

How common is religious freedom worldwide?

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Abstract

This study discusses and measures six alternative definitions and conceptions of religious freedom: free exercise, religious persecution/repression, religious tolerance, absolute separation, neutrality and laicism. Each conception is operationalized using both strict and lenient interpretations based on data from the Religion and State round 3 (RAS3) dataset on discrimination against religious minorities, regulation of the majority religion, and support for religion. According to some of the stricter operationalizations, no countries have religious freedom; even using the most lenient approach, most countries in the world do not have religious freedom. These findings also apply to Western democracies, thus contradicting claims that liberal democracy is strongly associated with religious freedom.

Keywords religious freedom, religious minorities, persecution, repression.

The topic of religious freedom is widely discussed but often not examined with sufficient care. As a result of this lack of rigor, two problems arise. First, it is very much a Tower of Babel where many people using the same term do not agree on what that term means. Second, many assume that religious freedom is present in cases where it is not.

This study addresses these issues by discussing six competing conceptions of religious freedom and operationalizing them using the Religion and State round 3 (RAS3) dataset, to determine how many states in practice subscribe to any of these conceptions of religious freedom. I find that even when using relatively lenient operationalizations of these conceptions, which allow states that engage in significant violations to still be viewed as adhering to an overall regime of religious freedom, a majority of countries do not have religious freedom. This finding also applies to Western democracies, thus calling into question whether religious freedom is truly an essential element of liberal democracy or whether Western democracies are truly liberal democracies.

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1. Six conceptions of religious freedom

Religious freedom is a contested term. The concept is understood in multiple ways, with different implications for what specific rights are subsumed within the right to religious freedom. In this section, I discuss six popular definitions. My list is not intended to be inclusive, but to represent a range of different conceptions and to demonstrate that variations in how to define the term have practical implications for what specific rights are promised.

Table 1 summarizes the six conceptions and their consequences for religious freedom. The table focuses on four types of government policy that violate each conception of religious freedom: (1) restricting the religious practices or institutions of religious minorities, (2) regulating all religions including the majority religion, (3) laws or institutions which enforce religion, and (4) other laws or policies which support religion. I discuss the empirical definition of each of these types of policies in the methodology section below.

The term *free exercise* of religion originates from the First Amendment to the US Constitution. It means that the government may not restrict the free practice of religion, including the right to create and manage independent religious institutions. This right focuses on what is specifically religious and does not cover other types of discrimination against religious minorities that do not interfere directly with the free exercise of religion, such as economic discrimination (Fox 2016:14-15). Thus, it does not prevent the enforcement of religious laws that do not directly contradict the practices of a minority religion. For example, since no religion of which I am aware mandates abortions, except perhaps to save the mother's life, a religiously motivated law banning abortions would not violate this conception of religious freedom.

Bans on *religious persecution and repression* are a second common conception of religious freedom. This conception is broader and involves all the freedoms included in the free exercise conception, as well as precluding any form of restriction placed specifically on religious minorities. For example, Farr (2008) states, "Religious persecution is generally associated with egregious abuse – torture, rape, unjust imprisonment – on the basis of religion." Jenkins (2007:3) similarly defines religious persecution as "an effort by a government to repress major activities by a given religious group, commonly with the goal of eliminating that group in the long or short term." Sarkissian (2015) uses a broad definition of religious repression which includes both limits on the free exercise of religion and political and economic restrictions on religious groups. This broader view would most likely include a ban on laws or institutions which enforce the majority religion.

The third conception, *religious tolerance*, focuses on giving equal rights to religious minorities. Tolerance is generally defined as the ability or willingness to accept something with which one does not necessarily agree or like (Eisenstein

Conceptions and their consequences for religious freedom	Types of Government policies			
	Restricts the religious practices or institutions of religious minorities	Regulates all religions, including the majority religion	Entails laws or institutions which enforce religion	Other types of support
	Does this activity violate religious freedom?			
Free exercise	Yes	Yes	Only if observing the religious laws violates one's own religion	No
Religious persecution/repression	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Religious tolerance	Yes	Maybe, depending on interpretation	Yes	No
Absolute separatism	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Neutrality	Yes	No	Yes	No if all religions are supported equally
Laicism	Yes	No and some such laws are required	Yes	Yes

Table 1: Concepts of Religious Freedom and Religion and State 3 (RAS3) Measures

2008). In the context of religious freedom, this means guaranteeing the same rights and freedoms to religious minorities as are granted to the majority. For example, Little (1996:81) argues that “to be tolerant is, at a minimum, to respond to a set of beliefs and practices regarded as deviant or objectionable without forcible interference.” Karpov (2002:267) similarly defines political tolerance as “the willingness to extend civil liberties to political outgroups.”

There is considerable room for interpretation of this concept. A narrow definition would give religious minorities only whatever rights are also granted to the majority. Thus, any restriction placed on everyone, including members of the majority religion, would be permissible within the bounds of tolerance. A broader definition could mirror the previous conception (religious persecution

and repression) by banning any restriction on religious practices. From this perspective, the two bodies of literature discuss the same conception in practice, with the persecution/repression literature focusing on what governments may not do and the tolerance literature focusing on the justifying the importance of religious freedom and providing a philosophy for protecting that freedom.²

In practice, however, these three conceptions of religious freedom focus on what the government may not do, on the presumed basis that as long as a government avoids restricting certain freedoms, religious freedom exists. The following three conceptions, in contrast, are conceptions of secularism rather than religious freedom. As such, they look at a broader range of government policies concerning religion, including other forms of support for religion. More specifically, they consider whether a government can support certain expressions of religion in various ways, such as financing, and still maintain a religiously free environment. However, these conceptions also include inherent definitions of religious freedom.

The fourth conception, *absolute separationism*, bans any government entanglement with religion. That is, the government may neither support nor restrict religion in any way. This conception clearly includes protections of the free exercise of religion, as well as a ban on any support for religion, such as laws or institutions which enforce the majority religion. However, restricting religious minorities in matters other than religion is not explicitly excluded under this conception.

Some, such as Casanova (2012:81-82) view this concept more broadly to include restrictions on discrimination on the basis of religion. Casanova argues that in addition to a ban on establishing a religion (a form of support for religion) and respecting the free exercise of religion, the state must also guarantee equal participation for all citizens in matters outside of religion. However, in some respects his definition is narrower because he only bans state support for religion because established religions often limit the free exercise of religion. It is important to emphasize that this model, of which the United States is considered the archetype, requires only separation of religion and state but not separation of religion and politics. "In a liberal democracy, one can pursue absolute separation of church and state, but one cannot ask for or pursue an absolute separation of religion and politics. These are two radically different pursuits; the first one is institutional, the latter is behavioral" (Eisenstein 2008:6).

The fifth conception, *neutrality*, focuses on ensuring equal treatment for all religions. Finke (2013; Stark and Finke 2000), among others, argues that true equality requires a "level playing field," meaning that the government must support all religions equally. If any one religion receives a form of support, then so must all

² For a discussion of how religion is related to tolerance and intolerance, see Djupe and Calfino (2013) and Eisenstein (2008).

the others, because selectively supporting some religions can have the same result as discrimination putting adherents of other religions at a disadvantage, even if this support in no way restricts the practice of the non-supported religions. For example, when a government provides selective financial support for religion, the supported religions are less expensive for their congregants. Religion is not free. Its financial costs include the construction and upkeep of physical buildings and salaries for clergy. Congregants of non-supported religions have to bear the full cost of these expenses while congregants of supported religions pay less or perhaps even nothing. This lower cost gives the supported religions an unfair advantage in attracting congregants.

Interestingly, this conception does not necessarily ban the placing of limitations on religion and its free exercise, since as long as all limitations are placed on all religions equally, the playing field remains level.

The final conception is *laicism*, taking this name from France's religion policy. Laicism is perhaps the most extreme type of secularism found in democracies. It forbids state support for any religion and restricts expressions of religion in public. Under this conception, religion is considered a private matter that should not intrude into the secular public sphere. Thus, restrictions on religion in the public sphere are not only allowed by this conception, but even mandated. However, as the purpose of these restrictions is to maintain a secular public sphere, all restrictions on public manifestations of religion must be applied equally to all religions, including the majority religion. Applying any restrictions only to minority religions is ruled out, because this practice would constitute support for the non-restricted religion (Kuru 2009; Haynes 1997; Keane 2000; Durham 1996:21-22; Esbeck 1988).

Joustra (2018) argues that this conception of religious freedom contains some inherent tensions between freedom and repression. It posits the necessity of restrictions on religion in the name of pluralism. That is, repressing religion is considered necessary to enhance equality and freedom. In addition, "a political system that replaces the religious with a comprehensive secular philosophy at its foundation risks making religious members into second-class citizens." (Joustra 2018:57). Moreover, this conception essentially prefers a secular ideology over religion (Bader 1999).

As shown in Table 1, each of these conceptions of religious freedom has important consequences for government policy concerning religion. With the exceptions of the second and third conceptions, which lead in practice to essentially the same policy, each one places a different set of requirements on governments. It is also not possible to create a policy which adheres to all six conceptions at the same time. For example, whereas laicism requires restrictions on religious expression and institutions in public, guarantees of the free exercise of religion ban all such restrictions.

As already noted, these six frameworks are not the only possible conceptions of religious freedom. For example, Joustra (2018:33) points out that “for the ardent religious believer ... religious freedom often means the right to restrict the freedoms of others, or to impose one’s religion on the larger world.” However, these six conceptions are the most common ones in Western democracies.

2. The assumption of religious freedom in Western liberal democracies

The literature on religious freedom in liberal democracies makes two assumptions: first, that religious freedom is a core value in Western liberal democracies; second, that in practice Western liberal democracies maintain religious freedom for all citizens, including religious minorities. However, as I demonstrate in the empirical section of this study, the second assumption is incorrect, because in actuality most liberal democracies do not satisfy any of the six conceptions of religious freedom discussed above – a finding that also calls the first assumption into serious question.

The foundations for these assumptions in existing literature can be divided into three categories. First, some argue that processes inherent in modern Christianity increase religious toleration. Martin (1978:25-49) argues that this is true for Protestant Christianity, in that the Protestant Reformation increased religious pluralism in the West, which in turn increased toleration. The fact that the newer Protestant denominations were less closely linked to the state facilitated this process. Ideologically, Protestantism focuses on individualism, so Protestants are less likely to consider religion superior to the state. Martin also links the Protestant doctrines of election and free grace to support for universal rights. Woodberry and Shaw (2012) argue that pluralism, reduced corruption, economic development, mass education, an independent civil society and religion’s independence from the state are all ideas linked to Protestantism.

Others focus on progress within Catholic ideology, especially related to Vatican II, which made the Catholic Church more tolerant toward religious minorities and separated it from local politics, leaving more room for democracy and toleration (Philpott 2007; Anderson 2007). However, arguments based on this theological evolution do not explain why this evolution would have occurred only in the West and not also in Christian-majority countries outside the West.

Second, many argue that the West is more secular than the rest of the world and that this factor results in more religious freedom. For example, Appleby (2000:2) contends that “the core values of secularized Western societies, including freedom of speech and freedom of religion, were elaborated in outraged response to inquisitions, crusades, pogroms, and wars conducted in the name of God.” Calhoun (2012:86) similarly states that “the tacit understanding of citizenship in the modern West has

been secular. This is so despite the existence of state churches, presidents who pray, and a profound role for religious motivations in major public movements.”

These arguments imply that this combination of religious freedom and secularism is unique to the West. Others make this argument more explicitly:

The modernization of Muslim societies, unlike Western ones, did not lead to the privatization of religion but to the opposite, that is, the politicization of Islam in a way unprecedented in premodern Muslim societies. This is not because Islam does not separate religion and politics (which is by the way historically false) but because the Islamic tradition was integrated into the nation state-building that took place at the end of the Ottoman Empire. (Cesari 2014:xiii)³

Others focus on the process of secularization, arguing that this process is uniquely strong in the West and has led to more religious freedom (e.g., Berger 2009; Marquand and Nettle 2000; Bruce 2009; Halman and Draulans 2006; Kaspersen and Lindvall 2008; Voicu 2009).

Third, some focus on specific political and social processes purportedly unique to the West which have led to secularization and religious freedom. Haynes (1997, 1998, 2009), for example, cites Western governments’ institution of equality policies and their tendency to co-opt and subordinate religious institutions. Norris and Inglehart (2004) argue that increased prosperity has led to increased secularism. Crouch (2000) suggests that past religious wars, increased tolerance, individualism, and liberalism among Europeans have contributed to a Western rejection of religion in politics. Kuhle (2011) demonstrates that many Western governments have imposed secular liberal values on their national churches. For example, several Nordic countries forced their national churches to change their theology on a wide variety of issues, including the ordination of women and same-sex marriage.

3. The religion and state dataset as a practical measure of religious freedom

Since there is no general consensus on how to define religious freedom, any measure of the concept would take a normative position on the meaning of religious freedom. Methodologically, I take a broad view of religious freedom by operationalizing all six conceptions of religious freedom discussed above.

The Religion and State round 3 (RAS3) dataset provides the variables necessary to measure the degree of religious freedom based on each conception. RAS3

³ For similar arguments, see Demerath and Straight (1997:47); Facchini (2010); Haynes (1997:709); Huntington (1996:75); Imboden (2013:164).

includes data on government policy concerning religion policy in 183 countries from 1990 to 2014. This study uses the data for 2014, the most recent year available.⁴ As in previous rounds, the RAS3 data are based on a country-by-country survey of information from multiple sources, such as laws and constitutions; reports by media outlets, governments, and NGOs; and academic works. The variables measure different aspects of government policy on religion: laws, court decisions, bureaucratic regulations, or consistency of government officials' behavior.⁵

RAS3 includes three sets of variables that measure the four types of activity described in Table 1. The first set of variables measures *religious discrimination*, or "limitations placed on the religious practices or institutions of minority religions that are not placed on the majority religion" (Fox 2015:136-137). RAS3 includes 36 specific types of religious discrimination including 12 types of restrictions on religious practices such as restrictions on observing religious dietary laws or on the ability to observe one's religion in public, eight types of restrictions on religious institutions and clergy such as restrictions on access to or ordination of clergy or on the ability to build places of worship, seven types of restrictions on conversion and proselytizing including restrictions on proselytizing by residents of a country as well as foreign missionaries, and nine types of restrictions which do not fit into these previous categories such as the arrest or harassment of religious figures and anti-cult policies. All of these are measured on a scale of 0 to 3 based on their severity and combined in a cumulative measure on which scores can range from 0 to 108.⁶

Religious restrictions refer to the restriction or regulation of all religions in the country, including the majority religion. Although in theory this category overlaps with religious discrimination, in practice the types of restrictions placed on all religions are different from those imposed only on minorities. In addition, the motivations for restricting the majority religion are different from those for restricting minority religions (Fox 2015, 2019). The RAS3 contains 29 types of religious restrictions. These include seven limitations on religious-affiliated political activities, such as bans on political

⁴ For countries in which no data is available for 2014, I used the most recent year available.

⁵ Sources of the RAS data included government documents such as the US State Department's reports on international religious freedom, reports from international organizations such as the EU and UN, reports from advocacy groups such as Forum 18 and Human Rights without Frontiers, and media coverage. For a discussion and analysis of the dataset, the variables described below, and reliability tests, see Fox (2015, 2020); Fox et al. (2018).

⁶ The scale is as follows: 0 = none, 1 = The activity is slightly restricted or the government engages in a mild form of this practice for some minorities, 2 = The activity is slightly restricted for most or all minorities, the government engages in a mild form of this practice, the activity sharply restricted for some of them or the government engages in a severe form of this activity toward some of them, 3 = The activity is prohibited or sharply restricted or the government engages in a severe form of this activity or most or all minorities.

speech by clergy and religious political parties; seven types of restriction on religious organizations, institutions, and clergy, such as government influence on the appointment of religious leaders and limitations on access to places of worship; seven restrictions on religious practices such as people being arrested for conducting religious activities and barring religious activities outside recognized places; and eight other types of restrictions that do not fit into the previous categories, such as restrictions on public religious speech or government influence over the content of religious education. Again, each item is scored from 0 to 3, so the cumulative scores range from 0 to 87.⁷

The final two sets of measures are based on *government support for religion*. The RAS3 variable has 52 components, which I divide into two categories. The first includes 26 topics that measure governments' legislation of *religious precepts* and their *enforcement* of religious laws:

- Marriage or divorce can only occur under religious auspices.
- Automatic civil recognition for marriages performed by clergy.
- Restrictions on interfaith marriages.
- Restrictions on premarital sex.
- Banning homosexuals or homosexual sex.
- Prohibitive restrictions on abortion.
- Restricting access to birth control.
- Women may not go out in public unescorted.
- Required public dress or modesty laws for women.
- Female court testimony given less weight than male testimony.
- Restrictions on women other than those listed above.
- Religious dietary laws.
- Restrictions on alcohol.
- Laws of inheritance defined by religion.
- Religious precepts define or set punishment for crimes.
- Charging interest is illegal or restricted.
- Required public dress or modesty laws for men.
- Restrictions on conversions away from the dominant religion.
- Significant restrictions on public music and dancing.
- Mandatory closing of some or all businesses on religious holidays and/or the sabbath.
- Other restrictions on religious holidays or on the sabbath.
- Blasphemy laws or restrictions on speech about the majority religion.

⁷ The scale is as follows: 0 = none, 1 = Slight restrictions including practical restrictions or the government engages in this activity rarely and on a small scale, 2 = Significant restrictions including practical restrictions or the government engages in this activity occasionally and on a moderate scale, 3 = The activity is illegal or the government engages in this activity often and on a large scale.

- Censorship of the press or publications for being anti-religious.
- A police force or government agency exists solely to enforce religious laws.
- Religious courts have jurisdiction over family law and inheritance.
- Religious courts have jurisdiction over matters other than family law and inheritance.

Each variable is coded as 1 if identified in a country and 0 otherwise, creating a scale from 0 to 26.

The last category includes *all other types of government support* for religion. These 26 items are as follows:

- Government funding of religious primary and secondary schools, or religious education programs in non-public schools.
- Government funding of seminaries.
- Government funding of religious education in colleges or universities.
- Government funding of religious charitable organizations, including hospitals.
- Government collects taxes on behalf of religious organizations (religious taxes).
- Official government positions, salaries, or other funding for clergy, excluding salaries of teachers.
- Direct general grants to religious organizations.
- Funding for building, maintaining, or repairing religious sites.
- Free airtime on television or radio provided to religious organizations on government channels or by government decree.
- Funding or other government support for religious pilgrimages such as the hajj.
- Funding for religious organizations or activities other than those listed above.
- Some religious leaders are granted diplomatic status, diplomatic passports, or immunity from prosecution by virtue of their religious office.
- Presence of an official government ministry or department dealing with religious affairs.
- Certain government officials are also given an official position in the state church by virtue of their political office.
- Certain religious officials become government officials by virtue of their religious position.
- Some or all government officials must meet certain religious requirements to hold office.
- Seats in the legislative branch or cabinet are awarded by law or custom, at least in part, along religious lines.
- Religious education is present in public schools.
- Official prayer sessions occur in public schools.
- Public schools are segregated by religion, or separate public schools exist for members of some religions.

- The presence of religious symbols on the state's flag.
- Religion listed on state identity cards or other government documents that most citizens must possess or fill out.
- A registration process for religious organizations exists that is in some manner different from the registration process for other non-profit organizations.
- Burial is controlled by religious organizations or clergy or is otherwise subject to religious laws or oversight.
- Blasphemy laws protecting minority religions or religious figures.
- Other mandatory religious prohibitions or practices.

The scoring is the same as for the previous category.

As noted in Table 1, the free exercise conception bans religious discrimination and restrictions. Religious persecution/repression and religious tolerance, though theoretically distinct, are operationalized identically, as both ban religious discrimination and restrictions as well as religious precepts or enforcement. Absolute separationism bans all four types. Neutrality bans religious discrimination and precepts or enforcement. Finally, the laicism conception bans religious discrimination, precepts or enforcement, and other support.

These five operational conceptions allow testing whether countries meet a variety of religious freedom standards. In addition, I operationalized three versions of each conception. The first is a "zero tolerance" version that requires government to engage in no activity whatsoever that violates the conception – i.e., it must score 0 on all relevant variables to be counted as permitting religious freedom. Thus, for example, the free exercise conception would require a score of 0 on the religious discrimination and religious restrictions indexes. On the other hand, since this conception does not ban support for religion, high scores on the last two variables would not be considered a violation.

I also conducted two more lenient operationalizations, to acknowledge the possibility that a government may violate religious freedom in some minor way within the context of an overall policy that respects religious freedom. This analytical leniency recognizes that perfection is often not possible and that a lack of perfection may not necessarily undermine adherence to a larger principle. Where governments still violate a more lenient operationalization, this may demonstrate a general lack of adherence in practice to religious freedom. In the first lenient operationalization a country must score 3 or lower on all relevant variables to qualify as permitting religious freedom; on the second, it must score 5 or lower. These more lenient assessments would permit a government to engage in a substantial amount of activity that undermines religious freedom yet still be classified as respecting the rights of religious believers. Below, I refer to them as lenient-3 and lenient-5, respectively.

While any such ‘lenient’ operationalization is, of necessity, arbitrary, these operationalizations are intended to allow the maximum level of violations of religious freedom possible while plausibly maintaining an overall policy of religious freedom.

4. How many countries have religious freedom?

Table 2 shows how many states have religious freedom based on each of the three operationalizations and each of the five different standards for religious freedom described above. (Recall that two of the six conceptions were merged as a single standard.) Based on the “zero tolerance” standards, very few countries qualify. No country meets the zero-tolerance standard under the conceptions of religious persecution/repression/tolerance, absolute separationism, or laicism, because no country fails to support or enforce religion in at least some small way (Fox 2019). Only Taiwan and Uruguay meet the neutrality zero-tolerance standard (which allows some forms of government support for religion), and only Cameroon, Namibia, and the Solomon Islands meet the free exercise standard (which allows all types of government support for religion). Thus, when we define the term strictly, few or no countries have religious freedom and, interestingly, none of those meeting the standard are Western democracies.

When we examine the results for all 183 countries, based on even the lenient-5 version for each category, we find no instance in which most of the world’s countries are religiously free. This statement is also true of Western democracies and democratic countries as defined by the Polity dataset (Jagers and Gurr 1995). Within several religious or geographic groupings, a majority of states qualify as religiously free:

- Christian-majority countries that are neither Catholic nor Orthodox, based on the lenient-5 standard for free exercise and religious persecution/repression/tolerance, and the lenient-3 standard for neutrality;
- Catholic-majority countries, based on the lenient-5 standard for neutrality;
- Countries in sub-Saharan Africa, based on the lenient-3 standard for neutrality; and
- Latin American countries, based on the lenient-5 standard for neutrality.

Thus, using even relatively lenient standards for religious freedom, only a few groupings of states – mostly in the developing world – can be said to have a majority of states that are religiously free.

5. Conclusions

It is not my purpose to express an opinion as to which conception of religious freedom is best. That is a normative question that lies beyond the scope of this study. Rather, my intention is to demonstrate that on any generally recognized conception, religious freedom is far rarer in Western democracies than many assume.

% of countries which Meet this Standard of Religious Freedom															
Score	Free Exercise			Religious Persecution/Repression/Tolerance			Absolute Separationism			Neutrality			Laicism		
	0	3	5	0	3	5	0	3	5	0	3	5	0	3	5
All Countries	1.6	17.5	28.4	0.0	16.9	28.4	0.0	8.2	21.3	1.1	29.0	40.4	0.0	12.6	27.3
By Majority Religion															
All Christian	1.9	23.3	37.9	0.0	22.3	37.9	0.0	9.7	28.2	1.0	27.9	53.4	0.0	14.6	35.0
Catholic	2.2	20.0	33.3	0.0	17.8	33.3	0.0	6.7	22.2	2.2	33.3	53.3	0.0	8.9	28.9
Orthodox	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	4.3	34.8	54.3	0.0	34.8	54.3	0.0	17.4	43.5	0.0	54.3	69.6	0.0	26.1	52.2
Muslim	0.0	3.8	11.3	0.0	3.8	11.3	0.0	0.0	5.7	0.0	9.4	17.0	0.0	1.9	11.3
Other	3.6	21.4	25.0	0.0	21.4	25.0	0.0	17.9	25.0	3.6	32.1	35.7	0.0	25.0	28.6
By World Region															
Western Democracies	0.0	22.2	40.7	0.0	18.5	40.7	0.0	0.0	22.2	0.0	25.9	48.1	0.0	0.0	22.2
Former Soviet	0.0	3.4	6.9	0.0	3.4	6.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.9	13.8	0.0	0.0	0.0
Asia	3.4	17.2	27.6	0.0	17.2	27.6	0.0	10.3	24.1	3.4	27.6	31.0	0.0	10.3	24.1
Middle East	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	4.2	27.1	41.7	0.0	27.1	41.7	0.0	18.8	35.4	0.0	54.2	66.7	0.0	33.3	54.2
Latin America	0.0	25.9	40.7	0.0	25.9	40.7	0.0	11.1	33.3	3.7	37.0	59.3	0.0	14.8	40.7
Democracy															
Polity = 10	0.0	25.7	42.9	0.0	25.7	42.9	0.0	11.4	22.9	5.7	34.3	48.6	0.0	11.4	22.9
Polity 8 or higher	1.4	20.5	32.9	0.0	20.5	32.9	0.0	12.3	20.5	2.7	30.1	45.2	0.0	12.3	23.3

Table 2: Percentage of Countries with Religious Freedom as of 2014, Based on 15 Operationalizations

Overall, the findings in this study falsify arguments that Western liberal democracy is strongly associated with religious freedom. Although in theory this value is supported by liberal democracies, in practice – even using standards that allow considerable deviation from perfection – fewer than half of Western democracies and democracies offer religious freedom. This finding has considerable implications for our understanding of the link between liberal democracy and religious freedom.

Interestingly, there is some support for the argument that Christianity is a source of religious tolerance, as countries with Christian majorities are among the most likely to have religious freedom. However, this Christian tolerance seems more

common in the developing world than in Western democracies. Fox (2020) explains this somewhat surprising result by suggesting three features present in Christian-majority countries in the developing world that make religious discrimination less common. First, they are less economically developed, giving the government fewer resources to spend on restricting religion. Second, they are less likely to support a single religion either officially or unofficially. Third, secular ideologies, which can be a source of intolerance of certain practices of religious minorities (such as ritual slaughter or female head coverings), are less common in developing countries.

The conception on which the greatest number of countries fulfill the religious freedom standard is neutrality, which permits restrictions on religion and government support for religion as long as all religions are treated equally. This finding suggests that this conception of religious freedom is most popular among governments, perhaps because it is the least restrictive option.

The results show that much work is needed to promote religious freedom worldwide, and that Western countries that include religious freedom on their foreign-policy agenda need to get their own house in order if they desire to more effectively pursue this agenda globally.

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