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# A world of complexity

*Professor Winnifred F. Sullivan collaborates in three-year project on religious freedom*



*“This is an academic project, not a political project. We’re interested in the ways in which religious freedom is not actually a single thing.”*  
 – Professor Winnifred F. Sullivan

Professor Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, who directs UB Law School’s Law, Religion, and Culture Program, is one of four scholars to receive a major grant from the Henry R. Luce Foundation for an ambitious project called “Politics of Religious Freedom” (see [www.politicsofreligiousfreedom.com](http://www.politicsofreligiousfreedom.com)). The three-year project (2011 to 2014) also includes scholars from the University of California, Berkeley; Northwestern University; and the University of Maryland.

The researchers – Sullivan, another legal scholar, an anthropologist and a political scientist – will study how religious freedom is being transformed through legal and political contestations in the United States, the Middle East, South Asia and the European Union. Often understood to be a single, universally recognized human right enshrined in international law, the project seeks to understand “the multiple historical trajectories, concepts and practices now organized under the rubric of religious freedom.”

“This is an academic project, not a political project,” says Sullivan, whose best-known book is *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, 2005). “We’ll be looking, for example, at the ways in which, while having longer histories, contemporary ideas about religious freedom as a global concern largely grew out of the international agreements that were made in Europe after World War II and the institutions that were created then. We also recognize an ongoing concern about minority populations and how they should be treated in the European context.”

“We each come at this history from our own disciplinary perspectives and our own specialized knowledge about a part of the world. My own training is in law, in religious studies and in the history of religion in the United States. In the last several decades, laws protecting religious freedom, and political efforts to extend religious freedom, have grown around the world, in ways that are

both recognizable and not to Americans. One of the aspects of this history that I’m interested in is the way in which a certain understanding of religion is built into American notions about religious freedom. This tends to be a more Protestant understanding – priority is given to conscience or belief, and religious practice is usually understood to be secondary. American understandings of religious freedom also tend to focus on the individual. What we usually say we want is to separate church and state and to protect the individual’s freedom to choose and to respond to his own belief, although we do much more than that. For example, Protestant Christian ideas about humans and about society are also built in to our laws, most recognizably in family law, but also in many other areas of law. Other peoples have different understandings of what religion is and how it should be present in public life.”

The other scholars involved in the project are Saba Mahmood, associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, an international political theorist and assistant professor of political science at Northwestern University; and Peter Danchin, associate professor and director of the International and Comparative Law Program at the University of Maryland School of Law. “We have a set of common concerns,” Sullivan says. “We each have our own research that we’re doing independently, but we’re also trying to put together our different disciplinary approaches, and the different parts of the world we study, to better understand something that we think is a pretty important issue in the world today.”

The project will include major workshops in Venice, Delhi and Cairo. The participants expect to publish papers from those workshops; produce a handbook to be used by legal practitioners and civil society organizations; produce translations of, and commentaries on, key legal cases involving religious freedom from India, Egypt and South Africa; and develop undergraduate and graduate courses on the comparative history of religious freedom globally.

The Luce Foundation’s decision to fund the project, Sullivan says, “shows an interesting, lively sense of the complexity of the world. They’re not just funding the easy route. The fact that the Luce Foundation is interested in listening to some other voices is really important. The world is a complicated place, and we don’t know all the answers. It’s really fun to work with smart people who know about different areas of the world and think about them in different ways than you do.”