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Genres of Religious Freedom: Cultural Pluralism in Practice at the United States Department of State

Abstract (142 words):

Each year the U.S. Department of State writes a report on the status of religious freedom in every country in the world. These reports draw upon a set of pre-existing genres that structure how international religious freedom is talked about in the United States, namely universal human rights and idealized religious pluralism. In addition, due to the organizational structure of the State Department, the reports are each written and edited by a number of different individuals, resulting in a bureaucratic bricolage where a tangle of multiple authors, overlapping departments, various ideologies and competing interests create barriers to more nuanced reporting on religious freedom. This combination of speech genres and organizational constraints explains the tendencies described by critics for the reports to favor some religious groups over others. It also illustrates one way that the concept of religious freedom is constructed in practice.

Although religious freedom is frequently presented as a stable category, differing versions of religious freedom are often found in practice. At the United States Department of State a specific type of cultural pluralism combined with ideas of universal human rights shape the way that the agency approaches religious freedom. These two concepts as expressed in particular speech genres (Bakhtin 1986) interact with the bureaucratic apparatus of the State Department and lead to a particular conception of international religious freedom that is codified in the organization's annual report on the subject (IRF Report). These reports are significant because they 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

¹ The essay submitted is the work of only the individual whose name appears on the front page as the author; any parts taken from other sources are appropriately referenced in the essay.

have an interest in the issues surrounding religious freedom (Hertzke 2004; Yelensky 2008).² As many of the individual country reports concern the treatment of religious minorities, they also reflect the U.S.'s position towards religious minorities and the way that this position is informed by particular versions of cultural pluralism, human rights and the bureaucracy of the State Department.

Theory, Data and Methods

According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), all utterances, both spoken and written, fall within one of an infinite number of speech genres. 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. Genres are not absolute constraints and cannot be reduced to a simple set of rules. Instead, they influence speech by roughly directing it towards its targets in a particular way.

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 also providing a framework for creativity and change, through individuals' creative use of genres. Genres are not only concerned with expressing our pre-existing thoughts but are 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

² The full text of the IRF Reports can be found on the website of the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom: www.state.gov/g/drl/irf

analyses of hierarchical social situations where recognition of power is important, such as the dominate discourse on religious freedom by the United States.

When investigating the speech genres used in the IRF Reports I drew upon a variety of sources beyond the reports including press releases and conferences; proceedings from academic conferences; newspaper articles; and other publications by actors involved in the promotion of international religious freedom. I looked at these outside sources because I argue that the State Department 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 these reports.

Within the reports I examined 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 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, local religious demography or geographical location.

When reading these sources I looked for indications suggesting common speech genres, classifying them by their structural and thematic similarities. If there was a fairly consistent use of particular rhetorical strategies, structural features and reoccurring themes, I considered it to be evidence supporting the presence of a probable speech genre.

Speech Genres in the Reports

The IRF Reports are written around the genre of human rights discourse. The version of this genre found in the reports was also 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. First, the genre makes direct references to human rights. Second, it uses particular rhetorical strategies, especially laundry lists of violations and naming and shaming. Finally, and most importantly, it places an emphasis on universalism.

In effect, the focus on human rights works within the reports to support the claim made by the State Department that the IRF Reports apply universal, non-American standards equally across 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. But, unsurprisingly, interpretations of religious freedom that differ from the American perspective are common. Other nations often understand religious freedom in many different ways, especially in regards to controversial topics like proselytism, conversion and the space for religion in public life (Smolin 2001; Gunn 2006). Thus, the United States not only clashes with countries like Saudi Arabia, which most everyone agrees does not respect religious freedom – however defined – but also with countries like France and Germany, where the concepts of religion and religious freedom are interpreted differently than in the United States, especially in regards to religious minorities. Conflicts with Germany often concern Scientology and center on question of what qualifies as a religion. Many arguments with France also have to do

with so called cults like Scientology, in addition to its ban on headscarves in public schools affecting the country's Muslim minority, which brings up issues of defining the appropriate space for religion in the public sphere. So the genre of universal human rights talks about religious freedom as a clearly defined global universal, even in the face of contrary empirical evidence.

While the speech genre of universal human rights frames discourse on religious freedom as universal and non-American, another genre organizes dialogue on religious freedom around concepts of a mythic American past and cultural pluralism based on a distinctly U.S. model. This genre, which I call idealized religious pluralism, paints a rosy picture of American history that ties the United States to the invention of religious freedom and largely ignores violations that have taken place throughout U.S. history. It proscribes a perfected form of engaged pluralism, based mainly on American Protestant understandings of religion, as the proper model for the presence of religion in the public sphere as well as for the interaction between different religions. Pluralism in this sense is not synonymous with mere diversity but is rather seen as an active strategy of mutual engagement between different groups (Connolly 2005; Eck 2001; Hutchison 2003).

The following excerpt from the Executive Summary of the 2007 report serves as an example:

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...The *Annual Report on International*

Religious Freedom is a natural outgrowth of our country's history and a current reflection of our values.

This passage stands in sharp contrast to those primarily invoking the universal nature of religious freedom. Here the IRF Report is described not in terms of human universals but rather as a “reflection” of *American* values. The United States and its history is linked to religious freedom, and religious freedom in turn is presented as a fundamental aspect of the country’s foundation.

Proposed solutions in the reports to religious freedom problems begin to overtly point towards a direct connection between American style cultural pluralism and religious freedom. For example, many reports list positive developments for religious freedom, and these developments serve as guidelines for the “correct” functioning of religion in society. These positive developments often concentrate on examples of religious dialogue and other indications of active engagements of pluralism. The State Department praises interfaith dialogue, seminars on cultural diversity and meetings among diverse religious groups. Religious diversity is celebrated and distinct religious groups are encouraged to engage one another. This form of interaction between religions is equated with religious freedom.

What makes the genre of religious pluralism so important is how it is actually used in the IRF Reports. When put into practice the genre of idealized religious pluralism tends to emphasize Christian religious traditions over others. The majority of passages relating the United States to religious freedom do so using examples of Christian groups. Even when speaking of religious freedom in general terms or in regards to non-Christians, the language used often has highly Christian overtones with

words like “faith” appearing frequently. The use of the word “faith” to stand in for religion has strong Protestant connotations and often occurred during the debates leading up to IRFA (Castelli 2005). I do not mean to suggest that religion is only talked about in Christian terms. The reports describe multiple religions and in some reports non-Christian religions figure more prominently than Christianity. But the overall tone of the reports has a Christian flavor that reflects 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 (Cozad 2005; Marshall 2008; Pastor 2005; Wales 2002). The focus on Protestant leaning understandings of religion and religious freedom often tends 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 because the genre of pluralistic engagement by definition excludes the possibility.

Organizational Constraints

Beyond the constraints on the reports expressed in the speech genres, the structure of the State Department also guides how the IRF Reports are written. These organizational constraints feed back to the cultural constraints making it less likely that the writers of the reports will work outside of the speech genres I just described.

The State Department, as an established government bureaucracy, constitutes a field of action (Bourdieu 1993) where different actors who contribute to the writing of the report occupy various positions in relation to each other in addition to any other fields that they may also be situated within, such as religion, politics, human rights advocacy, etc. People working at the State Department attempt different position-takings within the field based on their dispositions and understanding of the field. The junior Foreign Service Officer (FSO) may have an interest in advancement to a new post, the senior manager might be concerned with ballooning costs and the retired employee returning to help with the IRF Report could simply be looking for an excuse to get out of the house. All of them bring their own experiences and interpretive schemes (Schutz 1967) for understanding their job and religious freedom.

This situation of multiple perspectives and a historic reluctance by the State Department to approach religion (Farr 2008; Hurd 2004) is exasperated by the lack of comprehensive training. While IRFA mandates the training of FSOs in concepts of religious freedom, and some training does take place in practice, on the whole, formal instruction on religious freedom issues is quite limited. Public remarks from retired FSOs suggest that any knowledge of religious freedom at the State Department is more likely to come from one's own personal religious background than from any formal

training on the subject (Farr 2008; Jones 2001; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2007).

Besides a lack of formal training on the issues surrounding religious freedom the high staff turnover among the writers of the report further contributes to the likelihood of a general knowledge gap (Seiple 2008). FSOs transfer posts every one to two years. That means that practically every other year the person responsible for investigating religious freedom in each country has changed. The same is true for the staff in Washington that compiles and edits the final version of the reports. Based on passages in the reports thanking the staff of the IRF Office by name, the estimated yearly turnover rates for 2005 through 2008 are 69%, 46%, 64% and 40% respectively. This suggests that in a typical year around half or more of the office's staff are new. Because of the extremely high turnover most of the people involved in the reports' production at any given time would be relatively inexperienced in their position. They would still be in the process of learning not only the mechanics of the job but also the nuances of religious freedom as understood by the rest of the staff (who are themselves unlikely to have received much formal training in the short time they have been there).

Left without any substantial training that might introduce employees to different ways of talking about religious freedom the speech genres used by those who pressed for the passage of IRFA tend to structure the reporting. Thus the structural organization of the State Department works to reinforce the language of universal human rights and idealized religious pluralism used in the writing of the reports.

Conclusion

The production of the State Department's reports on international religious freedom provide an example of one way that religious freedom, and as an extension, religion itself, are socially constructed as categories. Borrowing from the sociologist Jeffrey Olick (1999), 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" (399), that here led the State Department to talk about religion in the way it does. As can be seen in the cases of France and Germany, this also contributes to differences in how countries interpret actions towards religious minorities, in this example Muslims and Scientologists.

In summary, the discourse of religious freedom found in the reports is arranged around two major speech genres, universal human rights and idealized religious 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 American centric genres, and in light of the rest of the organizational constraints of the State Department, the genres used by the supporters of IRFA prevailed.

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