

Faith in Numbers:

Can we Trust Quantitative Data on Religious Affiliation and Religious Freedom?

■ Judd Birdsall and Lori Beaman | 22 June 2020

Working in religion and international affairs, it has become almost obligatory to start a talk by citing the Pew global religious landscape data...which noted that 84 percent of the world's population identifies with a religious tradition."

So says Gerald Fitzgerald of the British Council in a recent interview with *Religion & Diplomacy*.¹ In early 2020 the British Council released a report, authored by Fitzgerald, that opens by citing the Pew data to substantiate the relevance of religion for public diplomacy: "The fact that more than 8 out of 10 people worldwide identify with a religious group underlines the importance of taking religion into account as a key component of cultural relations work."²

There is a similar, "almost obligatory" usage of Pew's data on global religious restrictions in reports, articles, and statements dealing with international freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In particular, Pew's finding that 83% of the world's population lives in countries with "high" or "very high" levels of restrictions on religion is cited by activists, academics, and officials as authoritative evidence that persecution is a pervasive global problem that demands an urgent response.

Taken together—and they are often cited in tandem—these 84% and 83% figures are used in support of a wide range of state, business, and civil society initiatives related to religion and religious freedom. The identification and restriction figures have been used in scores of publications as diverse as the scientific *Discover* magazine (in an article which begins with "It's natural to believe in the supernatural")³ and *Esquire*⁴, a men's lifestyle magazine. It has also been used by the United Nations Population Fund⁵; various groups of politicians and official and semi-governmental bodies, including the Government of Australia's Expert Panel's Religious Freedom Review⁶ and the Commonwealth Initiative for Freedom of Religion or Belief⁷; as well as a wide range of think tanks and religious NGOs. This small sampling helps to illustrate the ubiquity of the Pew figures in our discourse related to religion.

It is also important to note that the same Pew figures can be used to buttress claims of the relevance of non-religion and the rights of non-believers. In her testimony before the U.S. Congress in January 2020, Bangladesh-born Humanist activist Bonya Ahmed said, "In 2012, the Pew Research Center estimated that religiously unaffiliated people make up 16% of Earth's population, or 1.1 billion individuals,

¹ "Faith in the Special Relationship? An Interview with Ger Fitzgerald," *Religion & Diplomacy*, 25 February, 2020. <https://religionanddiplomacy.org.uk/2020/02/25/faith-in-the-special-relationship-an-interview-with-ger-fitzgerald/>

² *US and UK Perspectives on Religion and Belief*, British Council, 2020.

https://www.britishcouncil.us/sites/default/files/usukreligionbeliefreport_1.pdf

³ Bridget Alex, "The Human Brain Evolved to Believe in Gods," *Discover*, October 15, 2018.

<https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/the-human-brain-evolved-to-believe-in-gods>

⁴ Josh Sims, "Religion: A study into the differences, similarities, and longevity of the major faiths," *Esquire*, 13 November 2019.

<https://www.esquiresg.com/features/religion-a-study-into-the-differences-similarities-and-longevity-of-the-major-faiths/>

⁵ *Religion, Women's Health and Rights: Points of Contention and Paths of Opportunities*, United Nations Population Fund, 2015.

https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Religion_Womens_Health_and_Rights.pdf

⁶ *Religious Freedom Review*, 2018.

<https://www.ag.gov.au/RightsAndProtections/Human-Rights/Documents/religious-freedom-review-expert-panel-report-2018.pdf>

⁷ *Freedom of Religion or Belief – A Toolkit for Parliamentarians*, Commonwealth Initiative for Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2018

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/ptr/ciforb/resources/FoRB-Toolkit.pdf>

joining Christians and Muslims as one of the three largest belief groups in the world.”⁸ Giovanni Gaetani of Humanists International used the Pew data in the same way in an April 2020 webinar on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on civil society.⁹

In this paper we attempt to do four things. First, we discuss the appeal of quantitative data generally and the particular salience of the Pew data on religious identification and religious restrictions. Second, we examine Pew’s data on religious identification. Third, we examine Pew’s data on religious restrictions. Fourth, we provide some recommendations for diplomats and other international affairs practitioners as they engage with quantitative data on religion.

Our aim is not to challenge Pew’s credibility. We believe they provide an enormously useful service to scholars, policymakers, activists, the media, and the general public. We focus here on Pew, among the many organizations that do quantitative work on religion, because their work is the most prominent and influential. By using Pew as an illustrative case study, we aim to encourage readers to think more carefully and critically about the inherently tricky task of quantifying religion and religious freedom.¹⁰

Reasons for Our Faith in Numbers

Before we analyze the methodologies and findings of the Pew Research Center with respect to religious identification and restrictions, we should consider why it is that we are drawn to the type of data they produce. Why do we place such faith in numbers? Here we offer three key reasons.

First, numbers are succinct. They enable us to quickly summarize and communicate complex information. If one wanted to understand the status of governmental respect for FoRB in China, for instance, one could read the U.S. State department’s annual religious freedom report on the country. The full report on China, including special additional sections focused on Tibet and Xinjiang, is over 30,000 words and would take several hours to read. Or, one could simply look up Pew’s quantitative data: China ranks 8.9 out

of a possible 10 on government restrictions on religion. That data took only a few seconds to read.

Second, quantitative social science is widely regarded as factual, objective, and thus authoritative. Whereas many religious groups and NGOs that track religious affiliation and religious freedom have a clear religious or ideological commitment, the Pew Research Center is not a sectarian nor partisan institution. It calls itself a “nonpartisan fact tank.” The Center eschews taking policy positions. The authors of a recent global study on Christian responses to persecution noted that “Well-documented social science research into persecution increases the trust of media and politicians and is taken seriously by the secular world. Reports including the use of rankings are especially effective.”¹¹

Third, a particular appeal of the Pew data on both religious identification and religious restrictions is their shock value among Western policymakers. For the typical Western policymaker who lives and works in a liberal and highly secular environment wherein very few of her friends and colleagues are actively religious or concerned about religious freedom, it can be a major wake up call to encounter data indicating that the overwhelming majority of the world’s population is affiliated with a religion and faces the threat of persecution.

Religious Identification

The Pew Research Center’s ‘84%’ finding first appeared in its 2012 report, *The Global Religious Landscape*.¹² The report’s executive summary states, “Worldwide, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group.”¹³ This figure was reported widely by news media, including in the *Washington Post*, the *Catholic News Agency*, the *Huffington Post*, and *Reuters*, among others. And despite dating to the 2012 report, this finding continues to be cited and reported as news. For example, a 2018 article by Harriet Sherwood in *The Guardian* stated: “If you think religion belongs to the past and we live in a new age of reason, you need to check out the facts: 84% of the world’s population identifies with a religious group.”¹⁴

⁸ United States. Cong. House. Foreign Affairs Committee and Oversight and Reform Committee. Hearing on Ending Global Religious Persecution. 28 January 2020. (testimony of Rafida Bonya Ahmed). <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO02/20200128/110404/HRG-116-GO02-Wstate-AhmedB-20200128.pdf>. p. 3.

⁹ “COVID-19, Religion and Belief.” Webinar series. <https://spark.adobe.com/page/4vSJTeJhUd96y/>

¹⁰ We want to thank colleagues at the Pew Research Center for

reviewing and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹¹ *In Response to Persecution*, Notre Dame University, 2018, 54.

¹² Pew Research Center, 2012.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

¹³ Pew Research Center, 2012, 9.

¹⁴ Harriet Sherwood, “Religion: why faith is becoming more and more popular,” *Guardian*, 27 August 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why->

After its initial release in 2012, the 84% figure began to circulate widely as a fact upon which NGO action, state policies, and academic studies should build. The figure has been cited extensively in high-profile statements. For example, in *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel on Social Progress* well known sociologists of religion Grace Davie and Nancy Ammerman note: “The pursuit of social progress and human flourishing is inevitably intertwined with religion. Well over 80 percent of the world’s population is connected to some sort of religion, a percentage that is growing rather than declining.”¹⁵

How did Pew arrive at this number? Pew’s researchers are exceptionally competent and adept at data collection, analysis, and reporting. Pew did not, however, collect the data on which the 84% figure is built. Rather, they gathered existing data from “national censuses, large-scale surveys and official population registers that were collected, evaluated and standardized by the Pew Forum’s demographers and other research staff.”¹⁶

There are some issues that cannot be completely overcome with standardization, including the fact that there was variability in years that data were collected, that different questions and approaches are used from country to country, and different collection methods (telephone, face to face, online) may influence responses to religious self-identification. Why does this matter? Some countries are experiencing rapid change in relation to religious identification. Non-religious identities are increasing in Western countries. Some former communist countries are experiencing a reverse trend, with rapid increases in religious identification; the re-establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church is one key example.

Pew describes the study as being based on self-identification. The Pew report says, “It seeks to estimate the number of people around the world who view themselves as belonging to various religious groups. It does not attempt to measure the degree to which members of these groups actively practice their faiths or how religious they are.”¹⁷

Self-identification is tricky for a number of reasons. First, in some contexts it is not possible or desirable to religiously or non-religiously

identify. For example, being labeled as non-religious in Indonesia or Pakistan is dangerous. Similarly, identifying as Baha’i in Iran may have serious negative consequences.

Second, Pew does not attempt to measure active practice in *The Global Religious Landscape*, but this too has implications for understanding the meaning of declaring a religious identification. For example, in the case of Sweden, which hasn’t had a state church since 2000, approximately 58% of the population belongs to the Church of Sweden, but fewer and fewer Swedes regularly attend religious services.¹⁸ The distinction between affiliation and identity is important, as how someone is affiliated (e.g. member of the Church of Sweden) may have little to do with how they identify – either religiously or otherwise – or how they practice.¹⁹

Third, there is also the issue of leaving. Some religions make it extremely difficult or even impossible to exit. Following a 2010 decree by Pope Benedict XVI revising the formal process of defection, many former Catholics have found it practically impossible to defect from the Church.²⁰ Thus, people who have *de facto* left a religion but do not go through formal processes of exit continue to be counted as affiliated or belonging. For some people it is simply easier to stay affiliated than to go through the process of disaffiliating if it is complicated or might attract political or social sanction. To be clear, Pew relies primarily on surveys and censuses and not denominational reporting. Our point is to encourage those who use quantitative data on religion to ask questions about that data – no matter who generates it and how.

Where no other reliable data are available Pew uses the World Religion Database (this accounts for Pew’s data on only 5% of the world’s population). The World Religion Database is also widely cited and is an important source of information. However, it comes with limitations. In his review of the Database, the statistician Peter Brierley pointed out that for the United Kingdom the Database used denominational reports, such as Church of England baptismal records, rather than the UK census figures to calculate affiliation. A tally of denominational reporting showed that 82% of Britons were Christian, whereas only 72% of

is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next

¹⁵ Davie et al., 2018, 644. “Religions and Social Progress: Critical Assessments and Creative Partnerships,” In *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel on Social Progress, Volume 3*, 641-676. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ Pew Research Center, 2012, 14.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, 2012, 15.

¹⁸ <https://sweden.se/society/10-fundamentals-of-religion-in-sweden/>

¹⁹ Conrad Hackett, “Seven things to consider when measuring Religious Identity” *Religion*, 44(3).

²⁰ For a discussion of the complexities of defection, see J. Patrick Hornbeck, II “The Formal Act of Defection and U.S Catholic Deconversion,” *American Catholic Studies*, 127(1).

them claimed to be Christian in the UK census.²¹ Census statistics should also be used with full knowledge of their complications. The ‘religion’ question is notoriously difficult to formulate.

Pew is aware of these issues. The problem is that the information compiled in the 2012 report has taken a life of its own, being cited as indisputable fact and, as mentioned above, in various forms without any explanation or contextualization of what precisely is being measured.

The Pew finding on global religious identification is sometimes presented as the percentage of the world’s population that has belief or faith. A 2012 *Washington Times* headline declared “84 percent of the world population has faith; a third are Christian.”²² A 2019 *BBC* article referred to an “increase in believers” when citing the Pew study.²³ These shifts in language matter and have different implications. Identification may be interpreted as institutional membership or sense of connection, but how this translates into belief, practice, or faith is not known. Broad national surveys often focus on simple religious identity or affiliation categories and not levels of engagement.

The irony is that even as the Pew figure is used to justify greater inclusion of religion in various contexts, it is based on data that counts as religious many people who are only nominally religious or who might otherwise identify as non-religious if it were easier—or less dangerous—to do so.

Religious Restrictions

Since the 1990s there has been an explosion of new reporting on FoRB by governments, NGOs, think tanks, and religious groups. The reporting varies considerably in scale, methodology, emphasis, audience, and quality. Most of the reporting is in narrative form, providing descriptions and analyses of FoRB cases and conditions.

Starting in 2009 the Pew Research Center began issuing annual quantitative reports on religious restrictions. These reports code the narrative data from 20 government and NGO reports²⁴ into quantitative indicators to create a “systematic assessment and comparison of

restrictions on religion worldwide.”²⁵ Pew employs a rigorous and transparent social scientific methodology, which it details at length in its annual reports.

With its coding instrument, Pew creates two 10-point indexes: the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and the Social Hostilities Index (SHI). GRI is a measurement of how a government’s laws, policies, and concrete actions restrict religion in a given country. The SHI measures religion-related acts of hostility perpetrated by non-governmental actors and groups. Dividing the difficulties facing religious groups into these indexes, each made of several sub-categories, enables a finer-grained understanding of conditions within a given country. And we see that government restrictions and social hostilities would seem to be mutually reinforcing. Though there are some outliers (e.g. China and Vietnam have “low” or “moderate” SHI but “very high” GRI), countries tend to have roughly similar GRI and SHI scores. At the bottom of the rankings, Japan and Taiwan score “low” in both indexes. At the opposite end, Pakistan and Egypt score “very high” in both.

With graphs, charts, and tables Pew makes it easy to quickly assess and compare countries. Readers can spot, for instance, that several of the countries that actively promote FoRB as part of their foreign policy actually have less than stellar conditions for religion and religious tolerance domestically. Denmark, Germany, Hungary, the UK, and the US all have special envoys for FoRB and all have “high” social hostilities involving religion and “moderate” government restrictions, according to the Pew data.

Aggregating the country data, the Pew reports also enable analysis of conditions at the continental and global level. The MENA region has consistently ranked far worse than all other regions in both GRI and SHI. The Americas rank lowest on both indexes. At the global level, the median SHI is 2.1 and the GRI is 2.8. But as we noted in our introduction, what garners by far the most media and policy attention is the Pew finding that that 83% of people live in countries with “high” or “very high” levels of religious restrictions (GRI or SHI).

Because of the salience of that 83% figure, it’s worth taking a moment to examine the finding.

²¹ Peter Brierley, “World Religion Database: Detail Beyond Belief,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 2010. <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2010-01/2010-01-018-brierley.html>

²² Jennifer Harper, “84 percent of the world population has faith; a third are Christian,” *Washington Times*, 23 December 2012. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/watercooler/-2012/dec/23/84-percent-world-population-has-faith-third-are-ch/>

²³ Sumit Paul-Choudhury, “Tomorrow’s Gods: What is the future

of religion?” *BBC*, 2 August 2019.

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190801-tomorrows-gods-what-is-the-future-of-religion>

²⁴ For a full list of the primary sources Pew use, see pages 68-69 of their 2019 report, https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/07/Restrictions_X_WEB_7-15_FULL-VERSION-1.pdf.

²⁵ *Global Restrictions on Religion*, Pew Research Center, 2009, 31.

There are two important questions to consider. First, how does Pew determine what is “high” and “very high”? The thresholds for these categories, as well as “moderate” and “low,” were set in Pew’s inaugural 2009 report (using 2007 data). The top 5% of countries in the SHI and GRI indexes were labeled as “very high.” For GRI, those countries had scores of 6.6 and above. For SHI it was 7.2 upwards. The “high” countries were next 15%, with GRI scores from 4.5 to 6.5 and SHI scores 3.6 to 7.1. In all subsequent years, Pew kept this 2007 baseline. So, all countries with a GRI of 6.6 or above continue to be classified as “very high” although 14% of countries (27 of 198) fall into that classification as of 2017.

Second, what does it mean on the ground when a country has a “high” or “very high” GRI or SHI? The finding is often employed in policy and activist discourse to paint a picture of a world ablaze with persecution, with more than 8 in 10 of the earth’s inhabitants actively suffering for their beliefs. But rarely quoted is the caveat that Pew commendably offers directly following the sentence with 83% figure in its 2016 report:

It is important to note, however, that these restrictions and hostilities do not necessarily affect the religious groups and citizens of these countries equally, as certain groups or individuals—especially religious minorities—may be targeted more frequently by these policies and actions than others. Thus, the actual proportion of the world’s population that is affected by high levels of religious restrictions may be considerably lower than 85% [sic].²⁶

Concerns

The possibility of a considerable gap between Pew’s findings—or what their findings are often assumed to suggest—and lived reality leads us to offer the following points.

“Religious Restrictions” do not necessarily equal FoRB violations. Perhaps the most significant gap is between what Pew is actually measuring—“government restrictions on religion” and “social hostilities involving religion”—and the frequent use of their data by advocates and policymakers as the definitive quantification of violations of the universal human right to FoRB. A quick search on Google brings up many instances of foreign ministers and other senior officials referencing the 83% figure as a measure of the world’s population that live in nations where *religious freedom* is threatened or banned.²⁷

This distinction between religious restrictions and FoRB violations may seem rather

technical and even trivial, but it has profound implications for our understanding of the severity of religious persecution and discrimination around the world—and for policy and programs formulated on the basis of that understanding. We suspect that part of the problem could be the word “restriction.” Pew uses the term in a neutral way, making no explicit claim as to whether the restrictions are good or bad. In everyday usage, though, the term often has a normative, pejorative connotation. It is easy to see how “restrictions on religion” could be taken to mean illegitimate limitations on religious freedom.

Looking carefully at Pew’s diagnostic questions for the GRI, it’s clear that “restrictions” according to Pew’s methodology do not always constitute violations according to international legal norms. Consider these questions:

- Does any level of government ask religious groups to register for any reason, including to be eligible for benefits such as tax exemption?
- Does the national government have an established organization to regulate or manage religious affairs?
- Do some religious groups receive government support or favors, such as funding, official recognition or special access?
- Does the country’s constitution or basic law recognize a favored religion or religions?
- Does any level of government provide funds or other resources to religious groups?
- Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious education programs and/or religious schools?
- Does any level of government provide funds or other resources for religious property (e.g., buildings, upkeep, repair or land)?
- Is religious education required in public schools?
- Is proselytizing limited by any level of government?
- Is religious literature or broadcasting limited by any level of government?

²⁶ *Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016*, Pew Research Center, 2018, 15-16.

²⁷ To be fair, one can also find many examples of officials, activists,

and journalists carefully citing Pew data using Pew’s precise terminology.

A country in which the answer is some gradation of “yes” to many of these questions would likely have a high GRI score but would not necessarily have any violations of the right to FoRB. Some “restrictions” on religious practice may be entirely legitimate and some forms of cooperation between the state and one or more religious groups may not impinge upon the free exercise of other religious and belief groups. For instance, many governments place restrictions on the call to prayer from minarets because of noise regulations. A state may ban or restrict a religious group that has shown a pattern of hateful or extremist speech or harmful or illegal activity. For instance, according to the European Court of Human Rights, the freedom to promote one’s religion and seek converts is an important dimension of FoRB but “does not extend to abusive behaviour such as applying unacceptable pressure, or actual harassment.”²⁸ State funding to religious facilities can be in the service of cultural preservation. State-mandated education about religion can foster religious literacy and tolerance. And a system of registering religious groups can be non-discriminatory.

The right to FoRB, as enshrined in international law, does not require the unfettered manifestation of religion or the strict separation of religion from the state. According to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.” To be sure, these limitations can be and very often are misused by governments. But that does not mean the limitations themselves are inherently problematic. The mandatory closure of religious sites and the ban on religious gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplified, at least in principle, a justifiable limitation on religion in order to protect public health.²⁹

Numbers versus lived reality. While most of Pew’s national GRI and SHI scores are about what one might expect, several scores seem to defy lived experience. In the “very high” GRI bracket, Singapore ranks above (that is, worse than) Myanmar, Sudan, Brunei, and Pakistan. Russia ranks above Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea. Spain is in the “high” bracket, above “moderate” countries like Somalia and Libya. Portugal, despite its cultural and legal

similarities with Spain, is ranked “low.” The United States receives a higher GRI score than Cambodia, Poland, and just three places below Hungary. The United Kingdom ranks worse than war-torn Central African Republic.

In the SHI sub-category of social hostilities related to religious norms, Germany ranks worst in the world – alongside India and Somalia.³⁰ France, Italy, and the UK also rank in the top ten. Israel ranks above Afghanistan even though the narrative explaining the results highlights widely variant hostilities: the Taliban threatened or killed disfavored clerics while ultra-Orthodox Jews insulted and spat on taxi drivers working on the Sabbath. Such results demonstrate how hard it is to account for enormous differences in the severity of social hostilities. Pew does include gradations in many of its metrics to account for some of these differences, but its reports don’t tell us how they score those gradations.

To its credit, Pew does caution that two countries having similar GRI scores “does not mean that the lived experience of someone in those two countries is similar with respect to government restrictions on religion.” The authors of the report commend examining the sub-categories that together comprise the GRI “when comparing countries that have similar overall scores but very different situations within their borders.” That’s a useful suggestion. But we suspect that most readers, particularly non-specialists, simply look at the summary data. Further, the utility of the GRI and SHI scores are called into question if they can’t be assumed to reflect lived experience.

“Any level of government.” Many of the diagnostic questions used by Pew as part of its coding instrument include the phrase “any level of government.” For example, “Was there harassment or intimidation of religious groups by any level of government?” In a great many countries one can find an allegation of an overzealous government official somewhere that harasses or intimidates a religious group. This official may serve at a low level in a remote province and may be ignorant about national law and policy or simply take matters into his own hands. The State Department’s 2018 religious freedom report for Vietnam notes, for instance, that “Religious group adherents reported local or provincial authorities committed the majority of harassment incidents.” Pew does mitigate the impact of “any level of government” metrics by

paper.

³⁰ Germany, India, and Somalia all receive a 10/10 on this measure. We should note that Pew reports present all countries in descending order of their scores but does not explicitly rank them 1, 2, 3, etc.

²⁸ European Court of Human Rights, “Overview of the Court’s case-law on freedom of religion,” 2013. https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Research_report_religion_ENG.pdf

²⁹ Many thanks to Marie Juul Petersen of the Danish Institute for Human Rights for her comments that informed this section of the

using many other metrics, including several that focus on the national government. But we are left wondering if GRI scores are at least slightly inflated by actions of local officials that may have isolated impact and don't reflect national law and policy.

National scores. This raises a related concern about how singular national GRI and SHI scores obscure significant regional variations within large, diverse countries. In places such as India and China, government policy and practice and societal attitudes vary considerably between and even within states/provinces. Separate reports for every province or state would of course be impractical, so we're left with an inherent limitation when dealing with national scores. This limitation is not unique to Pew. Other groups that create measures or rankings of religious persecution do so with country-level analysis. Narrative reports are needed to identify the locations of FoRB violations and offer analysis as to which regions are more problematic and why.

Recommendations

To conclude we offer eight recommendations and reflections for diplomats and other practitioners to bear in mind as they encounter and engage with quantitative data on religious affiliation and religious freedom.

1) Numbers are not neutral. Behind any quantification of religion or FoRB there are a range of qualitative assumptions and decisions as to what constitutes religion, religiosity, a restriction on religious belief or practice, or a social hostility involving religion. It's both an art and a science.

2) Numbers can obscure the enormous complexity and variety of religion around the world. The conceptions and functions of "religion" and "religious freedom" can and do look very different in the Global South—at the personal, communal, and national level—than they do in the contemporary West.

3) Pay close attention to what an organization is actually measuring and use the correct terminology when citing its data. As we have seen, religious "identification" is not synonymous with faith, belief, practice, or even formal affiliation. "Restrictions" on religion are not the same as FoRB violations.

4) Religion and belief are dynamic. Take note of when data were collected and be aware of major events that may impact on religious identity measures. For example, there is currently a great deal of speculation about the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religious behavior. Whether it will have an impact remains to be seen.

5) Reflect on your own context. If the data on religion or FoRB seem highly contestable in your country, then they probably are contestable elsewhere. There are always contextual factors and dynamics that may be difficult or impossible to quantify but are nevertheless essential to understanding the lived reality in a given country.

6) Consider regional variation. National-level data on religious affiliation and FoRB can obscure significant regional variation within countries. The distribution of religious communities and the intensity of religious hostilities are never uniform throughout an entire country.

7) Consider what doesn't make the headlines. The old saying "if it bleeds, it leads" is certainly true in the area of FoRB. It is the stories and data on severe persecution—often involving actual bleeding—that grab our attention. There are indeed tragic situations of oppression and violence that need to be addressed. But a well-rounded understanding of FoRB conditions requires appreciation of the success stories, improvements, and encouraging signs. For instance, according to the most recent Pew data the global median score for SHI was 2.1 ("low"). That's good news that doesn't make the news.

8) There is no replacement for qualitative data. To be sure, there are numerous benefits to quantitative data. But narrative accounts and analysis are needed to more fully capture the gradations, nuances, tensions, debates, regional variations, and the complex ways religion is embedded within a range of other socio-cultural dynamics. Just as single-story narratives do not give the big picture, numbers without narrative lack nuance.

About the Report

This report was commissioned by the Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies (CIRIS) on behalf of the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD).

About the TPNRD

The TPNRD is a forum of diplomats from North America and Europe who collaborate on religion-related foreign policy issues. Launched in 2015, the network is co-chaired by officials from the European External Action Service and the U.S. Department of State.

About CIRIS

CIRIS is a multi-disciplinary research programme at the Centre for Geopolitics at Cambridge University. CIRIS's role as the Secretariat of the TPNRD is generously supported by the Henry Luce Foundation's initiative on religion in international affairs.

About the Authors

Judd Birdsall is the Director of the TPNRD Secretariat and an Affiliated Lecturer at the University of Cambridge. Lori Beaman is Professor and holder of the Canada Research Chair in Religious Diversity and Social Change at the University of Ottawa.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of CIRIS, Cambridge University, the Luce Foundation, the TPNRD Secretariat, or any TPNRD-participating government.

Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies

Fitzwilliam House
32 Trumpington Street
Cambridge CB2 1QY
United Kingdom

CIRIS.org.uk | ReligionandDiplomacy.org.uk

