenger starts, however, with retrieving the historical origins of religious freedom.

Wenger traces the ‘modern category of religion along with the ideal of religious freedom’ back to the early modern ‘religious wars’ and enlightenment-rationality within Europe. In this period, religion became separated from its ‘worldliness’ through the belief that it was necessary to ‘limit the sphere of the religious to the spiritual and the otherworldly, as opposed to the political and

material domain of the state' (Wenger 2017, 6). This view on religion became the dominant discourse within the Anglo-Saxon imperial and administrative realm, wherein Protestant Christianity would be deemed as the most rational and ethical religion, best suited for modernity because it guarantees a separation (freedom of religion) between the religious and the secular state.

This Protestant Christian configuration had far-reaching consequences. Religious freedom, for example, became a powerful tool for the US Protestant majority to justify imperial and racial policies; protestants argued that the US would bring religious freedom to uncivilized people who were thus far denied this freedom. However, these minorities were excluded from the right of religious freedom as long as their sense of religion did not meet the characteristics of this configuration. Through analyzing public statements and personal writings of representatives of minorities as well as US government officials, Wenger has been able to retrieve the many discursive practices through which people invoke the ideal of religious freedom. Minorities employed these practices, which Wenger calls religious freedom talk, to bring their communal identities and traditions in line with the protestant Christian configuration (Wenger 2017, 1). Consequently, a rethinking of tradition and identity inherently led to an actual change of tradition and identity. In Wenger's words: 'religious freedom was a double-edged sword: while it promised expanded rights for minorities, it also required that they reshape themselves and their traditions according to its demands' (Wenger 2017, 145).

As mentioned above, however, Wenger does not confine herself to religion alone but discusses it concomitantly with race and hereby she builds on a wider tradition within the field (Goldschmidt and McAlister 2004). Both race and religion are so-called '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' (Wenger 2017, 3). Whereas religion was believed to belong to the realm of the consciousness, race, on the contrary, was a 'physiognomy, an immutable difference written above all on the body' (Wenger 2017, 8).

The ability to successfully argue one's 'whiteness' was, therefore, a key emancipatory factor. Wenger demonstrates this in chapter four, where she discusses the position of American Jews. During the first half of the twentieth century, representatives of this group renegotiated the Jewish position within American society by claiming to be a religiously, instead of racially and nationally, defined group. By doing so, Jews successfully moved into 'the racial status of whiteness in American life', a status that was enforced by a likewise successful deployment of religious freedom talk—that is, they were a religious group in accord to the Protestant Christian

configuration (Wenger 2017, 236). In contrast to the Jews, African Americans were less fortunate in parting from their racial categorization: Wenger illustrates in chapter five how a black and white racial binary was strongly embedded in American society. For African Americans, their ‘racial inferiority’—marked by their skin color—outweighed their claims to a Christian and modern religious identity.

This dynamic interplay of different civilizational assemblages comes to the fore in chapters one and two, where Wenger impressively shows how Catholic freedom talk was evident in both the ‘motherland’ and in America’s overseas territories. At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was in conflict with Spain about the hegemony of the Philippines. Although many American Catholics supported Spain as a Catholic nation, others increasingly took distance from Spanish colonial rule. Coined as second-rate citizens, American Catholics took this opportunity to argue that Catholicism also belonged to the modern category of religion and that they likewise envisioned a separation between religion and state.

Together, American Protestants and Catholics argued that imperialism was justified because it would bring civilization and liberty to the uncivilized people of the Philippines. Race in this instance functioned as another legitimizing factor: It was the ‘White Man’s Burden’ of the American whites to become the patrons of the racially backward Philippines (Wenger 2017, 29). At the same time, representatives of different Philippine groups started to use religious freedom as a negotiation tool to better their position within American imperial society. To some extent, Philippian Catholics succeeded in this, while other people within the Philippines, mainly the Islamic Moros, were less successful.

In chapter three, Wenger illustrates how, during the first few decades of the twentieth century, Native Americans tried to resist further social political and cultural domination by the American state. Often already converted to Christianity, they deployed religious freedom talk in order to persuade policy- and lawmakers that their indigenous practices and traditions were, in fact, Christian. In this process, ‘they had little choice but to restructure their traditions to fit the model set by Christianity’ (Wenger 2017, 142). Their success in receiving religious freedom, however, was limited because American authorities kept regarding them as racially inferior and therefore did not accept their traditions to be ‘religious’.

In her conclusion, Wenger states that ‘white American Christians used religious freedom talk as a way to mark their own superiority and the civilizational inadequacies of those they governed’ (Wenger 2017, 235). Indeed, through a thorough analysis of a vast body of primary sources,

Wenger convincingly shows how religious freedom enabled and legitimized coercive policies within the United States. This is a valuable conclusion, but it also raises some questions.

For instance, she uses relatively static qualifications such as Protestant, Catholic, Philippine, Moro, Native American, African American, and Jewish. These are umbrella terms for what are, in reality, profoundly diverse groups—for instance, there is no ‘one’ Protestantism. In this respect, how should we, for example, think about the position of groups such as Mormons and the Amish within the Protestant Christian configuration? Their place within the US Protestant majority has always been contested and, therefore, these minorities have often been treated as sectarian groups (Butler, Wacker, and Balmer 2011, 77, 210-11). Of course, not every story can and has to be included, but a more elaborate discussion of these groups would have made *Religious Freedom* feel less decisive.

Besides, how should we think of conversion? Wenger does discuss the cases of the Native and African Americans, who often were already converted to Christianity in the centuries before, but conversion itself is not an explicit part of her argument. This absence is striking, precisely because, on the one hand, it is not unthinkable that conversion could also have been an instrument for (forced) emancipation, while on the other hand, conversion can also be an act of opposition against the majority (Viswanathan 1998).

The points raised here should be regarded as some general critiques on what can be considered an outstanding book. In *Religious Freedom*, Wenger has convincingly shown how religious freedom has served as an imperial and racializing instrument, through which the United States has been able to expand its power and territory at the cost of ‘Others’. These ‘Others’ at the same time have used religious freedom talk to improve their social standing. Yet, such improvements were rarely realized and, on occasion, even counterproductive. Wenger, therefore, righteously questions the idealization of religious freedom within American history.

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