

## The societal relevance of religious freedom research

Notes for academia, public policy and vulnerable religious groups

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### Abstract

In recent years, the study of religious freedom has received increased attention in academia. In parallel, more and more national governments and supranational bodies have taken an interest in religious freedom, developing documentation tools and appointing specialized religious freedom officers. Notwithstanding these developments, there is little consensus about the conceptualization and measurement of religious freedom. Moreover, the effectiveness of religious freedom research to combat religious freedom violations remains unclear. Based on a review of the articles included in this special issue, we discuss the impact of religious freedom research on academia, on public policy and on vulnerable religious groups.

**Keywords** religious freedom, research, societal relevance, academia, public policy, vulnerable religious groups.

We are strong believers in the importance of the societal relevance of academic research. In our view, researchers should not stay in their ivory towers, but engage in an open dialogue with “the real world”, which, ultimately, we seek to understand better and, if we can, help move forward. This does not mean that we are academic activists, because that would imply that we allow our personal preferences and biases to take precedence over the methodological soundness of our research.<sup>3</sup> Rather we are of the conviction that one of the justifications for doing academic research is to make a meaningful contribution to address real-life problems, while at the same time being sufficiently detached from them to be objective.

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<sup>3</sup> We are aware that the influence of personal preferences and biases cannot be avoided completely, although the practice of submitting our work to peer review is helpful!

One of the problems of “the real world” is religious freedom or, as it is referred to more inclusively, “freedom of religion or belief.” Until recently, the social sciences were still largely dominated by the secularization theory, which regarded religion as not worth spending time on, in line with its claim that religion’s societal significance was bound to decrease. This also led to a neglect of religious freedom as an area of study, which created a kind of self-reinforcing spiral: because religious freedom was not perceived as an important issue, it was not researched, and because it was not researched, no significant religious freedom violations were identified, which further discouraged scholars from researching it.

This impasse started to be dissolved, in part because of the realization that the empirical evidence contradicted the central claim of the secularization theory, which its main proponent, Peter Berger, later graciously recognized (2009).<sup>4</sup> There were also some pioneering academics who took an interest in the issue of religious discrimination. In 1997, Jonathan Fox took Ted Gurr’s Minorities at Risk dataset and adapted it to include religious minorities, which later evolved into the Religion and State Project at Bar-Ilan University (Fox 1999). That same year, Paul Marshall’s book *Their Blood Cries Out* attracted wide attention (Marshall and Gilbert 1997). In 2005, Brian Grim and Roger Finke (Grim 2005; Grim and Finke 2011) laid the foundations of what would later become the Pew Research Center’s Global Restrictions on Religion reports. Around the same time, Thomas Schirrmacher and Christof Sauer founded the International Institute for Religious Freedom, which has grown to become a network of scholars working on reliable data on the violation of religious freedom worldwide.

The initial impetus for religious freedom research, however, did not come from academia. For decades, faith-based organizations, some with a missionary focus, had been involved in documenting and measuring religious freedom, mainly to inform their strategic planning. The first version of Open Doors’ World Watch List was developed in 1992. In the 1990’s, public and multilateral institutions all around the world followed and started developing religious freedom monitoring instruments.

This brief historical background illustrates that religious freedom research, mainly since the 1990s, has been a growing field. It is timely, therefore, to look back and reflect on the impact of this research. The contributing authors to this special issue explore this theme from a wide variety of angles. In this essay we highlight some key findings from these authors, which we complement with our own reflection. In the following, we will discuss the impact of religious freedom research at three levels: on academia itself, on the policy world and on vulnerable religious groups.

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<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging that religion indeed continues to be present in society, Peter Berger did note that it has taken on new forms.

## 1. Observing the full scope of religious freedom

The growing interest in academia in the documentation and measurement of religious freedom has led to the development of an increasingly rich corpus of religious freedom monitoring instruments, ranging from qualitative monographs and narrative reports to surveys and quantitative tools.<sup>5</sup> The contributing authors to this issue discuss the following instruments in-depth: the Religion and State dataset (Fox; Petri), the Freedom of Thought Report of Humanists International (De Nutte and Van Dyck), the Pew Research Center's Global Restrictions on Religion (De Nutte and Van Dyck; Petri; Buckingham; Wallace) and the World Watch List of Open Doors (Müller, Rees and Veerman; Sauer; Petri; Buckingham; Bartolini). In their articles, Klocek, Buckingham, Perez and Wallace also take a look at US-based reports, including the Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report.

An unavoidable observation is that there is little consensus about the conceptualization and operationalization of religious freedom, as well as about the proper methodology to measure it. In this respect, Matthias Koenig speaks of a "polyphony of religious freedom", referring to the plurality of uses of this concept in different legal traditions throughout history, a point also made by Joustra (2018) and by Fox in this issue. This is not necessarily a problem because the different approaches and instruments to assess religious freedom can be used alongside each other, as they each highlight complementary aspects.

Yet, conceptual and methodological choices have very real consequences, for example if one seeks to determine which countries have religious freedom (Fox), to rank countries based on the degree of legal discrimination and restrictions on freedom of thought, belief and expression (De Nutte and Van Dyck), to quantify the number of persecuted Christians (Sauer) or to assess the intensity and severity of persecution of Christians (Müller, Rees and Veerman). It also makes a difference how broad or narrow the adopted definition of religious freedom is, how religion is defined and operationalized and whether non-religious factors that create vulnerability for religious groups are considered (Fox; Petri).

When making these conceptual and methodological choices, there will always be a tension between pragmatism and idealism. As pointed out by Owen (2003), data collection in social sciences is subject to what can be referred to as a "measurement paradox"; the more exhaustive one seeks to be in observing any social phenomenon, the more difficult data collection becomes. The only way to overcome

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<sup>5</sup> As an illustration, Katherine Marshall's comprehensive working paper "Towards Enriching Understandings and Assessments of Freedom of Religion or Belief: Politics, Debates, Methodologies, and Practices" (2021) discusses 31 different instruments.

this measurement paradox seems to be for quantitative and qualitative approaches to remain in dialogue with one another, as we have attempted in this issue. This way, the advantages of both types of approaches can be harnessed. Indeed, qualitative studies focusing on specific countries or subnational areas have the advantage of being more granular. They can also inform quantitative studies. For example, a premise of Petri's Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool, but also of other tools such as the World Watch List, is precisely that data from other sources can be integrated in its own data collection process. The strengths of quantitative studies are that they allow for cross-national comparisons, which provide helpful international benchmarks for qualitative case studies.

Important blind spots of religious freedom research are discussed in this issue. Müller, Rees and Veerman show how the World Watch List of Open Doors has shed light on some "dark corners of persecution." This includes the plight of Christian converts, the compound vulnerability of women belonging to persecuted groups and "eclipsed" expressions of persecution in multi-faceted conflict situations such as Nigeria or Myanmar. Petri stresses the importance of observing three aspects: (1) the role of religious behavior; (2) the actions of non-state actors; and (3) activities at the subnational level to get a more complete picture of religious freedom violations in a given context.

There are many more areas with very real religious freedom implications that have thus far been neglected by empirical observation or that existing frameworks fail to detect. Wallace makes a compelling case to acknowledge the religious implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has not been the object of prior research. McDonald describes the concerning lack of basic knowledge of religion of the managers of Danish Red Cross-operated asylum centers, which poses challenges to the protection of religious rights in these centers. Bartolini signals, among other things, that research on religious freedom in Mexico has almost exclusively focused on church-state relations, thereby ignoring other important dimensions of religious freedom. Boyd-MacMillan looks at some of the factors that have historically threatened the mere existence of Christianity, but that are not widely known.

These examples of blind spots of religious freedom research underline the necessity of approaching religious freedom as a multidimensional concept. In line with UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) CCPR General Comment No. 22 (1993), and as we have argued elsewhere, religious freedom should be considered as a multidimensional concept (Petri and Veerman 2020). We develop this notion further in the next section of this essay.

## **2. Designing public policy from a "religious freedom perspective"**

In a 2015 TEDx talk, Allen Hertzke, a leading scholar in religious studies, recognized how instrumental religious freedom data has been to make this issue visible

and to promote policy responses: “To create the kind of global future we want, we must put religious freedom back on the map. We must put religious freedom back on the map! Indeed, the protection of religious freedom may be the best means of navigating the crucible of the 21st century. Living with our differences and a shrinking world.” (Hertzke 2015) Was Hertzke too optimistic?

It is undeniable that since the 1990s, national governments, as well as supranational bodies, have taken interest in the issue of religious freedom, developing their own documentation tools and, in some cases, appointing specialized officers to promote religious freedom in foreign or domestic policy.

A landmark was the adoption of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in the United States in 1998 which created an Office of International Religious Freedom within the Department of State, headed by an Ambassador of Religious Freedom with the mandate to produce an annual “International Religious Freedom Report” on all countries of the world. It also created the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which is an independent, bipartisan, federal government entity mandated with monitoring the status of freedom of religion or belief outside the United States and providing policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. After the adoption of the IRFA, other national governments which in the 2010s have created specialized divisions focusing on religion or religious freedom within their ministries for foreign affairs include Norway, Canada, Italy, France and The Netherlands. In addition, several Western parliaments have deployed initiatives to promote freedom of religion (Petri 2020).

The impact of these initiatives varies greatly; some government divisions have since been abandoned or receive less attention, while other governments have increased their efforts (Toft and Green 2018; Petersen and Marshall 2019). By contrast, religious freedom is not a policy priority for any Latin American country except for Brazil (Freston 2018) nor for multilateral regional bodies such as the Organization of American States (Petri 2020).

The articles included in this issue offer a mixed account of the impact of religious freedom research on domestic and international policy, in particular its effectiveness to combat religious freedom violations. Let's start with the success stories first.

As a result of the IRFA, the United States made religious freedom an explicit foreign policy priority (Klocek; Perez). Although presidential administrations since 1998 have placed different emphases, it has become institutionalized and is expanding. One example is the increasing requirements of federal agencies to incorporate religious freedom into their programming, which has led some of them to hire religious freedom experts (Klocek). In Colombia, something similar occurred, affecting domestic policy, the adoption of the “Comprehensive Public Policy on Re-

ligious Freedom and Freedom of Worship” in 2018 by the Ministry of the Interior. This triggered local governments to adopt their own religious freedom policies, which in the case of the city of Manizales included a consultation mechanism aimed at involving religious groups in local development policies (Osorio).

The contributing authors to this issue highlight other ways in which religious freedom research has informed policy. The World Watch List of Open Doors (Müller, Rees and Veerman) and the Freedom of Thought Report by Humanists International (De Nutte and Van Dyck) have been used to brief parliamentarians and diplomats from various countries as well as UN staff. Open Doors was also instrumental in getting the vulnerability of women from minority faith communities recognized within the UK’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI).

Religious freedom research has, nevertheless, not had the impact on policy it could have, as our contributing authors show. Whilst Open Doors reports have informed asylum cases involving Christian converts in the United Kingdom and in Germany, this is much less the case in other countries. As Buckingham claims, important documentation or reports specializing in religious freedom are not considered in the refugee determination process in Canada. On a related matter, McDonald shows that Danish refugee center managers are unfamiliar with religious freedom research that could benefit their work. On Mexico, Bartolini concludes that religious freedom research has had no bearing whatsoever on the religious freedom situation of the country. One could also ask how sensitive policymakers are to the methodological and measurement challenges related to religious freedom discussed by Fox, Petri and Sauer.

Even in the US, there are issues. Klocek warns that calls to include religious freedom in the programming of federal agencies do not always lead to structural responses or are insufficiently informed by data. He observes that policymakers do not always follow the most recent and accurate data available, nor are they always sensitive to the nuances of this data.<sup>6</sup> Perez signals the key importance of educating the general public about the existence of international religious policies to ensure ongoing support for them. Wallace cautions that although US foreign policy may have espoused religious freedom, its diplomats have also overlooked the religious implications of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The consequences of the neglect of religious freedom research in policy are evident. It is a direct obstacle to evidence-based policy when it disregards religious sensitivities. Indeed, religious freedom is not only affected by religious policy (Fox), but by many other policy fields. The contributors to this issue illustrate this: religious freedom has implications for public health (in relation to COVID-19: Müll-

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<sup>6</sup> A related challenge is the (perceived and effective) politicization of religious freedom (Klocek).

ler, Rees and Veerman),<sup>7</sup> refugee policy (Buckingham; McDonald), foreign policy (Klocek; Perez; Wallace), infrastructure (Wallace), urban planning (Osorio) or security policy (Petri; Wallace; Bartolini). In other words, appointing ambassadors for religious freedom, whilst important, is not enough; religious freedom needs to be a cross-cutting policy theme, very much like gender or the environment.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the above, what determines the impact of religious freedom research on policy? Primordially, the documentation of incidents is the main justification for requesting attention to a specific social problem or social fact, as almost all authors in this issue confirm. If religious freedom violations are not documented, it is as if they did not exist. Documentation is particularly important in situations in which victims of violence are too afraid to report crimes to the police – as observed in Petri's three case studies – or when states fail to comply with the requirement to register human rights violations as is the case in Mexico (Bartolini).

Another factor seems to be the level of institutionalization of religious freedom as the examples of the United States and Colombia show. Indeed, it is not without significance that the US government is mandated to do its own religious freedom research (Perez; Klocek) and that the Colombian city of Manizales has created an interreligious council to advise its development policies (Osorio). Of course, such institutional mechanisms cannot prevent blind spots from appearing, but they do help to keep public institutions focused on religious concerns.

Two more determining factors can be cited. The first is the role of political support (Klocek; Osorio; Bartolini) and public support (Perez). It is worth noting that the passage of the IRFA was the result of aggressive lobbying by David Horowitz, who led a broad interfaith coalition of opinion leaders and religious representatives including key Jewish leaders such as Rabbi David Saperstein, the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhists, Baha'is, the US Catholic Bishops Conference and various Evangelical activists (Hertzke 2004). The adoption of the Colombian religious freedom policies is, at least in part, the result of the personal commitment to religious freedom of national and local government officials (Osorio). The softening of Mexico's anticlericalism in 1992, as well as the current lack of a federal religious freedom policy, can be interpreted as a consequence of electoral considerations (Bartolini), confirming Anthony Gill's thesis about *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (2008).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The IJRF is preparing a special issue on the relationship between COVID-19 and religious freedom (scheduled for 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Policy documents all over the world speak of "the gender perspective" and the "environmental perspective." Whilst this is naturally important, "the religious freedom perspective" is often missing and is also essential.

<sup>9</sup> Noting the role of political and public support also compels us to acknowledge that policy is, unfor-

Finally, religious literacy, especially religious freedom literacy, is hugely determinant for religious freedom research to be taken into consideration in policy as Klocek, Perez, Wallace, McDonald and Bartolini stress in various ways.

### 3. Serving vulnerable religious communities

Most analyses of religious freedom focus on documenting religious freedom violations but give little attention to the responses of religious minorities to these violations. As Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah, who directed the first systematic study on the resilience of Christians to persecution, *Under Caesar's Sword* (2018), comment, "Far less well understood is how Christians respond when their religious freedom has been severely violated." (2017:2) The resilience of religious groups was the subject of the 2017 issue of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* which collected 7 articles around the topic "Responding to Persecution".<sup>10</sup> Save these examples, academic research projects that investigate the resilience of religious groups are rare.<sup>11</sup>

Even rarer are reflections on the impact of religious freedom research on vulnerable religious communities. This is quite surprising. After all, if all this research on religious discrimination is being done, shouldn't we want to know if it is making a difference for religious minorities and contributes to increasing the resilience of religious groups to persecution? The articles contained in this issue only laterally look at this question. It is, without a doubt, a subject that demands further research.

Clearly, religious freedom research exerts an indirect influence on vulnerable religious groups by informing policy initiatives, as described in the previous section. This is, however, quite a diffuse effect, because in the best case, religious freedom research contributes to more religiously literate policies that take the expectations, needs and sensitivities of religious groups into account. This does not automatically imply, however, that religious freedom research actually helps religious groups to be better prepared to face pressures.

More to the point, in this issue De Nutte and Van Dyck argue that the comparative and global nature of the Freedom of Thought Report (and any cross-national religious freedom datasets for that matter) increases the resilience of religious groups because it helps them identify countries' strengths and weaknesses in relation to FoRB, without targeting any particular country or religious group. These authors also describe how

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tunately, not always informed by research.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Boyd-MacMillan's *Faith That Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church* (2006) is a practical handbook based on years of fieldwork that offers advice for persecuted Christians. This book was later expanded in the form of the educational video series "Dangerous Faith" and "Thoughts from the Underground." This course was later developed into a course on "Persecution, Mission and Christian Spirituality" that is taught at Fuller Theological Seminary.

<sup>11</sup> The USAID-USIP "Closing the Gap" project (2020-2021) also laterally covered responses of discriminated religious groups in its case studies of the state of religious freedom in four countries.



religious freedom data has been used to campaign against religious freedom violations more effectively, citing the examples of blasphemy and apostasy. For example, they recount how the removal of the word “blasphemy” from the Irish constitution came to be referred to as a “best practice” by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Similarly, the religious freedom policy of the city of Manizales in Colombia can also be analyzed as a “best practice” because consultation of religious groups on policy matters is a very effective model to prevent religious conflict (Osorio).

In his contribution, McDonald highlights the way in which religious beliefs constitute a coping method which provides asylum seekers with a framework to make sense of their suffering. Likewise, Boyd-MacMillan shows that persecuted Christians can obtain much encouragement and hope by understanding church history, first because it helps them realize that their plight is not unique but has been shared by many others throughout history, and second because it can provide them with tactics to endure their tribulations.

#### **4. Final remarks**

Notwithstanding their richness, the collection of articles included in this issue only cover a limited sample of the conceptual and methodological challenges and blind spots of religious freedom research. We encourage our colleagues to consider religious freedom from the broadest possible perspective, always acknowledging its multiple dimensions and being on the lookout for neglected areas where the rights of religious groups are being threatened. An incomplete understanding of the right to religious freedom results in many violations not being recognized, which leads to victims of these violations not being helped.

Promoting religious literacy and religious freedom literacy is key. We encourage our colleagues to include relevant aspects of religious freedom research in their teaching. The fact that religious freedom research has grown does not mean that it has become mainstream, nor that it has influenced academia more broadly. Moreover, we encourage religious freedom scholars to dedicate more attention to the identification and systematization of good practices that can contribute to the resilience of religious communities.

We hope that our joint research efforts will contribute to more informed and more religiously literate decision-making, that is more sensitive to the religious freedom implications of policy decisions.

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