



**Religion, Secrecy and Security: An  
Interdisciplinary Conference on Religious  
Freedom and Privacy in a Global Context**

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Mershon is funding a small conference on the topic of religion, secrecy and security in a global context that will offer an explicitly comparative, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach to the problems of secrecy and religion. The scholars involved will be drawn not only from the field of religious studies, but also from political science, sociology, law, anthropology and communications. Tentatively proposed for Autumn 2003, the conference will involve an intensive discussion of papers submitted by twelve participants and two public keynote lectures for the University community at large.

The conference will address the following key questions: Why do some religious traditions insist that certain aspects of their beliefs and practices remain secret and closed to outsiders? Is secrecy a potentially dangerous force within religious traditions, either as a means of concealing immoral activities (such as pedophilia or other sexual crimes) or as a means of conducting subversive and violent activities (such as terrorism)? Conversely, how far should government agencies be allowed to go in order to monitor or infiltrate religious groups that may pose a threat to other individuals or to national security? And to what degree do such groups retain the rights to privacy and freedom from government surveillance?

These questions have become all the more critical in the wake of recent events within the United States itself. The spread of terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda have generated a whole new wave of fears --not only the fear of infiltration by secretive and destructive religious movements, but also the fear that this will in turn lead to the loss of privacy and freedom for many alternative religious groups who now face more ever intense government scrutiny within an increasingly "surveilled" society.

Conference Organizer:  
[Hugh Urban](#), Professor, Comparative Studies