



Article

Can Religion Be Quantified?

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A report on the tension between religious faith and faith in numbers

Religious freedom and religious identification are two major areas that help us understand the role of religion in human life. A wide array of organizations, academic institutions, and governmental entities rely on major polling centers to make sense of religious trends. However, can religion and belief truly be understood through quantitative data alone?

Concerns and limitations of religious data

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.

In their 2020 report, *Faith in Numbers*, commissioned by the Transatlantic Policy Forum on Religion and Diplomacy, Lori Beaman and Judd Birdsall discuss the limitations in relying on

big data, like those from Pew Research Center and Gallup to paint an accurate picture of religious practices and experiences throughout the world. These are some of the limitations they address involving statistics about religious identity, participation, and freedom.

1. **Standardizing studies on religion identification is challenging:** Compiling a single dataset about religion across the world is extremely difficult given that different countries and polling entities use different methods to gather their data. Therefore, Pew's famous 2012 *Global Religious Landscape* report may not tell the entire story when it states that 84 percent of the world population identifies with a religious group. Aside from the challenge of data standardization, there is also a more basic problem: there is no one way to be "spiritual" or "religious." Pew and other organizations that study religion are still developing new ways to understand the differences and commonalities in how people practice, express, and understand their beliefs.
2. **Measuring identification is not the same as measuring active practice:** Another critique of Pew's 2012 study involves the difference between identifying with and practicing a religion. Not everybody who identifies with a religious group practices actively in terms of attending houses of worship. To complicate things further, there are many different ways that people incorporate their belief systems into their daily lives—sometimes through measurable rituals and sometimes in not-so-obvious ways.
3. **Self-identification poses issues in measurement:** There are many complexities in relying on self-identification to measure religious identity. As the authors of the report point out, some highly religious societies may impose penalties on individuals who openly denounce or distance themselves from a dominant faith. Aside from this obvious problem, researchers may use particular labels to identify a particular faith may not align with how respondents see themselves.
4. **Some people may find it difficult to officially leave a religious organization:** Even people who discontinue practicing a religion may find it hard to officially leave a

religious organization. As an example, Beaman and Birdsall cite the Catholic Church, which makes the formal process of defection from the Church virtually impossible.

5. **Pew's metrics for measuring governmental restrictions on religion and social hostility towards religious groups are imprecise:** Pew's indexes for governmental restrictions and hostility towards religious groups conceals considerable complexities about phenomena in particular countries.
6. **The presence of social hostility and religious restrictions do not equally affect all populations within a country:** On paper, a nation's laws restricting religion may ostensibly apply to all groups when in practice, they may affect a particular minority group most acutely.
7. **Religious restrictions do not necessarily equate to reduced religious freedom:** There may be limits on certain forms of religious expression but these are not the same as religious persecution. Birdsall and Beaman provide critical questions to assess freedom of religious belief in particular contexts more accurately.



Source: Ian Kiragu via Unsplash

Recommendations for making sense of religious data

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.

1. "Numbers are not neutral," the authors argue. They suggest that readers stay aware of

qualitative biases behind data and the presentation of data.

2. Reducing phenomena to statistics can erase the complexity of religious life.
3. Quantitative analyses can only measure quantifiable aspects of religion such as “identification” and “restrictions,” although these narrow aspects may not map neatly onto general statements about religious practice or religious freedom.
4. Religion, spirituality, and belief are dynamic, not static.
5. The authors point out that, “if data on religion or religious freedom seem highly contestable in your country, then they are probably contestable elsewhere.”
6. Standardized statistics may not be equally applicable or illustrative in all regions.
7. Headlines about religion—which often lean towards the sensationalistic—do not tell the whole story of religious life in a particular country.
8. Never underestimate the importance of qualitative data in a field as complex as religious studies.

The full *Faith in Numbers* report appears below. This was one of many reports that the Secretariat of the TPNRD commissioned. The full body of reports, along with other resources, are on the *Religion and Diplomacy* website.

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