

Religious freedom and social well-being: A critical appraisal

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Abstract

Based on extensive research the author demonstrates that social and governmental religious freedom as part of an overall 'bundled commodity of human freedoms' contributes significantly to the social well-being of a country's citizens. This because religious freedom positively impacts on stability, democracy, as well as religious tolerance within a society.

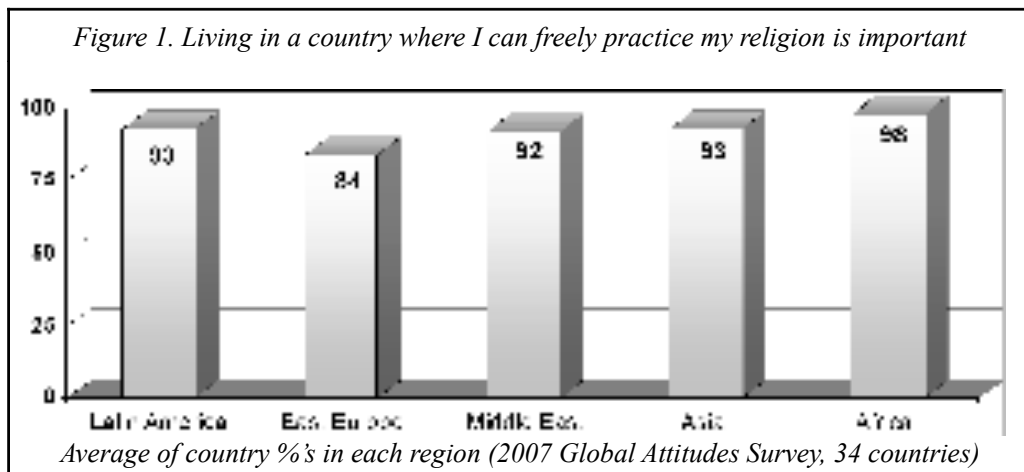
Keywords Social and governmental religious freedom, social well-being, 'bundled commodity' of human freedoms, equitable framework.[MS]

To judge from international survey data, people the world over want to be able to practice their religion freely. In the 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, publics in 34 countries covering five different regions were asked about the importance of practicing their religion freely.¹ The response was extremely high, ranging from 84 percent in

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¹ See "World Publics Welcome Global Trade—But Not Immigration," Pew Global Attitudes Project, October 4, 2007, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/258topline.pdf>. Question wording: "How important is it to you to live in a country where you can practice your religion freely? Is it very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important?" Countries covered: The Americas: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela; Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine; Middle East: Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestinian territories, Turkey; Asia: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan; Africa: Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda. The question was not asked in Western Europe.

Eastern Europe to 98 percent in Africa. On average across the 34 countries, 93 percent indicated that it is important to be able to live in a country where they can practice their religion freely, with less than 2 percent indicating that it wasn't important at all.



Yet at the same time, religion is implicated in many of today's most urgent security problems. Millions have been killed or displaced due to religion-related conflicts in the first years of the 21st century alone.² Such conflicts lead to political instability, prevent the consolidation of democracy, and feed terrorism.

This raises a critical question: While the global public may want religious freedom, is it risky to give it to them?³ Or alternatively, could religious freedom in fact be an essential part of the solution to socio-political problems? In what follows, I explore the global relationship between religious freedom and social well-being (or lack thereof), drawing from extensive international data on religious freedom and various social and political indicators.

² Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, "International Religion Indexes: Government Regulation, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* (2006). See data on religious abuse and displacement coded from the State Department International Religious Freedom reports at www.TheADRA.com.

³ See Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, "Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Religious Economies?" *American Sociological Review* 72:4 (2007): 633-658; and Brian J. Grim (2008). "God's Economy: Religious Freedom and Socio-Economic Well-being," in Paul Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 42-47.

Is religious freedom correlated with socio-economic well-being?

At an anecdotal level, my own international observations while living abroad lead me to hypothesize that religious freedom should correlate strongly with positive social indicators. For example, I have lived in both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In the Emirates, where my Catholic faith was legal, I had many ways to contribute to society, both through the church as well as through other avenues. I felt motivated to work hard and contribute to society. In Saudi Arabia, however, where my Catholic faith was illegal, I had much less enthusiasm for work and no real desire to contribute to society outside of work. If my feelings were representative, it could be part of the explanation for the fact that the per capita income in the Emirates is \$55,200, while in Saudi Arabia it is only \$20,700.⁴

Are there multinational statistical data that confirm these impressions? According to a recent study of 101 countries conducted by the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, the answer is yes. The presence of religious freedom in a country mathematically correlates with the presence of other fundamental, responsible freedoms⁵ (including civil and political liberty, press freedom, and economic freedom) and with the longevity of democracy.⁶

Harvard Economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen⁷ argues, however, that human freedom is not just the *general* opportunity

⁴ CIA Factbook estimates.

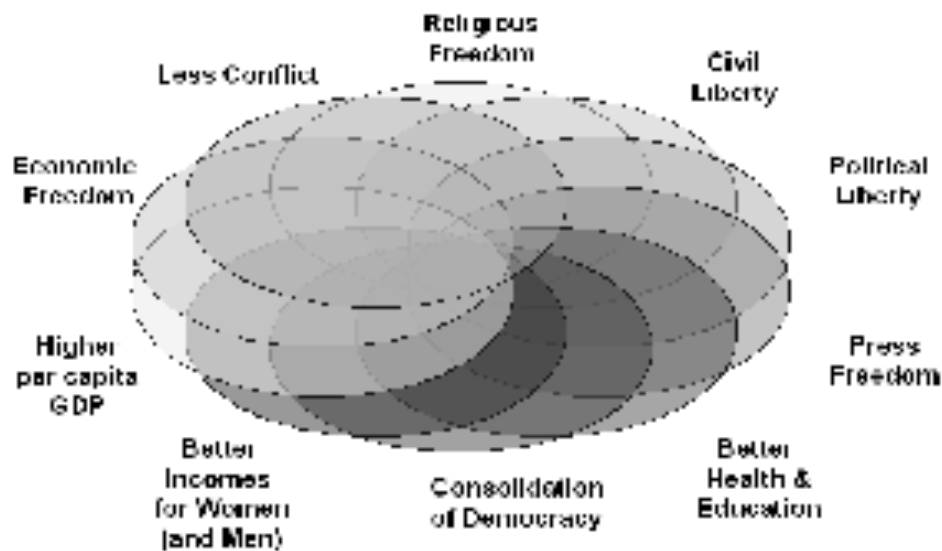
⁵ "Responsible" freedom means that freedoms should be used responsibly for the good of people; otherwise, anarchy and exploitation of the weak can result. Specifically, religious freedom does not give license to cause harm or exploit others.

⁶ Correlations between the Hudson Institute's Religious Freedom Score and the other measures reported by Grim (2008) are all statistically significant at $p < .001$, two-tailed, and are as follows: Freedom House civil liberty index (.862); Freedom House political liberty index (.822); Reporters Without Borders press freedom index (.804); Heritage Foundation economic freedom index (.743); and the longevity of democracy index (.646).

⁷ See Amartya K. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf., 1999) and Amartya K. Sen, *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002).

for such freedoms, but also the *specific* processes within a country that result in better lives. Thus, if religious freedom is an integral part of the “bundled commodity” of human freedoms, religious freedom should be closely associated with the general betterment of people’s lives. The Hudson Institute data again confirm just such a correlation. The study found that wherever religious freedom is high, there tends to be fewer incidents of armed conflict, better health outcomes, higher levels of earned income, and better educational opportunities for women. Moreover, religious freedom is associated with higher overall human development, as measured by the human development index.⁸

Figure 2. Fundamental, Responsible Human Freedoms – A Bundled Commodity



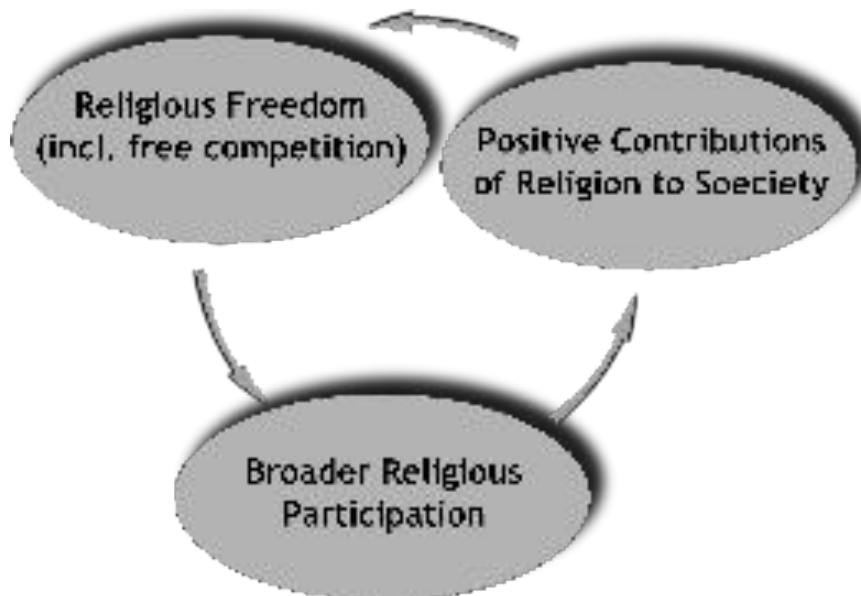
Statistically significant correlations found in the 2007 Hudson Institute study⁹ (101 countries)

⁸ Correlations between the Hudson Institute’s Religious Freedom Score and the other measures reported by Grim (2008) had the correlation signs reversed in this analysis to reflect correlation with religious freedom rather than restricted freedom; the correlations are statistically significant at $p < .05$, two-tailed (or better), and are as follows: Military Expenditure as a percentage of GDP in 2005 (– .3); Armed Conflict since 1988 (– .3); Seats in parliament held by women (.3); percentage of females reenrolled in tertiary schools, 2002/2003 (.6); female earned income (.6); male earned income (.5); gross domestic product (.3); human development index (.5); physicians per 100,000 people (.3); infant deaths per 1,000 (– .4); underweight children (– .3).

Does religious freedom lead to socio-economic well-being?

Religious freedom, then, is *associated* with better social outcomes, but can we say there is a causal relationship? More advanced statistical tests suggest that there is indeed a critical independent contribution that religious freedom is making. A growing body of research supports the proposition that the religious competition inherent in religious freedom results in increased religious participation;¹⁰ and religious participation in turn can lead to a wide range of positive social and political outcomes, as discussed below. Furthermore, as religious groups make contributions to society and become an accepted part of the fabric of society, religious freedom is consolidated. This can be conceptualized as a *religious freedom cycle*.

Figure 3. The Religious Freedom Cycle



⁹ Grim, "God's Economy."

¹⁰ See Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

In recent years, many studies have looked at the benefits of the social capital and spiritual capital generated through active civic and religious involvement.¹¹ As more people actively participate in religion, religious groups increasingly bring tangible benefits such as literacy, vocational, and health training, marital and bereavement counseling, poverty relief, and more. Faith-based organizations, for example, are the major providers of care and support services to people living with HIV/AIDS in the developing world,¹² and there is a growing scientific evidence of the health benefits associated with religious participation itself.¹³ Some studies suggest that the advent of new religious forms can help to improve the lives of women¹⁴ and activate greater civic participation.¹⁵

Established religions, however, often act to curtail competition from new religious groups by preventing proselytism,¹⁶ restricting conversion, and putting up barriers that

¹¹ A new initiative studying spiritual capital is funded by the John Templeton Foundation (http://www.templeton.org/funding_areas/core_themes/spiritual_capital/); for papers offering an analysis of religion from a 'religious economies' perspective, see: <http://www.religionomics.com/>.

¹² See Edward C. Green, "Faith-Based Organizations: Contributions to HIV Prevention" (Washington, DC: USAID, 2003).

¹³ See Harold G. Koenig, Michael E. McCullough, and David B. Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ For example, the growth of newcomer evangelical groups in Catholic areas has been argued to promote gender equality, See Christian Smith and Joshua Prokopy, eds., *Latin American Religion in Motion* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁵ See Eric M. Uslaner, "Religion and Civic Engagement in Canada and the United States." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:2 (June 2002): 239-254, and Corwin Smidt, "Religion and Civic Engagement: A Comparative Analysis," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 565 (September 1999): 176-192.

¹⁶ Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam notes that diversity without activities aimed at integrating divergent groups can divide societies, but that activities such as proselytism and inter-religious marriage (both dependent on religious freedom) help social identities to become permeable and thus better integrate people into societies, See Robert E. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century: The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30:2 (June 2007): 137-174.

make it difficult for new religions to gain a foothold.¹⁷ My colleague Roger Finke and I recently published a study in the *American Sociological Review* which found that the attempt to restrict fair religious competition results in more violence and conflict, not less. Specifically, we found that social restrictions on religious freedom lead to government restrictions on religious freedom and the two act in tandem to increase the level of violence related to religion—which in turn cycles back and leads to even higher social and government restrictions on religion. This creates what we call the *religious violence cycle*.

Figure 5. The Religious Violence Cycle¹⁸
Structural Equation Model, 143 countries, populations > 2 million



Grim and Finke (2007), *American Sociological Review* 72(4):649

¹⁷ Some claim that the religious competition that resulted from the Reformation kept the Catholic Church from remaining a medieval religion. For a discussion of the controversies surrounding interpretations of the impact of the Reformation on religion, see Philip S. Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State, and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700," *American Sociological Review* 65 (2000): 138-167. Also, without competition, the Russian Orthodox Church easily became a tool of the Czars; see Adamantia Pollis, "Eastern Orthodoxy and Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 15:2 (May 1993): 339-356.

¹⁸ In the ASR piece, "violence" is termed "persecution," and is defined as the abuse or displacement of people due to religion.

Our research on 143 countries finds that when governments and religious groups in society do not erect barriers to religious competition but respect and protect such activities as conversion and proselytism, religious violence is less. A further analysis of the data shows that countries with no restrictions on conversion, in particular, tend to have higher levels of fundamental freedoms, better lives for women, and less overall armed conflict.¹⁹ These results offer a different perspective than the Clash of Civilizations theory, in that, rather than religious competition automatically leading to violence, the protection of fair religious competition actually leads to *less* religious violence.

One unique aspect of these findings is that social restriction of religious freedom (or social religious intolerance) drives government restrictions.²⁰ Examples include the social pressures in India for anti-conversion laws, calls for Shari'a law in northern Nigeria and parts of Indonesia, expulsions of evangelicals in Chiapas, Mexico,²¹ and

¹⁹ My analysis of data from Penn State's ARDA on restrictions to conversion in 196 countries shows that having no restrictions on conversions is significantly correlated (at least at $p < .05$, two-tailed) with economic freedom (.3), civil liberties (.6), political rights (.5), and press freedom (.5). They also relate to democracy (.4) and lower levels of armed conflict (.3). They correlate with higher income for females (.2), presence of females in legislatures (.5), higher percentages of female professional (.5), higher gender empowerment (.5), more expenditures on public health (.2), fewer people living below the poverty line (.3), a lower percent of GDP spent on the military (.5).

²⁰ The social restriction of religious freedom can be thought of as the gap between the value people place on living in a country with religious freedom for their own religion versus freedom for other religions. A recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life of populations in 10 countries from Asia, the Americas, and Africa found an average gap of 14 percentage points across the countries. For details see <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/pentecostals-06.pdf>.

²¹ Although these effects of social restrictions on religious freedom often play themselves out at the local or provincial level, they also play out at the transnational level. For example, on September 11, 2001, the World was introduced to the power of asymmetrical religion-related warfare, where religiously motivated non-state actors rained down violence upon thousands. 9/11 shows how the actions of religiously motivated social actors—many of whom came from Saudi Arabia, where religious freedom does not exist—lead to higher worldwide government restrictions of religion-related groups (rightly and wrongly) suspected of being like or related to Al Qaeda. As documented by the State Department, the pressures to reduce religious freedom for the sake of

numerous religious rebellions from China's long history.²² One of the clearest historical examples of the way social restrictions of religious freedom can feed into the religious violence cycle is the Holocaust. Research has shown that the Nazi government's violence toward Jewish people reinforced pre-existing social prejudices, creating a cycle of violence that was banally carried out with the support of many in German society.²³

A clear current example of the religious violence cycle can be seen in Iraq. The U.S. State Department concluded in 2007 that the religious freedom situation has dramatically deteriorated. In pre-invasion Iraq, life for many religious and ethnic communities was certainly dire, especially for Shiites and Kurds. However, in the years after the invasion, the Shi'a, who were previously targeted for violence, acquired the political reins, and with their newfound power, religiously oriented Shi'a parties successfully lobbied for the insertion of the so-called repugnancy clause in the recent Iraqi constitution, which requires that no law can contradict Islam. It essentially gives Islam, and advocates of Shi'a Islam in particular, veto power over any law in Iraq, lessening the power of any other religious group in the political process. This new political environment has exacerbated religious sectarian violence. In the process, minority religious groups ranging from Christians to Yazedis have been targeted. Now, the economy cannot get on its feet, democracy is not functioning, and women, especially in Baghdad by the account of many, have become virtual prisoners in their own homes for fear of unmentionable violence.

Conclusion

To quote sociologist Peter Berger, we are in an "age of explosive, pervasive religiosity."²⁴ Thus, it is essential to understand how the

security are real and growing in many countries today, representing a globalized version of the religious violence cycle.

²² See Vincent Y.C. Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967).

²³ See William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003) Also see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963).

²⁴ Peter Berger, "Religion in a Globalizing World," Pew Forum presentation, Key

affairs of nations and peoples are affected by religious freedom—in both its social and governmental aspects. The empirical data are clear on two points. First, religious freedom is part of the “bundled commodity” of human freedoms that energize broader productive participation in civil society by all religious groups, which is conducive to the consolidation of democracy and to socio-economic progress. Secondly, religious freedom reduces conflict and increases security by, among other things, removing grievances religious groups have toward governments and their fellow citizens.

In sum, religious freedom promotes stability, helps to consolidate democracy, and lessens religious violence. Based on an analysis of data, it is clear that religious freedom is much more than an American pet peeve; religious freedom is a universal aspiration. As another sociologist, N.J. Demerath, has said, the challenge for governments is to “set the rules for cultural conflict and assure an equitable framework for religious diversity.”²⁵

West, Florida, December 4, 2006, <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=136>.

²⁵ N.J. Demerath III, *Crossing the Gods: Worldly Religions and Worldly Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 124.