

History, Time, Meaning, and Memory

Ideas for the Sociology of Religion

Edited by

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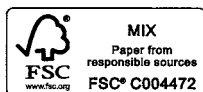
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CHAPTER NINE

THE GENRES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: CREATING DISCOURSES ON RELIGION AT THE STATE DEPARTMENT

RICK MOORE

Despite the obvious resurgence of interest in religion, sociology has yet to give adequate attention to the public discourses used to discuss it. Instead, social scientists examine situations where religion or religiosity can be argued to be causally significant without addressing the constant struggle by individuals and groups to determine the boundaries of what constitutes religion and its appropriate space in society (Bourdieu 1993, McGuire 2003). Many studies treat religion as a predefined analytical category, and struggle over the definition of the “field” is virtually ignored (Beaman 2003). Analyzing the discourses used by actors to bind religion in particular ways offers insight to the processes involved in the ongoing creation of religion as a real world category. A series of government reports on the status of international religious freedom gives us the opportunity to examine these processes at work within the confines of American politics and international relations.

Each year the U.S. State Department writes a report on the status of religious freedom in every country in the world (U.S. Department of State 1999–2009). These reports have become the starting point for anyone who wants to learn about religious freedom in a given country. Easily accessible online, the reports are used by activists, foreign governments and others who have an interest in the issues surrounding religious freedom (Hertzke 2004, Yelensky 2008). Many observers have sharply critiqued the document over a range of issues, however, usually pointing to omissions, errors and perceived biases of varying degrees (Wales 2002, Cozad 2005, Pastor 2005, Marshall 2008). Others find that the reports, while not perfect, accurately depict the status of international religious freedom and serve an important function in the promotion of universal human rights (Gunn 2000, Hertzke 2004). Some sociologists are in this later camp and have begun treating the report as a relatively unbiased source of data for research on

religious persecution (Grim and Finke 2005, 2006, 2007, Grim and Wike 2010).

Upon examination, the reports draw upon a set of pre-existing genres that often influence how international religious freedom is talked about in the United States: universal human rights and idealized religious pluralism. Building on the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986), I will show how these two interrelated genres work together to structure the yearly reports. Through the use of these genres, the State Department promotes particular versions of religion and religious freedom, illuminating one way that the category of religion is created in practice.

Background: International Religious Freedom Reports

The State Department first began writing reports on international religious freedom after being required to do so by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).¹ This legislation grew out of the movement against religious persecution in the 1980s and 1990s. Its main purpose was to make the active promotion of religious freedom an official part of U.S. foreign policy (Hertzke 2004, 2008, Hanford 2008). Besides mandating the so-called “IRF Report,” the law created an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, required the State Department to designate especially severe violators of religious freedom as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs), and compelled the administration to take action against CPCs ranging from a private demarche to serious economic sanctions. It also created the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which is an independent bi-partisan body charged with making policy recommendations to both Congress and the administration regarding international religious freedom.

The State Department released its first IRF Report in 1999 and has continued to release one annually each fall. The reports include Preface, Introduction, Executive Summary, and individual country reports describing the status of religious freedom in every nation in the world, plus some territories with nation-like standing (for example, Taiwan). An Executive Summary focuses on highlighting key problem

¹ The full text of IRFA and the IRF Reports can be found on the website of the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom: www.state.gov/g/drl/irf.

areas, in both CPCs and non-CPCs, and devotes a large section to describing the most important U.S. government actions in promoting religious freedom abroad. The individual country reports provide more detailed information on the particulars of religion and religious freedom around the world, usually listing series of violations or other related events in a bullet-point fashion. The lengths of the individual country reports vary widely and, to a certain extent, match the State Department's measure of concern with religious freedom in the country, although this is not true in all cases (for example the reports on Eritrea, a CPC, are relatively short compared to those of France and Germany, which are not CPCs).

The creation of the reports at the State Department is complex. No section of the report has a single author, but is rather written through a process involving numerous people in different areas of the organization, all with varying interests, experience and influences (Farr 2008). The authors of the reports draw heavily on past reports, often recycling sentences or whole paragraphs verbatim or with only minor changes from one year to the next. Disagreements are common among the individuals and departments involved in the writing, editing and approval process. Arguments concern the choice of words, inclusion of countries within the Executive Summary and general disagreements over the concept of religious freedom (Farr 2008). Thrown into this mix are other groups and individuals outside of the State Department who have a stake in the reports. USCIRF, activists, religious groups, other government agencies, Congress and its staffers, foreign governments and the American public all participate in the negotiation with individuals at the State Department that results in the bureaucratic bricolage that is the annual IRF Report.

The reports thus offer an important and unique opportunity to study questions of how religion is produced as a real world category. When religious freedom is evaluated one is forced to confront both the idea of religion (i.e., deciding what is and what is not religion) and its freedom (i.e., deciding what constitutes religion's appropriate space in society—what defines “good” vs. “bad” religion). The IRF Reports provide an unparalleled volume of text concerning an organization's assessment of religious freedom around the world over a period of several years. It is also significant that the reports are written by a government organization like the State Department. As such, the reports are not just harmless documents; they have real consequences, which include justifying possible sanctions and other diplomatic activity.

They reflect the manner in which religion is conceived at the institution responsible for implementing American foreign policy, demonstrating governmentality in practice (Foucault 2007).

Speech Genres

How can we best understand the way that the category of international religious freedom, including value judgments of what constitutes “good” versus “bad” religion, are produced in the State Department reports? A useful place to start is Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of speech genres. According to Bakhtin (1986), all utterances, both spoken and written, fall within one of an infinite number of speech genres.² Speech genres are the broad frameworks for communication that we learn as we learn language. They help shape what is said by providing generally accepted structures for how conversations proceed. Example speech genres include, but are not limited to, greetings, commands, novels, scientific papers, and letters. While they do not actually determine what is said, speech genres have been described as the “form-shaping ideology” that help guide a conversation (Morson and Emerson 1990). Genres are not absolute constraints and cannot be reduced to a simple set of rules. Instead, they influence speech by roughly directing it toward its targets in a particular way. For example, when I am in a university classroom I speak using academic language, or genres, and expect that others do the same. The use of a particular genre does not control what I say but it does mean that I will probably construct my speech consistent with the genre. It also makes me more likely to talk about some subjects and less likely to discuss other topics. In this example, the genre of an academic discussion guides the conversation in the classroom.

Existing speech genres, although theoretically infinite, in practice offer a limited repertoire of forms of discourse appropriate in a given situation. Although a speaker may consciously decide to employ a particular genre, genres are often used automatically and constitute a part of our habitus (Hanks 1987, Garrett 2005). Once a genre has been chosen by an author, either consciously or otherwise, it then centers the

² In Bakhtin’s theory, an utterance is the basic unit of communication and is marked by a change in speaking subjects. An utterance encompasses everything someone has to say before pausing to give someone else a chance to respond. It can thus be a single word or an entire novel.

conversation loosely on its framework. This does not mean that a speech genre is absolutely deterministic—authors may move outside a given genre although this may affect how their statement is received by those who were expecting a different genre. It is useful to think of genres as constraints that take the form of “structuring points for conversation” and that offer “expectations for how a conversation might proceed” (Bender 2003: 93). Genres are contextual. A particular genre is chosen by a speaker according to the audience being addressed. They are forward looking in that they anticipate a certain response (for example, think of the expectations a professor has of how a student will respond to a question in class). At the same time, genres are based upon their own past usage and are socially constructed. While they are relatively stable, genres do change over time (Olick 1999). “Genres are the residue of past behavior, an accretion that shapes, guides and constrains future behavior” (Morson and Emerson 1990: 290).

The concept of speech genres moves beyond ideas of frames, scripts and other ways of describing patterns of speech or action in several useful respects. Genres emphasize the socially constructed, contextual and dialogical aspects of the way we communicate. They highlight our usage of cultural repertoires (Swidler 1986, 2001), while providing a framework for creativity and change. From Bakhtin’s perspective, genres are not only concerned with expressing our pre-existing thoughts but are also intimately intertwined with ideology and our very conception of reality. We think in genres (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978). The stress on genres’ social creation and relationship to fundamental thought processes lends them to analyses of hierarchical social situations where recognition of power is important, such as in the dominant discourse on religious freedom by the United States.

Data and Methods

In this project I draw upon a variety of sources including the IRF Reports; State Department press releases and press conferences; proceedings from academic conferences where religious freedom activists, State Department officials and congressional staffers were present; newspaper articles; and other publications by relevant actors involved in the promotion of international religious freedom. I include these outside sources in the study because part of my argument is that the State Department itself drew upon *pre-existing* genres in producing

the IRF Reports. In particular, it made use of the genres employed by supporters of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which mandated the State Department write the reports. Many of these outside sources also supply us with crucial information on the internal processes within the State Department that are a part of the production of the IRF reports.

The State Department reports themselves are very extensive. Over the eleven years that the report has been released to date their combined length adds up to several thousand pages of data. Since a detailed qualitative examination of such large amount of information was impractical, I focused on each year's Introduction, Executive Summary, and a sample of key country reports. I chose to examine countries that were designated by the State Department as Countries of Particular Concern, or CPCs, (for example, Eritrea). I also looked at other nations where the State Department was critical but stopped short of naming a country a CPC (such as France and Germany). Finally, I investigated some of the shorter reports for countries where the State Department found little to criticize. My aim was to achieve a balance that would enable the discovery of overall patterns unrelated to the State Department's evaluation of religious freedom in a specific country, local religious demography or geographical location.

One practical difficulty in using the concept of speech genres is identifying what actually constitutes a genre and its boundaries in the real world. It is not enough to rely simply on the formal structure of an utterance, the environment in which it takes place, or the linguistic code used. In keeping with the nature of the concept, there are no absolute rules as to what constitutes a genre and what does not. Some have suggested taking the speaker's stance (Garrett 2005) or the purpose of the utterance into account (Orr 2007), while others focus on the expectations that the genre sets for conversation (Bender 2003). While all of these criteria are potentially helpful, they offer limited guidance in analyzing a government report written by multiple authors. The stances of the writers of different sections of the report can vary. There is not always a clear or unified purpose, and the multiple concurrent audiences for the reports make defining expectations problematic. Therefore, I primarily classified genres in the reports by their structural and thematic similarities. If there was a more or less consistent use of certain rhetorical strategies and reoccurring themes for a given topic over time, I considered it to be evidence supporting the presence of a speech genre. It is possible that other researchers reading the same

material might recognize other genres, but I believe that the empirical evidence presented below supports my claim for the existence and influence of the genres I identify in this chapter.

Universal Human Rights

The IRF Reports are written around the genre of universal human rights discourse. Echoes of this genre can be found not only in the reports but also in documents used by the activists who lobbied for the passage of IRFA, statements from politicians who supported the law and in the language of the law itself. The genre is defined by its clear thematic use of human rights, as well as particular rhetorical strategies (synecdoche, metonymy, naming, shaming), quasi-performative definitional work, and an emphasis on universalism. The genre is clearly used and easily recognized in a variety of human rights documents such as the annual reports of Amnesty International (AI) or Human Rights Watch (HRW), as well as most other examples of human rights discourse. The reader knows that the genre is being used when the topic of an utterance is described in terms of human rights that are universal, and when the utterance makes use of certain rhetorical strategies and undertakes performative definitional work. However, it is important to understand that not every document written in the universal human rights genre displays all of the genre's features, displays them to the same degree, or has the same content. Rather, the genre works like a set of family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1953) that signal to the reader not only the mere presence of the genre but also, and more important, the expectations and assumptions that accompany it, as will be seen below.³ In this section I will point to the common structures, language, rhetorical strategies, and themes found in both the IRF Reports and much of the human rights literature. I argue that presuppositions of the genre affect how the IRF Reports are received by their readers and that they speak to some of the particular ways that the State Department conceives and develops the category of religious freedom.

³ This does not mean that statements made in the genre by different parties will necessarily agree with one another. Human rights documents often sharply disagree about the specifics of particular violations as well as on the gradients of human rights more generally.

To understand better the feel of the genre it helps to study an example of the genre antedating the IRF reports themselves, such as the AI reports written since the 1980s. Like the IRF Reports, the AI Reports begin with ideological introductory and summary material, proceed with individual country reports and conclude with several appendices including the texts of various international human rights treaties. The AI reports clearly signal that their content is to be understood under the rubric of human rights, and they have a heavy emphasis on universalism, making use of several other of the generic features listed above. For example, the 1998 AI Report starts with an essay entitled "All Human Rights for All" celebrating the 50th Anniversary of The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights and focusing on the universality of that proclamation and the ideals within it. In that essay, the reader is also confronted with metonymy (e.g., long lists of example human rights abuses used to signal the presence of abuse generally), naming and shaming (e.g., passages emphasizing the effectiveness of public reporting), quasi-performative definitional work (e.g., descriptions of economic and women's rights that serve to create the rights), and most obviously, the universalism of human rights (e.g., sentences like "*all* human rights should be enjoyed by *all* people" [1998: 3, emphasis in original]). When reading the AI report, the genre of universal human rights leaps from the page.

Within the IRF reports, the universal human rights genre is used most heavily in the Executive Summaries and in the individual country reports, although it is echoed in other sections as well. The reports make many direct references to universal human rights, and religious freedom is explicitly defined as a human right. The linking of human rights and religious freedom clearly signals to the reader the use of the human rights genre and prepares the reader to engage the themes of the document in a way consistent with the genre's framework. This signaling occurs with sentences like the following from the 2007 Executive Summary, "The United States seeks to promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as *a fundamental human right*" (2007: xiii). Phrases like this one are typical and are found throughout the reports. The use of the genre's standard rhetorical strategies reinforces this kind of thematic indication and fully signals the presence of the human rights genre.

While the language of the individual country reports does not always spell out the link between religious freedom and human rights, it does so implicitly in several other ways common to the genre.

First, the reports use metonymy, or the practice of using a word to stand for something else to which it is related (e.g. “crown” in “lands that belong to the crown”). Violations of human rights are listed out of context and without details to stand in for the larger category of persecution (Castelli 2005). Violations and potential violations of rights are cataloged in a laundry-list fashion with limited commentary and analysis. The 2007 report on India serves as an example. The “Abuses of Religious Freedom” section of the Indian report is made up almost entirely of short 1–3 sentence paragraphs documenting specific violations. Many of the paragraphs begin with a date and then follow with a brief summary of an incident. There is little or no attempt to place the events in context or provide any analysis of possible causes of or reasons for the violations.⁴ The examples below are quoted in the order they appeared in the actual report and are typical in length and style not only for the reports on India but also for the IRF Reports in general.

In the state of Karnataka, Christian and human rights groups reported increased attacks and harassment following the formation of a coalition government that includes the BJP.

On February 20, 2007, a local BJP leader, Panat Ram, and his followers allegedly attacked three pastors of the Believers’ Church while they were holding a prayer meeting in Raigarh district Chhattisgarh. Elisha Baker, Balbir Kher, and Nan Sai were slightly injured. Panat Ram also tried to register a complaint against the pastors for engaging in conversion activities. Police investigated the complaint but found it unsubstantiated, and did not register a First Information Report (FIR) against the pastors.

On November 9, 2006, a local BJP politician and party workers allegedly attacked six Christians at a village meeting in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. According to the Christians, police refused to file an FIR against the attackers.

On October 10, 2006, the Chhattisgarh BJP government reportedly closed a government-financed, Christian-operated child nutrition services center in Raigarh, Chhattisgarh. The government fired 17 employees of the center on suspicion of engaging in conversion activities (IRF Report 2007: 641).

In the actual report there are five more paragraphs listing similar violations of religious freedom in the state of Karnataka. Again, notice how reported violations of religious freedom are listed as single itemized

⁴ This is not to suggest that the human rights genre never allows context to be presented, but simply that a lack of context in some circumstances is a common and defining feature of the genre.

events that mainly serve to emphasize the presence of some kind of religious freedom violation but do not explain the situation in any depth.

This approach of listing violations out of context is more than just simply reporting on facts. Rhetorically it has the effect of creating a sense of urgency and embattlement (Castelli 2005): religious freedom is something serious that must be addressed immediately. At the same time, by only listing “facts” without any context, the apparent severity of potential violations as understood by the reader can be adjusted up or down. For example, the country reports on Germany from 1999–2004 all contained a statement saying that the German government was considering adding chaplaincy positions for Islamic clergy in its military (there were none at the time). Presented without any further context, the information appeared to be a new development each year with the reports neglecting to state that the proposal had been under consideration for several years in a row. Absent this important background information, a person reading the German report in any particular year would likely interpret the statement on Islamic chaplains as a new positive development. However, if the reports had included the larger context that the German government had been talking about the issue for five years without any resolution, the same statement might actually indicate a possible violation of religious freedom to the same reader. The fact that the reports do not provide this kind of context, but instead just catalog events, can dramatically affect their interpretation by their readers.

The basic strategy of listing multiple abuses out of context was also used by activists and politicians leading up to the passage of IRFA. For example, one supporter in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial drew attention to the plight of persecuted Christians by listing bullet point examples of their mistreatment in Muslim countries (Horowitz 1995). Nina Shea (1997), a religious freedom activist, also employed a similar strategy in her highly influential book on Christian persecution, *In the Lion's Den*, and the same tactic was used by her fellow activist Paul Marshall (1997) in his book *Their Blood Cries Out*. This generic feature was not limited to activists but was also employed by congressmen during the many hearings and debates leading up to IRFA (Castelli 2005). Speaking on the floor of the House of Representatives congressmen read lists of atrocities as a part of their efforts to secure the passage of the bill. While it may be that in these last examples religious freedom was really being addressed in terms of religious persecution

and not in terms of human rights, this practice of publicly reporting fact after fact in a metonymic fashion is a shared practice within the larger human rights discourse, whether the focus is on rights or persecution. This rhetorical feature later became one of the defining characteristics of the IRF Reports, where there is little effort to place events in context or provide any analysis of possible patterns or reasons for violations. Another practice associated with the genre of universal human rights is the argument that reliable information, when made public, will motivate people to act. This general strategy has been referred to as the “human rights methodology” and has often been used by transnational networks of human rights activists (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Of course, the State Department is not an activist in any conventional sense of the term. In spite of this the agency at least partially subscribes to this method of “naming and shaming” even as it often argues for quiet diplomacy. For example, as stated in the Introduction to the 2003 report, “In seeking to prevent or remedy abuses [of religious freedom], the first and often the most vital step is to ensure that the stories are told, the abuses revealed, the restrictions exposed. This report attempts to do just that” (xvi).

The State Department’s attempts at revealing abuses of religious freedom are always done under the pretense not just of rights but of *universal* human rights. Claims of universality are prevalent in virtually all reports, press conferences and other comments made by the State Department in regard to religious freedom. They played a large role in the arguments for the passage of IRFA and are enshrined in the text of the law itself. The second paragraph of the “Findings” portion of IRFA begins: Freedom of religious belief and practice is a *universal human right* and fundamental freedom *articulated in numerous international instruments*, including... [a list of six instruments follows]. (IRFA 1998: 2788 [emphasis mine]).

Similar arguments linking universality to international human rights instruments are frequently repeated in the IRF Reports. Although the examples are far too numerous to list here, the passage below from the 2004 Executive Summary is typical of the rhetoric used.

Religious freedom is a *universal value*, and almost all of the world’s nations have signed one or more international agreements committing them to respect individual freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Beginning with the 1948 adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and continuing with the *nearly global ratification* of the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights, the nations of the world have affirmed the principle that governments have a fundamental responsibility to protect freedom of religion.... Ultimately, each nation's policies and practices regarding religious freedom must be measured against *international norms* (IRF Report 2004: xix [emphasis mine]).

This quotation stresses the universalism of religious freedom not only by expressly naming it a “universal value” but also by using such phrases suggesting its universal nature such as “nearly global ratification” and “international norms.” Further uses of the word “universal” along with other cognate phrases pepper the reports.

So far we have seen how the reports signal the genre of universal human rights to the reader by directly referencing the concepts of human rights and universalism, as well as using metonymy and the practice of naming and shaming. Yet beyond just situating religious freedom firmly within human rights discourse, the use of the genre also begins to tell us more about the particular shape of religious freedom through the quasi-performative acts that the State Department deploys. For example, all of the Executive Summaries in the reports have used the same five categories for violations of religious freedom: 1) Totalitarian or authoritarian attempts to control religious belief or practice; 2) State hostility toward minority or nonapproved religions; 3) State neglect of discrimination against or persecution of minority or nonapproved religions; 4) Discriminating legislation or policies disadvantaging certain religions; 5) Stigmatization of certain religions by wrongfully associating them with dangerous cults or sects.⁵ By declaring violations to fall within one of these five categories, the State Department is also drawing boundaries around a particular definition of religion and religious freedom. I call this a “quasi-performative” act because saying, for example, that wrongfully associating a religion with a cult is a category of persecution does not make it so in the same way that a traditional performative utterance is an example of doing something by saying something—e.g., “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” (Austin 1962). When the State Department announces such a category in a public document, however, it does have a performative quality about it. Falsely associating a religion with a cult becomes a violation of religious freedom simply because the State Department

⁵ The only exception is that the first report (1999) did not include a separate category for the present category 5.

has uttered that to do so is such a violation. From 1999 through 2005 the reports used synecdoche, or the use of long lists of atrocities that come to be a part of the general category of persecution, to place countries and their violations within the categories (Castelli 2005)—in essence creating the categories of violations from the lists of their typical cases. For example, the treatment described in the report on Scientology in France and Germany serves to define what it means to associate a religion with a cult “falsely” and therefore helps flesh out the boundaries of religion as a category.

Together these five groupings of violations of religious freedom tell us much about the notion of religion used in the reports, especially the relation between religion and the state. As a whole, the categories suggest that there are multiple acceptable religions through their use of the plural “religions” instead of the singular “religion.” The juxtaposition made in the descriptions of the categories between religion and the state indicates that the two objects are not the same for the State Department and suggests that they should in practice be separated, at least to a degree. Category 1 (totalitarian control) makes the common distinction between religious belief and practice as separate aspects of religion and tells us that it is wrong to attempt to control them overzealously. By extension, however, the prohibition on *overzealous* domination implies that there is a level of control that may be acceptable. Category 2 (hostility to non-approved religions) lets us know that not all religions are on equal footing in practice. Some religions have more adherents and others are “not approved.” It is not entirely clear if it is the state or others in society who do not approve of these religions, nor is it clear why they do not approve—but the state must tolerate these non-approved and minority religions nevertheless. Category 3 (neglect of persecution) elaborates on this theme and places the state in a position where it must actively protect religions from other areas of society in order to stop any discrimination against them. Category 4 (discriminatory policies) reiterates the notion of state protection of religions and prohibits the state from treating separate religions differently. Equality is emphasized in that it is only a problem if “certain” religions are disadvantaged, although presumably if all religions were equally and severely disadvantaged it would still be considered a violation of the prohibition against excessive control of religions. Finally, Category 5 (cults) introduces the idea of sects and cults that are identified to be different from religion and potentially dangerous. The state must not wrongfully label a religion a cult because that would result in its stigmatization.

However, Category 5 still leaves open the possibility that some groups may actually be cults and therefore be properly labeled as such.

In summary, these categories tell us that religion is made up of both belief and practice. While for the State Department religion and religions are relatively independent from other areas of life and cannot be entirely controlled by the state, there is room left open for some “appropriate” state control. But control has its limits. The state may not overstep its bounds by meddling unequally in the affairs of religion or by banishing a religious group from the official category of religion altogether by categorizing it as a cult. Not only must the state tolerate religion, it must actively protect religious practitioners from societal discrimination and avoid creating state sanctioned discrimination. The model for religion and its relationship to the state resonates with that of free market liberalism where the state ensures that there is a level playing field. This market view of religion also implies an understanding of religion as a free choice that people make within this market.

The universal human rights genre also works within the reports rhetorically to support the claim made by the State Department that the IRF Reports apply universal, non-American standards equally across the various cultures of the world instead of relying on U.S. understandings of religious freedom. State Department officials also use this genre when asked about possible U.S. bias in the reports, and this language echoes that used by supporters of IRFA in the fight to ensure its passage. Additionally it begins to lay out specific properties of proper religion and religious freedom through its performative work.

But, not surprisingly, interpretations of religious freedom that differ from the American perspective are common. For example, Germany actively promotes religious freedom and other human rights by relying on many of the same international documents that the State Department refers to in the IRF Reports. Despite this fact, the United States criticizes Germany for its treatment of Scientologists because the United States views Scientology as a religion deserving of protection under the concept of religious freedom while Germany does not. According to the German government Scientology is not a religion but rather a subversive commercial enterprise.⁶ The dispute between the two nations

⁶ For the U.S. position on Scientology in Germany see any of the IRF Reports on Germany. For the official German position see the most recent Annual Report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2008), http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/en/en_publications/annual_reports.

exists even though both countries claim to adhere equally to the UDHR and other human rights instruments. If religious freedom were as clearly defined or universal as the State Department claims, such fundamental disagreements between supposed human rights partners would in theory be far less common than they are. But instead of being rare, differing interpretations are the norm. As the example illustrates, disputes happen not just between the widely acknowledged supporters of human rights and the usual suspects of violators, but also among the supporters themselves. Countries negotiate the proper space for religion based not only on international norms but also in light of their own historical experiences and practice. Nations with different religious histories from the United States often understand religious freedom in different ways, especially with regard to controversial topics like proselytism, conversion and the space of religion in public life (Smolin 2001, Gunn 2006).

But the genre of universal human rights, as expressed in the State Department reports, does not allow such differences. When international religious freedom is presented as a universal human right, religion is fixed as a constant unchanging category and not viewed as a reflection of a particular historical and cultural context. In essence, this stance denies that its understanding of religion and religious freedom are anything but clear empirical facts. However, in practice, many conflicting versions of this “universal” exist.

As will be seen in more detail, universal claims are effectively used in the reports to hide the next speech genre introduced below. Speaking of religious freedom in the language of universal human rights partially masks that it is almost always spoken of in terms of *the American particular*. This works to conceal the way in which the reports are socially constructed and favor certain groups, drawing attention away from how structures and discourses influence interpretations and actions. Thus constructing the IRF Reports around a speech genre of *universal* human rights helps defend them against accusations that they reflect a particular, not universal, way of thinking about religion and religious freedom.

Idealized Religious Pluralism

While the speech genre of universal human rights frames discourse on religious freedom as universal, another genre organizes dialogue on international religious freedom around concepts of a mythic American

past and an idealized religious pluralism based on a distinctly U.S. model. The genre I call idealized religious pluralism is defined by its rosy picture of American religious history that ties the United States to the invention of religious freedom and for the most part ignores American violations of religious freedom. It is also characterized by the way it prescribes a perfected form of engaged pluralism, based on a largely American Protestant understanding of religion, as the proper model for the presence of religion in the public sphere as well as for the interaction among different religious groups. The emphasis on pluralism tends to obscure the fact that in practice the reports sometimes favor certain groups over others. The notion of pluralism in the genre is specific to particular conceptions of “correct” religious practice and excludes any possibility for non-pluralistic engagement. This genre can be seen in most statements made in the United States concerning religious freedom abroad, including those made by activists, political leaders and those found in the State Department’s IRF Reports.

The first defining feature of the genre is the *presence of a particular narrative that tells a story explaining why the United States is the leader in religious freedom today.*⁷ This narrative signals to the reader the presence of the genre and sets up expectations for how the utterance will proceed. Although not all versions of this story are exactly the same, working again from a set of family resemblances, a similar narrative of American religious history can be found in statements by activists leading up to IRFA, the text of the law itself and in the IRF reports. The story usually begins with European settlers fleeing religious persecution to the colonial United States. Religious freedom is then established legally, enshrined as a part of our national identity. Often the settlers are privileged with a unique understanding of religious freedom because of the persecution they suffered. Eventually this early manifestation of religious freedom leads to present-day religious pluralism and the United States’ promotion of religious freedom around the world.

Many ideal-typical instances of this narrative structure can be found in the rhetoric leading up to the passage of IRFA. For example, religious freedom activist Nina Shea states early in her book that was published shortly before passage of IRFA:

⁷ Following Polletta (2006), I am using the words “narrative” and “story” interchangeably.

More than 350 years ago the Puritans journeyed to these shores in search of religious freedom. Sixty years later the Quakers settled Philadelphia as a haven for persecuted sects.... The right to worship God according to one's conscience is recognized in our founding documents as a basic, inalienable human right. So if Christians in America stand by and do nothing as their brothers and sisters in other parts of the world suffer, they are abandoning the proudest heritage they have as Americans (1997: xi).

Later, the first paragraph of the "Findings" section of IRFA begins with a strikingly similar statement:

The right to freedom of religion undergirds the very origin and existence of the United States. Many of our Nation's founders fled religious persecution abroad, cherishing in their hearts and minds the ideal of religious freedom. They established in law, as a fundamental right and as a pillar of our Nation, the right to freedom of religion. From its birth to this day, the United States has prized this legacy of religious freedom and honored this heritage by standing for religious freedom and offering refuge to those suffering religious persecution (*IRFA* 1998: 2788).

Finally, the same basic version of American religious history can be found in the IRF reports themselves, primarily in the Introduction to each year's report but also in other sections as well. When it is used in the Introduction, the narrative often encompasses most of that section of the report. The basic narrative also appears to a certain degree in most Executive Summaries, with a greater emphasis on it in 2003, 2004 and 2008, while it is downplayed somewhat in 2006, 2007 and 2009. The 2007 report offers a prototypical example of the genre. The first few sentences of the Introduction read:

Our founding fathers established religious liberty as the cornerstone of America's constitutional system by enshrining it in the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights. Many of our nation's early settlers fled religious persecution to come to America; hence they vividly understood the importance of religious freedom... [today] the heart of our foreign policy encompasses the protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms, starting with freedom of worship (*IRF Report* 2007: xi).

While these examples illustrate the basic plot structure of the narrative, there are many different variations to be seen in any particular telling of the story. The most common ones connect the United States and its history to the invention of religious freedom and human rights in general, as well as directly linking religious freedom to democracy. This again serves to tie the universality of human rights to the American

experience in particular. The use of historical persons, especially those “mythic” characters of early American history like Washington and Jefferson, aids in this endeavor. The story also usually contains an us/them dichotomy that is brought out with the use of first person plural pronouns (we, us, our). At times the pronouns clearly refer to the State Department itself (“We do not confine our reporting to the negative.”), but more often they seem to stand in for the American people as a whole (“Our own nation’s founders...”) (both examples from the 2004 Introduction). Infrequently the pronouns are slightly ambiguous and could also be understood as referring to all of those in the world who support religious freedom (“We on the right side of freedom’s divide...” 2005 Introduction). The story thus normally emphasizes a split between the United States, which respects and promotes religious freedom, and the rest of the world, which does not correctly understand or practice religious freedom in the same way as the United States. It presents the U.S. as having a single common identity in respect to religious freedom that has been developed over the course of its history.

Of course, these narratives offer a very simplified picture of American religious history that has little to do with historical reality. The United States has denied religious freedom to countless groups and individuals, and historical evidence does not support the statement that it was founded on an ideal of religious freedom as we know it today (e.g. Peters 2000, Eck 2001, Gordon 2002, Hamburger 2002, Sullivan 2005, Gunn 2006). Yet in spite of this and despite the fact that one might think that the genre of universalism would discourage references to American history, similar statements to the ones above appear frequently in the IRF Reports.

That is not to say that the State Department in its reports and other comments completely rewrites history to remove any challenges to religious freedom in the United States. Officials occasionally acknowledge that religious freedom in the U.S. has been far from perfectly implemented (e.g. in the 2004 Introduction and the remarks by Ambassador Hanford quoted in the previous section). Yet there is the presupposition, often stated almost directly, that even with these lapses the United States is one of the leaders in religious freedom, if not *the* leader, in the world today. As put succinctly by Shea, “I believe that religious freedom is universal...but at the same time I find that religious freedom is only fully understood in this country, not even in the west, but in this country” (Cozad 2005: 79). Religious freedom then, as the narrative of its genre prescribes, is not just any version of religious

freedom but rather one modeled after an American separation of church and state and, as will be seen below, a celebrated expression of religious pluralism based on the United States's unique history.

As such, *pluralism is the second defining feature of the genre*. The concept of pluralism as expressed in the reports is not synonymous with mere diversity itself but is rather an active strategy of mutual engagement similar to that described in academic literature promoting pluralism. It is not the same as models like the familiar "melting pot" where immigrants come to the United States but then shed part of their identities in order to become one with the American whole. Pluralism is different in that individuals are instead encouraged to keep their distinct identities and are expected to interact with each other across lines of difference. Scholars promoting pluralism see reactions to difference, especially religious difference, along a continuum from less desirable (exclusion and toleration) toward more desirable (pluralism and participation) (Eck 2001, Hutchison 2003, Connolly 2005). These scholars agree that throughout its history the United States has been moving toward a more pluralistic mode of handling diversity even if there have been setbacks along the way. They argue that, while the United States has not yet reached its ultimate goal of participatory pluralism, because of the realities of an increasingly diverse society there is no turning back. The following quote illustrates an ideal-typical description of this kind of religious pluralism:

Pluralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences.... Pluralism does not mean abandoning differences.... The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. In the world as it is today, it is a language we all will need to learn (Eck 2007: 266).

The language of pluralism has become so embedded in the story of religious freedom in the United States that, while some participants might not even fully support pluralistic projects of dynamic engagement, the idea that each individual has a right to religious freedom within a pluralistic society saturates the discourse, even if it is not always put into practice.

Compelling evidence of the importance of religious pluralism can be found in the country reports themselves. It is here, although it is rarely stated explicitly, that religious freedom is most closely associated with religious pluralism. States are expected to ensure an environment where all individuals and groups can fully participate in society in a

pluralistic manner. The only exception to this is when a group becomes exclusionary toward others. At that point any exclusionary bodies are criticized for their position and their lack of willingness to accept other viewpoints. The apparatus of the state is then held responsible to rectify the situation.

It is important to note that the story of American religious history described above is absent in the country reports. Keeping with the idea of reporting events without any commentary, the country reports do not explicitly situate their findings within a larger ideological framework. The absence of narrative itself is not particularly surprising when one considers that the use of stories, including when and where they are considered appropriate, is often institutionally defined (Polletta 2006). Here the State Department has confined direct narratives to other sections of the report in order to preserve an appearance of impartiality. However, if one considers the use of the standard narrative in the Introduction and Executive Summary as the preamble to the findings of the country reports, then the country reports can be interpreted as the culmination of the story. The standard narrative usually ends in the present day with U.S. efforts to promote religious freedom, and this is exactly what the country reports are an attempt to do. In this context, the emphasis on pluralism can be considered an elaboration of the ideas of pluralism alluded to in the more detailed general narrative found elsewhere.

While most of the individual country reports demonstrate this assumption of pluralism, it is easiest to view in the context of those countries that are normally considered supporters of human rights. France, for example, strongly supports religious freedom and other human rights, yet the United States frequently criticizes the country for its treatment of minority religions such as Islam and religions defined by the French government as “cults.” In 2004, in response to a growing controversy over the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women and girls, France passed a law that banned any conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. The 2005 IRF Report lists instances where students were expelled for ignoring the law as violations of religious freedom, but also mentions that the European Commission on Human Rights upheld the law as not violating the concept of religious freedom. In this example, the role of religion in public life was negotiated differently in Europe from what it has been in the United States. What would normally be allowed under American concepts of religious pluralism was prohibited under the French model of *laïcité*, which proscribes

virtually any space for religion in the public sphere. This illustrates how deviance from an engagement of religious pluralism as understood in the United States often becomes defined as a violation of religious freedom, even when multilateral bodies do not view it as such.

Other examples explicitly tie violations or support of religious freedom to pluralistic notions of engagement among religious groups. A common sentence found in many country reports is: "The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom." This stock phrase is revealing in the way that it links positive relationships across different religions to freedom of religion more generally. We again find a rhetorical connection between how people of different religions engage one another and the status of religious freedom.

Proposed solutions in the reports to religious freedom problems begin to point overtly toward a direct connection between American religious pluralism and religious freedom. The following passage from Section IV of the 2007 report on Jordan describes some of the activities of the U.S. Embassy in that country:

The U.S. Embassy sponsored many individuals on exchange programs related to *religious freedom and tolerance*.... [T]he Embassy also sponsored the second annual International Visitor Program designed to expose Shari'a judges to *the diversity, religious tolerance, and freedom of U.S. society*, including by meeting religious leaders from several religious groups and U.S officials who raised religious freedom concerns.

In the summer of 2006 a Fulbright scholar studied for six weeks at the University of California at Santa Barbara on a U.S.-funded project entitled "*Religious Pluralism in the United States*." This scholar, a dean at a major Jordanian university, returned to his faculty and students with an appreciation of *how American society, culture, and institutions allow varied religious beliefs to coexist* (IRF Report 2007: 562 [emphasis mine]).

As can be seen in the italicized passages, religious freedom is directly linked not only to concepts associated with pluralism in general, such as tolerance and diversity, but also to how these concepts are actualized in the United States. Key words and phrases include *tolerance, diversity, pluralism, and allow varied religious beliefs to coexist*, demonstrating how the reports exhibit a commitment to the ideal of pluralism. In another example, the 2007 report on the United Arab Emirates lists twenty positive developments in religious freedom in that country. Over half of them are concerned with constructive dialogue among

groups, while one quarter use the word “dialogue” directly. The State Department praises examples of interfaith dialogue, seminars on cultural diversity and meetings among diverse religious groups. Overall, these passages suggest that the State Department, in the reports on religious freedom, is encouraging a kind of engaged pluralism and deep discussion. Religious diversity is celebrated, and religious groups are encouraged to engage one another through dialogue. While the separation between religion and the state is still considered the correct model, religion is not banished from the public sphere, and the only stance not tolerated is intolerance.

The rough boundaries of the role of religion in public life can also be observed. On the one hand, the IRF Reports criticize countries like Saudi Arabia for their distinct lack of a pluralistic concept of religious freedom and for taking the mixture of religion and politics too far. On the opposite end of the spectrum, countries considered highly secular, such as France, are also criticized for their implementation of religious freedom. As can be seen in the headscarf debate mentioned above, the IRF Reports took France to task for not allowing enough religion in the public sphere. Religious freedom in the reports has therefore become synonymous with an American understanding of the appropriate public space for religion and religious freedom, as opposed to a universal pluralism simply found in the United States. The genre of idealized religious pluralism defines a specific space for religion in public life where the mixing of religion and politics is accepted, but where this interaction is also limited. As is common in the United States, the genre of the reports expects that religious actors can be political up to a certain point. Many passages in the executive summaries draw connections between religious freedom, American style democracy and functioning nations. America does not attempt to remove religion from politics but rather strives to create a religious subject compatible with its specific vision of a democratic society (Mahmood 2006). Like all nations, the United States has its own history of negotiating a space for religion in public life, and this history is reflected in the reports.

Similar to the genre of universal human rights, the genre of idealized religious pluralism favors certain conceptions of religion over others. Religion still has some of the same characteristics found in the universal human rights genre, namely that it is based on a free market model where religion is understood to be a freely chosen entity separate from the state, which in turn regulates religion only to ensure a level playing field through the separation of church and state. But the

pluralism genre goes beyond this model of religion in several respects. First, the genre is not only concerned with the relationship between religion and the state but also the relationship between various religions and between their practitioners. Engaged pluralism, understood in its idealized American version, is seen to be the only “correct” way to practice religion. The genre takes this position as its starting point and uses it implicitly to sort religions into categories of good and bad. Good religion is tolerant and strives toward the ideal of engaged pluralism, while anything less becomes a substandard version of religion that is seen as incorrect. Of course, such a stance insisting on open and dynamic pluralism, the kind that potentially puts one’s own religious dispositions at risk, does more than just promote religious tolerance; it also presents a framework favorable to proselytizing traditions in their efforts to engage potential converts.

Second, as previously suggested, the pluralism genre defines the correct style of relationships between religions to be modeled heavily on the American case. Correct religion is therefore tied to the United States and its specific past, leading the narratives of the genre to resonate with common hagiographical understandings of U.S. history. As the Puritan leader John Winthrop preached in 1630, America is seen to be a “city on a hill” offering an example for the rest of the world to follow, in this case in regard to what religion should look like and how religious freedom should be implemented. The 2005 Introduction to the IRF Report quotes President George W. Bush speaking along these lines:

“Our Founding Fathers,” [President Bush] said, “knew the importance of freedom of religion to a stable and lasting Union. Our Constitution protects individuals’ rights to worship as they choose. Today, we continue to welcome the important contributions of people of faith in our society. We reject religious bigotry in every form, striving for a society that honors the life and faith of every person. As we maintain the vitality of a pluralistic society, we work to ensure equal treatment of faith-based organizations and people of faith” (IRF Report 2005: xv).

In this passage the United States is held up as the shining example of what religion should look like to the rest of the world—which is then critiqued in the reports.

There is also a strong sense in the reports of a manifest destiny in respect to religious freedom as well as passages that resonate with the idea that America is God’s chosen land. The same introduction quoted above begins with several paragraphs that walk the reader through the

history of religious freedom in the United States. Believers flee persecution in the seventeenth century, the legal foundations for religious freedom are laid in the eighteenth century, American presidents strive to protect religious freedom in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century sees American leaders celebrating religious liberty, and America promotes that liberty abroad in the twenty-first century through IRFA and its provisions. The reader is left with the sense that this march toward liberty and progress was not only inevitable but also tied to the divine. "As the United States advances the cause of liberty... we remember that freedom is not America's gift to the world, but God's gift to each man and woman in this world" (IRF Report 2005: xvi) America is the city on a hill that was chosen to receive god's gift of freedom and disseminate it widely. Religion in the reports is thus intertwined with and shaped by mythical understandings of American history (Gunn 2006).

Again, as with the speech genre of human rights, what makes the genre of idealized religious pluralism so important is how it is actually used in the IRF Reports. Unsurprisingly, considering the Christian focus in the version of history from which the report draws, the genre of idealized religious pluralism tends to emphasize Christian religious traditions over others when put into practice by advocates of religious freedom. As seen in the examples of the main narrative, the majority of passages relating the United States to religious freedom do so using examples of Christian, and usually Protestant Christian, groups. Even when speaking of religious freedom in general terms or in regard to non-Christians, the language used often has highly Christian overtones with words like "faith" appearing frequently. With its emphasis on belief, the use of the word "faith" as a stand-in for religion has strong Protestant connotations (Lopez 1998) and often occurred during the debates leading up to IRFA (Castelli 2005). The reports therefore sometimes clash with alternative religious paradigms like those built around the idea of protection *from*, rather than protection *of*, proselytizers, and instead focus on the rights of groups, usually Christian, to try to convert others (Cozad 2005). Some scholars have also pointed to factual inaccuracies in the reports that at times minimize the religious persecution of Muslims (Wales 2002), while others see a general tendency to focus on religious groups that are more familiar to the majority of Americans, especially various Christian denominations (Gunn 2000). I do not mean to suggest that religion is talked about only in relation to Christianity. The reports describe many religions and in

some country reports non-Christian religions figure more prominently than Christianity, but the overall tone of the reports has a slight Christian flavor that reflects the dominant discourses on religion within the United States.

The fact that the genre of idealized religious pluralism favors Christianity is significant because it helps explain the perceived biases that critics of the reports have pointed out (e.g. Wales 2002, Cozad 2005, Pastor 2005, Marshall 2008). The United States is notorious for many of its citizens having a generally limited understanding of religion, especially non-Christian religions (Prothero 2007). People familiar with only their own religion often see the religions and religious freedom problems of others fairly narrowly and therefore sometimes miss potential violations of religious freedom (Gunn 2003). While these facts cannot automatically be generalized back onto the authors of the IRF Reports, it seems likely that the use of the idealized religious pluralism genre combined with a reported lack of training at the State Department (Farr 2008) contribute to the way in which religious freedom issues are presented. At the same time the links between religious freedom and the U.S. in particular tend to remain below the surface because the pluralism genre, through its very language of inclusiveness, denies that these kinds of issues would surface in the reporting. This is similar to recent findings on how people talk about diversity. The language of diversity obscures deeper structural problems dealing with race “in the way in which it appears to engage and even celebrate differences, yet does not grasp the social inequities that accompany them” (Bell and Hartmann 2007: 910). Here the language of religious pluralism obscures structural issues regarding the construction of religious freedom as a concept. Religious freedom is seen to be universal but is in practice based upon an American concept of pluralism that favors some groups over others. This favoritism remains unnoticed partially because the story of religious freedom told in the genre excludes the possibility.

Conclusions

Countless volumes have been written on academic definitions of religion. Social scientists have taken nearly every position from concluding that universally defining religion is impossible (Asad 1993) to assuring us that universal definitions are necessary for analysis

(Riesebrodt 2008, 2010). Instead of concentrating on the debate concerning how scholars should define religion, I would like to shift the focus to investigating how people on the ground create and use varying versions of religion as a category. That is not to say that we should stop engaging scholars' use of definitions of religion, since definitions, both explicit and implicit, naturally inform our understandings and interpretations of our objects of study. However, the most pressing matter is to look at how categories of religion, as defined by those using them, are employed by ordinary people in practice. The State Department's reports on international religious freedom provide such an example of one way that international religious freedom—and, by extension, religion itself—are socially constructed as categories. In the case of the State Department reports, critics have pointed out that the reports tend to favor religious groups likely to be more familiar to the majority of Americans. Other groups are not always reported in the same way unless they have especially strong ties to the United States or the ability to lobby successfully on their behalf. This perceived "bias" is due at least partially to the speech genres that are used to write the reports, which encourage certain types of discourses and certain understandings of religion.

The discourse of religious freedom found in the reports is arranged around two major speech genres, universal human rights and idealized American religious pluralism. The genre of universal human rights is defined by the use of certain rhetorical strategies, naming and shaming, quasi-performative definitional work, and an emphasis on universalism. Idealized religious pluralism is defined by the presence of a narrative linking U.S. history and understandings of religion to the promotion of religious freedom today—along with a heavy emphasis on the concept of pluralism. These two genres were also used by those involved in creating the legislation that mandated the IRF Reports. Later, the authors of the reports drew upon these pre-existing ways of organizing discourse in their writing. In lieu of any substantial training on religious freedom that might have led to the use of other, less Ameri-centric genres, the genres used by the supporters of IRFA prevailed. The continued use of pre-existing genres by the State Department resonates with the hypothesis made by Snow *et al.* (1986) that early social movements sometimes provide "master frames" that are picked up by movements that emerge later. The end result is also a clear demonstration of culture interacting with other institutional spheres. Borrowing from Jeffrey Olick (1999: 399), I argue that,

“it makes little sense to say that either political context or discursive history was decisive. Instead, it is the inextricable interplay of past and present, discursive history and contemporary context,” that has here led the State Department to talk about religion in the way it does.

In particular, religion in the reports is seen to consist of both belief and practice. The concept of religion presented resonates with free-market liberalism in that religion is seen to be a personal choice with the state serving to keep a level playing field among religions. In doing so the state must not only treat religions equally but is also charged with protecting individual religions from societal discrimination. On one hand, this version of religion is portrayed as a universal ideal based on the idea of human rights, but at the same time it is described as something uniquely American. The linkage between the United States and religious freedom in the reports suggests that correct religion, according to the State Department, embraces an engaged pluralism as found in mythologized versions of the story of religion in America. Idealized religious pluralism, as theoretically found in the United States, serves as the example to the rest of the world of how religions are supposed to relate to one another. This version of religion is represented as inevitable and in itself quasi-divine in origin. It tends to resonate most closely with Christian traditions, which may explain some alleged discrepancies in the reports when reporting on religions patterned after different models. This process of creating and recreating the category of religion at the State Department draws attention to the authorizing discourses (Asad 1993) used by the U.S. government to promote its version of religion and religious freedom. It demonstrates how a form of governmentality (Foucault 2007) is used by the U.S. to exercise the power of the state over an international population through the IRF Reports and thus in essence creating a particular version of religion.

Additionally, the questions discussed in this chapter highlight the importance of thorough qualitative analyses. Many of the key issues dealing with how the State Department talks about religious freedom could be easily missed in a purely quantitative study that simply counted types of events reported. This serves as a note of caution to those who would use the IRF Reports and similar documents as unbiased data. The use of the report as objective data is problematic, not only in light of the issues raised by critics, but also because it does not take into account the way the reports' production leads to its conclusions in regard to the fundamental questions of what constitutes

religion(s), religious freedom and the appropriate spaces for religion(s) in a society. While I do not argue that my findings suggest that treating the IRF reports as data is impossible, researchers must be alert to how culturally structured discourse can affect reporting on “facts.” Quantitative measures used to test whether or not a document is biased often do not take form and style into consideration even though these factors are extremely important to real-world readers interpreting a document. Readers do not simply count and categorize events; they interpret texts based on a combination of content, form and their own experience. In the case of the IRF Reports, interpretation matters even more because the reports are not only used internally by the State Department but, as public documents, are also read by activists and foreign governments (Hertzke 2004, Yelensky 2008). Of course, it is unlikely that any documents would ever be the impartial sources that they are often claimed to be. As one human rights researcher wrote in reference to quantitative measures built upon qualitative sources, “Even more disturbing than the deficiencies of these data resources is the fact that social scientists have treated them as though they are methodologically sound quantitative data” (Goldstein 1986: 620). Due to the inherently slippery nature of their subjects, researchers on religion and religious freedom must be prepared to confront their sources seriously in this respect before considering quantifying their data for use in other analyses.

Finally, this study can only begin to point to ways in which the field of religion is defined by the struggles of the actors within it. Further research should aim to flesh out how this occurs in practice. For example, ethnographic work on how people talk about religious freedom would help illuminate the various speech genres described here and explore how they are used in daily life. To what extent can they be considered part of our standard cultural repertoire? Are there major differences between how the genres affect writing and how they are used in actual speech? What is the relationship, if any, between use of the genres and other actions? How does the use of the genres participate in struggles over defining religion as a field? Including, but not limited to, ethnographic work, more needs to be done in exploring the language and assumptions present in the discourse on American religious pluralism. To what extent, if any, is the idea of religious pluralism dependent on particular understandings of religion? How does America’s historically Protestant dominated culture influence the pluralism debate? I hope that this chapter will help to provide a basis from which to begin to answer these and other related questions.

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