The Review of Faith & International Affairs

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfia20

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To cite this article: Dennis P. Petri (2022) The Tyranny of Religious Freedom Rankings, The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 20:1, 82-88, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2022.2031064

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2022.2031064

Published online: 07 Mar 2022.

THE TYRANNY OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RANKINGS

By Dennis P. Petri

In 2006, Grim and Finke lamented that "religion receives little attention in international quantitative studies. Including religion in cross-national studies requires data, and high-quality data are in short supply" (Grim and Finke 2006, 3). Today, this is less of a problem, as increasing amounts of cross-country data on religion have become available (Fox 2011). Katherine Marshall's (2021) comprehensive working paper "Towards Enriching Understandings and Assessments of Freedom of Religion or Belief: Politics, Debates, Methodologies, and Practices" discusses 31 different instruments, of which the Global Restrictions on Religion of the Pew Research Center, the Religion and State Project at Bar-Ilan University, and the World Watch List of Open Doors are among the most popular.

In a 2015 TEDx talk, Allen Hertzke, a leading scholar in religious studies and political science, recognized how instrumental religious freedom data has been to making this issue visible and to promoting policy responses (Hertzke 2015). Indeed, the endeavors to document the situation of religious freedom worldwide have made data available for cross-national comparisons, which give an indication of the scope of religious freedom and religious conflict worldwide. This serves an apologetic purpose: the numerical importance, occurrence, and scope of religious freedom violations justifies its analysis (Sauer 2019). By objectively observing the (quantitative) impact of an issue, it can then be considered a "social fact," to use Durkheim's concept (1893), i.e. an objective social phenomenon which can be an object of research, i.e. "a single reality that is independent of any observer" (Yin 2014, 17). Religious freedom has increasingly been included in both foreign and domestic policy, in the United States (Klocek 2019) and many other countries (Toft and Green 2018; Petersen and Marshall 2019; Petri and Buijs 2019).

Yet, notwithstanding the benefits of religious freedom datasets, essential aspects of the vulnerability of religious minorities continue to be overlooked or underweighted because of a combination of conceptual and methodological reasons. In this essay, I discuss three areas where I've identified problems with religious freedom datasets and how they are used by academics and policymakers. I will make references to some real-

Abstract: In this essay, I discuss three areas where I've identified problems with religious freedom datasets and how they are used by academics and policymakers. First, I discuss the implications of the problematic ways in which religious freedom rankings are being used. Second, I argue that religious freedom violations that can only be observed at the subnational level tend to be overlooked by religious freedom datasets. Finally, I stress the importance of understanding the multidimensionality of religious freedom to avoid oversimplifications of reality. I provide practical recommendations for the improvement of religious freedom datasets and their correct use by policymakers.

Keywords: religious freedom, datasets, rankings, methodologies, subnational level, non-state actors

life examples taken from my work as a consultant to various civil society organizations and international institutions over the last 15 years, primarily in Latin America but also in Africa and the Middle East. My aim is not to dismiss religious freedom datasets, which certainly have their place, but to explore how they can be improved and how they should be used by policymakers. To achieve this, I include practical recommendations in my discussion.

The Problem with Rankings

Indexes, especially rankings, are very appealing, especially to policymakers. In a landmark article with the suggestive title "The Tyranny of International Index Rankings," Høyland, Moene, and Willumsen (2012) argue that these can be misleading because rankings give the false impression that they are precise, when in fact, they tend to be subject to a large degree of uncertainty. In other words, whether a country ranks 1st, 22nd, or 51st on, say, Freedom House's Freedom in the World ranking, is ultimately not that meaningful; the underlying research is. Høyland and his colleagues do not argue against the usefulness of these indexes *per se*; their criticism is mainly focused on "how the data are summarized in a one-number-per-country fashion, as this practice can be highly misleading when the inherent uncertainty in this one number is not reported" (Høyland, Moene, and Willumsen 2012, 2). Ranking "ends up emphasizing differences where similarity is the dominant feature" (2012, 2; see also Michener 2015; Søreide 2006).

Rankings also lead governments to engage in what Høyland, Moene and Willumsen refer to as "rank-seeking behavior." In their study, they give the example of the Malaysian government, which stated as a policy goal to improve their position on the World Bank's Doing Business ranking, rather than focusing on improving their real performance. Similar behavior can be observed by universities, who seem to be more concerned with their position in international rankings than with the quality of the education they provide (Dill 2009).

Religious freedom indexes do not escape these problems. In 2021, the Colombian government disagreed strongly with the inclusion of Colombia in Open Doors' top 50 ranking of countries where Christians are most persecuted for their faith. Government officials felt this was unfair considering their efforts to promote religious freedom. But they failed to take note that the primary source of persecution of Christians identified in the report was not the Colombian government but non-state actors (including guerrillas and indigenous chiefs). In another illustrative case, in a North African country, Protestant missionaries who were arrested by the government were told: "We are only going to release you because we don't want to end up with a higher rank on the World Watch List. We expect the fanatical movements to get to you anyway."[1] This may of course seem positive for the released prisoners and a testament to the influence of the World Watch List publication, but it is nevertheless concerning because it shows this government has no genuine commitment to religious freedom.[2]

Birdsall and Beaman (2020, 60) observed that "There is [an] 'almost obligatory' usage of Pew's data on global religious restrictions in reports, articles, and statements dealing with international freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)." This is a problem because other sources of data, that may be more accurate, detailed, and robust, are too often ignored. Moreover, there is a real risk that nuance is abandoned because

> Policymakers typically prefer direct, concise arguments and findings that can be applied to a broad set of cases. However, this desire for simplification can also lead to casual rather than causal inferences. The best policies are informed by scholarship that clearly acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of its empirical work, the conditions under which its findings are most likely to apply, and what questions remain unanswered. (Klocek 2019, 94)

There is no need to do away with religious freedom datasets, but they should be handled with caution, in line with Klocek (2019) and Birdsall and Beaman (2020). These datasets are a useful source of information and may be a good

basis for decision-making, but it must be remembered that rankings only provide an *ordre de grandeur* that is useful to situate specific cases within a broader context—identifying global trends—from which comparative results can be distilled. The limitations of rankings should always be taken into consideration, and they should ideally be nuanced by contextualized and qualitative perspectives.

The Observation of Subnational Religious Freedom

Another reason why index rankings entail so much uncertainty is that they are macro-level indicators, aggregates that conceal realities that can only be observed locally, as Owen (2004) asserts. The negligence of the local scale—what Stein Rokkan refers to as the "whole-nation bias" in political science ([1970] 2009)—means that findings are not nuanced or specified depending on local particularities (Snyder 2001; Høyland, Moene, and Willumsen 2012; Glasius et al. 2018).

This is also true for religious freedom datasets in which the local expressions of the vulnerability of religious minorities often go unnoticed. Because of their primary focus on the national state, most current datasets insufficiently detect religious freedom violations that occur at the local level. The methodologies of many religious freedom datasets indicate they take local variations into account when relevant, but most of them are based on the coding of publicly available sources and do not realize original fieldwork which would enable them to nuance their nationwide findings by local particularities (Schirrmacher 2016).

In line with the literature on subnational undemocratic regimes, which suggests that democratization rarely occurs evenly throughout a territory (O'Donnell 1993; Snyder 2001; Gibson 2005; Dabène 2008; Giraudy 2012; Harbers and Ingram 2014), I have found that this also applies to the enforcement of religious freedom. Indeed, the existence of subnational areas that are characterized by weak rule of law and weak state capacity has obvious implications for the enforcement of democratic rights, including religious freedom. The indigenous communities in Colombia and the lawless states in north Mexico fit in this category (Petri 2020b).

I had the opportunity to observe similar dynamics in subnational communities in San Salvador (El Salvador) and Caracas (Venezuela) (Petri 2020a). In all these cases, I identified structural forms of religious discrimination at the subnational level, which may have nothing to do with the quality of national legislation and that are not reported in most religious discrimination measuring instruments (Petri and Glasius 2022). Through an in-depth study on religious freedom in the Muslim world, Daniel Philpott came to a similar conclusion. Because of the important heterogeneity in the Muslim world, tailormade and locally developed policies are needed to promote religious freedom (Philpott 2019).

Of course, this shortcoming of religious freedom datasets applies to quantitative methods in general. I realize that doing qualitative studies of religious discrimination in subnational areas may be time-consuming and resource intensive. However, it is important for quantitative and qualitative approaches to remain in dialogue with one another in order to harness the advantages of both types of approaches (see Birdsall and Beaman 2020). Quantitative indexes should be more open to input from a larger variety of sources in order to reduce their blind spots on subnational realities. Katherine Marshall makes this point well:

> Country analysis is crucial because the specific context has vital importance for a granular appreciation for causes and impact of FoRB [freedom of religion and belief] violations. This granularity, however, is poorly reflected in broader quantitative transnational and time series indices that highlight trends and comparative impact. (Marshall 2021, 2; see also Schirrmacher 2016)

The Multidimensionality of Religious Freedom

Most religious freedom datasets adopt what can be called a "laundry list" approach. The problem with this type of approach, as Fox

analyzes, is that laundry lists are either so specific —"limited to various aspects or instances of the relationship between religion and violence and revolution"—that they are insufficiently comprehensive, or on the contrary so comprehensive that they have "extensive lists of factors contributing to religious violence and revolution" (Fox 1999, 443). In essence, laundry lists are subject to what Owen (2003) refers to as a "measurement paradox": they are never representative (exhaustive) enough, but the longer they are the more difficult data collection becomes, particularly if the methodology requires cross-national comparisons.

Because of coding requirements, the simplification of reality by focusing on a reduced number of variables is unavoidable in quantitative instruments. As stated before, measuring a fixed set of variables can be useful to make cross-national comparisons and to observe evolutions of these variables over time. However, such approaches do not account for the complex interaction between social-political factors which, under specific circumstances, can lead to situations of vulnerability for religious minorities. Moreover, important explanatory factors in particular cases may not have been included in the datasets and risk being ignored in the subsequent analysis.

Empirical observation issues arise in the case of cluttered civil conflicts. As Marshall (2021, 32) affirms, "Complex interactions among social, political, and cultural factors that so often contribute to the vulnerability of specific religious communities or individuals are difficult to discern." In such cases, many are quick to discard cases as "not religious persecution," pointing to alternative political, economic, or social explanations (Polinder 2010; Hurd 2015; Pérouse de Montclos 2018).[3] In such comments it is implicitly assumed that an incident should only be labeled as religious persecution if the perpetrators had a deliberate religious motive and that religion is the only, or at least the most important, explanatory factor. An additional implicit assumption is that an incident should only be labeled as religious persecution if it has a sufficient degree of intensity, a notion Marshall rejects (2018).

Yet, conflicts that are purely religious are rare.[4] As Fox (2001, 54) rightly observes: "there are few, if any, important political events that are purely motivated by religion. Most are motivated and influenced by complex factors." A case in point is the interpretation of the ongoing sectarian violence in northern Nigeria, a cluttered civil conflict in which isolating the religious element is particularly challenging, as Madueke explains (2018). Another Nigerian scholar, who prefers to remain anonymous for security reasons, argues that this conflict is subject to a "persecution eclipse," which he defines as follows:

> [A] situation whereby [religious] persecution and civil conflict overlap to the extent that the former is in a real or imaginative sense overshadowed or rendered almost invisible by the latter. … [Persecution] eclipse is a dangerous set of lenses that: minimizes, overlooks, or denies the suffering of a victim of persecution; encourages a causal analysis that provides vicarious justifications for the perpetrators' actions; shifts the focus of interrogation from religious freedom violations to conflict analysis; and embraces an instrumental view of conflict in which religion assumes an insignificant place in the analysis. (Anonymous author 2013, 1)

In other words, political and economic factors related to ongoing civil unrest often overshadow and obscure the religious dimension of the violence in Nigeria.

In other cases, religion may overshadow political and economic factors. For example, in a monograph about the Mexican state of Chiapas, Kovic describes how "religion masks political and economic struggles" (Kovic 2007, 203; see also Toft 2011). In my own research, I have shown that when drug cartels take over essential functions of the state, as is the case in northeast Mexico, they effectively regulate aspects of religion, either because they view religion as a source of revenue or to defend their interests, contradicting the conventional wisdom that organized crime is not particularly concerned

with religion. In other words, religious freedom may be threatened by non-state actors who need not be religiously motivated. Most importantly, by focusing on religious behavior rather than religious identity, we bring to light the risks people may run because they translate their religiosity into behavior that, intentionally or unintentionally, challenges local powerholders (Petri 2020b; Petri and Glasius 2022). So, even though the motives of organized crime most of the time do not really have anything to do with religion *per se*, this does not mean that the religious freedom of religious minorities—actively practicing believers in this case—is not affected by it.

All this suggests that alternative political, economic, or social explanations do not invalidate the existence of a relationship between religious behavior and vulnerability (Marshall 2018; Petri and Glasius 2022). It is a mistake to want to single out one factor of vulnerability, because conflicts are always multifactorial. Indeed, in the case of threats to religious minorities that do not have a religious motivation that can be singled out, this does not mean that religion does not play a role. Rather, I believe religion should be viewed as one factor, among other factors, of the vulnerability of religious minorities.

Religious freedom datasets would do well to take fuller account of all the relevant actors, including non-state actors, that can exercise various kinds of power over religious people and their activities. Variables describing restrictions on religious freedom (or persecution of religious groups) by non-state actors are comparatively underutilized and/or underemphasized in much religious freedom research. The Pew Research Center's Social Hostilities Index does consider a range of non-state actors, but in the context of a social hostilities category that is too broad for a single index in my opinion. The new societal module of the Religion and State Project incorporates some consideration of nonstate actors, as has Open Doors International's World Watch List since its methodological revision in 2012, but overall, it is still the case that religious discrimination by the state receives the most scholarly and journalistic attention. It is therefore essential for religious freedom datasets to consider non-state actors such as organized crime or indigenous authorities as players that can restrict the religious freedom of religious minorities, either by taking advantage of the impunity or by effectively taking over control of government. The "over-attention on the state," as Owen calls it, makes it difficult to observe the role of non-state actors (Owen 2003, 10).

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM HAS TO BE A CROSS-CUTTING POLICY ISSUE, MUCH LIKE GENDER OR THE ENVIRONMENT

Finally, religious freedom datasets could be improved by developing variables that describe some of the overlooked aspects I mentioned in this essay, notably religious freedom violations that occur in spheres of society other than the religious sphere. Religious freedom is a multidimensional and intersectional concept that has implications beyond religious policy. Indeed, religious freedom is not only affected by religious policy, but by many other policy areas such as public health, refugee policy, foreign policy, infrastructure, urban planning, or security policy (Petri and Buijs 2019). In other words, religious freedom has to be a cross-cutting policy issue, much like gender or the environment. Policy documents around the world talk about "the gender perspective" and the "environmental perspective." While this is naturally important, the "religious freedom perspective" is often missing. ❖

About the Author

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Notes

1. In the World Watch List methodology, the actions of non-state actors are also taken into consideration. So, if the fanatical movements would have harmed these missionaries, it would have driven the country score up as well.
2. My account of these two examples is based on personal conversations with Open Doors staff and with Colombian government officials in the first case.
3. Birdsall and Beaman (2020, 66) argue that the conceptions and functions of "religion" and "religious freedom" are dependent upon the cultural background of the observer.
4. This is true even for conflicts that are described in the Bible. One could argue that the incident of the stoning of Stephen, who is traditionally remembered as the first Christian martyr, was more political than religious. A careful analysis of the report of this incident in the New Testament (Acts 6:8-8:1) shows that he was not killed for religious reasons, but because he had insulted the members of the Sanhedrin and because he represented a movement that threatened their influence (Boyd-MacMillan 2006). The crucifixion of Jesus himself could also be interpreted in political terms: he was sentenced to death because he was a threat to the authority of the Romans. Notwithstanding the obvious political dimension of these incidents, no one would dare to downplay the religious convictions of both its perpetrators and its victims. A multifactorial approach to interpret these incidents that recognizes its political and religious dimensions seems therefore more appropriate.

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