

Should International Relations Scholars Care About Religious Freedom?

Written by Peter Henne

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PETER HENNE, APR 22 2013

In August 2012, Rimsha Masih, a Pakistani Christian girl, was arrested “for her own protection” after a mob attacked her for reportedly blaspheming Islam. This followed several other high-profile acts of violence relating to blasphemy, including the 2011 murders of Punjab governor Salman Taseer and Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti. And in June 2012, sectarian violence broke out in Myanmar (Burma) targeting the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group that the government has long harassed. The violence resulted in numerous deaths and tens of thousands of displaced persons.

One thing these two examples of extremist violence have in common is their connection to the status of religious freedom in their respective countries (taking a basic definition of religious freedom as: the ability of groups to worship or not worship as they see fit). Pakistan has anti-blasphemy laws that are often enforced against both religious minorities and Muslims based on flimsy accusations. And while the Burmese government’s repression of the Rohingya has to do with ethnic tensions, it involves restrictions on the Rohingya’s religious practice and occurs in the context of broader state favoritism towards Buddhism.

Yet, commentary on incidents like these often overlooks the religious freedom element and the similarities among them (state repression of religious groups connected to violent extremism). And the public doesn’t really seem to prioritize religious freedom. I’ve done a fair bit of blogging, and while some of my posts—like a recent one satirizing academic conferences—get a lot of attention, whenever I write about religious freedom I hear virtual crickets.

I think this has to do with a general lack of focus on religious freedom in policy and academic circles.

One reason for this is that some do not think religious freedom is as important an issue as other elements of world politics. Many see religious freedom as a normative topic not ripe for empirical analysis. Others perceive it as a niche topic that affects religious communities, but not society more broadly.

Also, many take issue with the terminology as often “religious freedom” itself is an arena for debate. For example, many conservatives believe government laws ensuring access to contraception or allowing same-sex couples to marry undermines the religious freedom of people opposed to these things. The flip side of this is the argument that limiting access to services and institutions (like marriage) for some people because of others’ religious beliefs restricts the religious freedom of those affected: their freedom *from* religious belief. Another critique is that supposed restrictions on religious freedom are not due to religion, but political struggles unrelated to religious beliefs.

The former is an ethical debate I can’t resolve here. The latter I can address, however, as I think the “politics-not-religion” critique is a bit misplaced. Few scholars argue religion influences politics through people looking at a religious text and acting based on what it says; instead, “religious politics” involves the deployment and mobilization of religious symbols and identities in political struggles. Thus, even if the Burmese government is not repressing the Rohingya because they disagree with their religion, they are targeting them as an ethnoreligious group, which brings religion into the conflict.

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One area where religious freedom does seem to have an empirically verifiable effect divorced from normative vagaries is its impact on violent extremism. When states limit religious freedom, they restrict the religious practice of some or all religious communities, harass members of religious communities, and/or favor certain religious traditions at the expense of others. This directly affects the welfare of the targeted groups, but can also disrupt society in general.

Restrictions on religious freedom can radicalize repressed religious communities and produce violent offshoots of mainstream movements. This can be seen in Egypt, in which the state's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s radicalized members like Sayyid Qutb, who later inspired groups to wage violent campaigns against the government.

Similarly, a lack of religious freedom usually includes support for certain religious communities or groups (the exception is aggressively secular states like Uzbekistan or Turkey under Ataturk). This often favors conservative elements of the religion, making violent extremism more likely. For example, the favoritism in Sri Lanka towards the majority Sinhalese Buddhist population contributed to the rise of extremism among some Sinhalese Buddhist monks, which resulted in several violent incidents including the assassination of a Prime Minister in the 1950s.

In these examples, the state's targeting of religious communities contributed to the rise of violent extremism. And these are not cases of random violence or riots, but organized efforts to impose an extreme interpretation of a religion on society through violence.

Several studies have highlighted this phenomenon. A recent report by the Religious Freedom Project of Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (to which I contributed) made this point through a series of case studies. And the findings of the ongoing "Global Restrictions on Religion" project at the Pew Research Center suggest a connection between government restrictions on religion and religion-related social hostility. Other studies have analyzed this topic as well, including a book by Brian Grim and Roger Finke and another by Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah.

Religious freedom's effect on violent extremism thus seems plausible. States with lower levels of religious freedom tend to experience violent extremism, and several violent religious groups arose through state repression. Moreover, numerous studies have shown that religion-state interactions do affect politics; this includes my scholarly work on how religion-state relationships affect counterterrorism, interstate conflict, and United Nations voting.

Granted, this doesn't clarify the conceptual issues in studying religious freedom ("religious repression" might be more useful). And domestic political fights over religious freedom can make some wary of touching such a normatively-charged term.

But if a lack of religious freedom can lead to extremist violence, then we should not confine religious freedom to the margins of international relations. Attention to how religious repression contributes to violence can help policymakers prevent and respond to civil wars, refugee flight and terrorist campaigns. And analysis of the interaction between religious belief and state behavior can greatly contribute to scholarly research on religion and politics.

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