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Dennis P. Petri

Measuring What Matters

Evolving Metrics of Religious Freedom

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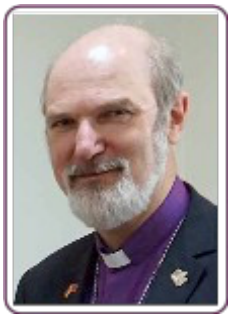

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Measuring What Matters:

Evolving Metrics of Religious Freedom

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Abstract

This article surveys the evolving landscape of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) measurement, proposing a typology of four major instrument types: narrative-coded datasets, expert opinion-based indices, survey-based tools, and real-time event datasets. While FoRB metrics have grown increasingly sophisticated, they still face challenges, including conceptual ambiguities, underreporting, and limited subnational sensitivity. The paper critiques existing tools in capturing non-Western religious expressions, intra-group diversity, and the distinction between restrictions and violations. It also highlights emerging priorities: measuring the positive presence of FoRB, ensuring equality in practice, and recognizing geographic variation. The study argues for a more holistic, context-sensitive, and policy-relevant approach.

Keywords: *religious freedom, FoRB metrics, event datasets, measurement typology, human rights data, conceptual clarity, subnational variation*

Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) measurement instruments have gradually become more sophisticated. The rudimentary tools developed by well-intentioned advocates in the 1990s[1] are now surpassed by elaborate academic tools that do justice to the intrinsic complexity and multidimensional nature of religious freedom. To my knowledge, the tools developed in adjacent human rights fields (such as free speech, press freedom, union rights, fair trial, intellectual property, privacy rights, or even gender equality) cannot rival the level of sophistication of FoRB tools. Only the instruments used in economic development (such as the Social Progress Index), democracy (consider the Varieties of Democracy dataset) or conflict studies (Minorities at Risk, ACLED, Fragile States Index, etc) may be comparable in terms of sophistication.

Among human rights datasets, FoRB datasets stand out for their detailed breakdown of religious freedom into specific dimensions—such as legal restrictions, social hostilities, government favoritism or discrimination, non-state actor involvement, physical violence, and institutional access. This level of granularity is not typically applied to other human rights. FoRB datasets also distinguish between violations committed by state actors (e.g. laws, police, judiciary), non-state actors (e.g. militias, mobs, vigilantes), and religious authorities or clerics. By integrating legal frameworks, documented practices, and event-based data, they provide a comprehensive, full-spectrum view of FoRB conditions. Additionally, these datasets often disaggregate violations by group identity, including religious minority or majority status and denominational differences.

Sure, we still have got a long way to go in terms of the impact of the FoRB datasets on policy. Birdsall and Beaman (2020) complained that it's always the

[1] Paul Marshall's Religious Freedom Rating was groundbreaking for its time, though it now appears quite basic. It intentionally adopted the scale used by Freedom House.

same FoRB instrument that is used in policy circles, the Pew Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and the Social Hostilities Index (SHI), which is regrettable not because these indexes are bad, on the contrary, but they are meant to be macro-level indicators that do not offer the granularity that would be helpful for true evidence-based policymaking. I have myself criticized journalist's and policy-maker's "obsession" with religious freedom rankings which leads to oversimplification and other forms of misuse of the instruments. I have also expressed concerns about the widespread reliance on religious freedom rankings by journalists and policymakers. While these rankings may seem appealing for their simplicity, they often create a misleading sense of precision and tend to exaggerate differences between countries. Even individual country scores, though potentially more informative, are subject to the same limitations—oversimplifying complex realities and overlooking important nuances. For a more accurate understanding, such data should always be interpreted with caution and supplemented by contextual and qualitative analysis (Petri 2022; see also Philips 2025). Klocek, among other things, cites challenges related to the incorporation of initiatives and findings of religious freedom research into the broader foreign policy apparatus (Klocek 2019). And Zellman and Fox (2022) made the worrying observation that as the US government budget earmarked for religious freedom has only increased since the adoption of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998, religious freedom violations have as well, raising questions about the efficacy of the programs these funds were used for. However, it is equally plausible that our capacity to monitor and measure such violations has improved substantially in the past two decades—making it appear that religious freedom is deteriorating when, in fact, the tools for detecting violations have simply become more refined. In any event, it's not incidental that USAID-USIP's "Closing the Gap" project (2020–2021) aimed to bridge the gap between religious freedom research and development planning, seeking to interrogate how the former could inform the latter.

Despite valid criticisms regarding the limited policy impact of FoRB datasets, the significant progress the field has made is remarkable. We have moved from a period marked by widespread disinterest in religion—shaped largely by secularization theory—to a growing recognition of religion's role in international relations, and now to the development of increasingly sophisticated instruments for measuring FoRB. These advancements have brought meaningful benefits: they help document the global state of religious freedom, describe and quantify violations, enable cross-national comparisons, and establish religious freedom as a "social fact" in the Durkheimian sense.[2]

[2] The latter point may seem superfluous to the readers of this journal, but the reader should remember religious freedom as a foreign policy priority was far from accepted before the adoption of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 in the United States and similar instruments in other countries. In 2011, Dutch liberal MP Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) sparked significant debate by suggesting a re-examination of the constitutional protection of religious freedom in the Netherlands. She argued that the core components of religious freedom—such as freedom of expression, association, and non-discrimination—were already safeguarded by other constitutional

This study[3] does not aim to provide an exhaustive review of all existing FoRB datasets. Instead, I propose a typology of the main categories of measurement instruments that remain in active use and discuss their respective strengths and limitations. I then examine key analytical challenges and measurement gaps such as operationalization difficulties and the need for greater sensitivity to non-Western contexts. I then turn to emerging priorities in FoRB measurement, including the need to capture positive dimensions of religious freedom and measure equality and fairness in the exercise of FoRB. I conclude by summarizing the main gaps and proposing recommendations for improved data collection and policy relevance.

Typologies of FoRB Measurement Instruments

To gain a clearer understanding of the current landscape of research on FoRB measurement instruments, it is useful to adopt a typological perspective. FoRB datasets can be broadly grouped into four main categories, based on their methodological approach and data sources: (1) coding of narrative sources, such as country reports and legal texts; (2) expert opinion-based measures, which rely on assessments from scholars or practitioners; (3) survey-based instruments, which capture attitudes; and (4) real-time event datasets, which document concrete incidents of religious freedom violations.

Coding of Narrative Sources

The first category of FoRB measurement instruments includes datasets based on the systematic coding of narrative sources.[4] These tools derive quantitative indicators from qualitative reports—typically government publications, legal documents, or NGO reports—through structured coding protocols. The most prominent and widely used instruments in this category are the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and the Social Hostilities Index (SHI), developed by Brian Grim and Roger Finke (2006; 2011) and published annually by the Pew Research Center.

The GRI and SHI rely primarily on the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Reports, supplemented by 18 other sources, to generate a standardized assessment of religious restrictions and hostilities across countries. The GRI captures 20 indicators of government-imposed restrictions, while

provisions. Therefore, she questioned whether a separate constitutional article on religious freedom was necessary.

[3] This article is part of a special issue titled "Religious Freedom Studies: The State of the Field and Recommendations for Future Research." The issue is made possible by a collaboration between *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* and the IRF Secretariat's Global Academic Council (GAC), and by a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust (TRT) to Love Your Neighbor Community (LYNC).

[4] I leave less known and discontinued FoRB datasets such as the Herfindahl Index of Religious Pluralism (Alesina et al. 2003), the State Regulation of Religion (Chaves and Cann 1992) and the Government Religious Preference dataset (Brown 2016) out of consideration.

the SHI uses 13 indicators to assess societal pressures, including mob violence, harassment, and social norms. Together, these indices are widely recognized in policy circles for providing macro-level trend data on religious freedom conditions across nearly every country in the world.

While Pew's indices are the most visible and widely cited, they are not the most granular. The Religion and State (RAS) Project, housed at Bar-Ilan University and led by Jonathan Fox, offers a more detailed and analytically robust alternative. Although the findings of RAS rarely contradict the broad trends identified by the Pew indices, they provide considerably greater depth and disaggregation. Methodologically, the RAS Project, which includes various datasets,[5] employs a more rigorous data collection process, including a significantly broader range of variables and sources, such as national legislation, court cases, media reports, and academic studies. This allows RAS to capture the specific mechanisms, legal frameworks, and group-level dynamics behind observed restrictions and hostilities, enabling a more nuanced understanding of religious freedom conditions that often remain obscured in Pew's aggregate scoring system.

In its third and fourth data collection rounds, the RAS incorporates a broader range of sources, a larger number of coded variables, and a disaggregated approach that scores each religious group separately. RAS3, for example, covers 771 religious minorities in 183 countries, and RAS4 expands this scope further. The dataset includes 171 government-related variables and, since the addition of a societal module in 2014, 34 forms of societal discrimination, such as religiously motivated violence, employment discrimination, and social exclusion (Fox 2024; Fox, Finke, and Mataic 2018). Unlike Pew's indices, which treat religious communities as a whole within a country, RAS disaggregates data by religious group, making it possible to identify differential treatment of religious traditions, whether majority or minority, within the same national context.

This capacity for disaggregation is one of RAS's major strengths. It enables researchers to analyze intra-country and inter-group variation, offering a clearer picture of which religious minorities face specific types of discrimination or privilege. Moreover, the public availability of the dataset allows researchers to construct their own composite indices by selecting relevant variables—an option unavailable in Pew's standardized model. This does not apply only for the various indicators of state and non-state discrimination, but also for a broad offer of detailed variables on topics such as Religious Education in Public Schools, Restrictions on Abortion or Blasphemy Laws.

The complexity of the RAS dataset is perhaps its main limitation. Its updates are less frequent than Pew's annual releases, which limits its immediate applicability for policy actors seeking real-time data. This may explain why RAS, despite its academic prominence—having been cited in over 250 scholarly

[5] The RAS Main dataset measures government religion policies toward all religions in a country, to which a Societal Module was added in 2014. RAS Minorities focuses on state treatment of specific religious minorities. RAS Constitutions analyzes how national constitutions reference and regulate religion.

publications—is not yet widely adopted in the policy and advocacy spheres. The more frequent updates and standardized format of Pew make it easier to use for public reporting and international comparisons.[6]

It is also worth noting that the RAS Project does not explicitly frame itself as a FoRB measurement tool. Nevertheless, its content and coded indicators align closely with internationally recognized dimensions of religious freedom, as argued by Fox (2019).

Despite their differences, both Pew and RAS, as well as the religious freedom variable in the Civil Liberty Dataset and the now discontinued Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Project, share a relative underemphasis on societal discrimination. This likely reflects the historical focus on state actors as the primary violators of religious freedom—especially in the Cold War context, marked by the authoritarian regimes and state-sponsored religious ideologies. However, non-state actors now play an increasingly important role, and their actions remain underexplored in both datasets. Pew captures societal hostilities through a single index, while RAS only introduced its societal module in 2014, and the number of variables remains smaller than those covering government actions.

While much attention in FoRB measurement is placed on state-imposed restrictions, societal hostilities—ranging from hate crimes and mob violence to social exclusion—play an equally important role in shaping religious freedom conditions. These forms of pressure are arguably more volatile than government actions, often responding to political events, media narratives, or economic shifts. One could hypothesize that government discrimination tends to be more stable over time, while societal hostilities fluctuate more dynamically, sometimes escalating rapidly in response to perceived threats or populist rhetoric. Given that non-state actors, including community groups, extremist organizations, and even organized crime, are frequently the main perpetrators of FoRB violations, understanding their role and the dynamics that trigger societal hostility is essential. Yet, these factors are notoriously difficult to measure, especially when they occur informally or go unreported. Improving FoRB measurement requires greater attention to these fluid, decentralized, and context-specific forms of religious repression.

Importantly, narrative-coded datasets such as Pew and RAS differ from expert opinion-based indices in that they are grounded in empirical sources. Like event-based datasets, they rely on official records, media reports, and documented incidents, which ties them more directly to verifiable facts. This makes them less vulnerable to coder bias, as interpretations are more tightly constrained by the content of the source materials rather than subjective judgments.

[6] The dataset has recently been adapted and republished for advocacy purposes as the Global Religious Freedom Index by the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), with the publication of regional reports—beginning with Sub-Saharan Africa (2025), and with upcoming reports on the Post-Communist Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Europe, Latin America, Asia, and MENA (2025–2026), and a global report expected in 2026.

Expert Opinion-Based Measures

The second type of FoRB measurement instruments are expert opinion-based tools. These rely on the judgments of individuals considered to have specialized knowledge—often through structured questionnaires or rating exercises—rather than on direct coding of narrative or event-based data. These tools typically use panels of country experts, practitioners, or field staff who assess religious freedom conditions using standardized rubrics. While the data thus produced benefits from informed, context-specific input, it also carries the limitations inherent to subjective interpretation (Ouchi 2004).

Among Christian ministries, the World Watch List (WWL) developed by Open Doors International has achieved the widest recognition. It underwent a major methodological overhaul in 2014 and has since been audited annually by the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF). The WWL draws on multiple sources of expert input, including field staff and external country experts, each of whom completes a detailed questionnaire. The final scores are compiled and refined by a lead country analyst, who is allowed a degree of discretion to deviate from the experts' input, provided the reasoning is made explicit (Sauer 2012).

A particularity of the WWL is that it focuses specifically on persecution of Christians, not religious freedom more broadly, and it applies its assessment only to the top 50 countries deemed most dangerous for Christian communities (an additional 30 countries are monitored). The underlying definition of persecution is theological rather than legal or sociological. This specialized focus allows for depth in a targeted area but also limits its applicability for comparative analysis across religious traditions.

The WWL's strongest asset is its on-the-ground presence in many of the countries it reports on. This field-level engagement brings valuable firsthand knowledge into the assessment process. However, this proximity is also a potential weakness, as it may introduce internal bias or conflicts of interest. Open Doors attempts to mitigate this through its triangulation of information streams and an independent external audit, which enhances the reliability of its scoring.

Derived from the World Watch List (WWL), Sauer (2025) developed a Missions Hostility Index to specifically assess the level of opposition faced by missionary activity across different countries. Sauer's index isolates hostility to proselytism as a unique dimension of religious repression. It combines WWL data to score countries based on factors such as legal restrictions on missionary work, societal rejection of conversion efforts, and the risk of persecution for engaging in evangelistic activities. This index is particularly valuable for faith-based organizations engaged in global missions, as it offers a tailored lens through which to evaluate operational risk and strategic engagement in hostile environments (Sauer 2025).

Other Christian organizations (such as Aid to the Church in Need, Voice of the Martyrs, and Christian Concern International) have produced similar tools or country rankings, but these are typically far more rudimentary and primarily

serve awareness-raising purposes rather than offering rigorously developed measurement instruments.

Expert opinion-based indexes that focus narrowly on Christian communities, particularly evangelical or missionary activity, have drawn criticism for reinforcing perceptions of bias in international religious freedom advocacy. Scholars and critics argue that these indexes often reflect a Western-centric framework, privileging Christian experiences of persecution while overlooking the broader spectrum of religious repression. This selective emphasis can reduce the credibility and perceived neutrality of such measures, particularly in multifaith or non-Christian contexts.

An ethnographic study by Philips (2025) underscores this concern, demonstrating how religious freedom advocates construct Christian persecution as a global crisis through strategic use of data. Philips shows that organizations often misinterpret or selectively present data—such as omitting comparisons or conflating types of religious restriction—to support the claim that Christians are the most persecuted religious group worldwide. By leveraging the perceived objectivity of quantification, these actors legitimize a narrative that aligns with evangelical political agendas, even as it obscures more complex realities of global religious persecution.

Another expert-opinion-based dataset that includes a FoRB-relevant dimension is the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. While not specifically designed to measure religious freedom, V-Dem is widely regarded as the successor to the Polity project in evaluating the quality of democracy. Among its roughly 200 indicators, as part of a broader index of civil liberties, V-Dem includes two that are directly related to FoRB: v2clrelig—Government respect for religious freedom, and v2clchurch—Freedom of religious organizations to operate without state interference (Coppedge et al. 2025).[7]

These variables are derived from expert coder assessments, following a highly developed methodology intended to reduce individual coder bias. V-Dem uses a system of cross-coder reliability checks and algorithms to adjust for optimistic or pessimistic tendencies among individual experts (Coppedge et al. 2025). While the names of expert coders are made public, their individual scores are not disclosed, limiting full transparency. The key limitation here is that religious freedom is represented by only one or two variables in a much broader governance framework, and only considered from the perspective of state restrictions, ignoring societal hostilities. This makes it difficult to capture the full complexity of FoRB conditions, particularly those involving non-state actors, minority-specific dynamics, or positive rights like access to worship spaces or faith-based education.

V-Dem's strengths lie in its long time series, broad country coverage, and the ability to compare FoRB indicators with other democratic metrics, such as media freedom, civil liberties, or judicial independence. However, the limited

[7] The religious freedom component of the Human Freedom Index, co-published by the Cato Institute and Fraser Institute, draws on variables from both the V-Dem dataset and the Civil Liberty Dataset (Skaaning 2024; Coppedge et al. 2025)

number of FoRB-related variables raises questions about the meaningfulness of its insights for specialized religious freedom research.

A final example in this category is the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI), which includes a pilot module on religious freedom as part of its broader set of rights assessments. Like V-Dem, HRMI relies on expert surveys to assess government respect for various rights, but its FoRB component is still under development and currently lacks the depth or validation of more established indices.

Survey-Based Instruments

A third category of FoRB measurement instruments relies on surveys to assess perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to religious freedom. Surveys offer a way to gather data directly from large populations, often through structured questionnaires that use Likert scales or other rating systems to capture levels of agreement or disagreement with particular statements. Survey-based instruments are particularly valuable in contexts where perceptions of religious freedom diverge significantly from official legal frameworks or expert assessments. They provide insight into how individuals experience or interpret religious freedom in daily life, as opposed to how it is codified or observed externally. In doing so, they help reveal the social climate around religion—such as tolerance, prejudice, or support for pluralism—which may not always correlate with government behavior or media reports (Creswell and Creswell 2022).

One prominent example in this category is the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) Global 100 Index of Anti-Semitism, which has surveyed public attitudes toward Jewish people in over 100 countries. The index includes questions that measure agreement with various anti-Semitic stereotypes, such as beliefs about Jewish influence, loyalty, or behavior. Each country is then assigned a score reflecting the proportion of respondents who agree with a majority of these statements (ADL 2024). While the index focuses exclusively on anti-Semitic attitudes rather than religious freedom per se, it provides a useful model for measuring societal biases through survey data.

International public opinion surveys, including widely cited instruments such as the World Values Survey, Gallup World Poll and the various regional Barometers, rarely include questions about religious freedom itself. A rare—and telling—exception comes from Pew Research Center's 2013 global survey of Muslims in 39 countries, which included a question asking whether respondents believed it was "a good thing" or "a bad thing" if people of other faiths are able to practice their religion very freely (Pew Research Center 2013). In the U.S. context, the Becket Fund's longitudinal survey series on American perceptions of religious freedom is a promising example of how regular, well-designed public opinion research can provide insight into evolving attitudes on FoRB (Becket Fund for Religious Liberty 2024). This model could usefully be replicated or adapted for international survey consortia.

That such a basic question appears so infrequently in global surveys underscores a broader problem: questions about religious liberty should not be siloed

within religious subpopulations or limited to one-time studies, but rather integrated into recurring international survey frameworks and posed to general populations. Compounding this issue is the lack of comprehensive efforts to systematically compare public perceptions of religious freedom, as captured through surveys, with objective metrics derived from legal texts, expert assessments, or event-based datasets. This remains a significant gap in the literature and a potential area for future research.

Real-Time Event Datasets

The final category of FoRB measurement instruments—incident-level or real-time event datasets—is in active development. While well-established in conflict studies, this approach is relatively new in the measurement of religious freedom. These datasets aim to record discrete, verifiable incidents of violence, discrimination, or repression, often using media reports or other real-time sources. These tools are highly ambitious, costly to maintain, and inherently dynamic, requiring continuous updates and verification.

Previous attempts to apply this model to FoRB include the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Dataset (Svensson and Nilsson 2017), the Religion and Conflict Database (RDCD) (Basedau, Pfeiffer, and Vüllers 2015), and a short-lived religion pilot within the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). These efforts were either discontinued or absorbed into broader conflict-tracking systems, often due to sustainability challenges.

While the Religion and State (RAS) Project also codes concrete, documentable state behaviors, it does so retrospectively through narrative summaries and is not real-time. The focus here is on datasets that aim for near-real-time coverage of incidents as they occur, such as ACLED and the newer initiatives described below.

The most recent development in this space is the Violent Incidents Database (VID), hosted by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) and the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF). Initially focused on Latin America, the VID expanded globally in 2021. It collects and verifies incidents of religious freedom violations based on digital media sources. Unlike aggregate reports, the VID documents only what is knowable, but aims to include everything that is knowable (Petri and Flores 2021; Petri, Wisdom, and Bainbridge 2025).[8]

What sets the VID apart is its open-source and falsifiable structure: the database is continuously updated, and the public can submit additional incidents or corrections through an online form. It includes geolocation, enabling subnational analysis, and—unlike most other tools—tracks both the religion of the

[8] Although a recent tool, the VID has been cited in publications by the United States of Peace (Klocek and Bledsoe 2022; Petri and Flores 2022) and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (Petri et al. 2023; Petri and Klocek 2025). Additionally, it was presented at the IRF Summit in January 2024 and mentioned in a Universal Periodic Review report by the UN Human Rights Council on Nigeria, as well as in country reports by the US State Department.

victims and, where possible, of the perpetrators. Furthermore, the VID categorizes incidents by type of perpetrator (state or non-state) and disaggregates event characteristics to include physical violence, threats, harassment, and discrimination. This level of detail, while difficult to maintain comprehensively, opens new possibilities for understanding patterns of religiously motivated violence, and complements FoRB datasets that use a different approach.

While event-based tools like the VID can never offer complete coverage, they provide a real-time, evidence-based lens into religious freedom violations—grounded not in perceptions or expert judgments, but in observable incidents. Their greatest strength is also their greatest challenge: they are dynamic by design and never finished.

Analytical Challenges and Measurement Gaps

Each FoRB measurement instrument has its own strengths and limitations. While the growing sophistication of these tools has significantly advanced our understanding of religious freedom conditions across countries and over time, important analytical challenges and measurement gaps remain. These include conceptual ambiguities, blind spots in coverage, and methodological difficulties that continue to constrain the precision, comparability, and usability of FoRB data. This section explores these limitations in greater detail.

The Operationalization Gap in FoRB Measurement

A persistent challenge across all FoRB measurement instruments is the difficulty of operationalizing a concept as multidimensional as religious freedom. Whether approached from a human rights, politico-logical, or theological perspective, religious freedom includes a broad range of elements. In line with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it is both individual and collective, public and private, and it manifests across different spheres of social life. Violations of religious freedom may be violent and non-violent, high- and low-intensity, perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, and motivated by religious and non-religious factors. It may target people for their identity or for their behavior inspired by belief.

Most codebooks and methodological documents of FoRB datasets acknowledge this complexity, but much of it is flattened during operationalization. This is particularly evident in how the concept of religion is translated into measurable indicators. Theoretical approaches to religion increasingly adopt inclusive and layered definitions that emphasize belief as existential meaning-making (McGrath 2025), religion as social ritual and symbolic process (Turner 1969), systems of supernatural compensators (Stark and Bainbridge 1987), and everyday embodied practice (Ammerman 2007; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005). Yet, the actual coding frameworks in FoRB datasets often fall back on narrow proxies.

A critical question is how to deal with diverse religious and belief communities—particularly those that are numerically small, culturally marginalized, or insti-

tutionally unrecognized. Among the tools currently available, the Religion and State (RAS) Project stands out. Unlike other projects that provide a general country score or focus on a single religious minority (e.g. Christians), RAS scores minorities in each country separately. It includes all minorities that constitute at least 0.2 % of a country's population, as well as Jewish, Muslim, and Christian minorities that are smaller than 0.2 % but consist of at least several hundred individuals.[9] Round 3 of RAS included 771 such minorities in 183 countries and territories. Round 4 is expanding this coverage by introducing finer distinctions between different Christian denominations and identifying previously overlooked small minorities.

However, even RAS remains limited in some respects. It is not designed to capture internal diversity within traditions. For example, while "Judaism" or "Christianity" may be recognized as distinct categories, they can conceal sharp internal variations—such as progressive Jewish women or marginalized Pentecostal groups—whose experiences differ significantly from those of mainstream communities. These groups represent what might be called minorities within minorities, whose specific vulnerabilities are rarely tracked. Examples of discussions of minority-within-the-minority cases are Kymlicka (1996) (Canada and United States), McDonald (1998) (Australia and Canada), Pfaff-Czarnecka (2010) (South Asia), Jobani and Perez (2014) (Israel), and Pinto (2015) (Israel and Canada).

Hyper-minority groups—such as small syncretic movements, unregistered religious actors, or emerging spiritual communities—are even more invisible. These communities often lack formal recognition or documentation, making them difficult to capture in traditional datasets. Additionally, they may hold beliefs or engage in practices that blur the lines between religion, ideology, and cultural identity, challenging conventional definitions of religion used in legal or statistical frameworks (De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2012; Gutiérrez Zúñiga and la Torre 2016; RIFREM 2016). When broader definitions of religion are adopted—encompassing worldviews, philosophies of life, and existential belief systems—the challenge of disaggregation becomes even more complex (Altnurme, Arigita, and Pasture 2023; Naugle 2002; Smart 1998; Stenmark 2022; Taylor 2007). Where does one draw the line between religion and non-religious ideology?

The absence of religious affiliation data in national censuses further exacerbates the problem. Countries such as Nigeria, Egypt, and Colombia do not collect or publish official data on religious identity, likely due to political, historical, or ideological reasons. In such contexts, researchers often turn to global repositories like the World Religion Database (WRD) or the World Christian Database (WCD) (Johnson and Grim 2024; Johnson and Zurlo 2025). While valuable, these sources rely on broad groupings and rarely capture intra-faith variation or the full spectrum of belief systems—especially Indigenous and informal traditions.

All of this addresses only identity. Yet, religious behavior—what people do because of their faith—can also make individuals and groups vulnerable to FoRB

[9] The VID follows the categories of the RAS Project.

violations, even when their identity is not, in itself, marginalized. For example, although scholars widely accept that both religious identity and behavior can trigger vulnerability (Fox 2013; Grim 2005), the majority of variables in their datasets measure identity-based discrimination, leaving out many actions driven by religious convictions. This may be sufficient in contexts like the Middle East, where religious identity is already a source of vulnerability. However, in Latin America, as my own research reveals, it is often religious behavior (such as preaching, social outreach, or religiously motivated activism) rather than identity per se that attracts hostility or repression (Petri 2021).

Another conceptual problem lies in the widely shared implicit assumption that a FoRB violation must be motivated by religion. This is difficult to maintain in practice. As Glasius and I have argued, what matters is not the intent of the perpetrator but whether a person's religious identity or behavior contributes to their vulnerability (Petri and Glasius 2022). This technical point has significant consequences, as ignoring it may lead to many incidents being dismissed a priori when they should, in fact, be considered.

A related problem is the implicit assumption held by many that a FoRB incident only qualifies as one if it exclusively applies to a particular religious minority. Even though religious minorities may be vulnerable to the same threats as other groups, there may still be some degree of specificity to their vulnerability, which may be related to their religious convictions or behavior, or the increased statistical probabilities to become a victim as is the case in Nigeria, for example (ORFA 2024; Petri and Bainbridge 2024).

The limitations presented above are not entirely avoidable, given the constraints of quantitative research. Coding necessarily requires selection: only a finite number of variables can be tracked. The Religion and State (RAS) Project is probably the most ambitious in this regard, with over 200 variables in its latest version, yet it too is limited by the initial choices made in the coding framework. The RAS Project has proven responsive to qualitative research, often incorporating new variables inspired by insights from qualitatie fieldwork. In contrast, Pew's GRI and SHI indices have not meaningfully evolved since their inception.

Undetected or Underreported Violations

Religious freedom violations do not only go undetected because of the operationalization challenges discussed in the previous section. Two additional dynamics contribute significantly to the underreporting of FoRB violations: first, the limited availability of reliable data, especially in repressive environments; and second, the increasing sophistication of both state and non-state actors in concealing violations.[10]

[10] These issues were the subject of a dedicated symposium and a subsequent series of essays on "Masking Religious Freedom Violations" hosted by Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University and Canopy Forum in November 2024, highlighting various types of violations of religious freedom that fall outside the current scope of measurable or observable data: https://canopyforum.org/events/masking-religious-freedom-violations/.

In contexts marked by authoritarianism, weak institutions, or social marginalization, data collection is often incomplete or altogether absent (Glasius et al. 2018). The absence of reports does not imply the absence of violations. For example, claims about large numbers of imprisoned religious believers—such as the oft-cited figure of 70,000 Christians in labor camps in North Korea—are difficult to substantiate, not necessarily because they are false, but because reliable verification mechanisms are lacking. Similarly, religious communities differ significantly in their ability to document abuses, as the experience with the VID reveals. Christian and Jewish advocacy groups tend to be well organized and capable of publicizing violations. Other communities—such as moderate Muslim groups, Buddhists, or Indigenous communities—often lack centralized mechanisms for reporting or do not prioritize documentation in the same way. As a result, many abuses against these groups remain invisible in global datasets.

Even when data exists, some violations are deliberately masked through non-religious justifications. Governments may use zoning laws to block the construction of places of worship (Guardia Hernández 2010; Osorio Cardona and Girón Cárdenas 2024), or apply fabricated criminal charges against religious leaders (Apostle 2024; Prud'homme 2010; Tyson 2021). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on public gatherings had a disproportionate impact on collective religious life. While justified as public health measures, they raised legitimate questions about how states balance public safety with the protection of religious rights (Burlacu et al. 2020; Du Plessis 2021; Flood et al. 2020; Madera 2022; Martínez-Torreón 2021; Mazurkiewicz 2021). In all these cases, it may not be immediately apparent that religious freedom is being violated.

Securitization policies present another example. In many Western countries, Muslim communities have been subjected to surveillance, profiling, and legal restrictions framed as national security measures. Although these policies are rarely labeled as religious discrimination in official discourse, their disproportionate impact on specific religious groups—particularly Muslims—suggests otherwise. Scholars have shown that counter-terrorism frameworks often conflate Islamic identity with security threats, contributing to the normalization of exceptional legal treatment for Muslim populations (Cesari 2013; Fox 2016; Nussbaum 2012). While both the Pew and RAS datasets capture some of the patterns associated with securitization—such as state monitoring or legal restrictions targeting specific groups—they do not explicitly distinguish security-driven policies from other forms of restriction. As a result, the deeper legal and sociopolitical implications of securitization remain underexplored in current FoRB measurement frameworks.

Religious freedom violations also go undetected when they occur in complex or overlapping conflict settings. In places like northern Nigeria or parts of India, religious identity may be a key driver of violence, yet is often subsumed under broader categories like ethnic, sectarian or communal conflict (see Marshall 2018; Toft 2011). Similarly, violations in Latin America frequently escape notice because traditional FoRB analysis focuses narrowly on church-state relations

(Alves 2020; Gill 2008). Yet the region presents a range of contemporary challenges, particularly in areas controlled by organized crime (Petri and Glasius 2022) as well as in indigenous communities (Reguart Segarra 2021).

These examples illustrate that many violations fall outside the current reach of FoRB datasets, not due to negligence but because they are difficult—sometimes impossible—to quantify with current tools. Whether concealed through legal mechanisms, lost in bureaucratic reporting gaps, or occurring in under-monitored regions, these violations call for a broader and more adaptable approach.

Distinguishing Between Restrictions and Violations

A persistent conceptual challenge in the field of religious freedom measurement lies in distinguishing between legitimate restrictions and outright violations of the right to FoRB. While this distinction is foundational in international human rights law, applying it in empirical research and data collection remains highly complex.

During his tenure as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt offered a rigorous clarification of this issue. According to his reports and subsequent scholarship, states may, under specific and narrowly defined circumstances, impose limitations on the external manifestations of religion or belief. These limitations are permissible only if they conform to the strict criteria laid out in Article 18(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Specifically, any restriction must be prescribed by law, must serve a legitimate public interest—such as public safety, health, order, or the rights of others—and must be both proportionate to the stated aim and non-discriminatory in its application (Bielefeldt 2020; Gunn 2011; UN Doc A/HRC/19/60). These conditions are not mere formalities but essential safeguards designed to preserve the integrity of the right to religious freedom, even in contexts where it may come into tension with competing public concerns.

Violations, by contrast, arise when these conditions are not satisfied. For example, the imposition of bureaucratic hurdles that prevent religious minorities from obtaining legal recognition, state interference in the internal governance of religious communities, or the arbitrary seizure of religious property are all practices that lack legal justification and therefore constitute violations under international law (UN Doc A/HRC/22/51; UN Doc A/HRC/31/18). Such actions are not only incompatible with the ICCPR but undermine the very foundation of pluralistic societies.

The distinction gained relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many governments imposed restrictions on collective religious gatherings as part of broader public health measures. While these limitations affected the communal aspect of religious life, they do not automatically qualify as FoRB violations if they adhered to the legal principles of necessity, proportionality, and non-discrimination. In such cases, the intention behind the restriction and its consistency with broader public policy objectives are crucial in determining its legitimacy.

Nevertheless, despite the conceptual clarity offered by legal standards, this distinction proves difficult to operationalize in practice. Many restrictions that appear neutral on the surface may in fact have discriminatory intent or disproportionate effects on particular religious communities as I exposed above. The overlap between restriction and violation is particularly common in contexts where governments exploit vague legal provisions—such as public order clauses—to justify broad and often abusive limitations. The coding frameworks used by most datasets, however, are rarely equipped to assess the legal proportionality or context-specific justification of each case. As a result, many restrictions are recorded without a clear determination of whether they cross the line into violations.

This ambiguity presents a significant methodological challenge for FoRB measurement instruments. While the normative distinction between restriction and violation is well established, its empirical application requires deeper legal analysis and often context-specific interpretation. This suggests the need for more nuanced coding practices that engage with international legal standards and incorporate qualitative assessments, particularly when evaluating complex or contested restrictions.

Conceptual Ambiguities and the Politics of Language

A deeply consequential challenge in the measurement of FoRB is the instability and contestation surrounding the language used to define and assess it. Terms such as "persecution," "discrimination," "harassment," and even "religious freedom" itself lack universally agreed definitions. The U.S. International Religious Freedom Act, one of the main legal instruments shaping global discourse, does not even offer a clear definition of religious freedom. What appears to be conceptual richness can easily slip into terminological inflation, or even cacophony, as various actors—governments, NGOs, faith-based organizations, scholars—deploy these terms according to different normative frameworks and cultural or political objectives (Bielefeldt, Pinto, and Petersen 2022; Philips 2025).

This is particularly evident in the proliferation and inconsistent use of terms like "persecution." In the context of asylum applications, "persecution" has a narrow and technical definition with legal implications. In contrast, political activists and religious advocacy groups often employ the term more expansively, referring to a broad range of societal pressures or limitations. These variances are not only disciplinary but also ideological. For instance, some actors equate "persecution" with any constraint on proselytization, while others reserve it for physical violence or institutional repression (Thames 2024). As a result, important violations may be dismissed because they do not fit predefined labels.

Scholars have long pointed to this conceptual disarray. Fox (2019) identifies and operationalizes six competing definitions of religious freedom: free exercise, religious persecution/repression, religious tolerance, absolute separation, neutrality, and laicism. He concludes that, under even the most lenient operationalizations, most countries do not uphold religious freedom. Koenig (2017)

similarly refers to a "polyphony of religious freedom," acknowledging the term's use across diverse legal traditions, often for self-serving reasons, such as justifying conversion or mission work. Joustra (2018) and others have also noted the shifting political uses of religious freedom terminology, which can obscure rather than clarify the normative commitments underlying FoRB advocacy.

The acronym "FoRB" itself, while meant to signal inclusivity and alignment with international standards (notably ICCPR Article 18), has contributed to this problem. Its expanding scope risks diminishing analytic precision. This is especially evident in political and diplomatic arenas, where FoRB is increasingly merged into broader human rights mandates—as illustrated by the UK's special envoy for "FoRB and Human Rights." While such integration may have institutional benefits, it risks diluting the unique legal and moral protections associated with religious freedom.

Language politics also emerge in the overt politicization of FoRB discourse. In the United States, Christian nationalism has instrumentalized religious freedom claims to advance exclusionary political agendas. Scholars such as Haynes (2021) and Johnson (2021) argue that religious freedom rhetoric has become a tool for segments of the Christian Right to resist pluralism and civil rights, often cloaked in appeals to originalist interpretations of constitutional liberty. Juergensmeyer (1998) warned of this tendency decades ago, noting how religious symbols and freedoms can be manipulated to justify violence and political domination.

This dynamic is not exclusive to Christianity. In the Indian context, Hindu nationalist groups have invoked the term "Hinduphobia" to delegitimize criticism of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian violence. However, organizations such as Hindus for Human Rights (Rajagopal 2023) contest this framing, warning that it serves to mask majoritarian repression. Likewise, Dent and Walker (2021), reflecting on African American religious experience, show how religious freedom has historically been used to justify slavery, forced conversions, and segregationist policies—creating deep skepticism about its emancipatory potential. Similarly, many Muslim actors worldwide claim that "religious freedom" should include protection from insults or blasphemy against their faith (Yaakob and Syafiqah Rajuddin 2017). These examples illustrate how FoRB discourse can obscure power asymmetries and serve hegemonic interests, rather than protect the vulnerable.

Such ambiguities are also present in academic and data-driven measurement efforts. Most FoRB datasets adopt working definitions of key terms but rarely make them fully explicit. What one dataset codes as a "restriction" might be classified as a "violation" or omitted entirely by another. This inconsistency complicates efforts to compare across datasets and undermines the reliability of global indices.

Further complicating measurement is the vernacularization of religious freedom—the adaptation of transnational norms to local contexts. As Wilson (2022) explains, vernacularization entails reshaping global concepts to fit culturally and

institutionally specific environments.[11] This is necessary but also risky. In contexts like Afghanistan, as noted by Pinna and Hilliard (2025), applying Western-centric definitions of religious freedom without sensitivity to Islamic jurisprudence or local religious authority structures can misrepresent or marginalize local understandings. Their work with the Ulema Council demonstrates the need for culturally embedded standards that do not impose external assumptions onto domestic realities.

This issue is especially acute in Indigenous contexts, where the sacred is often expressed not in doctrinal texts or hierarchical institutions but through land, community, and ritual practice. For many Indigenous peoples, the desecration of sacred sites or the disruption of traditional ecological knowledge systems constitutes a profound violation of religious freedom. Yet, such violations are rarely recognized as such by legal or policy frameworks that privilege institutional religion (Alves 2020; Petri and Klocek 2025; Reguart Segarra 2021).

These examples underscore the limitations of a one-size-fits-all model for defining and measuring religious freedom. They highlight the need for greater reflexivity in both the design of FoRB instruments and the interpretation of their findings. The field must grapple more explicitly with the conceptual elasticity of its key terms, the political agendas embedded in their usage, and the sociocultural assumptions that shape how religious freedom is understood and applied.

Emerging Priorities in FoRB Measurement

As the field of FoRB measurement continues to evolve, new areas of inquiry are gaining prominence. Traditional indicators have focused primarily on legal restrictions and instances of persecution, but important dimensions of religious freedom remain insufficiently captured. These include questions of equal treatment, positive state action, localized variation, and the need for more holistic and context-sensitive approaches. This section highlights several emerging priorities in FoRB measurement, emphasizing recent efforts to address persistent blind spots and expand the conceptual scope of what religious freedom entails.

[11] The University of Groningen's Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization is currently spearheading a significant thematic initiative titled "The Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief: Perspectives from the Global South." This project, running from 2023 to 2026, builds on the broader Reimagining Religion, Security and Social Transformation program under JISRA—a collaboration backed by Dutch government funding (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The research explores how FoRB is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced in Global South contexts, including Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Uganda. By engaging local scholars, practitioners, and religious actors, the initiative aims to develop culturally grounded frameworks and comparative insights into how religious rights are understood and operationalized in non-Western settings—addressing a critical gap in existing FoRB scholarship. https://rug.nl/research/centre-for-religious-studies/research-centres/centre-religion-conflict-globalization/the-right-to-freedom-or-religion-or-belief.

Metrics for Free Exercise and Equal/Fair Treatment

A key limitation in many religious freedom datasets is the failure to account for implicit favoritism—that is, preferences by the state for certain religious groups that do not necessarily translate into formal restrictions or policies. These privileges may be symbolic, material, or both, and often go unmeasured. Symbolic privileges—such as official recognition of a dominant religion—may appear benign but can perpetuate structural inequality. They subtly signal which faiths are culturally legitimate and which are marginal. Incipient research has begun to address this issue, though it remains underdeveloped.

Costa Rica offers a particularly illustrative example. Even though the country is officially Catholic, this does not result in overt restrictions on other faiths, nor in institutional subordination to the Catholic hierarchy or Catholic doctrines. Most of the material privileges of the Church have been abolished, and Catholic members of parliament do not appear to align in their voting behavior. To the extent that their personal faith influences their politics, it does so in diverse ways—suggesting they do not receive directives from the Catholic hierarchy. Moreover, a host of laws and policies have been adopted recently that the Church explicitly disapproves of, signaling a decline in its influence. In essence, the confessional nature of the Costa Rican state is merely symbolic. Yet, despite its symbolic nature, a perception persists among political scientists that the Church retains influence in the country and continues to shape public debate and national identity in subtle ways (Petri 2022).

Material favoritism persists in more covert forms. In Costa Rica, a Ministry of Education subsidy program places public school teachers in private institutions for "social purposes"—a benefit that has historically gone almost exclusively to Catholic schools. This practice is opaque, hidden within the national education budget under general salary expenditures, making it invisible to most religious freedom datasets. Identifying such patterns requires time-consuming information requests and detailed local knowledge (Carballo Villagra 2019). In secular Mexico, similar dynamics play out through discretionary political party funding that quietly supports local churches in exchange for electoral loyalty—once again bypassing formal mechanisms, contradicting the state's anticlerical policy, and escaping detection in standard data collection (Klocek and Petri 2023). These phenomena are real but difficult to measure. They may be partially captured in expert-opinion tools, but unless explicitly named, they remain interpretative and uncertain.

An important debate in this context concerns government subsidy schemes for private schools and providers of social services. A key example is the "charitable choice" model in the United States, promoted by groups such as the Center for Public Justice. This approach holds that if governments are going to subsidize private organizations to deliver public goods—such as education, healthcare, or welfare services—they should do so on a pluralistic basis that includes qualified faith-based organizations alongside secular ones. This model also emphasizes beneficiary choice, ensuring that individuals can select from

among diverse providers, thereby reinforcing both religious freedom and institutional parity in the public square (Andersen 2009; Smidt 2009).

On the dimension of equal and fair treatment, few datasets distinguish between overt legal discrimination and more subtle forms of inequality—such as symbolic advantages, underrepresentation in public life, or discouragement through red tape. The Government Religious Preference (GRP) dataset disaggregates state favoritism across 30 religious denominations using 28 variables grouped into five composite indices: official status, religious education, financial support, regulatory burdens, and freedom of practice. GRP's fine-grained coding provides a structural map of how some groups receive consistent privileges while others remain excluded (Brown 2016; Brown and James 2017).

On closer inspection, the variables in the GRP dataset are very similar to some of those included in the RAS dataset, particularly those related to the religious support category, which is also one of GRP's sources. The dataset is notable for its extensive historical coverage, but unfortunately, it has not been updated since 2017. That said, the conceptual value of the GRP dataset remains significant, as it highlights a dimension of religious freedom that is often overlooked. GRP demonstrates that formal equality does not necessarily translate into substantive equality.

Measuring favoritism is not simply an academic exercise. As Henne, Saiya, and Hand (2020) argue, even subtle forms of state favoritism toward a majority religion can contribute to radicalization among segments of that majority, particularly when pluralism is perceived as a threat to their cultural or religious hegemony. In Muslim-majority countries, for example, they find that when states extend privileges to dominant Islamic institutions while marginalizing minority sects or non-religious groups, it can create fertile ground for extremist narratives that portray religious diversity as an imported danger or a form of moral decay. In such settings, state favoritism legitimizes exclusionary discourses, fueling societal tensions and occasionally even violence. The authors thus emphasize that unequal support is not merely a matter of rights denial but can actively distort the broader religious landscape, emboldening actors who exploit these imbalances for political or ideological gain.

Similarly, symbolic expressions like "God bless America" may seem routine, but they reinforce a form of religious nationalism that equates national identity with a particular religious tradition—often Christianity or monotheism more broadly (Gorski and Perry 2022). Zellman and Fox (2022) argue that U.S. promotion of religious freedom abroad is shaped by domestic biases that privilege Christianity—both culturally and institutionally—thus exporting a narrow vision of FoRB that neglects non-Christian traditions, a critique echoed by Haynes (2020).

Measuring the Positive Presence of Religious Freedom

A persistent limitation in religious freedom metrics is their overwhelmingly negative framing. Most existing datasets—including Pew's GRI and SHI, the Religion and State (RAS) Project, and the former CIRI project—focus primarily

on the presence of restrictions, violations, or hostilities. While identifying abuses is essential, such a one-sided approach risks overlooking the equally important question: where, and to what extent, is religious freedom actually present?

This asymmetry means that few tools offer indicators that capture progress, improvement, or proactive policies that foster pluralism and freedom. The lack of positive metrics hinders the ability of researchers and policymakers to assess not just where freedom is being violated, but where it is actively being cultivated and protected.

An innovative effort to fill this gap is the work of Maksym Vasin and the NGO Love Your Neighbor Community (LYNC), which is developing a pair of "positive indices" specifically for Central Asia (Vasin 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). These include the Religious Policies and Implementation Index and the Religious Pluralism Index, composed of 17 and 13 questions respectively. Unlike traditional models that penalize bad behavior, LYNC's framework evaluates affirmative steps taken by governments to enhance freedom and pluralism. Using a four-point scoring system, each question measures a continuum from minimal progress (1 point) to full compliance with international standards (4 points). This graded system allows for a more constructive assessment that identifies not only where countries fall short, but where they are improving.

Importantly, LYNC's methodology is designed to be flexible and iterative. Unlike Pew's static structure, which adds sub-questions within a closed framework, LYNC allows for new questions to be added over time, thereby raising the bar as standards evolve. The result is an index that does not merely measure conditions, but actively functions as a tool for building religious freedom. By offering concrete policy suggestions and benchmarks for progress, the index can serve as a roadmap for reform—and perhaps foster a spirit of constructive competition among countries in a given region.

V-Dem's religious freedom variable, v2clrelig, also reflects the positive presence of religious freedom by capturing whether people can convert, proselytize, abstain from religion, or belong to minority groups without harassment. Scored on a 0–4 scale, it offers a summary judgment of real-world conditions rather than merely formal guarantees. Its limitation, as already mentioned, is it does not disaggregate specific enabling policies or consider state from societal actors.

Broader governance indices, such as Freedom House's Freedom in the World, occasionally highlight improvements in religious liberty, while public opinion surveys like the World Values Survey and Latinobarómetro offer insights into societal tolerance and support for FoRB. These initiatives, though diverse in methodology, collectively reflect a growing awareness that measuring the presence of religious freedom is as critical as tracking its absence.

This kind of positive measurement is particularly needed in contexts where governments are making real efforts to advance religious freedom but remain overlooked in traditional datasets. It also has the potential to shift the global discourse from one of merely documenting violations to one of encouraging best practices. More broadly, such an approach invites a rethinking of what

religious freedom measurement is for—not just to name and shame, but to build, support, and recognize progress.

Subnational Variation

While most religious freedom datasets focus on national trends, this "whole-nation bias" (Rokkan [1970] 2009) often obscures significant subnational variation. Although many instruments claim to capture local realities through aggregate national scores, they typically do not provide subnational disaggregation. The assumption that national-level proxies reflect subnational conditions remains largely untested—and increasingly, this assumption proves misleading.

Democratization research has become increasingly aware of the importance of studying subnational dynamics, arguing that democratization does not always occur uniformly across a country's territory. Instead, enclaves of "subnational authoritarianism" may persist within otherwise democratic nation-states (O'Donnell 1993; Gibson 2005; Dabène 2008; Giraudy 2009, 2010, 2012; Harbers and Ingram 2014). The same logic applies to religious freedom, which can be viewed as a dimension of democratic governance.

A small but growing body of research has begun to focus on subnational religious regulation, even though much of it is not explicitly framed as FoRB research. Scholars have explored provincial-level religious policy in China and Russia (Koesel 2014; Yang 2013), sharia law regulation in Indonesia (Buehler 2013; Salim 2015), regional regulation of religious teaching in Southeast Asia (Achilov and Shaykhutdinov 2013; Woods 2018), and state-level sharia-law bans in the United States (Fallon 2013; Hummel 2020; Kim 2014).

Recent literature further underscores the importance of examining religious freedom at the local level. Golan-Nadir, Blumberg, and Baranes (2024), for example, show how local governments in Israel—acting as suppliers of public services constrained by religious policies—create considerable municipal variation in freedom from religion. Helbling and Traunmüller (2016) used RAS indicators to compare religious restrictions across Switzerland's 26 cantons, identifying variations similar in scale to those observed across entire nations. Similarly, Klocek and Petri (2023) argue that subnational variation in Latin America is more likely in larger states, particularly those with federal systems, expansive remote regions, or constitutionally recognized indigenous autonomy zones. The Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) 2019–2023 report includes a regional violence map that reveals stark disparities, showing, for instance, that Christians in the North West are about 6.5 times more likely to be killed than Muslims (ORFA 2024; Petri and Bainbridge 2024). By linking religious affiliation with geographic data, ORFA highlights how local context shapes patterns of religious violence. Taken together, these empirical studies suggest that structural religious discrimination is often embedded at the local level and goes undetected by national indicators.

The Violent Incidents Database (VID) offers a critical tool for analyzing subnational variation, as it includes precise geolocation data that enables the

identification of regional disparities in religious freedom conditions. This granularity allows for the detection of patterns—such as the concentration of attacks on religious minorities in specific municipalities or the persistence of localized religious tensions—that are invisible in national-level datasets.

Capturing subnational dynamics will require a paradigm shift in both data collection and conceptual framing. Rather than treating religious freedom as a uniform and static national condition, future research must recognize that religious freedom can vary not only between countries but within countries, shaped by local governance, demographic makeup, and informal power structures.

Toward Holistic and Contextualized Measurement

Operationalizing the full breadth of religious freedom remains an ongoing challenge. While datasets must simplify in order to measure, over-simplification can lead to conceptual distortion or exclusion. Adding new variables is valuable only when they capture dimensions not already addressed; yet, it is equally important to acknowledge that some critical aspects of FoRB may be entirely absent from existing frameworks. This calls for sustained dialogue between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative tools provide breadth and comparability, but they must be anchored in deeper sociopolitical contexts to avoid misrepresenting what counts as religious freedom—and what does not (Howard and Tadros 2023).

A more holistic understanding of FoRB benefits from insights drawn from adjacent fields such as political economy, human security, and development studies. In political economy, scholars have shown how FoRB outcomes are shaped by material conditions, power dynamics, and access to state resources. Grim, Clark, and Snyder (2014), and Grim and Grim (2016) examine the link between religious freedom and economic competitiveness. Rowe (2017) explores how India's economic liberalization under Narendra Modi—while promoting global investment—has coincided with rising restrictions on religious minorities, particularly Christian NGOs. Similarly, Bauman and Leech (2011) analyze how access to public subsidies and quotas in India has triggered religiously motivated discrimination. Wallace (2021) shows that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) introduces new risks to FoRB in partner states by exporting governance models with limited tolerance for religious plurality. Finally, Haynes (2022) illustrates how Turkey combines religious and economic soft power to expand its regional influence, as seen in Ghana.

A human security perspective extends this lens by focusing on how religious communities experience threats not just in terms of legal constraints but through broader patterns of physical insecurity, exclusion, and violence. Scholars like López Ruf (2023) and Petri (2019) argue for an understanding of FoRB that encompasses the everyday risks faced by religious minorities in fragile settings. Wellman and Lombardi (2012) explore how religion intersects with human security concerns across different regions, while Seiple and Hoover (2004) advocate for integrating religious freedom into peacebuilding and humanitarian policy. Together, these scholars push for an expanded framework

that accounts for both state and non-state sources of insecurity, including displacement, targeted surveillance, and violent repression. This approach challenges FoRB measurement tools to better capture not just formal violations but the lived vulnerability of communities on the margins.

In parallel, development studies has increasingly recognized the significance of religious affiliation in shaping access to basic services, political participation, and resilience. Marshall (2025) and Marshall et al. (2021) underscore the role that religious actors play in advancing (or hindering) inclusive development. Tadros, Mader, and Cheeseman (2023), as well as Tadros and Shutt (2024), explore how religious inequality and gendered discrimination affect civic engagement and policy access. Klocek and Bledsoe (2022) show how FoRB-related dynamics manifest in development practice, particularly in contexts where religion remains a critical axis of social differentiation. Collectively, this literature demonstrates that FoRB is not just a legal issue but a development challenge —affecting how communities navigate aid systems, engage with institutions, and exercise agency in contexts of structural exclusion.

Together, these interdisciplinary insights call for a reframing of how religious freedom is conceptualized and measured. Rather than relying solely on violations-based metrics or legalistic definitions, a more comprehensive understanding of FoRB should integrate political, economic, social, and security dimensions. This does not mean abandoning the comparative strengths of existing datasets, but rather complementing them with contextualized tools that reflect the complexity of lived experiences. Moving toward such holistic and layered measurement approaches is essential for informing more responsive policy interventions, advancing advocacy grounded in local realities, and ultimately building more inclusive societies where religious freedom is not only protected in law but experienced in practice.

Conclusions

This article has examined the expanding landscape of religious freedom (FoRB) measurement, offering both a typology of existing instruments and a critical reflection on their conceptual and methodological boundaries. We have reviewed key approaches—ranging from expert-coded narrative data to real-time event datasets—and highlighted how each contributes distinct insights to the global assessment of FoRB conditions. Yet we have also emphasized that these tools, while increasingly sophisticated, remain shaped by specific normative assumptions, data limitations, and structural blind spots.

A central finding is the persistent operationalization gap: much of what constitutes religious freedom in practice—especially the lived experiences of minorities, informal restrictions, and positive rights—is either poorly measured or not measured at all. This gap is compounded by the invisibility of subnational dynamics, the challenge of distinguishing between restrictions and violations, and the imprecision introduced by vague or politicized terminology.

In response, we have pointed to emerging priorities in the field. These include efforts to better measure the positive presence of religious freedom, to account for free exercise and equal treatment as distinct analytical categories, and to explore subnational variation that national averages often obscure. A final section advocated for more holistic and contextualized frameworks, drawing on insights from political economy, human security, and development studies to more accurately capture the complexity of FoRB in diverse settings.

Ultimately, improving religious freedom metrics is not merely a technical task but a normative and political one. Better tools can enhance accountability, inform policymaking, and support advocacy—but only if they are attentive to the lived realities they seek to represent. Future research must therefore combine methodological innovation with conceptual humility, ensuring that the pursuit of comparability does not come at the cost of accuracy, inclusivity, or justice.

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