



Producing a public television documentary with Luce support, the Bureau for International Reporting filmed Buddhist monks collecting alms under army protection in southern Thailand.

PHOTO BY JASON MALONEY,  
BUREAU FOR INTERNATIONAL REPORTING

## Challenging Assumptions

### THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The right to freedom of religion is recognized in national constitutions, international law and United Nations protocols. It is widely considered a hallmark of democratic societies and a condition for peaceful coexistence among groups. But the way this right is conceived, promoted and contested in different parts of the world can vary greatly. Understanding these differences, and the impact on affected communities, could add a critical new perspective to international debates about religious freedom and help inform policy and advocacy efforts.

Four scholars with wide-ranging expertise have joined together to lead a Luce-funded project that examines this issue. The comparative study—*The Politics of Religious Freedom: Contested Norms and Local Practices*—analyzes the concept, history and practice of religious freedom as it has taken shape in different national contexts. The inquiry focuses on several regions where religious freedom is conceptualized in different ways and in some cases is the subject of heated controversy: Europe, the United States, the Middle East and South Asia.

“Our project is distinct in that it questions the assumption that there is a single, stable principle of religious liberty. We need to understand that it is actually much more complex than any single definition will allow,” says project codirector Saba Mahmood, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. “We’re trying to create some stepping stones to critically rethink the terms of the debate, and we’re finding that there is a tremendous hunger for this work.”

In addition to Professor Mahmood, the project team includes Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, a political scientist at Northwestern

University, and two legal experts on the right to religious freedom: Peter Danchin, at the University of Maryland School of Law and Winnifred Sullivan, at the State University of New York’s Buffalo Law School. Two international partners complete the group: the legal aid organization Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and the Center for Rights Discourse, known as MAJLIS, based in Mumbai, India.

The three-year collaborative project holds an annual international workshop overseas (in Italy, Thailand and Egypt) that brings together human-rights and civil-society organizations and jurists and academics who have helped reshape the debate on religious freedom in the selected regions. “The conversation is very rich because it is across fields, across institutions, across countries,” says Professor Hurd. “We’re hearing the perspectives not just of academic experts, but also of practitioners who are dealing with these issues on the ground.”

The team will create scholarly and practical resources that draw on the project’s research and on the papers that are presented at the workshops. For example, one report will provide translations of precedent-setting international legal cases related to religious freedom, with explanatory background and commentary. The project directors are also developing interdisciplinary syllabi that can be incorporated into courses, and related readings and other pedagogical materials will be posted on the project’s website.

As their work progresses, the team will share what they are learning in a range of forums and academic journals. One discovery so far challenges the common assumption that the right to religious freedom is a neutral mechanism by which competing religious claims can be adjudicated. “Sometimes this is the case,” says Professor Mahmood, “but there are many times when invoking this right can work against peaceful religious coexistence and actually exacerbate sectarian conflict. It depends who’s using it, what context it is being used in, whose interests are being championed and whose interests are being squelched.” ■