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

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.