



Reports

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Religious Freedom for Whom?

Ecclesiocentrism in the Design and
Implementation of Colombia's Public
Policy on Religious Freedom

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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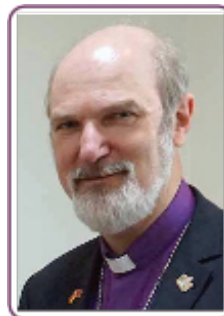
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Abstract

Colombia's Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (PPRF), adopted in 2018, made the country the first in Latin America to allocate public funds and a dedicated administrative structure to the promotion and protection of religious freedom. This article offers an academic evaluation of the policy's formulation and early implementation from a public policy perspective, based on a qualitative documentary analysis triangulating official documents, party accountability reports, press coverage, judicial decisions, and an interview with a senior member of the MIRA party with direct knowledge of the policy process. We argue that the policy's principal weaknesses, namely the absence of a clearly defined public problem, an undefined target population, and the lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms, are not generic implementation failures. Rather, they are shaped, in part, by an ecclesiocentric conception of religion, in the sense developed by Thomas Luckmann and Cristián Parker, although they also reflect broader limitations of policy design, administrative capacity, data availability, and interinstitutional coordination. This conception is reflected, in part, in the policy's political origins and in the legal framework on which it rests, particularly Law 133 of 1994. Because the policy's institutional architecture tends to privilege legally registered religious entities, it provides limited mechanisms for incorporating non-institutionalized religious expressions, leaves the documented religious freedom problems of Indigenous communities largely unaddressed, and offers no clear response to violations committed by organized crime. We conclude by proposing two legally precise reform routes: a reform of the statutory law on religious freedom and an ordinary law providing the policy with legislative anchoring, a fixed budget, and accountability obligations.

Keywords: *religious freedom; public policy; policy evaluation; ecclesiocentrism; Colombia*

1. Introduction

The Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (Política Pública Integral de Libertad Religiosa y de Cultos, hereafter PPRF), adopted by the Colombian government through Decree 437 of 2018, is a pioneering instrument.¹ While most Latin American states protect religious freedom through constitutional clauses and statutory law, Colombia appears to be an early and distinctive case in the region of a national public policy that translates such protection into defined policy axes, objectives, lines of action, and budgetary allocations.² The policy has attracted the attention of practitioners and of subnational governments, several of which have adopted local versions, yet it has received remarkably little academic scrutiny.

¹ Presidencia de Colombia. 2018. *Decreto 437 de 2018*. Bogotá: Presidencia de Colombia, March 6., adopting the Política Pública Integral de Libertad Religiosa y de Cultos.

² On the regulatory development of religious freedom in the region, see Sánchez, Camila. 2024. Desarrollo Normativo de la Libertad Religiosa en América Latina: Leyes, Artículos Constitucionales y Planes de Desarrollo. *International Institute for Religious Freedom*. https://iirf.global/wp-content/uploads/reports/2024-24_IIRF-Reports.pdf

This article addresses that gap by asking a single question: to what extent do the design and implementation of the PPRF reflect an ecclesiocentric conception of religion, and how might this conception affect the policy's capacity to achieve its stated objective of guaranteeing religious freedom for all? By ecclesiocentrism we mean, following Cristián Parker, the tendency, inherited from the classics of Western sociology and reproduced in legal and administrative practice, to treat the church, that is, the formally organized, institutionalized, and hierarchically structured religious body, as the paradigm of what religion is, thereby rendering other forms of religiosity analytically and legally invisible (Parker 2010). Thomas Luckmann described the correlate of this bias as “invisible religion”: forms of religiosity that persist and even flourish outside institutional structures but that escape frameworks built around them (Luckmann 1973).

Our argument proceeds in three steps. First, we show that the legal framework on which the PPRF rests, in particular Law 133 of 1994 (the Statutory Law on Religious Freedom), is built around the recognition and registration of institutionalized religious entities, and that its scope clause excludes practices deemed “foreign to religion” without ever defining religion. Second, we reconstruct the political origins of the policy, showing that it emerged from the mobilization of one institutionalized religious minority, the Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International (Iglesia de Dios Ministerial de Jesucristo Internacional, ID-MJI) and the closely associated MIRA political party in response to a well-documented episode of stigmatization and electoral irregularity. Third, we examine the policy's formulation and implementation through the lens of the public policy cycle, focusing on its definition of the public problem, target population, and accountability arrangements. We examine the extent to which these design weaknesses are associated with an institutional understanding of religion while considering alternative explanations related to general policy-design, administrative-capacity, data-availability, and interinstitutional-coordination constraints.

The contribution of the article is therefore twofold. To the public policy literature, it offers a case study of how the framing of a public problem, in Gusfield's and Head's sense, conditions subsequent stages of the policy cycle, and of how a conceptual bias inscribed in the legal framework may travel into policy design (Gusfield 1981; Head 2022). To law and religion scholarship, it offers, to our knowledge, one of the first academic policy-cycle evaluations of a national public policy on religious freedom in Latin America, together with a legally grounded proposal for its consolidation. Some clarifications about scope are in order. This article evaluates the national PPRF from its formulation in 2018 through 2025, focusing on what we describe as its early implementation phase. This designation refers to the first seven years following adoption, during which the policy's institutional arrangements, implementation mechanisms, and monitoring practices were established and developed. The analysis focuses exclusively on the national PPRF and does not assess the departmental and municipal religious freedom policies that the national policy has inspired.

The article also examines the role of the MIRA party in the origins of the policy because the available evidence, including the party's own accountability reports, makes that role relevant to an account of the policy's genesis. However, a full

study of those origins, including the role of other Christian-evangelical churches and of the Catholic Church in Colombian political life, exceeds the scope of a single article and is therefore identified as an agenda for future research.

Likewise, this article does not analyze the substantive religious freedom situation of Indigenous peoples in Colombia, which has been examined elsewhere (Petri et al. 2023; Petri and Kloczek 2025); rather, it establishes that documented problems exist and examines the extent to which the PPRF does not address them. A comprehensive analysis of Indigenous religious freedom would require its own methodology and sources and therefore falls outside the scope of this study.

Finally, because the PPRF document itself spans 72 pages, and given the space constraints, we concentrate on the elements most relevant to our argument and refer readers to the policy document for its full content. The article is organized as follows. After presenting the methodology, we develop the theoretical framework, combining the public policy cycle and the problem definition literature with the concepts of ecclesiocentrism, invisible religion, and vernacularization. We then reconstruct the legal framework of religious freedom in Colombia, which constitutes the normative substrate of the policy. The following section traces the political origins of the PPRF. The core of the article evaluates the policy's design and implementation through the policy cycle, before analyzing its ecclesiocentric bias, its politicization, and the reform routes available under Colombian law. The conclusion summarizes the findings.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative approach based primarily on documentary analysis, employing content analysis techniques to examine primary and secondary sources relevant to the formulation and early implementation of Colombia's *Política Pública Integral de Libertad Religiosa y de Cultos* (PPRF).

The documentary corpus comprises the PPRF document adopted by Decree 437 of 2018; relevant constitutional and statutory provisions, including Article 19 of the 1991 Constitution, Law 133 of 1994, Law 21 of 1991, and Decrees 1140 of 2018 and 922 of 2023; Constitutional Court and Council of State decisions concerning religious freedom and events relevant to the policy's origins; implementation reports and budgetary documents published by the National Planning Department (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, DNP) and the Ministry of Interior; and the annual accountability reports published by the MIRA party between 2015 and 2023. Selected press reports and secondary sources were also consulted when necessary to contextualize or corroborate claims concerning the political origins of the policy. The selection of documents was purposive and based on their relevance to the legal framework, formulation, political origins, institutional arrangements, implementation, and accountability of the PPRF. The documentary review covered the period from the establishment of the contemporary constitutional framework for religious freedom in 1991 through 2022.

The documentary material was analyzed thematically through qualitative content analysis. The principal analytical categories were: definition of the public problem; target population and beneficiaries; conceptualization and legal recognition

of religion and religious entities; participation of religious actors; institutional responsibilities and State–religion relations; policy objectives and lines of action; implementation and administrative capacity; monitoring, evaluation, budget, and accountability; and exclusions or omissions relevant to the interpretation of the policy. Particular attention was given to whether the policy privileged formally organized religious entities and whether other forms of religious belonging or vulnerability were explicitly recognized, implicitly included, or absent. At the same time, the analysis considered alternative explanations for identified weaknesses, including general policy-design limitations, administrative capacity, data availability, and interinstitutional coordination.

To operationalize the concept of ecclesiocentrism, the analysis examined observable features of the legal and administrative framework, including eligibility and registration requirements, participation mechanisms, access to policy instruments and programs, resource allocation and budgetary reporting, the institutional audiences of accountability mechanisms, and the treatment of religious groups without legal personality or registration. The analytical perspective is grounded in the sequential public policy process model associated with Harold Lasswell and disseminated in Latin America by Roth, which organizes analysis into stages of agenda setting, problem definition, formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Roth 2010). We concentrate on the formulation and implementation stages, while reconstructing relevant elements of agenda setting to examine the policy’s political origins. Following Weiss, evaluation is understood as the systematic assessment of the operation or impacts of a program or policy against implicit or explicit standards, with the purpose of contributing to its improvement (Weiss 2015). Given the scarcity of public information on the implementation of the policy’s programs, the evaluation offered here is a preliminary and formative assessment at the national level based on available data; it does not purport to measure impact.

A semi-structured interview consisting of five questions was conducted on 19 February 2025 with a senior member of the MIRA party with direct knowledge of the policy process.³ The interview was used to illuminate the party’s account of its motivations and political involvement in promoting a religious freedom agenda, rather than as independent evidence of the broader policy process. The interview was conducted in Spanish on 19 February 2025 through the Zoom platform with a senator from the MIRA Party, who was selected as a key informant due to his designation by the MIRA political party and his direct involvement in issues related to religious freedom. MIRA was chosen as the focal political organization because it has been one of the most active parties in Colombia in advocating for the protection and promotion of religious freedom. The interview adopted a semi-structured and historically oriented format, encouraging the participant to reflect on the origins of the party’s interest in religious freedom, the key historical events and circumstances that stimulated its engagement with this issue, and the institutional role it has played in promoting and advancing religious liberty within the Colombian political arena. The conversation lasted 36 min and 2 s and was audio-visually recorded through Zoom to ensure the accu-

³ Anonymous Senior Member of the MIRA Party. 2025. Personal communication, February 19. The reference to proceedings before the Inter-American human rights system reflects the participant’s account.

rate capture of the participant's responses and to facilitate subsequent qualitative analysis.

Claims derived from the interview were either corroborated by external documentary evidence or explicitly attributed to the participant as the party's account. Accordingly, the interview does not by itself establish the predominance of MIRA in the policy process or the positions of other governmental, religious, Indigenous, or civil-society actors. The available documentary evidence is instead interpreted as demonstrating MIRA's documented involvement in the policy's origins, while the interview provides evidence of how a directly involved actor understands that process.

The selection of Colombia as a case study follows from its pioneering status. While other Latin American countries have enshrined religious freedom in constitutions and statutes, Colombia formulated a public policy with concrete actions, objectives, and strategies (See note 2). Following Pal, Porto de Oliveira and Pal, and Pacheco-Vega, we treat the Colombian experience as a potential object of policy transfer, understood as a dynamic process of adaptation to local realities rather than replication (Pal 2014; Porto de Oliveira and Pal 2018; Pacheco-Vega 2021); precisely for that reason, an early diagnosis of its design flaws has relevance beyond Colombia. The study focuses on the national PPRF and its formulation and early implementation; it does not seek to provide a complete reconstruction of all actors involved in its origins or assess subnational policies. Future research should broaden the empirical base through interviews and focus groups with governmental officials, religious organizations, Indigenous representatives, and civil-society actors.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. The Policy Cycle and the Definition of Public Problems

Public policies consist of coherent sets of decisions and actions, such as laws, decrees, programs, and grants, adopted by public and private actors to change the behavior of target groups for the benefit of those affected by a public problem (Subirats et al. 2008). Within the policy cycle, problem definition is widely recognized as the foundational stage (Brewer and deLeon 1983). Public problems are not objective facts but social constructions shaped by political, social, and economic perspectives (Head 2022); how a problem is framed determines which of its aspects are emphasized or downplayed, and consequently, which solutions become thinkable (Gamson and Modigliani 1987). Stakeholders, including governments, advocacy groups, and the public, may hold competing interpretations of a problem's nature and severity (Prayoga 2019), and the narratives they construct at this stage propose implicit theories about the causes and remedies that guide the development of policy alternatives (See Gamson and Modigliani 1987). Problem definition is thus a contested terrain rather than a neutral exercise (Gusfield 1981; Head 2022).

Two implications of this literature structure our analysis. First, a policy that fails to define its public problem with precision risks dispersing its efforts across symptoms, complicating implementation and evaluation alike. Second, and more importantly for our argument, the actors who succeed in placing a problem on the agenda imprint their own understanding of the problem onto the policy. When the mobilizing actors are institutionalized religious organizations, the resulting policy can be expected to conceive of religion, of religious freedom, and of the beneficiary population in institutional terms.

3.2. Ecclesiocentrism and Invisible Religion

The conceptual tools for naming that bias come from the sociology of religion. Parker has shown that the classics of Western sociology constructed their analyses of religion around the model of the Christian church, an organized institution with doctrine, clergy, membership, and buildings, and that this ecclesiocentrism continues to structure both scholarly and administrative approaches to religion in Latin America, where a large share of lived religiosity does not take institutional form (Parker 2010). Luckmann's classic study of "invisible religion" describes the correlate of this bias: modern religiosity increasingly locates itself outside institutional structures, in diffuse, individualized, or communal forms that institution-centered frameworks cannot register (Luckmann 1973). Masuzawa has traced how the very category of "world religions" was constructed on a European model that privileges organized, scriptural traditions while relegating Indigenous and non-Western practices to residual categories (Masuzawa 2005).

These insights matter for law and policy because legal recognition regimes operationalize a concept of religion whether they admit it or not. A regime that conditions recognition on legal personality, registration, statutes, and designated ministers translates the ecclesial model into administrative requirements. Religious expressions that lack these attributes, including Indigenous spiritualities, popular religiosity, and the syncretic forms that characterize much of Latin American religious life (Blancarte 2000), are not persecuted by such a regime; they are simply not seen by it. In a country like Colombia, whose religious field has been transformed by the growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches challenging the historically dominant Catholic presence (Torre and Martín 2016; Román 2021), and where survey data indicate that 52.2 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, 19.5 percent as Evangelical or Pentecostal, and 13.2 percent as believers without religious affiliation,⁴ the population invisible to an ecclesiocentric regime is far from marginal. No comprehensive census captures Indigenous religious diversity or new religious movements.

3.3. Vernacularization

Finally, we draw on the concept of vernacularization, which Wilson applies to freedom of religion or belief: transnational concepts are adapted to local contexts to make them intelligible and usable by local actors (Wilson 2022). Vernac-

⁴ Beltrán, William Mauricio, and Sonia Larotta. 2020. *Diversidad Religiosa, Valores y Participación Política en Colombia: Resumen de los Resultados de la Encuesta Nacional Sobre Diversidad Religiosa 2019*. Bogotá: World Vision Colombia.

ularization is not inherently benign. As we show below, in Colombia, the concept of religious freedom has been vernacularized in at least two directions: it has been absorbed into a Western, institution-centered legal template, and it has been appropriated by political actors who reinterpret it according to their agendas. Both movements shape the PPRF.

4. The Legal Framework of Religious Freedom in Colombia

Public policy is inseparable from the legal framework that underpins it. The PPRF cannot be understood without reference to the 1991 Constitution and to Law 133 of 1994, the Statutory Law on Religious Freedom, and its implementing instruments. This section synthesizes that framework and identifies the features that carry the ecclesiocentric bias into the policy.

4.1. The Constitution of 1991 and Law 133 of 1994

Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the right of every person to profess and disseminate his or her religion individually or collectively, and declares that all religious confessions and churches are equally free before the law. This provision must be read alongside Article 13 (equality and non-discrimination), Article 7 (recognition and protection of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the nation), and the provisions on Indigenous autonomy and jurisdiction (Articles 246 and 330).

Law 133 of 1994 develops Article 19. It affirms that religious diversity shall not be a ground for inequality or discrimination (Article 3) and enumerates individual rights (Article 6) and rights of churches and confessions (Article 7), including the establishment of places of worship and religious assistance in hospitals, military installations, and detention centers (Article 8). Its institutional core, however, is a recognition regime: the Ministry of Interior grants a special legal personality (*personería jurídica especial*) to churches, confessions, and denominations and inscribes them in a Public Register of Religious Entities (Articles 9 to 12), while the Catholic Church retains its pre-existing legal personality of public ecclesiastical law under the Concordat approved by Law 20 of 1974 (Article 11). Article 15 authorizes the State to conclude agreements of internal public law (*convenios de derecho público interno*) with registered entities that offer guarantees of duration.

Article 19 therefore establishes the broader constitutional protection of religious freedom at both the individual and collective levels, while Law 133 develops this protection through both individual rights and a specific institutional regime for legally recognized religious entities. The existence of this legal-personality regime does not, by itself, establish administrative invisibility of unregistered or non-institutionalized religious actors. The relevant question for this study is instead whether administrative participation, institutional interlocution, access to policy instruments, and accountability mechanisms are structured in ways that systematically privilege legally recognized religious entities.

Two features of the statute deserve emphasis. The first is its scope clause. Article 5 provides:

“The activities related to the study and experimentation of psychic or parapsychological phenomena; satanism, magical or superstitious or spiritist practices or other analogous practices foreign to religion are not included within the scope of application of this Law.” (Congreso de la República de Colombia 1994, art. 5 (authors’ translation))

In its prior constitutional review of the statutory bill, the Constitutional Court upheld this clause, reasoning that the enumeration does not define religious freedom but merely lists activities that fall outside the statutory regime, activities that remain protected under other constitutional freedoms such as conscience, expression, and association.⁵ The Court’s reading is formally coherent, but it leaves the operative difficulty intact: the statute excludes practices “foreign to religion” without providing any criterion of what religion is. In administrative practice, the boundary must be improvised, and the path of least resistance is the ecclesial model implicit in the recognition regime itself: doctrine, organization, ministers, registration. Practices that do not fit that model, notably Indigenous spiritualities and non-institutionalized religiosity, risk being assimilated to the excluded categories or simply falling outside the statute’s field of vision.

Accordingly, the argument is not that practices falling outside the specific statutory regime of Law 133 lose constitutional protection. Rather, the concern is whether such practices have comparable visibility within the administrative and policy mechanisms developed under that regime and the PPRF. This distinction is central to the concept of ecclesiocentrism as used here.

The second feature is the disconnect between Law 133 and the legal framework protecting Indigenous peoples. Law 21 of 1991 ratified ILO Convention 169, which obliges the State to respect the spiritual values and practices of Indigenous peoples and their relationship with their lands. Yet Law 133 contains no bridge to that regime: Indigenous spiritualities are neither included in its recognition system nor expressly articulated with it. The constitutional protection of Indigenous religious life has therefore developed through litigation rather than through the statutory framework.

4.2. The Jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court

The Constitutional Court has in fact confronted, repeatedly and in depth, precisely the questions on which the PPRF is silent: conversion, proselytism, places of worship, and the tension between individual religious freedom and collective cultural identity in Indigenous territories. The leading case is SU-510 of 1998, which arose from a conflict within the Arhuaco (Ika) community of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta between traditional authorities and community members who had converted to the Iglesia Pentecostal Unida de Colombia (IPUC). The Court held that the dogmas and practices of the evangelical converts contradicted central elements of the Arhuaco cosmovision and that the Constitution authorizes traditional authorities to organize communal life according to their

⁵ Corte Constitucional de Colombia. 1994. *Sentencia C-088 de 1994*. Bogotá: Corte Constitucional de Colombia (prior constitutional review of the statutory bill on religious freedom).

collective creed; applying the interpretive maxim that greater conservation of usages and customs warrants greater autonomy, it upheld restrictions on evangelical worship and external pastors within the resguardo while protecting the converts' individual conscience (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 1998). Subsequent decisions have reiterated and systematized these subrules.⁶

Whatever one's assessment of the balance struck in SU-510 of 1998, the jurisprudence demonstrates two things that matter for our argument. First, religious freedom conflicts in Indigenous territories are real, recurrent, and adjudicated at the highest level of the Colombian legal system. Second, the constitutional treatment of religion in these cases is anything but ecclesiocentric: the Court reasons about cosmovisions, collective identity, and syncretism. The contrast with the PPRF, which as we show below contains no reference to these problems or to this case law, is therefore all the more striking.

4.3. The Agreements of Internal Public Law

The instrument created by Article 15 of Law 133 remained dormant for a quarter of a century after the first agreement of internal public law was concluded in 1997 (Convenio de Derecho Público Interno No. 1, approved by Decree 354 of 1998) with a group of non-Catholic Christian entities. In 2023, the government concluded a second agreement: Convenio de Derecho Público Interno No. 2 of 2023, approved by Decree 922 of 6 June 2023. This is a national-level agreement between the Colombian State and a group of non-Catholic Christian churches, confessions, and denominations, structured in two texts, one of which includes provisions on marriage. Its subject matter comprises the recognition of the civil effects of religious marriages celebrated by the signatory entities' ministers, religious teaching, education and information, and spiritual and pastoral assistance to members of the armed forces and in prisons and healthcare facilities, as well as provisions on places of worship.⁷ The agreement is a significant development in the equality of treatment of non-Catholic confessions, and the PPRF's line of action 1.6.2 is associated with it. At the same time, it illustrates the pattern this article documents: the instruments through which the Colombian State engages organized religion presuppose registered, institutionalized counterparts. An agreement of internal public law is, by legal design, unavailable to religious expressions that have no legal personality to contract with.

⁶ See, for example, Corte Constitucional de Colombia (2014), which reiterates and systematizes the interpretive subrules unified in SU-510 de 1998. (Corte Constitucional de Colombia. 2014. *Sentencia C-463 de 2014*. Bogotá: Corte Constitucional de Colombia.)

⁷ Ministerio del Interior. 2023. *Convenio de Derecho Público Interno No. 2 de 2023*. Decreto 922 de 2023. Bogotá: Ministerio del Interior, approved by Decreto 922 de 2023; for a legal analysis, see Prieto, Vicente. 2023. Colombia: Nuevo convenio de derecho público interno con entidades religiosas. *Revista Latinoamericana de Derecho y Religión* 9: 1–26.

5. The Political Origins of the PPRF

5.1. Context: The Peace Process and the 2014 Crisis

The PPRF emerged during the second term of President Juan Manuel Santos (2014–2018), a period dominated by the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla, initiated in 2012 and concluded with the 2016 peace agreement. The peace agenda focused on social justice, victim reparations, and the reintegration of former combatants. Although religious organizations participated in peacebuilding, there is no literature establishing a direct connection between the PPRF and the peace process; the two agendas developed separately. The proximate origin of the policy lies elsewhere, in a political and religious crisis that unfolded during the 2014 electoral cycle.

In January 2014, a video circulated in which María Luisa Piraquive, worldwide leader of the Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International (IDMJI), discussed, during a national convention of preachers, the qualities required of a pastor, including physical aspects such as the ability to climb the pulpit; at one point it was suggested that a person without an arm could not perform this role (Semana 2014). The video was widely used during the election period to attack both the IDMJI and the MIRA party, accusing them of discrimination. The MIRA party (Movimiento Independiente de Renovación Absoluta) is a confessional Christian party founded in 2000 and historically aligned with the values and teachings of the IDMJI, representing the church's views in the political arena; it has advocated for the rights of religious minorities alongside agendas of social justice, transparency, and public welfare. A senior member of the MIRA party with direct knowledge of the policy process described the episode in the interview conducted for this study:

There was a video where Dr. María Luisa Piraquive, Worldwide Leader of the Church, was giving private lessons about the qualities needed to be a pastor. They took that video, edited it, shared it, and an attack started, a media persecution against the Church and, of course, against the party. It was a very difficult year, 2014, a very complex year, because not only did they make us appear as a cult, but our believers, members of the Church, were persecuted, stigmatized, and pointed out. For example, children in schools were not given enrollment renewals, several employees had their contracts terminated in some companies, doors were closed in education, doors were closed in many places, because the video was edited in such a way that they made us look like a cult and like we were discriminators, pointing out people with certain disabilities, which is far from the truth. Over a thousand international cases were recorded, and this became the basis for a lawsuit before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (see note 3).

This is, of course, the account of a directly involved actor, and we treat it as such. What can be established independently is the following sequence.

5.2. The 2014 Elections and the Council of State Ruling

In the legislative elections of 9 March 2014, held at the height of the controversy, MIRA lost the three Senate seats it had held, falling short of the electoral threshold, while retaining three seats in the Chamber of Representatives. The party attributed the result to the stigmatization campaign and to irregularities in the count, and filed a nullity action before the Council of State, supported by a massive internal transcription of voting records (La Silla Vacía 2014; El Tiempo 2018).

Four years later, the Fifth Section of the Council of State ruled in the party's favor. The judgment of 8 February 2018 found proven, among other irregularities, unjustified discrepancies between the E-14 and E-24 vote-count forms affecting more than two thousand polling tables, sabotage of the vote-counting software affecting 1412 tables and excluding 236,523 votes from the count, the unlawful destruction of electoral material in several municipalities, and the annulment of valid MIRA votes caused by the slow-drying markers used on the ballots. The Council of State partially annulled the declaration of the Senate election for 2014–2018, recognized additional valid votes for MIRA, and restored the party's threshold and its three Senate seats (Consejo de Estado, Sala de lo Contencioso Administrativo, Sección Quinta 2018; see also El Tiempo 2018). The ruling concerns electoral irregularity rather than religious discrimination as such, and it does not adjudicate the party's persecution narrative. It nonetheless provides independent judicial corroboration for MIRA's claims concerning electoral irregularities during the 2014 cycle, but not for the broader claims of religious persecution, stigmatization, or discrimination reported in the interview. Those claims are therefore treated here as the testimony of a directly involved actor rather than as independently established facts.

In the presidential race of the same year, contemporary reporting documented that religious freedom became the central argument of the MIRA base's electoral behavior. The party did not issue a formal institutional endorsement, in keeping with its practice of leaving voters free to choose, and it was internally divided: most visible leaders and much of the base leaned toward the opposition candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga, who they felt understood their grievance, while the party's founder, Senator Alexandra Moreno Piraquive, publicly supported Santos (La Silla Vacía 2014). The dominant sentiment was a desire to punish the president for what the party perceived as his passivity during the crisis. As a party spokesperson put it at the time: "When we do not have a candidate, we always let people choose the best proposal, but this year there is a widespread feeling that the President of the Republic, faced with conspiracy, political persecution, defamation campaigns, religious persecution, and hate speech that cost us dearly, did absolutely nothing." (La Silla Vacía 2014 (authors' translation)). Zuluaga capitalized on the discontent within the religious sector by promising to defend freedom of worship.

5.3. From Grievance to Policy

Santos was nonetheless reelected in the June 2014 runoff, and it is from his second term that a policy shift is observed. The National Development Plan 2014–2018 included, as Article 244, a mandate on religious freedom:

Article 244: Religious freedom, worship, and conscience. The Ministry of Interior, in coordination with competent entities, will undertake actions that promote the recognition of civil society's associative forms based on principles of religious freedom, worship, and conscience. The National Government will formulate and update public policy on this matter with participation from religious entities, guaranteeing religious freedom and equality in terms of equity and recognizing their contribution to the common good at local, regional, and national levels (Congreso de la República de Colombia 2015, art. 244 (authors' translation)).

The inclusion of this article was an initiative driven by the MIRA party, as the party itself records in its 2016 accountability report, which lists among its most significant achievements the inclusion of the public policy on religious freedom, worship, and conscience in the National Development Plan, compelling the Ministry of Interior to formulate and keep the policy updated in a participatory manner (Partido MIRA 2016, p. 4). The formulation process culminated in Decree 437 of 6 March 2018, which adopted the PPRF, and Decree 1140 of 2018, which created the Directorate of Religious Affairs within the Ministry of Interior (Presidencia de Colombia 2018; Función Pública 2018).

According to the interview participant, the party's motivation stems from its direct experience: "As a result of that persecution, the consequences we lived through, intolerance, ignorance regarding many religious issues, that is why we presented this proposal." The participant added that the party seeks to guarantee that "everyone may freely profess their faith, without pressure or prejudice," and noted that in 2018 and 2022 MIRA presented proposals for the creation and strengthening of the public policy (Anonymous Senior Member of the MIRA Party 2025).

Two observations close this reconstruction. First, the available evidence suggests that the genesis of the PPRF illustrates agenda setting by an aggrieved organized actor: a registered church and its associated political party successfully brought religious freedom onto the national policy agenda following the 2014 electoral crisis. This represents a significant instance of minority political mobilization. At the same time, the available evidence does not establish that MIRA was the sole or dominant actor in the policy's origins. Other Christian-evangelical churches, the Catholic Church, public institutions, and legislative actors may also have contributed to the process, but their respective roles require additional evidence. The present analysis therefore treats MIRA's role as significant and documented, while leaving the relative weight of other actors open to further research.

6. The PPRF Through the Policy Cycle

6.1. An Undefined Public Problem

Analyzing the axes and actions of the PPRF requires first identifying the public problem it addresses, since a clear problem definition is the foundation of effective policy (Subirats et al. 2008). The PPRF document does contain a section titled "Enunciación y descripción de la problemática central" (pp. 29–32), but

instead of a defined central problem, it presents an enumeration. According to the document, the central problem is the weakness and insufficiency of actions to guarantee the exercise of the right to religious freedom and worship in Colombia. Around this formulation, the document lists, among others: the lack of recognition of the contribution of religious entities and their organizations to the common good, conflict resolution, peaceful coexistence, and social cohesion, a lack of recognition that can lead to acts of discrimination and religious intolerance; insufficient guarantees for the participation of religious entities in forgiveness, reconciliation, and peacebuilding scenarios; poor interaction and articulation between religious entities and the State, aggravated by the scarcity of institutional channels for dialogue and coordination; the absence of legal definitions adequate to the current reality of religious phenomena and culture in Colombia, resulting in regulatory gaps; distrust between religious entities and the State regarding reconciliation initiatives; and the absence of a dedicated directorate within the Ministry of Interior.

Each of these issues is plausible, but their presentation as an unprioritized list makes the policy problem analytically under-specified rather than simply broad or wicked. The PPRF identifies several dimensions of religious-freedom governance, but it does not establish a clear hierarchy among them, specify the population primarily affected, or articulate a causal relationship between the identified conditions and the proposed interventions. The formulation ‘weak and insufficient actions to guarantee the right’ therefore describes a general policy deficit rather than a sufficiently specified public problem from which priorities, target groups, and expected outcomes can be derived. The theory of change connecting the identified conditions, policy instruments, and expected outcomes consequently remains implicit. For the purposes of our argument, however, the most revealing feature of the list is its subject. Nearly every enumerated problem is a problem of religious entities and their organizations: their recognition, their participation, their articulation with the State, their legal status. The suffering subject of the policy’s problem definition is the organized confession. Violations experienced by individuals outside organized confessions, by non-institutionalized religious communities, or by Indigenous communities do not appear. The ecclesiocentric matrix is visible in the policy’s very first analytical move.

6.2. A Design Without Specificity or Target Population

To address the identified issues, the policy is organized into 3 axes, 12 objectives, and 34 lines of action (the main themes are presented in Table A1 in Appendix A). At first glance, this architecture appears comprehensive, but the breadth becomes a weakness because the lines of action lack specificity regarding execution. For instance, line of action 1.2.1 calls for the creation of pedagogical and interactive campaigns through institutional and digital media to promote tolerance and non-discrimination on religious grounds, and mentions the need for at least five campaigns; yet the policy neither designates the responsible institutions nor establishes accountability mechanisms or evaluation criteria for these campaigns, and it provides no framework for coordinating government

bodies and religious organizations. This lack of clarity on execution leaves the policy open to multiple interpretations and weak in its implementation.

The imprecision extends to the specification of target groups and beneficiaries. The PPRF does identify several groups and institutional audiences across its objectives and lines of action, including religious entities and their organizations, civil society, public and private entities, media workers, public servants, universities, territorial entities, and citizens. The problem is therefore not the complete absence of target groups, but the lack of a clear hierarchy or differentiation among target groups, beneficiaries, and institutional interlocutors. In particular, registered religious entities occupy a privileged position as recurring institutional counterparts in participation, legal recognition, interinstitutional coordination, and implementation mechanisms, while the policy provides less explicit specification of how non-institutionalized religious individuals or communities are to benefit from or participate in the policy. This distinction allows the analysis to recognize the breadth of the PPRF's stated audiences without abandoning the question of whether its institutional architecture privileges organized religious actors.

6.3. Implementation: Initiatives and Gaps

Publicly available documents and DNP reports allow for a partial reconstruction of implementation. Because this assessment relies on publicly accessible documentary evidence and does not include direct institutional inquiries or administrative access requests, the absence of publicly available evidence is not treated as conclusive evidence of non-implementation. Several initiatives can be verified. A characterization of faith-based organizations was carried out and publicly reported, partially aligned with line of action 1.1.1 (Alcaldía de Itagüí 2022). A program on the social contribution of churches and religious organizations in Colombia was broadcast in September 2022, reflecting line 1.2.1 (Programas del Congreso 2022). The Directorate of Religious Affairs was established through Decree 1140 of 2018, a critical component of line 1.3.1 that strengthened the institutional framework at the national level (Función Pública 2018). A course titled “Religious Freedom for Social and Democratic Development” was developed by the Senate of the Republic as part of line 1.3.2 (CAEL Senado de la República 2022). Colombia's report to the United Nations on measures adopted to combat religious intolerance mentions the creation of an Interreligious Initiatives Bank, a training manual for religious leaders, and the Hemispheric Forum on Religious Freedom, aligned with lines 1.5.1, 1.4.1, and 1.2.1 (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos 2020). The Convenio de Derecho Público Interno No. 2 of 2023, described in the previous section, is linked to line 1.6.2 (Ministerio del Interior 2023; Prieto 2023). The Ministry of Interior announced four manuals on the policy, whose public availability remains pending (Ministerio del Interior 2022).

The available evidence also reveals implementation and evaluability gaps, although these should be distinguished from demonstrated non-implementation. Line 1.8.4 promotes the designation of territorial liaisons between local entities and the Ministry of Interior; some implementation is documented, but publicly

available sources do not provide sufficient information to establish the designation and functioning of liaisons in each department. Likewise, a budget allocation for religious freedom in 2023 has been confirmed, but the available documentation does not provide sufficient detail on its distribution and use. These findings are therefore treated here as transparency and evaluability gaps rather than as proof that the corresponding measures were not implemented (Departamento Nacional de Planeación 2022).

6.4. Accountability and Territorial Articulation

The policy document itself assigns monitoring responsibilities. It provides that the Ministry of Interior, with the advice of the DNP, will create a strategic plan to monitor the implementation of the lines of action, and that the Ministry will inform religious entities and their organizations at the national level once a year about progress in implementation (Presidencia de Colombia 2018). Reality reveals a concerning opacity. Although the DNP has published information regarding the implementation of certain actions, primarily related to salary payments for projects and consultancies, the data are fragmented and disconnected: no clear relationship is established between the published information and the objectives or lines of action it is meant to serve. In a democratic context, transparency in budget execution is essential; the absence of accountability channels undermines the policy's legitimacy, erodes citizen trust, and creates opportunities for the misuse of public resources (de Fine Licht et al. 2011). It is worth noting the irony that the annual reporting obligation the policy does contain runs, once again, to “religious entities and their organizations”, not to the citizenry.

Territorial articulation displays the same pattern. The policy delegates responsibilities to local authorities but fails to provide effective coordination or monitoring mechanisms, resulting in disconnection between national and local efforts. The 2019 Implementation Guidelines for territorial entities did not resolve these issues; there is insufficient dialogue between national actions and local implementations, leading to uneven application of the policy across the territory.

7. The Ecclesiocentric Bias of the PPRF

7.1. An Implicit, Institution-Centered Concept of Religion

The PPRF emphasizes public recognition of religions but never defines “religion” or “religious freedom”. In the absence of a definition, the policy's operative concept of religion must be inferred from its interlocutors and instruments, and both point in the same direction: the policy engages churches, confessions, and denominations with legal personality, inscribed in the Public Register of Religious Entities and its flagship legal instruments, from the participatory formulation mandate of Article 244 of the National Development Plan to the agreements of internal public law, presuppose registered institutional counterparts. The policy thereby reproduces, at the level of public action, the ecclesiocentric concept of religion that Article 5 of Law 133 leaves implicit at the level of legislation.

This pattern is observable in several administrative mechanisms. First, the PPRF frames participation primarily through “religious entities and their organizations”, including their incorporation into the Ministry’s citizen participation strategies and instances. Second, several institutional instruments presuppose registered counterparts, including the updating of the Public Register of Religious Entities and the conclusion of agreements of internal public law with registered entities. Third, the policy’s monitoring framework requires the Ministry of Interior to report annually on implementation to religious entities and their organizations. Finally, the PPRF does not establish equivalent mechanisms of institutional participation or accountability for religious groups that lack legal personality or registration. These features provide observable evidence of differential administrative visibility beyond the mere existence of a legal-personality regime.

These patterns should not, however, be attributed exclusively to ecclesiocentrism: some implementation gaps may also reflect bureaucratic capacity, the sectoral mandate of the Ministry of Interior, limited availability or disaggregation of administrative data, and weak territorial coordination.

Read through Luckmann and Parker, the consequences are predictable. Non-institutionalized religiosity, which in Colombia includes the 13.2 percent of the population who describe themselves as believers without affiliation (Beltrán and Larotta 2020), popular religiosity and its syncretic expressions,⁸ new religious movements, and Indigenous spiritualities, is invisible to the policy: not excluded by name, but unreachable by instruments that require legal personality, registration, and organizational interlocution. This is the vernacularization of religious freedom in its first sense: a transnational human rights concept, whose international formulations protect theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic beliefs alike, has been adapted in Colombia to a legal and administrative template centered on organized churches (Wilson 2022). The descriptive-normative models proposed for analyzing Latin American religious diversity converge on the point that such templates cannot capture the region’s religious fabric, in which popular religion, official religion, and dissent continuously interact (Zavala-Pelayo and Góngora-Mera 2016).

7.2. The Case the Policy Does Not See: Indigenous Communities

The clearest illustration of this blind spot concerns Indigenous communities. It is not the purpose of this article to analyze the religious freedom situation of Indigenous peoples in Colombia, which has been documented in detail elsewhere. Suffice it to record that the problems exist and are serious. The report on the religious freedom of Indigenous communities in Latin America prepared for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom documents both external threats, including land dispossession, extractive encroachment on sacred sites and the pressure of organized crime, and internal restrictions on com-

⁸ Blancarte, Roberto. 2000. Popular Religion, Catholicism and Socioreligious Dissent in Latin America. *International Sociology* 15: 591–603. on the intercultural and syncretic dimensions of religious life in Colombia, see Rappaport, Joanne. 2005. *Intercultural Utopias: Public Intellectuals, Cultural Experimentation, and Ethnic Pluralism in Colombia*. Durham: Duke University Press.

munity members who adopt beliefs different from the communal tradition, noting that the low visibility of these groups has facilitated indifference and discrimination (Petri et al. 2023). Petri and Klocek systematize this double structure of external and internal threats for the region (Petri and Klocek 2025). In the Colombian context, specialized scholarship has examined the relationship between religion, cultural identity, and Indigenous communities. Lopera Mesa analyzes the role of religion in processes of Indigenous identity reconstruction and its relationship with the Colombian Constitutional Court’s jurisprudence on Indigenous cultural identity and religious freedom (Lopera Mesa 2013; Reguart Segarra 2021; Alves 2020). The Violent Incidents Database registered 1045 documented incidents of individual religious freedom violations in Colombia between 2018 and 2022, many of them affecting converts within Indigenous territories, including forced conversions and expulsions (International Institute for Religious Freedom n.d.). The Constitutional Court has repeatedly and in depth confronted conversion, proselytism, places of worship, and the tension between individual religious freedom and collective cultural identity in Indigenous territories. A leading case is SU-510 of 1998, which arose from a conflict involving the Arhuaco/Ika community and evangelical converts and established important criteria for balancing religious freedom, cultural identity, and Indigenous autonomy (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 1998). Subsequent decisions have reiterated and systematized this framework, including C-882 of 2011, which recognized the right of Indigenous communities to preserve, practice, and transmit their own religious and spiritual traditions as part of their cultural identity (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2011).

Against this documented background, the finding is stark: the PPRF contains no specific mention of Indigenous communities or their beliefs, no line of action addressed to them, and no articulation with the protections of Law 21 of 1991 or with the constitutional jurisprudence just described. Colombian legislation protects Indigenous culture and territories, yet the policy designed to guarantee religious freedom does not reach the population whose religious freedom has generated sustained constitutional litigation in Colombia. Even the interview material is consistent with this diagnosis: when asked about the scope of the policy, the interview participant emphasized that its benefits are for “all” religions and described interactions with local governments on issues such as security, mobility, and parking around churches and temples, but made no mention of Indigenous communities and their beliefs (Anonymous Senior Member of the MIRA Party 2025). We register this gap as a central design failure and leave its substantive analysis, which requires its own methodology and sources, to the specialized literature.

7.3. A Second Blind Spot: Violations by Organized Crime

The same institution-centered lens should not, however, be taken as a causal explanation for every gap identified in the policy. A separate limitation concerns violations of religious freedom committed by non-state actors, particularly organized criminal groups. A human security approach to religious freedom highlights that governments must protect religious communities not only from state repression, but also from threats posed by non-state actors (Petri 2019; Petri

and Glasius 2022). Guerrilla groups and criminal gangs operate precisely in areas with little or no state presence, where religious communities establish places of worship and support services; religious leaders become frequent targets because their moral authority and community leadership, including their resistance to the recruitment of youth, challenge the control that armed groups seek to exert over local populations (Observatorio de Libertad Religiosa en América Latina et al. 2022). Table 1 reports incident-level records extracted from the Violent Incidents Database in February 2025. The unit of analysis is the individual reported incident. The categories reproduce the database’s classification of reported incidents. In particular, ‘forced to leave home’ refers to cases classified by the database under that category. The figures are reproduced from the source database and are not intended as a comprehensive census of violence affecting religious leaders and communities or as an independent assessment of perpetrator attribution. The figures are reproduced from the source database and are not intended as a comprehensive census of religiously motivated violence or as an independent assessment of perpetrator attribution.

Killings	Religious Buildings Damaged	Religious Buildings Closed	Sexual Assaults	Abductions	Attacks on Houses	Attacks on Shops or Businesses	Forced to Leave the Country	Forced to Leave Home	Other Forms of Physical or Mental Abuse
33	76	6	2	18	48	3	18	3743	209

Table 1: Violent incidents against religious leaders and communities in Colombia (2021–2025).

A policy conceived around the recognition and participation of registered entities in institutional spaces has no natural place for this problem, which concerns physical security in territories where the State itself is weak. Integrating religious freedom into broader protection and security strategies for vulnerable communities is a necessary complement that the current design lacks (Petri 2019).

8. The Politicization of the PPRF

The concept of religious freedom in Colombia has also been vernacularized in a second, political sense. Pro-life and pro-family movements, conservative and Christian parties, and other actors have adapted the concept to promote their agendas on issues such as abortion, family matters, and LGBT rights, while progressive organizations reinterpret the same right in terms of equal rights. Rather than a universal concept, religious freedom in Colombia is shaped and adapted by political and social forces in multiple directions. Since 2014, presidential

campaigns have increasingly incorporated discourses centered on religious freedom, aiming to gain support from the religious sector.⁹

In this article, politicization refers to the process by which a public-policy issue becomes associated with the agendas, strategies, and political identities of specific partisan or organized actors. Politicization should not, however, be equated with political participation itself. Minority mobilization and agenda setting are legitimate democratic processes through which groups bring previously underrepresented concerns into public debate. The analytical concern arises when a policy issue becomes institutionally or symbolically identified with a particular political actor in ways that may constrain plural participation or create dependence on that actor's continued political presence.

Within this broader landscape, MIRA's own accountability reports document a sustained role in promoting the territorial implementation of the PPRF. An analysis of the party's annual accountability reports from 2015 to 2023 recorded interventions by its representatives in municipal councils, departmental assemblies, and Congress aimed at promoting the formalization of religious freedom policies through decrees and regulations (Partido MIRA 2016, 2018). The party's 2018 management report presents MIRA as a leading reference on the issue and records its proximity to local religious entities (Partido MIRA 2018, p. 107). These sources establish MIRA's sustained advocacy and self-presentation as a leading actor, but they do not by themselves establish its predominance relative to other political parties or religious organizations. Yet when one researches the participation of other political parties in implementing the policy, one observes a significant absence of effort on their part. Whether the limited evidence of involvement by other political parties reflects general disinterest, differences in party priorities, or a possible crowding-out effect associated with MIRA's sustained advocacy remains an open question for future research. Establishing such an effect would require comparative evidence from other political parties and religious actors.

This pattern nevertheless raises an important institutional question. When a fundamental right becomes strongly associated with the advocacy of a particular political actor, its public visibility and policy continuity may become vulnerable to changes in that actor's electoral strength or territorial presence. The available evidence does not establish that the PPRF currently depends on MIRA for its implementation; rather, it suggests a potential risk that warrants further comparative and institutional research. From this perspective, politicization is not synonymous with illegitimate partisan capture: the initial mobilization may represent effective minority agenda setting, while the institutionalization of the policy should ensure that the protection of religious freedom remains a state responsibility rather than an issue identified with any single political organization.

⁹ This trend is observable in the presidential campaigns since 2014, in which candidates have courted the vote of the religious sector; for the 2014 cycle, see La Silla Vacía. 2014. El Mira le cobra a Santos el escándalo que casi lo acaba. May 20. <https://www.lasillavacia.com/silla-nacional/el-mira-le-cobra-a-santos-el-escandalo-que-casi-lo-acaba/>

9. From Policy to Legislation: Two Reform Routes

Previous versions of this argument, including public debate in Colombia, have invoked the need for a “national law” or a “programmatic law” to secure the policy. These expressions do not correspond to categories of Colombian legal language, and the proposal must be stated with precision: what is needed, which instrument, and with what content. Two complementary routes are available.

The first route is a reform of Law 133 of 1994 itself. Because it is a statutory law (*ley estatutaria*) regulating a fundamental right, its amendment requires the qualified procedure of Articles 152 and 153 of the Constitution: approval by absolute majority within a single legislature and automatic prior review by the Constitutional Court. A reform bill should address at least three subject matters. First, the scope clause of Article 5 should be revised so that the exclusion of practices “foreign to religion” no longer operates without criteria, incorporating a functional and inclusive approach consistent with international standards on freedom of religion or belief, which protect theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic convictions and do not condition protection on institutional form. The proposed amendment does not challenge the Constitutional Court’s holding in C-088 of 1994. Rather, it responds to a distinction between constitutional protection and statutory-operational access. Although the Court held that the activities excluded by Article 5 may remain protected under other constitutional freedoms, the provision does not establish criteria for determining when a practice is “foreign to religion”. This lack of statutory criteria may affect the ability of non-institutionalized religious expressions to access the administrative recognition, interlocution, and participation mechanisms developed under Law 133 and the PPRF. The proposed reform therefore seeks to clarify the statutory framework without suggesting that practices falling outside Article 5 are unprotected by the Constitution. Second, the statute should be expressly articulated with Law 21 of 1991, recognizing the spiritual practices of Indigenous peoples and their collective dimension within the statutory framework rather than leaving their protection entirely to litigation. Third, the recognition regime should be complemented with mechanisms of interlocution that do not presuppose legal personality, so that non-institutionalized religious expressions have a channel of participation.

The second route is an ordinary law (*ley ordinaria*) giving the PPRF legislative anchoring. Its subject matters would include: the definition of the policy’s object, principles, and target population; the assignment of institutional responsibilities to the Ministry of Interior, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and the DNP; the creation of a dedicated budget line, subject to the annual budgetary process and supported by multi-year programming; the obligation to report annually to Congress, and not only to religious entities, on implementation and budget execution, with public evaluation indicators; and the definition of coordination mechanisms with territorial entities, including the regularization of the territorial liaisons contemplated in line 1.8.4. Elevating these elements to legislative rank would protect the policy’s continuity against changes of government, correct its accountability deficit, and depersonalize its implementation, addressing the politicization documented above.

The proposed ordinary law would not itself determine a permanent appropriation or displace the annual budgetary process. Its purpose would be to establish the institutional and accountability framework within which annual appropriations and multi-year programming can be determined according to applicable fiscal rules and legislative procedures.

The two routes are complementary rather than alternative: the statutory reform corrects the conceptual foundation, while the ordinary law secures the operational architecture. Either, standing alone, would leave part of the problem intact.

The distinction is deliberate: the statutory reform concerns the legal framework governing the scope and institutional recognition of the fundamental right, whereas the ordinary law concerns the organization, financing, coordination, monitoring, and accountability of the public policy through which that right is implemented.

10. Conclusions

This article asked to what extent the design and implementation of Colombia's PPRF reflect an ecclesiocentric conception of religion, and how that conception affects the policy's capacity to guarantee religious freedom for all. The answer developed across the preceding sections can be summarized in four findings.

First, the ecclesiocentric bias is inscribed in the legal framework on which the policy rests. Law 133 of 1994 builds religious freedom around a recognition and registration regime for institutionalized entities and excludes practices "foreign to religion" without defining religion; the Constitutional Court's validation of that clause preserved its formal coherence but not its operability. The agreements of internal public law, including the significant Convenio No. 2 of 2023 on the civil effects of marriage, religious education, and spiritual assistance in the armed forces, prisons, and healthcare facilities, presuppose registered institutional counterparts by legal design.

Second, the political origins of the policy appear to have been significantly shaped by the mobilization of a registered religious organization and the MIRA party in response to the 2014 crisis. The Council of State's 2018 ruling independently corroborates the existence of electoral irregularities during that cycle, while the broader claims of persecution and stigmatization remain part of the account provided by a directly involved participant. The available evidence therefore supports a significant role for MIRA in placing religious freedom on the policy agenda but does not establish that MIRA was the sole or dominant actor in the policy's origins. Nor should this mobilization be equated with partisan capture: it may also be understood as a legitimate instance of minority agenda setting. At the same time, the sustained association between the issue and one political actor raises a question about possible crowding-out or dependence that requires comparative research involving other political parties and religious actors.

Third, the policy's documented design weaknesses are consistent expressions of this matrix rather than isolated technical defects. The public problem is ana-

lytically under-specified because the policy identifies multiple conditions without clearly prioritizing them, defining the population primarily affected, or articulating a causal pathway between problems, instruments, and outcomes. The target-group structure is broader than registered religious entities, as the PPRF includes civil society, public and private entities, media, public servants, territorial institutions, and other actors; however, registered religious organizations remain its principal institutional interlocutors in several participation, recognition, and coordination mechanisms. Accountability and implementation evidence are also constrained by limited public information, making some findings better understood as transparency and evaluability gaps rather than demonstrated non-implementation.

Fourth, the consolidation of the policy requires legislative action stated in legally precise terms: a statutory reform of Law 133 of 1994, following the procedure of Articles 152 and 153 of the Constitution, to correct the conceptual foundation and articulate the statute with Law 21 of 1991; and an ordinary law anchoring the policy's institutional architecture, budget, and accountability obligations and shielding its implementation from dependence on the political will of any single actor.

None of these findings diminishes the significance of the PPRF. As an early and distinctive national public policy on religious freedom in Latin America, it has positioned the right on the public agenda, funded awareness and training activities, created a dedicated directorate, and offered a precedent that other countries in the region, and in the Global South more broadly, can adapt to their own contexts through processes of vernacularization. Precisely because the policy has that potential as a transferable model, the diagnosis matters: what would travel, in its current form, is a template that equates religious freedom with the recognition of organized churches. A policy that aspires to guarantee religious freedom for all must first learn to see all of the religion it is meant to protect.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study. The research consists of documentary, legal, and public policy analysis and does not constitute biomedical or health research within the meaning of the Declaration of Helsinki or of Costa Rican Law No. 9234, Ley Reguladora de Investigación Biomédica. Under the Política de Integridad Científica (POL-INVE-0003) of the Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología (ULACIT), the institution with which this research is affiliated, prior approval by the Research Ethics Committee is not required for purely documentary or theoretical research without risk to identifiable persons. The single expert interview was conducted with an adult participant in a professional capacity, collected no sensitive personal data, and the participant was not identified in the article.

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Informed Consent Statement

Verbal informed consent was obtained from the interview participant. Verbal consent was obtained rather than written because this was a single, minimal-risk expert interview with an adult participant acting in a professional capacity, involving no sensitive personal data and no publication of identifying information. Before the interview, the participant was informed that it formed part of academic research intended for publication and consented to participate and to the use of the information for that purpose.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Axis	Objective (Theme)	Lines of Action (Main Themes)
Axis 1 Religious freedom and worship and its scopes	1.1. Identify and position the contribution of religious entities and their organizations to the common good, conflict resolution, peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and community transformation	1.1.1. Strategy for mapping and characterizing the cultural, social, educational, peace and reconciliation work of religious entities and their organizations; 1.1.2. Protocol for articulating programs of family intervention, social cohesion, and community transformation
Axis 1	1.2. Promote non-discrimination, tolerance, and non-stigmatization on religious grounds in civil society, public and private entities, and the media	1.2.1. At least five mass pedagogical campaigns through institutional, digital, and communication media; 1.2.2. Training for media workers on the language and characteristics of the religious fact and culture
Axis 1	1.3. Strengthen the Ministry of Interior comprehensively in matters of religious freedom and worship	1.3.1. Creation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs within the Ministry of Interior; 1.3.2. Periodic training in religious affairs for public servants of the Ministry; 1.3.3. Updating of citizen service formats and protocols in religious affairs
Axis 1	1.4. Disseminate the national and international legal framework and promote knowledge of the religious fact and culture in the State and civil society	1.4.1. Forums, workshops, training, and pedagogical material on the legal framework and religious plurality; 1.4.2. Continuing education strategies with universities and cooperators; 1.4.3. Permanent space for research and analysis of the religious fact, culture, and plurality; 1.4.4. Spaces for interreligious encounter; 1.4.5. Support to SENA in updating the national occupational classification for ministers of worship; 1.4.6. Communication channel with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on visa procedures for religious entities; 1.4.7. Strategy of effective measures to prevent attacks on the exercise of religious freedom
Axis 1	1.5. Generate actions to guarantee the citizen participation of religious entities and their organizations	1.5.1. Training workshops and pedagogical schools in citizen participation under a train-the-trainer methodology; 1.5.2. Inclusion of religious entities in the Ministry's citizen participation strategies and instances
Axis 1	1.6. Propose modifications to the legal framework in force to recognize the new realities of religious freedom, its plurality, and its social, cultural, and educational incidence	1.6.1. Review of the legal framework to identify gaps and present normative proposals; 1.6.2. Update of the Interinstitutional Committee for the Regulation of Agreements of Internal Public Law and conclusion of new agreements with registered religious entities; updating of the Public Register of Religious Entities (as adopted in Decree 437 of 2018)

Axis	Objective (Theme)	Lines of Action (Main Themes)
Axis 1	Strengthening of intersectoral, interinstitutional, and territorial articulation (as adopted in Decree 437 of 2018)	Technical assistance to territorial entities; accompaniment of religious freedom committees and councils in departments and municipalities; creation of a governance toolkit in religious affairs; promotion of the designation of territorial liaisons between territorial entities and the Ministry of Interior; identification of the land use planning problems affecting religious entities
Axis 1	Understanding of the connection between religious freedom and the right to education (as adopted in Decree 437 of 2018)	Continuity of the interinstitutional working group between the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Education
Axis 2 Religious entities and their organizations as agents of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation	Promotion of the participation of religious entities in forgiveness and reconciliation scenarios for peacebuilding	Creation of the Working Group (Mesa) for the recognition and strengthening of the contribution of religious entities to peace, chaired by the Ministry of Interior with the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace as technical secretariat; pedagogy and awareness workshops on peacebuilding strategies; strategy to promote the peace and reconciliation activities carried out by religious entities
Axis 2	Identification and interinstitutional response to the victimization of religious entities in the armed conflict	Interinstitutional coordination mechanism to form strategic alliances among national and territorial institutions, the private sector, international cooperation, civil society, and religious entities
Axis 3 International and interreligious cooperation for development	Strengthening of collaboration among public entities, religious entities, and international cooperation bodies toward the Sustainable Development Goals	Training in the formulation and management of international cooperation projects; guidance on the international cooperation offer of interest to religious entities; identification of religious entities' programs contributing to the SDGs before the High-Level Interinstitutional Commission for the SDGs
Monitoring provisions	Follow-up and monitoring of the policy	Strategic monitoring plan created by the Ministry of Interior; annual communication of implementation progress to religious entities and their organizations; provision of implementation information to territorial instances and religious entities upon request

Table A1: Axes, objectives, and lines of action of the PPRF (main themes).

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