



Building religious freedom by engaging business and civil society institutions

A new paradigm taking economic arguments into account

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Abstract

This article reframes efforts to secure freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by arguing that while rights-based advocacy remains essential – particularly in contexts of religious persecution – it has limited capacity on its own to reverse the global expansion of religious restrictions. A complementary “builder’s approach” emphasizes the role of intermediate actors, such as businesses and civil society institutions, in cultivating FoRB through everyday institutional practices, especially within workplaces. The builder’s approach combines empirical measures of religious restriction with socio-economic incentives to explain how religious inclusion can be operationalized, diffused, and sustained for civic benefit.

Keywords

FoRB, religious freedom, economy, business, new paradigm.

1. Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) can be understood not only as a fundamental human right protected through law and advocacy but also as a socio-economic capacity that shapes social stability, economic development, and human flourishing. Cross-national data, economic impact studies, and long-term field experience indicate that while rights-based advocacy remains indispensable – particularly in contexts of egregious religious persecution – it has reached a practical plateau in reversing the global rise of religious restrictions. Nearly three-quarters of the world’s population now lives in countries with high or very high levels of gov-

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ernmental or societal constraints on religion, with significant human, social, and economic consequences (Grim & Finke 2011; Hertzke 2018).

A complementary paradigm, the “builder’s approach” (Grim 2023; Seiple 2023), emphasizes the role of intermediate actors, especially businesses and civil society institutions, in expanding the practical space for religious freedom. Similar to some adjacent frameworks such as covenantal pluralism (Seiple & Hoover 2021) or faith-at-work models (Miller 2007; Hicks 2003), the builder’s approach highlights – using data and case studies – the positive contributions of FoRB to socio-economic or other societal outcomes, demonstrating how religious inclusion in workplaces and civic institutions can reduce conflict, mitigate discrimination, and foster trust across deep differences.

The data on which this article relies come from two sets of evidence. First, it compares measures such as the Government Restrictions Index and the Social Hostilities Index (Pew Research Center 2007-2022) with measures of peace and economic competitiveness (Grim & Finke 2011; Grim et al. 2014). The discussion then turns to case examples including multifaith civic collaboration in Kazakhstan (Chute 1991) and findings related to the implementation of faith-inclusive corporate practices promoted by the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, which the author established in 2014. These measures and examples indicate that religious freedom is associated with lower corruption, greater peace, and improved economic performance.

2. Building religious freedom beyond advocacy

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is formally recognized as a universal human right under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1948). For decades, governments, international institutions, and civil society organizations have sought to protect this right through legal frameworks, diplomatic engagement, monitoring mechanisms, and public advocacy. These efforts have played an essential role in documenting violations, supporting victims of persecution, and establishing normative standards for religious liberty in international law.

Despite these efforts, however, global restrictions on religion have continued to rise. In many contexts, these restrictions translate into concrete experiences of discrimination, harassment, violence, imprisonment, and exclusion from economic and civic life. Religious persecution is not limited to dramatic episodes of violence; it is also embedded in everyday practices that limit access to employment, education, and social participation.

Traditional FoRB advocacy remains indispensable, particularly in contexts of acute persecution and state-sponsored repression. Legal protections, internation-

al pressure, and public accountability are often the only available tools for addressing severe violations. Yet long-term trend data suggest that advocacy alone has not been sufficient to reverse the global trajectory of rising restrictions. In many societies, governmental controls and societal hostilities reinforce one another, creating self-perpetuating cycles of repression that are resistant to legal or diplomatic intervention alone.

This empirical reality raises a pragmatic question: what additional strategies might expand FoRB in contexts where advocacy and legal reform have reached their practical limits? Addressing this question calls not for abandoning rights-based approaches but rather for complementing them with strategies that engage the social and economic structures shaping daily life.

The “builder’s approach” to FoRB is one such complementary strategy. Builders seek to advance religious freedom not only by appealing to legal norms but by cultivating inclusive environments within non-state institutions, including workplaces, educational settings, and civil society organizations. By engaging businesses and other influential actors, builder strategies expand the practical space in which individuals can live out their beliefs without coercion or discrimination.

From this perspective, religious freedom can be understood not only as a juridical right to be defended but also as a social capacity that can be strengthened through institutional practice. When religious inclusion is embedded in everyday economic and civic life, it can reduce conflict, foster trust across differences, and mitigate the social conditions that give rise to persecution.

3. Religious restrictions, persecution, and human consequences

Restrictions on religion rarely remain confined to belief or worship alone. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that limitations on religious freedom are associated with broader patterns of exclusion that affect employment, education, healthcare access, and participation in public life (Grim & Finke 2011). For many individuals and communities, religious restriction is experienced not primarily as a legal abstraction but as a daily reality shaping economic opportunity, social belonging, and personal security.

Cross-national studies of religious freedom have revealed a strong relationship between high levels of restriction and increased social conflict. Countries with extensive governmental controls on religion or high levels of social hostility toward religious groups are significantly more likely to experience religion-related violence, forced displacement, and intergroup tension (Grim & Finke, 2011; Hertzke, 2018). These patterns are especially pronounced where religious repression intersects with ethnic division, poverty, or weak political institutions.

Religious persecution also carries clear economic consequences. Members of religious minorities are often excluded from employment or face barriers to promotion and entrepreneurship. In some contexts, religious identity functions as a marker for discrimination in housing, education, or access to public services. Over time, such exclusion erodes human capital, undermines productivity, and weakens social trust. Where persecution escalates into violence or mass displacement, normal economic activity is disrupted, investment declines, and development gains are reversed.

Governmental restrictions and societal hostilities toward religion tend to reinforce one another. State actions that privilege or suppress particular religious groups can legitimize social prejudice, while widespread societal hostility can pressure governments to enact or enforce restrictive policies. When these forces operate in tandem, they can create self-perpetuating cycles of repression and conflict that are difficult to interrupt through legal reform alone.

These findings underscore why freedom of religion or belief matters not only as a matter of principle but also as a practical concern for peace, stability, and human flourishing. Where religious freedom is protected, societies tend to exhibit higher levels of social trust, greater capacity for cooperation across differences, and lower risks of violent conflict. Conversely, where religious freedom is denied, persecution and exclusion often become embedded in social and economic structures, amplifying their long-term impact (Fox 2013; Grim 2009; Grim & Finke 2011; Norenzayan et al. 2016; Putnam & Campbell 2010; Toft et al. 2011).

For this reason, addressing religious persecution requires attention not only to laws and policies but also to the institutional environments in which people live and work. While advocacy and legal protections remain essential for confronting severe violations, they are often insufficient on their own to dismantle the everyday mechanisms of exclusion that sustain religious repression. This gap points toward the need for complementary approaches that engage social and economic institutions as sites where religious freedom can either be constrained or actively constructed.

4. Economic contribution of religion to economies

Empirical research on FoRB has demonstrated that religious freedom is closely associated with the ability of religious individuals and institutions to contribute to economic and social life. Studies examining countries with relatively low levels of governmental restriction and social hostility toward religion provide a useful framework for understanding this relationship. In such environments, religion is not confined to the private sphere but operates openly across civil society and the economy, generating substantial social and economic value (Grim & Finke 2011; Grim et al. 2014).

Two national-level studies of the United States and Canada – countries with comparatively high levels of religious freedom – illustrate how low restrictions create conditions in which religious actors contribute robustly to economic activity. In these two studies, Grim and Grim (2016, 2020) showed that the contribution of religion to the national economy can be broadly categorized into three interrelated sectors: congregations, religious institutions, and faith-related or faith-inspired businesses.

4.1. Congregations

Local congregations constitute a significant economic and social presence within their communities. Each year, congregations in the United States spend tens of billions of dollars on operations, including personnel, facilities, and the purchase of goods and services such as utilities, maintenance, and supplies. The majority of this spending occurs locally, supporting neighborhood economies and employment.

Congregationally affiliated schools further extend this economic impact. These schools employ hundreds of thousands of full-time teachers and educate millions of students annually, contributing to workforce development and long-term human capital formation. In scale, the student populations served by these institutions rival those of small nations.

Beyond direct economic activity, congregations function as hubs that attract additional forms of economic engagement. Many congregations host events such as weddings, conferences, concerts, and lectures that generate demand for hospitality, transportation, and related services. Thousands of congregations also report visitors drawn by historical, architectural, or cultural significance, contributing to local tourism.

Moreover, congregations generate substantial socio-economic value through community-oriented programs that address pressing social needs. Large numbers of congregations operate addiction recovery programs, employment assistance initiatives, and educational support services. Others provide direct health interventions, often in partnership with public and private health organizations. These activities challenge common stereotypes about religious groups by demonstrating their broad engagement with social welfare and public health concerns.

Congregations also serve as important conduits for volunteer mobilization. Hundreds of thousands of congregations facilitate volunteer recruitment for both religious and non-religious organizations, including community charities and national service groups. In some cases, congregationally affiliated schools and programs achieve outcomes that significantly exceed local averages, particularly in underserved communities, illustrating how religious institutions can contribute to social mobility and neighborhood revitalization.

4.2. Religious institutions

In addition to the work of local congregations, religiously-affiliated institutions – including charities, healthcare systems, and institutions of higher education – add hundreds of billions of dollars in economic activity each year. These institutions employ large workforces, deliver essential services, and often operate in areas where public provision is limited or strained.

Religious charities respond to natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and long-term social needs, mobilizing volunteers and resources at scale. Faith-based healthcare systems operate hospitals and clinics that serve diverse populations regardless of religious affiliation. Religious colleges and universities educate millions of students, contributing to research, professional training, and civic leadership.

The economic and social contributions of these institutions depend fundamentally on the ability to operate freely within regulatory and cultural environments that respect religious liberty. Where such freedom is constrained, the capacity of religious institutions to serve broader society is correspondingly diminished.

4.3. Faith-related and faith-inspired businesses

A third category of economic contribution comes from faith-related and faith-inspired businesses. This category includes explicitly faith-based enterprises – such as religious media and food industries – as well as companies that are not religious in identity but intentionally accommodate religious diversity within their workforce.

Industries serving halal and kosher markets, for example, support extensive supply chains and international trade. Religious media organizations employ thousands of workers and reach global audiences. In addition, many large corporations have adopted practices that recognize and support the religious identities of employees, including chaplaincy programs, religious accommodation policies, and employee resource groups.

Such practices are often adopted not for ideological reasons but because organizations recognize their practical benefits. Accommodating religious identity can improve employee well-being, reduce conflict, and enhance retention in increasingly diverse workforces (Hicks 2003; Miller 2007; Ewest 2018). These outcomes illustrate how religious freedom, when embedded in organizational practice, can align with broader economic and managerial objectives.

Taken together, these three sectors demonstrate that religious freedom enables religion to function as a productive social actor rather than a source of marginalization or conflict. The economic contributions described here are not the purpose of religious freedom, but they are among its observable outcomes. Where religious

expression is restricted, these contributions are constrained or displaced, often with negative consequences for both religious communities and society at large.

5. The global economic impact of religious freedom

Beyond national case studies, cross-national research demonstrates that freedom of religion or belief is systematically associated with broader economic outcomes. Although economic performance is shaped by many factors, comparative analyses across a large number of countries indicate that religious freedom is among a small set of social conditions that consistently correlate with economic growth and stability.

A multi-country study examining the gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 173 countries found that freedom of religion or belief was one of three factors significantly associated with higher levels of economic growth, even when controlling for more than two dozen financial, regulatory, and social variables (Grim et al. 2014). Though such findings do not establish direct causation, they indicate that religious freedom merits serious consideration as part of the institutional environment that supports sustainable economic development.

Additional analysis shows that religious freedom is positively related to a wide range of economic and institutional indicators. Notably, higher levels of FoRB are associated with stronger performance across most pillars of global competitiveness as measured by the World Economic Forum, including innovation, labor-market efficiency, institutional quality, and business sophistication (Grim 2014). These relationships suggest that religious freedom contributes to environments in which trust, cooperation, and long-term investment are more likely to flourish.

Research has also highlighted several specific mechanisms through which religious freedom intersects with economic life. One such mechanism is corruption. Comparative data reveal that countries with high levels of governmental restrictions on religion tend to exhibit higher levels of perceived corruption (North & Gwin 2004). Restrictions that marginalize or exclude religious expression can weaken ethical norms in public and private life, whereas environments that permit individuals to draw on moral and spiritual resources can support ethical behavior in business and governance.

A second mechanism is peace and stability. When religious freedoms are not respected, societies are more vulnerable to violence and conflict, disrupting normal economic activity and deterring investment. Tourism, trade, and foreign direct investment are particularly sensitive to instability arising from religious hostility. In contrast, societies characterized by greater religious tolerance tend to exhibit higher levels of predictability and security, conditions essential for economic planning and growth.

A third mechanism concerns regulation and legal risk. Religious restrictions can directly affect economic activity by creating barriers for industries connected to religious practice, such as food production, media, or apparel. In some contexts, proscriptive laws and discriminatory policies expose businesses to legal liability and reputational risk. By contrast, inclusive approaches to religious accommodation can reduce conflict, litigation, and compliance costs.

Taken together, these findings suggest that freedom of religion or belief functions as an enabling condition within broader economic systems. It does not operate in isolation, nor does it guarantee prosperity. However, where religious freedom is respected, societies are more likely to cultivate the institutional trust, social stability, and ethical norms that support sustainable economic development. These dynamics help explain why intermediate actors, particularly businesses, have a tangible interest in environments that protect religious freedom – an insight that underpins the builder’s approach advanced in this article.

6. “Building” religious freedom: advocates and builders

The builder’s approach highlights the role of businesses and civil society in fostering religious freedom beyond legal advocacy alone (Grim 2023; Seiple 2023). Alongside covenantal pluralism and faith-at-work perspectives (Miller 2007; Hicks 2003; Seiple & Hoover 2021), it uses empirical data to demonstrate how religious inclusion within workplaces and civic institutions supports social trust while mitigating conflict and discrimination.

Advocates focus primarily on the moral and legal obligation to protect FoRB as a fundamental human right. Their work is grounded in international legal frameworks such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to manifest belief individually or in community, in public or private. Advocacy efforts typically emphasize documentation of violations, legal remedies, public accountability, and diplomatic engagement. In contexts of severe persecution or state-sponsored repression, advocacy may represent the only viable means of protecting vulnerable religious communities.

Builders share the same commitment to FoRB but approach its advancement through a different, complementary pathway. Rather than focusing primarily on governments and legal systems, builders seek to expand the *practical space* for religious freedom by engaging intermediate actors and institutions that shape daily life. Builders emphasize the social and economic relevance of religious freedom, presenting it not only as a moral imperative but also as a contributor to peace, stability, and human flourishing.

This distinction does not imply a hierarchy or competition between approaches. Advocacy and building are mutually reinforcing. Advocacy establishes normative standards and responds to acute violations, while building addresses the social and institutional conditions that often give rise to restriction and persecution in the first place. In societies where advocacy has limited reach or where political reform is slow, builder strategies can help shift social norms and institutional practices in ways that make religious freedom more durable over time.

6.1. Clarifying the builder's approach

While the builder's approach shares certain affinities with existing frameworks – such as covenantal pluralism, faith-at-work scholarship, and organizational ethics research – it is analytically distinct in several important respects.

Covenantal pluralism emphasizes moral commitments across deep religious and cultural difference, highlighting the importance of mutual respect and civic friendship in diverse societies. Faith-at-work scholarship examines how individuals integrate religious identity within professional life, often focusing on personal meaning, leadership, or organizational culture. Organizational ethics research explores how values, including religious ones, influence behavior within institutions.

The builder's approach adds to these frameworks by offering a pragmatic perspective that examines how religious freedom operates within concrete institutional settings – such as businesses, schools, and civic organizations – and how these settings can either constrain or expand human dignity and flourishing depending on whether religious liberty is prioritized and practiced.

Builders move beyond a recognition that pluralism is desirable and ask how it can be operationalized and sustained within environments shaped by incentives, regulations, and organizational constraints. By drawing on cross-national data, economic studies, and institutional case examples, the builder's approach demonstrates how religious inclusion can align with widely shared goals such as productivity, risk reduction, and social cohesion, without reducing religious freedom to instrumental utility.

6.2. Building through institutions

A defining feature of the builder's approach is its focus on institutions as sites where religious freedom is practiced or denied in everyday life. Workplaces, educational institutions, and civil society organizations are often the places where individuals encounter the most tangible constraints on religious expression, through hiring practices, accommodation policies, workplace culture, or informal norms.

By engaging with these institutions, builders seek to address forms of exclusion that may never reach the level of legal violation but nonetheless shape lived experience. In doing so, they complement advocacy efforts that target formal restrictions by addressing the informal and structural mechanisms through which religious repression is often sustained.

This institutional focus also helps explain why the builder's approach has particular relevance in economic contexts. Businesses and other intermediate actors operate across borders, influence large populations, and respond to incentives that differ from those shaping government behavior. When such actors recognize religious freedom as relevant to their organizational goals, they can become powerful allies in expanding the practical space for FoRB.

7. Examples of the builder's approach

The builder's approach to FoRB can be illustrated through several case examples that span different historical periods and institutional contexts. While these cases vary in form and scale, each one demonstrates how intermediate actors and socio-economic engagement can expand the practical space for religious freedom, often in environments where formal legal protections were limited or contested.

7.1. *Multifaith civic collaboration in Kazakhstan*

An historically significant illustration of the builder's approach occurred in Kazakhstan during the final months of the Soviet Union (Chute 1991). In 1991, large-scale people-to-people initiatives brought together religious leaders, professionals, and civic actors across confessional lines in a context where religion had long been suppressed under an officially atheistic regime.

These initiatives centered on collaborative activities that addressed concrete social and economic needs, including medical services, education, cultural exchange, and business engagement. By working together across religious and professional boundaries, participants expanded the public space in which religious identity could be expressed without coercion. Faith-motivated collaboration became visible in workplaces, schools, and civic venues, marking a departure from decades of religious marginalization.

A notable outcome of this period was the signing of Kazakhstan's first multi-faith declaration on religious freedom by senior Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant, and Adventist leaders. The declaration affirmed principles of non-interference and equal treatment, signaling a shift in social norms even before formal legal guarantees were established. Although subsequent political developments led to renewed restrictions, this episode illustrates how builder strategies can reconfigure institutional expectations and social attitudes toward religious freedom.

7.2. *Measuring restriction and its implications: The Pew indices*

A second illustration of the builder's approach emerges from the systematic measurement of religious restrictions through global indices (Pew Research Center 2007-2022). The development of cross-national measures such as the Government Restrictions Index and the Social Hostilities Index made it possible to document patterns of religious restriction with empirical rigor and to analyze their social consequences.

These data revealed that governmental restrictions and societal forms of hostility toward religion often reinforce one another, creating cycles of repression that are resistant to legal intervention alone. The indices also demonstrated that a large majority of the world's population lives under conditions of significant religious constraint, underscoring the scale of the challenge facing FoRB advocates and practitioners.

Importantly, the data further showed that rising restrictions were not being reversed through advocacy alone. This finding helped motivate greater attention to the role of social institutions and intermediate actors in shaping the lived experience of religious freedom. By identifying where restrictions were most acute and how they interacted with social forces, the indices provided a foundation for builder strategies that view educational institutions, business, and civil society as sites of intervention.

7.3. *Corporate and workplace-based initiatives*

A third illustration of the builder's approach can be found in the growing role of businesses and workplaces in advancing religious inclusion. In recent years, many multinational corporations have adopted practices that recognize religion as part of broader belonging and inclusion efforts supported by the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. The Foundation helps organizations benchmark progress in workplace religious inclusion through an annual Faith-Friendly Workplace Benchmarking REDI Index. These practices include employee resource groups organized around faith or belief, accommodation policies for religious observance, and internal education initiatives addressing religious belonging and inclusion.

Such initiatives are often driven by practical considerations rather than ideological commitments. Companies increasingly recognize that accommodating religious identity can improve employee well-being, reduce conflict, mitigate legal risk, and enhance organizational performance. In this context, religious freedom becomes relevant to core business objectives, aligning with incentives related to productivity and retention.

The development of tools measuring religious inclusion in corporate environments further illustrates the builder logic. By assessing the degree to which work-

places are faith-friendly, such measures provide benchmarks that encourage institutional learning and diffusion of best practices (Religious Freedom & Business Foundation 2020-2025). In doing so, they translate abstract commitments to religious freedom into concrete organizational behaviors that shape daily experience for employees.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how builder strategies operate across diverse contexts. Whether through civic collaboration in restrictive environments, empirical measurement that informs institutional engagement, or workplace-based inclusion initiatives, builders seek to expand religious freedom by working within the social and economic structures that shape everyday life. These examples demonstrate that while legal advocacy remains essential, durable progress in advancing FoRB often depends on complementary efforts that engage intermediate actors as partners in building inclusive societies.

8. Core elements of a builder's approach

Empirical research and extensive field experience indicate that a builder's approach to FoRB can be analytically characterized by four interrelated elements. These elements do not embody a moral exhortation; rather, they describe recurring features observed in effective efforts to expand the practical space for religious freedom across diverse institutional contexts.

8.1. Motivational orientation

Builders are motivated by a commitment to human flourishing across deep differences of belief. This orientation emphasizes constructive engagement rather than adversarial posture. Instead of framing religious freedom primarily in oppositional terms – such as winners and losers, or majority versus minority – builders seek approaches that highlight shared interests, social goods, and mutual benefit. This motivational stance helps create conditions in which religious inclusion is perceived not as a threat but as a contribution to collective well-being.

8.2. Empirical evaluation

A defining characteristic of the builder's approach is its reliance on empirical evaluation. Builders attend closely to data, measurement, and institutional feedback in assessing what strategies are effective and where adjustments are needed. This emphasis on evaluation reflects an understanding that social conditions are dynamic and that interventions must adapt to changing contexts. Learning from both successes and failures is central to sustaining progress in environments marked by religious diversity and tension.

8.3. Institutional creativity

Builders operate entrepreneurially within existing institutional constraints. Rather than waiting for ideal legal or political conditions, they develop new tools, practices, and organizational forms that expand religious freedom incrementally. This creativity may take the form of new educational initiatives, workplace policies, measurement tools, or collaborative platforms that translate abstract commitments to FoRB into concrete institutional practices. Innovation, in this sense, is not an end in itself but a means of addressing unmet needs within specific social contexts.

8.4. Collaborative diffusion

Finally, the builder's approach is inherently collaborative. Builders do not seek exclusive ownership over initiatives but instead aim to catalyze broader participation across sectors and identities. Effective builder strategies encourage diffusion by empowering others to adapt and replicate practices in their own institutional settings. This collaborative orientation increases the durability of gains in religious freedom by embedding them within networks rather than relying on centralized control.

9. Conclusion

FoRB remains under significant pressure globally, with profound implications for individuals, communities, and societies. While legal advocacy and international norms are indispensable for addressing violations and protecting vulnerable populations, they are not sufficient on their own to reverse long-term patterns of restriction and persecution.

A builder's approach, grounded in empirical evidence, socio-economic engagement, and institutional pluralism, offers a complementary pathway for advancing religious freedom. By engaging intermediate actors such as businesses and civil society institutions while embedding religious inclusion within workplaces, civic institutions, and economic life, builders help transform FoRB from a contested abstraction into a lived social reality.

Understanding religious freedom as both a human right and a social capacity underscores the importance of institutional practice in shaping everyday experience. Where religious freedom is actively built within social and economic structures, societies are better positioned to reduce conflict, mitigate discrimination, and foster trust across differences. In this sense, the builder's approach does not replace advocacy but strengthens its long-term effectiveness by addressing the social conditions in which religious freedom is either constrained or sustained.

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