IIRF Reports

Dennis P. Petri

From Rankings to Realities: Measuring What Really Matters for Religious Freedom

2025/25

International Institute
for Religious Freedom

IIRF International Institute for Religious Freedom

Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa

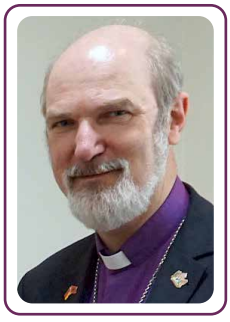
The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a "meeting place" for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.

Dr. Dennis P. Petri (V.i.S.d.P.)
International Director

Dr. Kyle Wisdom
Deputy Director



Prof. Dr. mult. Thomas Paul Schirrmacher
President of the Academic/Editorial Board

Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
Executive Editor of the International Journal for Religious Freedom (IJRF)

IIRF Reports Vol. 14—2025/25

This report is a reprint from: Petri, D. P. (2025, December 1). From Rankings to Realities: Measuring What Really Matters for Religious Freedom. *Institute for Global Engagement*. https://globalengage.org/?p=3546

Dennis P. Petri

From Rankings to Realities: Measuring What Really Matters for Religious Freedom

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dennis P. Petri, PhD, is International Director of the IIRF, founder and scholar-at-large of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, Executive Director of the Foundation Platform for Social Transformation, Associate Professor of International Relations and Head of the Chair of Humanities at the Latin American University of Science and Technology (Costa Rica) and Adjunct Professor of International Negotiation and Research Methods at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (UNESCO).

When it comes to religious freedom measurement, we've come a long way. 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 the freedom of religion and belief (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 firmly on the international agenda.

Still, progress has not been without problems. In my 2022 article "The Tyranny of Religious Freedom Rankings"[1] for *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* (RFIA), I argued that rankings can distort incentives by encouraging what social scientists call "rank-seeking behavior." Governments tend to react not to the substance of a report but to their position on a list. This dynamic has become even more evident since Nigeria was designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC)[2] by the United States, a label that has intensified the government's defensiveness. Successive administrations have disputed international assessments[3] highlighting widespread religious violence, insisting that such conflicts are "not religious" or that the country is being unfairly portrayed.[4] These reactions reveal how easily measurement can become politicized, deflecting attention from the structural causes[5] of religious discrimination and repression, and the overlapping roles of local powerholders, vigilante groups, and criminal networks. In such cases, a ranking or designation becomes a political irritant rather than an invitation to policy reform.

At the same time, and despite these political sensitivities, measurement practice has continued to evolve. In my more recent RFIA article, "Measuring What Matters: Evolving Metrics of Religious Freedom,"[6] I distinguish among four types of instruments: narrative-coded, expert-based, survey, and event-based. Each captures a distinct slice of reality. The future of religious freedom research, I believe, lies not in finding the single best index, but in combining approaches to form a more complete picture.

---

1 Petri, D. P. (2022). The Tyranny of Religious Freedom Rankings. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 20(1), 82–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2022.2031064

2 USCIRF (2025, November 3). Naming of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern is an Important Step to Advance Religious Freedom. *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*. https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/naming-nigeria-country-particular-concern-important-step-advance

3 Nnorom, N. (2025, November 2). Nigeria's int'l image takes hit as Trump redesignates it as Country of Particular Concern. *Vanguard Media*. https://vanguardngr.com/?p=2753056

4 Ukwu, J. (2025, September 30). Tinubu dismisses genocide claims, says no religion is under siege in Nigeria. *The Cable*. https://www.thecable.ng/tinubu-dismisses-genocide-claims-says-no-religion-is-under-siege-in-nigeria/

5 Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa. https://orfa.africa

6 Petri, D. P. (2025). Measuring What Matters: Evolving Metrics of Religious Freedom. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 23(4), 33–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2025.2545135

And we're still innovating. The Violent Incidents Database (VID)[7] is one such initiative. Rather than relying solely on annual reports or coded surveys, the VID collects and classifies discrete events of violence against religious groups. It allows us to trace micro-dynamics of vulnerability: who is affected, by whom, where, and why. In Mexico, for instance, the data reveal how religious leaders become targets when they challenge organized crime[8] or defend community integrity.

Another initiative, the Global Religious Freedom Index,[9] based on data from the Religion and State Project,[10] takes a complementary approach. It integrates multiple dimensions of restriction—from government regulation to social discrimination—and seeks to balance global comparability with contextual nuance. The goal is not to replace existing tools but to enrich them with a more holistic view of how FoRB actually operates in society.

Another frontier in this evolving field is the effort to measure not only restrictions but also positive expressions of religious freedom. Too often, our attention is limited to documenting violations, as if FoRB could only be understood through its absence. Genuine, sustainable freedom is also visible in acts of cooperation, interfaith dialogue, social contribution, and the public good generated by faith communities. An innovative initiative in this direction is being developed by Maksym Vasin and the NGO Love Your Neighbor Community (LYNC), which is creating a pair of "positive indices"[11] for Central Asia. These tools aim to assess constructive engagement between religious communities and the state, as well as the social capital produced by faith-based actors. Measuring such positive dynamics is challenging, but it reminds us that freedom of religion or belief is not just about removing obstacles. It is about nurturing the conditions that allow faith to enrich public life.

Underlying these efforts is a simple conviction: measurement should serve understanding, not competition. We do not measure religious freedom to crown winners and losers, but to diagnose problems and guide action. Rankings may be appealing to policymakers because they simplify complexity, but they often do so at the cost of accuracy. The challenge is to produce data that remain useful without losing sight of the human realities behind the numbers.

---

7 Petri, D. P., Wisdom, K. J., & Bainbridge, J. T. (2025). Tracking Religious Freedom Violations with the Violent Incidents Database: A Methodological Approach and Comparative Analysis. *Data*, 10(5), 72. https://doi.org/10.3390/data10050072

8 Petri, D. P., & Glasius, M. (2022). Vulnerability and Active Religious Behavior: Christians and Crime Syndicates in Mexico. *Human Rights Quarterly* 44(3), 514–536. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2022.0025

9 The Global Religious Freedom Index. *International Institute for Religious Freedom*. https://iirf.global/publications-resources/global-religious-freedom-index/

10 Religion and State Project (RAS). *The Research and State Project and The Association of Religion Data Archives*. https://ras.thearda.com

11 Vasin, M. (2024, June 2). Positive Indexes as a Framework for Building Religious Freedom in Central Asia. *Love Your Neighbor Community*. https://lyncommunity.org/blog/positive-indexes-as-a-framework-for-building-religious-freedom-in-central-asia/

We still tend to measure what is easiest to count rather than what is most meaningful. As a result, discrimination by state actors often receives more attention than that carried out by non-state actors. In Latin America,[12] threats to religious freedom frequently come from local authorities, criminal organizations, or indigenous leaders rather than from national governments. These actors enforce informal rules[13] that determine who may worship, where, and how. When a community expels converts, when a criminal group punishes a pastor for speaking against corruption, or when a woman hides her faith to avoid social reprisal, the violation is real, even if it does not fit neatly into a state-centric framework.

Just as non-state actors remain underexamined in most global datasets, the subnational dimension of religious freedom[14] is also a significant blind spot. As Jason Klocek and I discuss in our study on measuring subnational variation, the realities of freedom of religion or belief are often unevenly distributed within countries. National-level indices may record a stable or even improving situation, while localities experience acute deterioration. Provinces under the control of organized crime, indigenous jurisdictions applying customary law, or urban neighborhoods dominated by gangs can all become zones where religious freedom is effectively suspended. Yet these patterns are rarely captured in cross-national comparisons. Recognizing this gap is essential, because what happens at the subnational level often shapes how freedom of religion is lived or denied far more directly than national policies do.

Capturing these "gray zones" requires combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Event-based data can reveal patterns of violence; ethnographic and local studies can explain their meaning. This interplay between data and narrative, between numbers and stories, is where I believe the future of religious freedom research lies.

Ultimately, the task of measuring religious freedom is not only technical but moral. It asks us to balance precision with empathy, and analysis with listening. Religious freedom is often described as an individual right, but it is also a social process. It depends on relationships of trust, tolerance, and dialogue that cannot be legislated into existence. No dataset, however sophisticated, can fully grasp this dimension.

Still, data can help us ask better questions, challenge assumptions, and design more effective responses. We may never be able to measure religious freedom perfectly. But we can measure it more wisely, more contextually, and more compassionately. That is what really matters.

---

[12] Petri, D. P. (2021). The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities. *Religious Freedom Series,* Vol. 6. https://iirf.global/?p=625

[13] Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. https://olire.org

[14] Klocek, J., & Petri, D. P. (2023). Measuring Subnational Variation in Freedom of Religion or Belief Violations: Reflections on a Path Forward. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 21*(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2023.2200278

Imprint

Address

International Institute for Religious Freedom
P. O. Box 780068
Orlando, Florida 32878
United States of America

Friedrichstr. 38
2nd Floor
53111 Bonn
Germany

International Director: Dr. Dennis P. Petri (V.i.S.d.P.)
Research Director: Prof. Dr. Christof Sauer
Executive Editor of the IJRF: Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
President: Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Contact: info@iirf.global

Occassional journal with special reports, research projects, reprints and documentation published by VKW Culture and Science Publ.

Follow us:

International Institute
for Religious Freedom

International Institute for Religious Freedom

Bonn | Brussels | Cape Town
Colombo | Brasília | Delhi
Tübingen | Vancouver

iirf.global • info@iirf.global