This thesis provides a multi-layered contextualization of the article on religious liberty in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18), which was propounded by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948. It shows how the framers of the Declaration decided to break with some of the conventional ways of framing religious liberty in international law, by foregrounding the inner freedom of thought and conscience instead of the free exercise of religion, by directly recognizing the right to change religion or belief, and by restricting the human rights framework to the rights of individuals. It argues that these decisions can be traced back to a set of particular concerns and ideological standpoints of some of the central agents involved in this process.

By drawing on the official UN records, a wide range of published sources, and hitherto underexplored archival material, it reveals the significance of the Lebanese diplomat and philosopher, Charles Malik, and the representative of the then newly established Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, O. Frederick Nolde, in determining the orientation of the text. However, it also reveals how their proposals to include references protecting the rights of religious groups and corporations fell short due to the opposition of the American states—spearheaded by the United States—and France, which favored a text that would chime with policies of national assimilation and state-church separation.

This work distinguishes itself from other studies of the origins of the Universal Declaration by focusing on how the framers made use of the concepts of human rights and religious liberty in context-bound political arguments, and how these uses in turn affected the text's architecture. By directing attention to the particular battles in the negotiations on the text, Shrines and Souls takes issue with many of the dominant ways of narrating the emergence of the Universal Declaration, including accounts that present the text as the international community's response to the atrocities of World War II.

In a broadening chapter, it provides a unique exploration of how the concepts of human rights and religious liberty operated in the preparatory work for the Partition Plan for Palestine of November 29, 1947. This document also contained clauses on religion and rights, but here the main emphasis is on the rights of religious communities rather than the individual freedom of choice. This study argues that the differences between these two ways of articulating religious liberty and rights in the context of the early United Nations were largely a function of the documents' differences in genre. Whereas the Partition Plan addressed a complex geo-political situation and a wide range of competing interests, the Universal Declaration was a non-binding, educational text, intended to outline the moral horizon for nations to strive towards, and which therefore could bypass difficult issues of implementation. This feature of the Declaration meant that it was fertile ground for unconventional enunciations of rights-principles, including the seemingly ancient idea of religious liberty.