

Reflections on the Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion in International Affairs: 2005-2021

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[\(also available to read online\)](#)

In early 2021—sixteen years, 223 grants and more than \$60 million after its inception—the Foundation announced that the Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion in International Affairs (HRLI) would wind down its grantmaking. This decision was not intended to signal that the need to understand the role of religion in world affairs had lessened; indeed, new issues such as the rise of religious nationalism were front and center. It did, however, reflect our conviction that HRLI had contributed in significant measure to the recognition of religion as an important factor in a range of international issues; to deeper understanding of the complex roles religion plays in a myriad of contexts; and to closer, more productive ties among those working on this topic in academia, policy, and the media.

The initiative was conceived in a post-9/11 environment, a time when “religion and international affairs,” was, “for many people, simply a euphemism for work focused on the relationship between Islam and global security,” as Peter Mandaville, a political scientist at George Mason University has put it. The Foundation reasoned that a new initiative could further its goal of increasing America’s capacity for international understanding while enhancing public discourse about religion broadly understood.

From its inception in 2005, HRLI was intended to bring informed analysis of religion into relevant policy conversations through interaction with academia and the media. In the world of policy, the Foundation contended, religion was often ignored, gingerly avoided, or poorly understood. U.S. foreign policy was seen as a critical arena that could benefit from more nuanced perspectives on religion, while media and journalism—which were central to Henry R. Luce’s thinking about the practice of democracy—could play a pivotal role in enhancing public understanding of religion.

In its first three years the initiative focused on U.S. graduate schools of public policy and international affairs, with an eye toward training future policymakers, while also making responsive grants to policy and media organizations. Although few media outlets provided in-depth coverage of religion at this time, HRLI was an early supporter of *Speaking of Faith*, Krista Tippett’s weekly radio program, launched in 2003, and of Religion News Service.

One of the first four grants, to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, resulted in a report, *Mixed Blessings*, which validated the Foundation's assumption that there was little capacity in the U.S. government to work with religion, and that officials were often reluctant to address what they perceived to be a complicated, sensitive topic.

In 2008, the Luce Foundation's Board of Directors agreed to extend the initiative. At that point, the salience of religion in the world had not diminished. Islam loomed large in public consciousness in the aftermath of 9/11; the demonization of Islam and Muslims in the U.S. showed no signs of abating; and the mantra of "saving Muslim women" continued to be invoked to justify the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Religious fervor animated the endless "war on terror."

When I joined the Foundation in 2009 as director of policy initiatives, HRLI was at a key inflection point, poised to build on what had been learned since its launch, and to move in new directions. In this essay, I share my reflections on the evolution and impact of the initiative.

A retrospective view

As we began the process of winding down our grantmaking, I invited some of our interlocuters to share their own reflections. I wanted to know more about how HRLI had helped to "transform the conversation," a phrase I had often heard when people spoke about the impact of the initiative.

"I don't think there was a conversation 15-20 years ago," responded Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, a political scientist at Northwestern University. To find or invent such a conversation, she writes, was

hard and lonely work. The initiative was created in response to a gaping hole in academic and public discourse on this subject – a hole too often filled with ill-informed and politically dangerous ruminations about Islam by so-called experts. It is not possible to overstate the influence and impact of this initiative in creating and shaping a nuanced and thoughtful public conversation on a range of topics touching on religion and public international life.

Scholars in the social sciences and humanities were grappling anew with religion and secularism, but for the most part this was solo intellectual work, did not cross disciplinary divides, and those who sought to connect international affairs and religion struggled to find support. Peter Mandaville recalls:

When I started my career in the late 1990s, convincing foundations or government research funders to support research focused on religion in international affairs was an uphill struggle. One became very adept at using alternative terminology to avoid the “R” word (e.g. “values,” “culture,” “worldview”). There was always a prelude to any conversation with a funder where you felt it necessary to make the case that religion was a relevant focus in foreign affairs...HRLI changed all that by providing a dedicated line of support where the relevance of religion in international affairs was an already taken for granted point of departure. You could just get on with making your case without first being asked to prove that this kind of work is even worth considering.

Critically, HRLI also broadened the aperture. To quote Mandaville again:

By supporting projects focused on an incredibly diverse range of intersections between religion and various international issues, HRLI played an enormously important role in making space in the conversation for so much more than just Islam and security.

My priority when I joined the Foundation was to broaden the scope of HRLI grantmaking, especially to research universities. Several core principles informed these efforts: interdisciplinarity, especially in light of what was then a stark divide between the study of religion and politics/international relations; and international collaboration, as the initiative’s focus on the world required meaningful partnerships with individuals and institutions in the regions under study.

As an anthropologist, I was also committed to projects that were situated in specific times and places, engaged with local voices, and interrogated taken-for-granted concepts. It quickly became apparent that “religion” was itself a complex and ambiguous signifier, as were many other keywords that permeated both academic and policy discourse, such as secularism and sectarianism. Even the term “international” required a more capacious interpretation: we were supporting work on issues that were not only between nations, but also included non-state actors, diasporas, migrations, and digital mediations that transcended bounded territories or states.

To better understand these core concepts and the debates around them, I invited four scholars to meet at the Luce Foundation. To our surprise and delight, out of that brainstorming meeting a long-term project on the topic of religious freedom was born: housed at the University of California, Berkeley, and co-directed by Elizabeth Shakman

Hurd, Saba Mahmood, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Peter Danchin (each at different universities, from political science, anthropology, religious studies and law).

Over the next several years, the “Politics of Religious Freedom” project examined the many concepts and practices under the rubric of religious freedom. Workshops were held on four continents; multiple volumes, journal articles and special issues were published; op-eds and blogs and other public writing appeared. The project not only launched new courses, research, and a myriad of conversations on this contentious topic, but it provided a model of collaboration across disciplines, institutions, intellectual perspectives, and geographies, as well as varied formats for dissemination and sharing knowledge.

The conversations generated in this and many other projects raised critical questions about the category of religion. If HRLI began with an interest in remedying a perceived lack of attention to religion (in policy, media and academia), and in strengthening “religious literacy” about particular traditions, it evolved to focus on how to think about religion - who gets to define it, how, and why that matters.

From its inception, as noted above, the Board intended that HRLI would be about more than Islam. In later years, opening up the question of what we meant by religion allowed our work to extend beyond a focus on organized world religions, and to support projects on topics as diverse as lived religion and sacred landscapes in the Himalayas; indigenous knowledge and extractive industries in Latin America; and critical perspectives on humanitarianism through the lens of indigenous African traditions as well as varied forms of African Islam or Christianity.

While interrogating the category of religion, the initiative also encouraged attention to how religion works in the world, enmeshed in changing social, economic, political, and geopolitical contexts. This approach informs not just the scholarly work we have supported but, equally importantly, work in the domain of policy and media. The reports the International Crisis Group has produced, for example, examine the vastly different ways religion matters (or sometimes does not) in conflict situations in dozens of countries. The Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD, created with an HRLI grant) grapples with “right-sizing religion,” a term Peter Mandaville coined to suggest the need to attend to the role religion plays in different contexts, neither exaggerating its importance nor dismissing it.

Avoiding essentialism while still taking religion seriously, understanding its complex entanglements in politics and society and its myriad effects on the world – these challenges have shaped our approach throughout the life of initiative.

Accomplishments and surprises

The initiative has generated innovative, interdisciplinary, policy-related scholarship. In religious studies, bringing in considerations of power and the state has enriched the field; bringing religion into international relations has been no less important. Grants have produced fresh, critical thinking on challenging problems in the world of policy. In addition to the politics of religious freedom, projects have addressed such topics as sectarianism, humanitarianism, migration and forced displacement, development, gender-based violence, sources of religious authority, the changing nature of political Islam, caste and inequality, minorities and citizenship, human rights, conflict and peace building, gender and the “war on terror,” and climate change.

“Retrospectively,” writes Evan Berry, a religious studies scholar at Arizona State University,

it seems to me that the most significant changes in the conversation are byproducts of scholarly frustration about the unduly narrow attempts to render religion and politics as a binary discussion about “Western secularism” versus “Muslim polities.” The Luce Program has been instrumental in supporting the work of scholars who wish to broaden and deepen the conversation to include considerations of climate change, sexual difference and gender politics, indigenous people’s struggles, humanitarianism and development issues, etc. Stated plainly, the program has helped expand academic work in this space beyond the instrumentalization of religious studies for realpolitik approaches to cultural difference.

In ways that would have been hard to anticipate at the start of HRLI, our media grants expanded in later years, including partnerships with new non-profit news organizations such as the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting and the GroundTruth Project. Founded in 2006 and 2014, respectively, both organizations were committed to journalist collaborations with academics, and both were excited about creating more nuanced reporting on religion and other global issues. Academics, at the same time, became increasingly interested in going beyond their critiques of journalistic representations of religion to working with reporters and news organizations. Anthropologist Suad Joseph, for example, created a training institute at University of California, Davis. Over three years, more than 50 early-career journalists interested in Muslim women throughout the world participated in seminars, were mentored throughout a year, and now form part of an international network, continuing to support each other’s work.

While much of the media work we supported reached wide audiences (on FRONTLINE, PBS NewsHour, PRI, *New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *New York Times*, and other outlets), we were also committed to more specialized efforts, such as a public radio series, *God and Government*, on religion and state around the world. In recent years we have supported more experimental work: a graphic novel on ethics and health in Egypt and the U.S.; a feature film on surveillance in the Somali community in Minneapolis; the Magnum Foundation’s photographic collaborations on religion and migration; and *Digital Dignity*, a film and traveling multi-media installation on digital practices, religion, and the politics of belonging in India.

Also unanticipated was the impact our work would have in the policy arena. In announcing the new Office of Religion and Global Affairs in 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry introduced the director, Shaun Casey, who acknowledged HRLI’s pivotal significance in bringing attention to the role of religion in policy. A grant to the American Academy of Religion subsequently supported the placement of academic Fellows in that Office. TPNRD, the network mentioned above, brings U.S. diplomats (and scholars) into transatlantic deliberations and collaborations with their counterparts in North America and Europe.

Although “religion in international affairs” is neither a field nor a discipline, work at this nexus is now well established. In 2000, the United Nations held one global meeting on religion; by 2020, each of the 60 UN agencies was hosting conversations on religion and with religious leaders. Scholarly associations have added new sections on this topic, publications and courses have proliferated, and emerging scholars are mentored by academics who ten or fifteen years ago were still marginalized – doing the “hard and lonely work” against the grain of established practices in disciplines such as international relations or political science. HRLI grants, we are often told, have provided credibility and visibility to those who are now leading scholars working in this space.

On changing the nature of scholarly practice

“We sought to cultivate a sense of “slow scholarship,” Shakman Hurd writes, reflecting on two collaborative projects she led with Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, “where it was possible to think at leisure, try out ideas, retract or revise them, and experiment with knowing, presenting, and collaborating, all at a distance from the pressures of everyday academic life.”

Echoing this theme, John Paul Christy, Senior Director of U.S. Programs at ACLS, reminds us that beyond HRLI's importance in supporting new research and debates, it has also "been instrumental in changing the conversation about the nature of scholarly practice, and about how and where knowledge is created and circulated." Christy writes:

From the beginning the initiative focused on bridging diverse communities of practice (policy, media, academia) and respecting that each has its own valid claim to knowledge and understanding of global affairs. This mutual respect animated HRLI grantmaking, which made pathways available for work that broke down barriers across sectors and built trust and greater understanding where there was often suspicion and misgivings. This led to greater permeability among academia and journalism and public policy and (importantly) to work that was legible across these fields.

We see this work paying off in critical ways, not the least of which is the imprimatur that HRLI's funding offered to experimental and publicly engaged scholarship, which was not often "counted" as valid scholarly work. The capacity to communicate with multiple audiences and to make humanistic research meaningful beyond the academy is critical to the future of the scholarly enterprise, and HRLI fostered dozens and dozens of projects that were fruitful training grounds for this work.

The Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism & International Affairs (RJIA) grew out of our concern that schools of journalism and communication were oddly absent – given HRLI's interest in enhancing religion reporting – from our grantee pool. Christy convened several meetings with scholars and journalists, based on which ACLS designed a national program to complement HRLI's project grants while strengthening individual scholars' capacities to engage with journalists and diverse media platforms.

Since its launch in 2015, RJIA has supported 30 fellows and made 8 grants to universities, for collaboration on topics ranging from "Apocalyptic Narratives and Climate Change" to "Talking 'Religion:' Publics, Politics, and the Media."

Looking ahead

In 2022, the Social Science Research Council will launch a new digital platform intended to capture the initiative's breadth, accomplishments and challenges. The platform will serve as an accessible repository of the work of our grantees, as a forum for stimulating

reflections on the field, and as a catalyst for new research and conversations. In this partnership with one of HRLI's first grantees, we aspire to create something lively and engaging, and to reach diverse audiences: scholars, students, policymakers, media producers and journalists, and practitioners of various sorts, as well as peers in philanthropy who may be inspired to support new ideas and practices at the intersection of religion and international affairs.

In considering the future, John Paul Christy points to these challenges:

HRLI projects ... allowed scholars to explore how religion touched on practically every dimension of political and cultural life. That broad topical reach suggests that there are many areas of public importance – democracy, migration and immigration, environmental change, etc. – where scholars in the humanities and social sciences could be more active participants in the conversation. Of course, there are many hurdles in the way of achieving this vision, and one key challenge is to find ways to reward this valuable work as a kind of scholarly practice. But coopting traditional academic reward structures is not enough; the public sphere is hotly contested space, and both higher education and philanthropy must consider how best to train, support, and in some cases protect the scholars who are bringing their expertise into explosive debates.

Additional Reflections from the Field

In June 2021, I invited a number of grantees to reflect on the field and how the “conversation” has changed in the years since HRLI was launched. I also asked them to share thoughts on what they see as the important questions now, promising or exciting new directions, and challenges. Nearly 40 individuals responded, describing the ways our work has had an impact: on fields of inquiry, on modes of collaboration, on bridging sectors, on building enduring communities of thought and practice.

Excerpts from some of these reflections are offered here.

What has changed?

*Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Professor of Political Science and Religious Studies,
Northwestern University*

[The Initiative] sparked a generation’s worth of new questions, conversation and at times, solutions. It did so by creating the spaces—through the gifts of time, legitimacy, and resources—to pursue in-depth conversations, debates, publications, creative productions, and various forms of public education in an impressive variety of fora. This sustained commitment allowed for the creation and ongoing cultivation, often over the course of many years, of numerous, invaluable cross-disciplinary professional collaborative relationships, networks, and even friendships. Many of these connections are enduring and continue to shape the professional careers of those involved.

Of course, there had been attempts to consider questions of religion and law, governance and public life prior to June 2005, yet few considered the global aspects and implications of these issues. And among those that did, most simply took the category of religion at face value, presuming that it referred to traditional organized religions, often using a Protestant template to classify and categorize these vast and complex fields of human activity. We know that these convenient shortcuts in fact short circuit our understanding of the contemporary and historical realities at play.

*Benjamin Schonthal, Professor of Buddhism and Asian Religions, University of Otago,
New Zealand*

My main point of contact was the Politics of Religion Freedom project. Up until that point, the conversation around RF had focused on the importance of RF as a legal

principle and ‘critical accounts’ were directed towards the jurisdiction and legal regimes that failed to protect this presumptively universal ideal. The PRF project completely changed the way scholars engaged with the topic: rather than seeing RF as natural, universal, apolitical—a stable and unambiguous legal/social good that could be delivered to the world through the right mix of policy and law—the project started a new set of discussions about how RF actually worked on the ground. The project opened up a panoply of new questions: what interests underlay the promotion of RF both overseas and in the US? Who benefited and who was harmed? How did RF laws and policies actually get produced and deployed in particular places and times? Which types of practices were protected?

The project has been formative for my scholarly life. I participated in it as I was completing my PhD and the book that emerged soon after was strongly shaped by the conversations and theorizing that came out of the project, as were articles and research questions in the years that followed. My career has taken on a strong law-and-society focus in part due to the exciting conversations and scholarship that I was exposed to. I formed and deepened intellectual partnerships with folks from the project and I had a chance to meet people I wouldn’t have met otherwise—from a variety of fields!

Scott Appleby, Marilyn Keough Dean of Notre Dame’s Keough School of Global Affairs and Professor of History, Notre Dame University

Yes, the conversation has changed, in significant ways; I will mention three.

1. A new, more profound understanding of the fluid, shifting and unstable relationship between the religious and the secular under the conditions of modern pluralism. ...
2. Relatedly, religion has been “de-siloed,” seen more clearly as co-constituted by race, ethnicity and gender, and embedded almost without remainder in the local and historical. In one sense the “thickness” of religion is nothing new—to historians and anthropologists, especially—but this insight and awareness has altered, to a degree, the way the social sciences approach religion, with less tendency to reduce it to one independent variable. In one sense this dismantling of essentialist as well reductionist assumptions began much earlier, but progress over the last few decades has “almost” completed the necessary task.

3. A much greater sophistication of understanding and appreciation of the inescapable and defining power of the political, especially the state—to constrain or empower religious practices, cripple or neutralize (or legitimize) religious institutions, and nourish or marginalize communities. One cannot responsibly study lived religion any longer, whether in Africa, Asia, the Middle East or the Americas, without careful attention to the courts, secular (and religious) parties and politics, media and civil society organizations.

Philip Fountain, Senior Lecturer Religious Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

My interest in this field is largely in regard to conversations around religion and its connections with international aid and development (including community development, human rights, humanitarianism, and NGOs). My first research in this area was almost exactly 20 years ago, when I completed a Masters in Geography focused on the response of Christian churches in Papua New Guinea following the 1998 Aitape Tsunami Disaster. When I think back to the state of research then, and where it is now, I am happy to say that it is a completely and utterly transformed scholarly landscape.

Twenty years ago, there was a haunting scholarly silence around questions of religion. It was hard work simply to locate detailed empirical studies, let alone sustained and theoretically-informed analysis. I remember gasping for air, as I hunted through the sparse literature looking for stimulating and critical analysis. Today, this field – and I do think it is representative of much broader conversations around religion and international affairs – is a vibrant, dynamic and contested terrain with exciting work appearing all the time. There are plenty of thick and rich case studies; and plenty of solid theory and analysis. My graduate students now setting out researching the entanglements of religion and development don't have a chance of keeping up with the literature. But they can dip into it, and it is always rewarding and stimulating.

Frederic Wehrey, Senior Fellow at the Middle East Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

I undertook my first Luce Foundation-sponsored project on sectarian identity politics in the Middle East in 2013. At that time, only a handful of scholars were trying to

interrogate longstanding assumptions about the role of religious identity and especially the distinctions between Sunni and Shi'a Islam as a frame for understanding conflict in the Middle East.

Today, the so-called “primordialist” school of thinking on sectarianism—which sees sectarian tensions as rooted in “ancient,” immutable, and deeply ingrained differences—has been largely rejected in favor of a more sophisticated, rigorous approach. This approach analyzes sectarianism as the product of multiple factors, including the lack of political inclusion in Middle East societies, economic disparities inside Arab states, the deliberate stoking of religious differences by sectarian “entrepreneurs,” and the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Similarly, studies on Islamism have evolved in a direction that privileges local social and political contexts as a key determinant for explaining the behavior and choices of Islamists. These new insights, while acknowledging that belief, history and doctrinal differences within Islam matter, inject much-needed nuance into the general public’s understanding of this oft-maligned region.

*Thanassis Cambanis, Senior Fellow and Director of Century International,
The Century Foundation*

The hardest questions I’ve confronted as a policy researcher have come in the context of Luce-supported projects. We began an inquiry in dialogue with scholarship around the secular and the sacred, asking how can we talk about universal rights in the Middle East without erasing or ignoring religion? This question spawned three years of collective labor by twenty scholars, policymakers, activists and journalists, all of whom struggled with competing demands of identity, communal rights, universal rights, and citizenship. A successor project now underway asks how we can explore challenges to rights and citizenship within regions but also across them — for example, how can we explore the specificity of eroding citizenship rights in the Middle East while at the same time exploring the shared causes and trends across the world?

Today’s discourse represents, in my view, a deliberate improvement in the simplifying discourse around religion and international affairs (and conflict, and Middle Eastern politics) in the years after 9/11. Increasingly, we see scholars and policymakers incorporating a sophisticated understanding of the way that religious and sectarian identities can be mobilized, weaponized, or otherwise instrumentalized by actors pursuing (secular) power.

This understanding runs counter to trends that seek to simplify, or to render conflict and politics as somehow preordained by a fixed faith narrative. Happily, in the community of researchers seeking to understand conflict, politics and international relations, there is a growing body of work that builds a contingent, heterogenous analysis of the role of religion as one factor among many that drives political outcomes. Luce research has been the single most significant driver of this dialogue in the English-speaking policy world.

Suad Joseph, Distinguished Research Professor, University of California, Davis

The conversation about Muslim women or women and Islamic cultures has shifted dramatically in the past 20 years. In the last half of the 20th century, the conversation was dominated by the narrative of how Western societies could save Muslim women from Islam. The assumption was that Islam, by nature and scripture, is oppressive to women. While some of that narrative hangs on, particularly in the context of situations like the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, in general, there has been a broad shift in the media and the public understanding of both Islam and Muslim women.

First, there is much less homogenizing and essentializing, with the recognition that Islam is not the same in different places and different times. The recognition of cultural diversity in Islam, and historical context has situated Muslim women more firmly in their historical moments and their particular societies. Second, while there is acknowledgement of the strength of patriarchy in many/most Muslim majority societies, the recognition of the entrenchment of patriarchy in so many countries that have nothing to do with Islam has led to more systematic structural analyses of patriarchy. Third, despite the recognition of gender inequality, there has been much more recognition of women's agency and activism globally, including Muslim women. Fourth, the systematic critique of liberal feminism by global feminists of color and made it much more difficult for the narratives of liberal feminism about Muslim women to dominate. Fifth, the rise and success of the Black Lives Matter movement and the alliance between the BLM movement and a range of racial justice movements, including movements related to the Middle East, progressive women's movements, class-based movements, and movements in the Global South, have put the issues of Islam and Muslim women in the context of social justice movements.

The diagnostic for these shifts is the representation of Muslim women in the media, especially the news media, which is much more likely to print articles about Muslim

women activists, educators, artists, and politicians, than it was in the last half of the 20th century.

Sahana Udupa, Professor of Media Anthropology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich

A key shift in scholarly inquiries about religion and religiosities over the last two decades is the growing recognition of mediation processes and, consequently, a clear departure from understanding religion as unmediated invocations and experiences of the transcendental and the luminous. This recognition has led to a renewed interest in how media materialities not only shape but co-constitute religion—from print media’s foundational role in the spread of Protestant Christianity to the sensory effects of incense sticks and the sounds of audio recorders in shaping Islamic pieties, to digital “Darshans” that promise to reproduce the aura of the divine gaze in the Hindu traditions. The sheer expansion of digital technologies has deepened the focus on “mediation” as a foundational aspect of religion, leading to a spurt of scholarly interest in the relations between cyberspace and religion.

Attending to the processes of digital mediation is increasingly recognized as a necessary optic to understand the efflorescence of religion in public life and the intricate ways in which religion folds into the political. The Foundation’s grant helped us to advance key theoretical debates as well as new ways to gather and showcase empirical materials surrounding religious politics in the digital age. We have been able to explore the central premise of the Luce program—namely, the “international” dimension of religion—by asking how the territorial, spatial and administrative aspects of what is seen as “international” have been radically reworked by new forms of connections, visibilities, and affective flows of digital mediation.

Jon Sawyer, Executive Director, Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting

The Luce initiative began at a moment of profound crisis for journalism. The commercial model that had made journalism one of the most profitable industries in America for more than a century collapsed, the victim of the Internet and an explosion of new platforms targeting ever narrower niche audiences. National news organizations found themselves suddenly strapped for cash. Proud regional outlets were reduced to shells—or disappeared outright.

The new challenges facing religion were equally dizzying, and just as traumatic. Here at home, the old-line Protestant churches emptied out, Roman Catholics were in free fall, and evangelicals embraced the improbable presidency of Donald Trump. Authoritarian leaders across the globe followed the Trump playbook, demonizing marginalized groups—most often religious minorities—as they consolidated power to themselves.

From my perspective Luce did two big things: Through its media grants it provided money at a time when cash was extremely scarce, facilitating enterprise reporting that would never have occurred absent that support. Through its support of academics exploring this space it brought to light fresh thinking, and diverse perspectives, giving journalists the context they needed to make the case for less superficial coverage.

The most important shift for us has been a growing recognition of the importance of reporting by individuals from the communities we are covering. The COVID-19 pandemic, ironically, was a major impetus: Because it was suddenly impossible for journalists from the United States and Europe to travel, we increasingly turned to the networks we had built within regions across the globe. The result was deeper, more nuanced coverage, with Indian journalists tackling Narendra Modi's suppression of Muslims and Indigenous journalists across Latin America and North America sharing what COVID had meant for them.

Collaboration, networks, community

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Provost Professor of Religious Studies, Indiana University

I strongly believe that all valuable intellectual work is collaborative. Sometimes this is as simple as being in the same space together for a sustained period of time—a fact that is made even more poignant of course by the pandemic conditions of the last year or so. These opportunities are rare. Luce's support allowed us to do that. In [the *Politics of Religious Freedom*] we did that across the world, drawing in local scholars as well as bringing together a regular set of participants. With *At Home and Abroad* we did that closer to home. Our participants in each case have told me how much such occasions deepened their own work. Lasting relationships developed. I believe it is the attempt to articulate one's ideas in real time with a small but diverse set of interlocutors in such settings that can test and refine ideas.

In my experience, the value and effects of the kind of support and trust that Luce has provided lasted well beyond the immediate publications that can be traced to the projects, evidenced by new projects which developed out of the old as well as the spawning of adjacent lines of inquiry. Support of such collaborative efforts can also model the value of cooperative forms of academic research.

*Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Professor of Political Science and Religious Studies,
Northwestern University*

The critical importance of successfully translating academic concerns and debates into language accessible to wider, public audiences has been impressed upon me throughout my experiences connected with the Initiative. Among those one of the most rewarding was the opportunity to serve as content consultant for the Luce-supported public radio series *God and Government*, on religion and state around the world. I still use the series in my teaching and the students love it. I found that collaboration rewarding; the team was terrific, energetic, and open-minded. It helped me see and understand more deeply the real-world stakes of my work and field. It allowed me to tap the shoulder of the best scholars I knew and ask if they would agree to be interviewed on their area of expertise. And it led to a product that ordinary people liked and seemed to relate to on a basic human level.

John Paul Christy, Senior Director of U.S. Programs, American Council of Learned Societies

Among the many lessons learned through our project is the manifold value of collaboration, network-building, and community. Humanities research is often construed and practiced as a solitary activity. By building cohorts of fellows who were predisposed to partnerships with journalists and the media, and by requiring fellows to connect and collaborate with one another, this program allowed us to explore the benefits of a social scholarly practice. (The pandemic exacerbated isolation and made the fellows even more appreciative of the program's emphasis on interaction, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration.)

I've come to understand this collaborative, networked practice as consonant with (and probably inspired by) Luce Foundation culture. From the very beginning of our partnership, HRLI deftly facilitated connections between ACLS and other grantees and program partners, bringing us into informal conversation and diplomatically

suggesting (never mandating) ways that collaboration might mutually enhance our work. This led to fruitful partnerships with universities, media outlets, nonprofits like the Pulitzer Center, and individual scholars whose expertise amplified the work we were doing across ACLS's programs.

[The] Luce/ACLS program has become a template for how we think about building new programs at ACLS (like our Scholars and Society program with the Mellon Foundation) and enriching existing programs (like our longstanding central ACLS Fellowship program).

The project has also repeatedly reminded us at ACLS just how much of an appetite there is beyond the academy for the substance of humanities and social science research.

Magnum Foundation [Susan Meiselas and Kristen Lubben]

[F]rom our position in the field of documentary photography and media, we were very aware of the particular significance of visual representation when it comes to understanding and impacting the complex role of religion in our increasingly polarized society—both the long histories of surface-level representation reinforcing negative stereotypes, and the value that more complex and insightful visual representation brings.

As the media landscape has evolved significantly over the past 15-20 years, we have witnessed more and more acknowledgment of the particular history of misrepresentative coverage of religion, and a drive for more varied image making and self-representation. Working to advance that aim...we turned to interdisciplinary collaborations to create more expansive and exploratory modes of representation. Bridging fields such as the academic study of religion, photography, technology, painting, and new media, we found success in bringing exposure to important topics in religion through new forms of media, creating space for conversations and projects that were at once challenging, thought-provoking, and expansive.

Throughout the initiative we learned how to better facilitate collaboration, this ambitious undertaking having shown us both how difficult and potentially fruitful it can be to ask a photographer to work alongside a painter, statistician, creative technologist, etc. Throughout the process, we learned how to best set up those collaborations for success, and the value of giving the relationships and projects

sufficient time, opportunities to meet in person, space for the pairings to get to know each other on a personal level before undertaking their projects, and opportunities for collaborators to share their backgrounds and work with one another beyond the initial partnership project. The value of ongoing mentorship and project distribution support became clear throughout the initiative and the years that followed, and are components that we are continuing to deepen across all of our programs and initiatives.

Marc Lynch, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, George Washington University

[The initiative] has been transformative for the field, and has likely impacted the research trajectory and intellectual ambitions of almost everyone working within the space.... I want to emphasize that the Initiative's impact on me and my field goes far deeper and wider than any one project. It has helped to build a wide range of interlocking projects and programs which feed on each other, generating profound intellectual synergies and dynamic new research programs which have collectively vastly improved our understanding of the role of religion in world politics.

Everywhere we went, we found partners supported by Luce with whom we could exchange ideas, identify potential contributors, and (often) collaborate. From individual scholars working with Luce support to large-scale group programs, Luce-supported projects populated an emergent field, taking it to intellectually rich and productive places which in the past had been neglected. The study of religion in the Middle East would be far more impoverished without your efforts.

Erin Wilson, Associate Professor of Politics and Religion, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

From my perspective, one of the most valuable aspects of this program was the way it fostered and facilitated connections, interactions and exchanges amongst scholars and practitioners from across diverse disciplines and professions. Through this Luce initiative, religious studies, philosophy, journalism, law, IR scholars, artists, journalists, diplomats, civil servants, activists, civil society project managers all got brought into contact and were able to share with and learn from one other on crucial issues under the broad rubric of Religion and International Affairs.

I think it contributed to pushing our understanding of both what “religion” is and what “international affairs” is, helped us to see the interconnections and entanglements of events at the domestic level, within politics, media, civil society and business, and the international level.

It also facilitated encounters across international and transnational spheres of activity. It contributed to destabilizing hegemonic (usually transatlantic) understandings of “religion” and the “key issues” in international affairs, to the point that now we are moving away from an explicit focus on “religion” as such and a more nuanced approach that rather integrates religion and considers its place in relation to other key actors and dimensions.

While the program enabled the publication and production of multiple books, blog posts and fora, journal articles and events, a significant component of its contribution is intangible, in the sense of the relationships it contributed to building and that continue to shape and influence research, education and policy agendas, in the US and elsewhere.

Jon Sawyer, Executive Director, Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting

The silver lining of commercial journalism’s crisis was an openness to collaboration, including with groups like the Pulitzer Center that would have been unimaginable even a few years before. With the leverage of Luce dollars and ideas we were able to foster cross-platform reporting initiatives on a wide range of topics and help build the careers of remarkable young journalists, people like Ben Taub, Sarah Topol, Krithika Varagur, and Alice Su.

Thanks to you and others at Luce we also made connections with academic specialists who enriched our own understanding of the issues we were trying to cover. You inspired us to organize symposia at partner universities that brought together academics, journalists, and religious leaders. The venues ranged from Washington University in St. Louis, the University of Chicago, American University, Wake Forest University, Boston University, and Georgetown University (the last of which, with the help of Shaun Casey at the Berkley Center, led to a full-scale Campus Consortium partnership focused on this theme of religion and international affairs).

Multiple perspectives

*Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Professor of Political Science and Religious Studies,
Northwestern University*

The Initiative did all of this without precluding—even often actively supporting—more conventional approaches to the study of (organized) religious actors in politics. It did so without peddling or favoring a particular set of religious and/or political normative expectations. It did so without favor to those in positions of power.

Peter Mandaville, Professor of International Affairs, George Mason University

I have appreciated [the Initiative's] willingness to support—sometimes simultaneously—projects with very different dispositions towards the basic question of government engagement with religion. For the initiative to have in its portfolio scholars whose work is deeply skeptical of the government-religion interface alongside projects such as TPNRD (dedicated to building the capacity of governments to interface with religion!) just speaks to the breadth of vision and perspicacity that underpins HRLI.

*Frederic Wehrey, Senior Fellow at the Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for
International Peace*

Over the course of a near-decade of projects sponsored by the Luce Foundation I've become even more humble about our ability to grasp the momentous political and socioeconomic dynamics underway in the Middle East without sustained and frequent fieldwork. The interviews I've conducted through Foundation funding—with an array of political and religious actors across the Arab world—have opened up new vistas of complexity. I've become more convinced than ever because of this research that understanding the region on its own terms from within, rather than through a lens imposed by Washington DC, is absolutely essential to accurately informing policymakers and the public.

New ideas and challenges

*Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Professor of Political Science and Religious Studies,
Northwestern University*

Intellectually, addressing the most important questions going forward will require setting aside our (understandable and much-discussed) modern preoccupation with the category of religion and focusing instead of pressing questions of our time from a perspective that includes but is not limited to a narrow focus on the religious or the secular.

Looking ahead programmatically... I see our most formidable challenge in this field as continuing to build and sustain a lasting yet flexible institutional and intellectual scaffolding to support pre- and post-doctoral emerging scholars. Luce was absolutely crucial to this effort. It involves establishing enduring research networks and communities that model for students how to support each other; helping them find jobs in an academy that is—despite all the talk—generally wedded to disciplinary divisions that cut off exciting new research in favor of replicating old models; ensuring that students have the time and are emboldened to write and think outside the stifling requirements and parameters imposed by the need to be “productive” in conventional North American academic terms; connecting to a broader community of scholars working in this field internationally.

Evan Berry, Assistant Professor of Environmental Humanities, Arizona State University

The last several years have not been kind ones. Among the causes for lamentation: that economic inequality has continued to expand, that racism and nativism were intensified by the Trump Administration (and its cousins in Brazil, Hungary, and elsewhere), that the climate crisis continues to worsen with little material progress toward global scale decarbonization, that institutions of higher education are under threat, and that civic discourse has soured.

In the face of these and other pressures, it seems to be a time for developing new forms of intellectual labor and for imagining new ways to advance the public understanding of religion. Scholars of religion generally recognize that “objectivity” can be a dangerous intellectual myth: researching, understanding, and communicating about significant social issues is never a neutral enterprise. Our scholarship can and should have a normative purpose.

And yet, conversations within religious studies about how and why scholarship can be of value to broader publics remain muddled and halting. Many colleges and universities are chipping away at religion programs. Connections among scholars, journalists, and other media experts are limited. There remains real need to lift up scholarship on religion that advances public understanding of common good issues, and there remains a benefit to support and experimentation with public modes of research dissemination.

Perhaps it could be said this way: where two decades ago, scholars of religion and international affairs perhaps located the threat posed by radical ideologies as being “external” to liberal democracy, the machinations of history have brought us to a moment where the threat may be more accurately seen as “internal.” Scholars of religion work in an academy of diminishing resources, but have an important role to play in explicating the violence, racism, misogyny, transphobia, nationalism, and ecological exploitation that characterizes the 2020s.

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Provost Professor of Religious Studies, Indiana University

It is more than ever important to support and sustain disinterested academic inquiry, free of the need to show the immediate uses to which research can be put. With respect to the academic study of religion, in particular, it is more than ever critical to provide time and space and resources to ask difficult but open-ended questions about the nature of the human. These questions are, I believe, essentially religious questions.