Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Evidence on Religious Discrimination Against Minorities

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One of the established trends in religion and international relations (IR) scholarship is the awareness of a rising level of religious discrimination against minorities. Although there is variation in rates, religious restrictions are widely observed across the globe, including in Western democracies. Scholarship on the restrictions on religious practices has advanced through seeking answers to the following questions: Who discriminates? Who is discriminated against more? What are the causes of restrictions on religious freedom? What are the forms of discrimination? The purpose of this article is to connect the theories and findings of two religious discrimination studies of IR via the graphic method of systemism. Featured works engage with religious discrimination in a sub-group of states—Western democracies and those with a Christian majority. While one study focused on government-based restrictions, the other one engaged with societal ones. Collectively, these works revealed the fragility of freedom and the importance of understanding the mechanisms that protect it.

Keywords: Christian Majority; Minorities; Religious Discrimination; Religiosity; Systemism

INTRODUCTION

Since its well-documented "return from exile" (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003, p. 1), the role of religion has become a central theme in international relations (IR) scholarship. Among many significant findings of this field, religious discrimination against minorities is one of the clear trends (Fox 2016, 2021). Fox (2016) unveiled an atlas of religious discrimina- tion with his analysis of 597 religious minorities residing in 177 states. This was the first book of its kind, whereby findings of smaller-scale quantitative analyses of restrictions on religious freedom were confirmed (Fox and Akbaba 2015a). Although there is variation in rates, religious restrictions are widely observed across the globe and with acceleration (Fox 2016), including in Western democracies (Fox 2020).

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Scholarship on restrictions with regard to the exercise of religion has advanced from seeking answers to the following questions: Who discriminates? Who is discriminated against more? What are the causes of restrictions on religious freedom? What are the forms of discrimination? While there is relative clarity on the distribution and level of discrimination, the findings for quantitative studies on causes of restrictions are somewhat scattered. This is not to say there is a lack of research on the subject matter. It also does not suggest concern with the quality of research. Contrarily, this is a thriving field with a mosaic of results and observations. Yet, given the nuanced designs and complexity of discrimination as a concept, it is challenging to capture the big picture.

Systemism provides an opportunity to look at these works with a bird's eye view, which is emphasized through the visual communication of graphs (Gansen and James 2021, p. 273). As both a method and an approach, systemist graphs promote clarity, comprehension and precision (Gansen and James 2021, p. 273). The purpose of this article is connecting theories and findings of two religious discrimination studies of IR via the systemist graphic method. Featured works engage with targets and causes of religious discrimination. While Fox and Akbaba (2015b) focused on government-based restrictions in Western democracies, Fox et al. (2021) highlighted societal discrimination in Christian- majority states. Systemist graphic analysis shows that discrimination has government and societal roots. It is receptive to pivotal international events, as well as social dynamics. Collectively, these works on religion reveal the fragility of freedom and importance of understanding mechanisms that protect it.

Next, is an overview of religion in IR scholarship with a focus on religious discrimi- nation. In the following section, systemist graphics are used to trace the arguments and findings of featured works. This part also includes discussion on both studies in the light of the graphic analysis. A final section contains reflections on what has been discovered and ideas about future research.

RELIGION AND DISCRIMINATION

Secularization theory expected religion to slowly disappear from societies. When Stark and Bainbridge (1985, p. 1) proposed that religion is not fading away due to secularism, they acknowledged it to be a "very unfashionable" argument. Decades later, religion is no longer in the shadows of scholarship in general, and political science research in particular. Since early works on religion and IR suggested that it was 'overlooked' (Fox 2001) or had been in 'exile' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003), there has been a multidimensional academic exploration.1 As this research agenda expands, it reveals a complex role of religion in IR rather than as a simple comeback story. For example, Norris and Inglehart (2011, p. 5) note that, while some societies might be developing secular approaches, globally

more people hold traditional religious views "than ever before and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population". Similarly, Dhima and Golder (2021, p. 37) found that, even when religious attendance might have declined in line with the expectations of secularization theory, religious beliefs remain present. Fox and Sandal (2016, p. 279) suggest that, with time, religion's impact evolves and "the influence of many of religion's individual facets waxes and wanes". Akbaba (2019, p. 4) refers to the "fluidity of religion" with reference to its adaptative capacity in the context of protests. Therefore, rather than a uniform outlook on faith over time and place, scholars have tried to track the essence of this adaptive capacity as "one of the most important intervening variables in IR" (Fox and Sandal 2016, p. 270).

Consider the groundbreaking statement of Pope Francis on "Being homosexual isn't a crime" (Winfield 2023). This assertion shows more than restoration of religious institu- tions' political power. It is their reinvention that shapes the nexus of politics and religion. Cesari (2014, p. xiii) suggests that, for Muslim-majority states, this reinvention was an outcome of the nation building process that led to "politicization of Islam" rather than its "privatization". We observe such privatization in the West, which inspired secularization theories. However, Mavelli and Wilson (2016, p. 265) caution against thinking of "secular" and "religious" as "a natural divide". Instead, they propose, "the boundary between the secular and the religious" is "the product of multiple regimes of power and knowledge". Consequently, the reinvention of religious institutions takes place as a response and in line with many historical and contemporary factors.

Religious discrimination scholarship shares this understanding of the complexities embedded within the preceding broader observations. Restrictions on religion are surfacing in both expected and unexpected places with widening presence. Causes of discrimination can also be tied to historical, as well as contemporary, factors such as democratic backsliding, weaponization of identities and misinformation. Quantitative analyses on the nature and causes of religious discrimination against minorities suggest religious discrimination has a global presence (Fox 2020) that is increasing over time (Fox 2016). When it comes to level of discrimination, both the identity of the minority (Fox 2016) and country are seen to matter (Fox and Topor 2021).

A SYSTEMIST APPROACH TO AN ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

Systemism emphasizes communication through the visual representation of arguments (Gansen and James 2021, p. 273). As both a method and an approach, systemist graphics promote clarity, comprehension and precision (Gansen and

James 2021, p. 273). In this article, I will convert two articles on religious discrimination to systemist graphics in order to portray their connections and points of contrast.2 These works are "Securitization of Islam and Religious Discrimination: Religious Minorities in Western Democracies, 1990 to 2008" (Fox and Akbaba 2015b) and "The Causes of Societal Discrimination against Religious Minorities in Christian-Majority Countries" (Fox et al. 2021). Through graphic depictions, I will identify theoretical and methodological accomplishments as well as gaps in religious discrimination scholarship. I will also map out how domestic factors interact with system-level explanations in both studies.

I picked these works due to their connections to the current discussion on democratic recession and the global decline in freedom. Long before misinformation and polarization became trending topics, religious discrimination scholarship highlighted the vulnerabilities of democracies. Fox and Akbaba (2015b) theorize how the legacy of 9/11 attacks might have 'recoded' conditions of freedom for Western democracies through securitization of Islam. Data analysis shows religious restrictions against Muslims to be higher than other groups, with most of the upward trend occurring after 2001 (i.e., the post-9/11 era). Rather than external factors or sudden shifts, Fox et al. (2021) look at internal and relatively stable dynamics, with a focus on religiosity's impact on restrictions in Christian-majority countries. They find "increased levels of religious activity and commitment in a country lead to less discrimination against Muslim and Jewish religious minorities but more discrimination against Christian minorities" (Fox et al. 2021, p. 610). Collectively, the two studies sound the alarm on the fragility of tolerance as they confirm religious discrimination to be more than a rare problem of targeting a small group of people under particular circumstances. Contrarily, they reveal that restrictions can be triggered and normalized in different contexts for various groups. Such normalization quietly weakens the pillars upholding democracies, as well as opens the way to deeper and wider restrictions.

While both studies focus on causes of religious discrimination, they differ from each other on which kind they highlight. Fox and Akbaba (2015b) focused on government-based religious discrimination as a reaction to 9/11 attacks, whereas Fox et al. (2021) looked into the impact of religiosity on societal religious discrimination. These different takes show the various aspects of religious discrimination and how it can be operationalized in quantitative works. Societal discrimination, despite its theoretical prominence, is overlooked in the quantitative analysis (which typically focuses on the state-based restrictions (Akbaba 2009; Fox 2016)) of religious discrimination. Fox et al. (2021), implemented an analysis of a societal discrimination dataset, and their aim was to fill this gap along with others. All of this also encouraged scholars to think of discrimination as a multi-dimensional concept that goes beyond written law.

These featured works look at a subset of states such as Western democracies and Christian majority states. Other studies have also narrowed down their analysis by their choice of a majority religion (Philpott 2019;) or geographical location (Akbaba 2009) to detect trends of religious freedom. This approach is critical in identifying smaller-scale discrimination patterns. By examining studies that focus on different subsets (geographical region and majority religion) with an overlap (i.e., Western democracies are also Christian- majority states), this article connects two frequently used analytical categorizations.

Using the graphic communication approach of systemism, I will present figures of each study with all components, along with further text-based explanations for context.

Systemist notation is followed in each figure, and a full explanation of it appears in Gansen and James (2023). Each figure comes in double frames—the outer one refers to the envi- ronment, the inner one to the system. The featured works focus on the state as the system, with the international system as its environment. Text in each figure is typed in UPPER- or lower-case characters. UPPER case characters are used for MACRO variables, while lower-case characters are used for micro-level variables. In both studies, for the state as a system, the macro level is the government, and the micro level is society.

Figure 1 displays the main arguments from Fox and Akbaba (2015b). Fox and Akbaba (2015b, pp. 175–76) posed the following interrelated questions: “Do Western democracies treat Muslims differently than other religious minorities? Has this treatment changed since 2001? If so, are these changes consistent with the proposition that Islam has become securitized in the post-9/11 era?”. Fox and Akbaba (2015b) looked into 27 Western democ- racies over 19 years to trace changes in their treatment of religious minorities since the 9/11 attacks. Anti-Western attacks changed threat perception and shifted “discourses”, “policies” and “institutions” in a way that restricted Muslims more than other faith groups (Fox and Akbaba 2015b, p. 175). While a general rise in religious discrimination against minorities became apparent, “it increased disproportionately against Muslims primarily after 2001” (Fox and Akbaba 2015b, p. 176). The focus is on state-based religious discrimination, which is defined as “restrictions placed on the religious practices and institutions of each religious minority in a country which are not also placed on the majority religion” (Fox and Akbaba 2015b, p. 176). Religious discrimination is measured with 29 specific faith-based restriction variables that target minority religions.

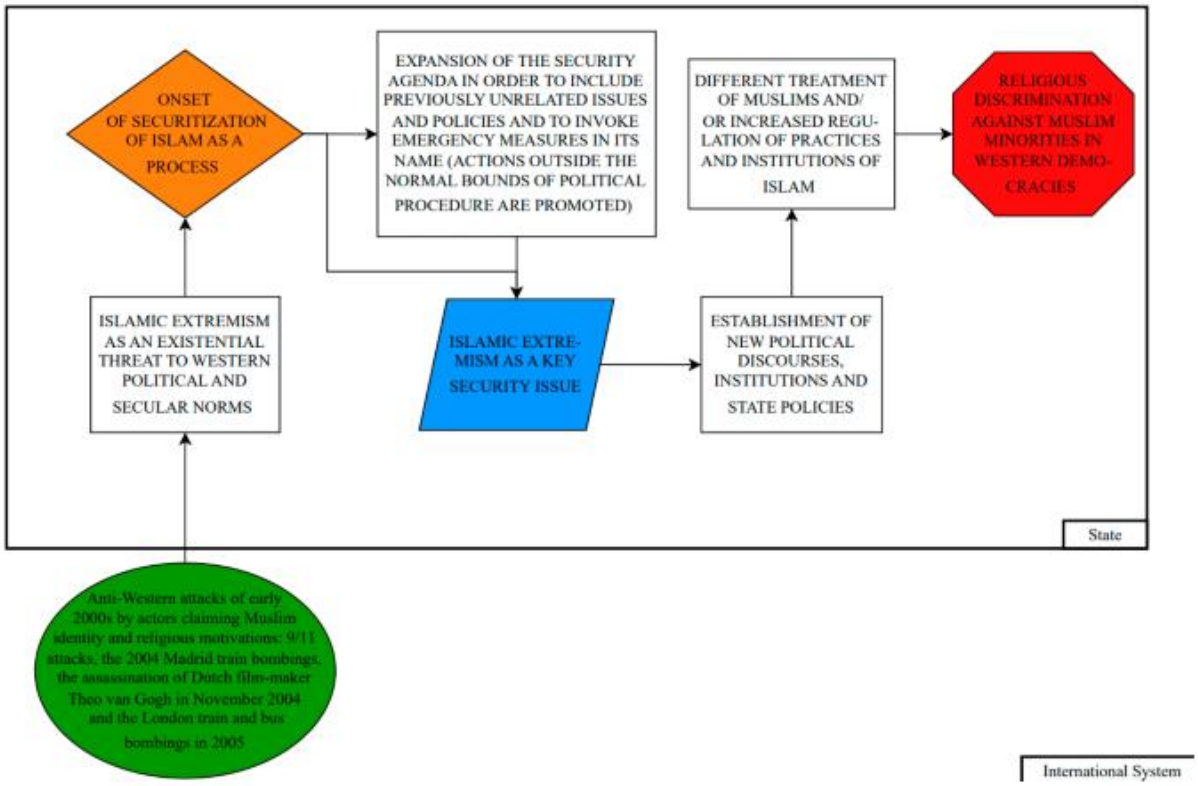

Figure 1. Securitization of Islam and Religious Discrimination: Religious Minorities in Western Democracies, 1990 to 2008 (Fox and Akbaba 2015b). Diagrammed by: Sarah Gansen and Patrick James.

Turning to the specific content of Figure 1, the initial variable of the 9/11 (and the following) attacks (i.e., the green oval) is associated with ISLAMIC EXTREMISM AS AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO WESTERN POLITICAL AND SECULAR NORMS. This novel perception of a security threat initiates a process of the SECURITIZATION OF ISLAM (SOI), a divergent variable that appears as an orange diamond. As part of that process, there follows on EXPANSION OF THE SECURITY AGENDA and invoking "EMERGENCY MEASURES" (p. 176). The onset of SOI, as well as other steps taken on the way to SOI puts "ISLAMIC EXTREMISM" in the "KEY SECURITY ISSUE" category (p. 177). This point of convergence is indicated with a blue parallelogram. Once Islamic extremism is an established security issue, to address this threat, states develop "NEW POLITICAL DIS- COURSES, INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES" (p. 175). As Figure 1 exhibits, ESTABLISH- MENT OF "NEW POLITICAL DISCOURSES, INSTITUTIONS AND STATE POLICIES" leads to DIFFERENT TREATMENT OF MUSLIMS AND/OR INCREASED REGULATION OF PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONS OF ISLAM. New institutions and polices include the US Patriot Act (plus its associated following events), along with attempts to control Imams, as well as mosques in Europe, and changes in political party rhetoric (Fox and Akbaba 2015b, pp. 178–82).

The diagram reaches a point of conclusion with the red octagon depicting RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIM MINORITIES IN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES. Statistical results show that "[r]eligious discrimination increased against Muslims consid- erably more than any other type of minority and most of this occurred after 2001" (Fox and Akbaba 2015b, p. 191). Although Muslims are discriminated against more than other groups (and even further since 9/11 attacks), restrictions are imposed on others as well. Despite finding support for the SOI argument, this means there is more to unveil about the causes of discrimination. As the next featured article will show, there are indeed other sources and potential explanations.

One connection with the second piece is receptiveness to securitization. With reference to securitization scholarship, Fox and Akbaba (2015b, p. 177) mention an audience require- ment for that process. They hint at the need for a societal foundation for securitization to take place, i.e., a receptive audience to such shifts in discourse and policy. They note previous works on "pre-existing concerns about Muslims" and "anxiety about Islam before 9/11 attacks". (Fox and Akbaba 2015b, p. 178) This is subtle in the analysis since the focus is on state-based restrictions. However, the idea of a receptive audience is central in the second article, which examines the social dynamics of discrimination.

Figure 2 exhibits the main arguments from Fox et al. (2021). This study asks "how the level of religiosity in the nation is related to societal religious discrimination (SRD) and how the predictors of SRD might vary by the religious minority being targeted" (Fox et al. 2021, p. 1). Fox et al. (2021) suggest both religiosity and the existence of an established relationship between a given minority and a Christian majority are key determinants of SRD. Two initial variables from Figure 2 reflect these assumptions. Religiosity at the micro level branches out into four pathways. These pathways start with an arrow pointing out the religiosity variable. In the first pathway, "exclusive truth claims" (p. 2) and "heightened group identities" (p. 3) lead to intolerance toward some groups, such as "theologically objectionable" (p. 4) ones, and this eventually connects to SRD. The second pathway to SRD is about the "desire to maintain monopoly" (p. 4) and how this prompts to targeting minorities that challenge such privileged positions. A third trail emphasizes a specific version of the previous one. It suggests "religions with interrelated theological traditions" (p. 6) compete and gives rise to SRD. Unlike the other three, the fourth pathway leads to tolerance against some minorities when they are considered as "potential allies" (p. 6) against secular states or cultures.

Two types of relationship with the state are prominent in Figure 2. One concerns a nodal variable that is depicted as a purple hexagon: STATE "CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH A SINGLE RELIGION". The other relationship focuses on CHRISTIAN CHURCHES "HOLDING FORMAL TIES WITH THE STATE"—an initial variable depicted as a green oval. The former

component feeds into three directions, one of which is toward SRD. The latter one leads to two distinct pathways: (1) Orthodox churches "organized around one country and culture" (p. 5) as a resistance mechanism are less tolerant and more prone to SRD; and (2) moving forward with relatively recent examples of how the Catholic Church has been supportive of religious freedom in general suggest general tolerance toward minority religions when the Catholic Church has formal ties with the state.6 Collectively, these connections suggest there are nuances to SRD. In addition to religious sentiments and actions, relationships matter in predicting (a) who is discrimi- nated against and (b) why they might be targeted.

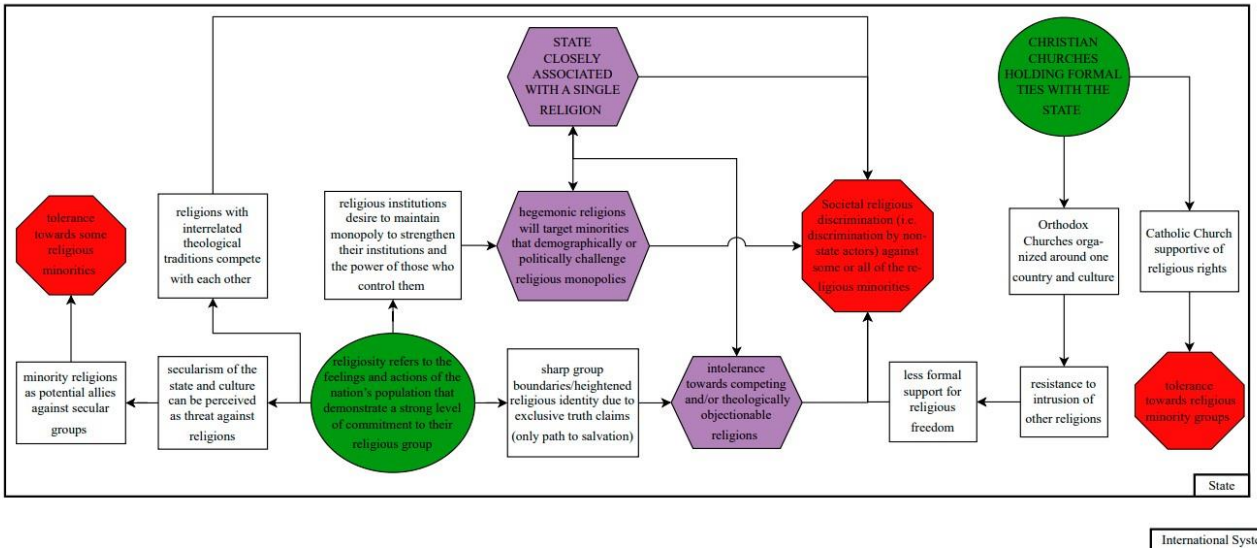

Figure 2. The Causes of Societal Discrimination against Religious Minorities in Christian-Majority Countries (Fox et al. 2021). Diagrammed by: Sarah Gansen and Patrick James.

A quick glance at Figures 1 and 2 reveals common grounds and points of agreement, along with contrasts, between these articles. Both studies engage with state-level factors. With the exception of an initial variable in the environment of Fox and Akbaba (2015b), all variables are in the state as a system. Like the many domestic outcomes of IR, restrictions on minorities are explained through state-level determinants. This encourages us to pay attention to institutional and societal dynamics of freedom.

Despite the emphasis on domestic factors, the featured articles suggest different mechanisms to exclusion. Fox and Akbaba (2015b) ground the process in external security and how perceived threats can rewire policies, institutions and discourse. While it notes the importance of an audience, this study has instrumentalist tones that emphasize the power held by decision makers. Contrarily, in Fox et al. (2021), agency is given to society as most of the development is shaped by societal factors that are not related to external security.

If we were to merge these ideas, we see that religious discrimination is a layered concept—created through governmental and societal factors. Religious restrictions are malleable to what is happening outside of the system, yet not permeable. Both historical and contemporary factors matter. Jointly, these figures reveal the complexity entailed in sustaining religious freedom. In line with its instrumentalist outlook, the graphic depiction of Fox and Akbaba (2015b) is dominated by the MACRO variables associated with government. Contrarily, Figure 2 for Fox et al. (2021) contains many micro-level variables that focus on society. Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of understanding how religious identities are constructed.

Maybe one of the most intriguing common denominators of these two studies is that, despite looking at different types of religious discrimination as the dependent variable and engaging with theories that assume unrelated independent variables to be triggers of these restrictions, they both find that religious minorities are treated differently. Therefore, the identity of the minority seems to matter. Interestingly, the studies also find different groups to be discriminated against more than others. While Fox and Akbaba (2015b) note Muslim minorities experience more discrimination, Fox et al. (2021) suggest more religious activity is associated with less discrimination against Jewish and Muslim communities. This is reflective of the larger scholarship on religious discrimination's complex relationship with minority identity. While many studies note differential treatment among faith groups, with some notable exceptions, there is no consensus on who experiences more discrimination.

For example, Fox and Topor (2021, p. 1) find Jews are discriminated against at high levels in many countries and not at all in some others. Fox and Akbaba (2015a, p. 1) highlighted the value of considering minority and majority identity as a dyad to understand which pair is more prone to minority discrimination. In other words, the identity of a religious minority is important, but there is no overarching explanation or finding to point to a particular one.

Even though there are simple explanations for the different findings on who is discrim- inated against most—such as differences among studies in terms of time frames, datasets, or statistical models used—we can also consider these puzzling results from a wider angle. Hurd (2015, pp. xi–xii) convincingly cautions about "privileging religious difference as a causal factor in politics" as this could "obscure the broader fields in which social tension, discrimination, and conflict take shape". The range of the discrimination observed could be because of the nature of freedom as a concept of governance and social practice. Historically, freedom has boundaries. From the Greek city states to the Roman Senate, where there was inclusion, there was also exclusion. Even in the modern examples of democracy such as the United States, racial and gender-based exclusion were integrated into institutions that also promoted democracy.

Shifts in global values and waves of democratization suggest that maybe all aspects of freedom eventually will be unlocked. However, long before a discussion of democratic backsliding flooded academic circles, religious discrimination scholarship reported findings on the fragility of inclusion. Identity-based religious restrictions (although present) are not about a particular religious affiliation (with the notable exceptions mentioned above), but more about a particular affiliation in a given moment. Therefore, speculatively, I assert that we will never find one particular identity to be the key independent variable with regard to the occurrence of decades-long global discrimination. However, we will, unfortunately, always find someone at the margins of freedom, no matter how narrow those margins become.

The best-case scenario will take the form of competing forms of freedom. For instance, some of the most contentious points for Western democracies have been over religious practices that concern the welfare of children and animals—those either partially or fully unable to speak on their behalf. Male circumcision, which is a common practice for Muslim and Jewish communities, can be considered an act that violates the right of the child.

Similarly religious traditions that require animal slaughter or require kosher or halal slaughter might contrast with values on animal rights (Raza 2018).

Perhaps the headscarf debate can serve as the best example of how conflicting freedom perspectives could balance each other. While someone can make the case that wearing one is a form of oppression against women (and therefore should be banned), others could argue banning the headscarf in public spaces would also discriminate against women. Similarly, women's reproductive rights in the context of the seemingly endless pro-choice versus pro-life debate reflect perceptions on conflicting rights. These arguments back and forth are not necessarily about a clash of civilizations or ancient hatreds, but more about how we define freedom and the seemingly impossible task of identifying ways through which it is possible to have it all for all. There is a need for informed and nuanced discussions to weed out the oppressive components of freedom arguments. Having such a debate under a siege of misinformation and the shadow of conflicting interests seems to be a tall order for humanity.

CONCLUSIONS

This article converted two studies of religious discrimination to systemist graphicsin order to connect the assumptions and findings of each in the context of the larger scholarship on religion and IR. What we know about religious discrimination is alarming. With its global presence and increasing intensity over time, religious restrictions have a home, even in democracies. Featured studies show religious freedom is complex. It is tied to domestic and external factors. It is

also receptive to historical and contemporary narratives. Most importantly the identity of the religious minority seems to matter. These results suggest religious discrimination could be a significant challenge for democracies. Is this a storm that will eventually calm down or is it the Achilles heel of pluralism? Future research could further theorize and analyze both the nature and causes of religious discrimination with a focus on the attributes of the minority beyond their affiliation. A systemist approach could ease this task by providing visual connections across works on religion, discrimination, freedom and on a host of other topics.

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