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Misconceptions of Religious Freedom: Toward an Empirical Study of Religious Freedom Awareness

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Abstract: This article offers an overview of the most common misconceptions about religious freedom, with reference to the 2017 UN Report by Mr. Shaheed and the perspectives of other human rights scholars and experts. It proceeds with the operationalization of a selected list of misconceptions about this subject for empirical research of religious freedom awareness. We discuss the primary results from a survey on social perceptions of religious freedom collected from a convenience sample of university students in Northern Italy (N = 1035), offering, first, a new scale of religious freedom awareness (RFA), and second, a consideration of its association with various dimensions of religious freedom and other human rights. The findings show that awareness of religious freedom serves as a robust predictor of endorsement of a broader set of human rights by participants, including those potentially antithetical to religious freedom claims, such as gay and women's rights. We discuss these findings against a holistic approach to human rights and empirical evidence that other variables (political engagement, passive secularism views, and spiritual identity) contribute to the endorsement of rights culture in Italian society.

Keywords: misconceptions of religious freedom; awareness of religious freedom; perceptions of religious freedom; women's rights; gay rights; freedom of speech; empirical research



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1. Introduction

Multiple interpretations of religious freedom are integral to the dynamic process of establishing its normative meaning within and across societies. In this regard, two main sociological perspectives towards the study of religious freedom—centered around the conventional nature and the multidimensional character of this right—together suggest some explanations about the process of interpreting and establishing its meanings. Taken together, these two perspectives may help to explain the main reasons for the misconceptions and misperceptions of religious freedom in particular, and human rights in general. The conventional nature of religious freedom refers to the necessity of constant attempts to establish a shared meaning of this freedom in public discourse and monitor public policies responsible for its maintenance. A taken-for-granted 'reality' of human freedom and the possibility that "this 'reality' may once again be lost to an individual or to an entire collectivity" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 14–15) attest to the socially constructed nature of religious freedom's norms and the vulnerability of this concept in political debates and everyday communication.

At the same time, the multidimensional character of religious freedom, with its complex layers of meaning, indicates that the misperceptions surrounding this right may occur not only in authoritarian states, but they can also be found "among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics generally sympathetic of the cause of human rights" (Bielefeldt 2013, pp. 34–35).¹ This is due to controversy around this human right, its dynamic relations with other rights, and the multiple meanings it implies (Bielefeldt et al. 2016; Breskaya and Giordan 2019; Ferrari et al. 2020).

More specifically, the holistic understanding of human rights (Bielefeldt et al. 2016), which is based on the formula that “[a]ll human rights are universal, indivisible and interrelated and interdependent” (Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action 1993), offers a detailed explanation of possible controversies regarding the interpretations and practices of human rights. As Bielefeldt et al. (2016, p. 29) noted:

The holistic understanding of human rights certainly does not guarantee win-win situations between the various practical human rights issues that come up on a daily basis. . . . Experience demonstrates that issues put forward under different human rights norms can, and do, collide. Aggressive speech acts defended in the name of freedom of expression may clash with policies of eliminating racist stereotypes; respect for family life can come into conflict with the requirements of guaranteeing every child’s right to school education; and conservative interpretations of religious family values may be at odds with the principle of gender equality and nevertheless seek protection under freedom of religion or belief. (Bielefeldt et al. 2016, p. 29).

Consequently, singling out the ‘typical misperceptions’ of religious freedom (Bielefeldt 2013), which can be seen as a result of “a lack of clarity about the content, scope, and limits of freedom of religion or belief and its relationship with other human rights, such as freedom of expression, gender equality, or LGBTI-rights” (Bielefeldt 2013, p. 35), presents an urgent analytical task. For legal scholars, sociologists, political scientists, historians, and human rights experts, these misconceptions have to be addressed in order to provide “more conceptual clarity” around religious freedom and to strengthen its role in democratic societies.

Against this backdrop, this article starts with a discussion of the most common misconceptions about religious freedom, with reference to the 2017 UN Report by Mr. Shaheed² and the perspectives of other human rights scholars and experts. Following these debates, we focus on: (a) challenges of defining the rights holders (believers vs. belief systems); (b) issues linked to the protection of private religious practices and non-recognized religions; and (c) complex relationships between the claims of political secularism and those of religious freedom. The article proceeds with an exploration of the misconceptions about religious freedom based on the primary results from a convenience sample of university students in Northern Italy (N = 1035). We propose a scale of religious freedom awareness (RFA) and consider its association with various dimensions of religious freedom and other human rights. In particular, we examine rights that have competing claims with religious freedom, including gay rights, women’s rights, and freedom of speech. The results of this study suggest that awareness of religious freedom serves as a robust predictor of citizens’ positive perceptions of religious freedom as well as an indicator of holistic understanding of other human rights, including those with potentially antithetical claims to religious freedom.

2. Common Misconceptions of Religious Freedom

Regarding religious freedom, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), Mr. Shaheed, noted that “misperceptions and misconceptions are both the product of the complexity of this right and the political and ideological dispute over norms of the international legal framework that underpin it” (Shaheed 2017, p. 9). Misperceptions and misconceptions of religious freedom, as we see from this passage, can be considered as interrelated, indicating the challenges of interpreting and defining this freedom. Misperceptions and misconceptions reinforce one another due to the mutual issues they cause within a broader society or at the level of individual relations. Ill-defined conceptions of religious freedom by the state and social institutions, including religious ones, support discrimination in the matter of religion and produce societal effects targeting particular religious groups and their members. Misperceptions of religious freedom can be caused by a lack of awareness about this right, and this leads, similarly, to the stigmatization of individuals and entire communities.

For the purposes of the current analysis, we differentiate the idea of misconceptions about religious freedom from that of misperceptions of religious freedom. By misconception of religious freedom, we mean an active process of establishing an incomplete, false, or manipulated definition or formulation of the meaning of this concept in public discourse or everyday communication. As a consequence, misconceptions about religious freedom at the level of state policies, social institutions, and local communities lead to coercive policies regarding religion, as well as improper instrumentalization or deliberate downgrading of the principles of religious freedom and its value within a society as a whole, its institutions or groups.

The misperception of religious freedom is the process of making wrong or inaccurate interpretations or observations about situations and conceptions concerning religious freedom. An absence of clarity in conceptualizations of religious freedom in public discourse (state policies, mass media, court rulings, school curricula, etc.) means that perceptions of religious freedom may, and mostly often will, follow similar patterns of misconceptions, leading to social divisions, exclusion, and discrimination. By contrast, an awareness of the key principles of religious freedom and an understanding of its complex history and its political and social consequences lead to an appreciation of its role in society. [Shaheed \(2017\)](#) noted that this requires policies and “long-term investment in the promotion and advancement of literacy regarding this right” ([Shaheed 2017](#), p. 9). We suggest that awareness of religious freedom and broader human rights is a concept that describes individual understanding and knowledge in the sphere of freedom of/from religion or belief and that influences perceptions of this and other rights in society.

Misconceptions and misperceptions of religious freedom are consequently linked to two basic processes in the implementation of religious freedom. The first process refers to the incorporation of FoRF principles into national legal and political systems and may be seen as a significant part of the constitutional process and democratization of political structures. The second process refers to the social implementation of religious freedom, which implies the distribution of values and norms concerned with religious/non-religious beliefs, as well as manifestations of this freedom across the fabric of society. The social implementation of religious freedom encompasses social structures, groups, networks, as well as individual relations requiring mediation facilities involving various stakeholders ([Breskaya et al. 2022b](#)).

The UN’s independent experts provide substantial material for comparisons and detailed analyses regarding misconceptions about the right to freedom of/from religion and the implementation of necessary remedies for these misconceptions. For the mandate holder of the Special Rapporteur on FoRB, this theoretical challenge is linked to the main duty of depicting the obstacles to the progressive implementation of this right, and, based on monitoring and analysis of concrete situations, to recommend possible means of eliminating the impediments to religious freedom both regionally and globally.

In 2017, Mr. Shaheed, as a mandate holder, described the need to operationalize the right to freedom of religion or belief due to “increasing emphasis on implementing human rights reforms”, and considering “traditional institutional undertaking, which focuses on laws, courts and other conventional aspects of compliance”, as well as the “efforts of the State, through policy, programmes and activities” ([Shaheed 2017](#), p. 4). In the following section, we review the key misconceptions about religious freedom raised by Mr. Shaheed as a background for a broader theoretical debate among legal scholars, sociologists, and political scientists regarding the challenges in defining religious freedom.

2.1. Protecting Believers and Not Belief Systems

Following his predecessor, Mr. Shaheed reviewed the challenges to and misconceptions about FoRB and highlighted an agenda for the operationalization of this right within the United Nations’ system and beyond. In addressing cases of intolerance and violent extremism, [Shaheed \(2017\)](#) underlined the importance of reporting on chronic violations of religious freedom and the necessity to reconsider the normative content of the right

to religious freedom within a perspective of international law, due to the “continuing development, clarification and evolution” of this right (Shaheed 2017, p. 9). Regarding ill-defined meanings of religious freedom, his primary emphasis was on drawing distinctive boundaries between individual claims and religious systems, specifying that the latter cannot be protected per se. He noted:

Individuals, not religions, convictions, belief systems or truth claims, are the right-holders of the right to freedom of religion or belief. More specifically, this right is not designed to protect beliefs as such (religious or otherwise), but rather believers and their freedom to possess and express their beliefs either individually or in community with others in order to shape their lives in conformity with their own convictions. (Shaheed 2017, p. 9)

Understood from the perspective of a believer or non-believer, this fundamental freedom empowers individuals and communities and protects their right to maintain and manifest a religion or belief. It does not empower religious traditions or systems of beliefs themselves, but it protects individuals to profess sincere views that are meaningful for them. According to this conception, each individual has the autonomy to decide what is meaningful for her or his being; thus, “no one else can tell them that they are wrong”. Furthermore, when “people claim that something is important to them, then, as long as they are sincere, it must be” (Trigg 2012, p. 43). Such an understanding ensures that individuals are not only equal in their autonomy and sincerity but shows that public, institutional, and communal dimensions are derivative from the meaning that one gives to their belief.

The test of sincerity of belief is important for courts in making decisions regarding violations of the right to freedom of/from religion. However, “looking for religious reasons is redundant, and unfair to people who are not religious” (Trigg 2012, p. 43). Such an approach does not relativize religious reasons but looks for equal and “common denominators” in pluralistic societies and a global world of diverse religions. It looks for a common foundation, which can be seen in human dignity, autonomy, free choice, and essential human needs in practicing, changing, teaching, or disseminating religious or non-religious views.

Moreover, Bielefeldt (2013) noted that “it would be a great misunderstanding to somehow associate freedom of religion with the fight against defamation of religions. . . . [I]t would amount to turning the human right to freedom of religion or belief upside down” (Bielefeldt 2013, p. 42). He made this comment regarding cases of “polemical cartoons”, emphasizing, along with other scholars (Temperman 2008), that religious freedom is about “protection of human beings rather than safeguarding the reputations of religions” (Bielefeldt 2013, p. 43). However, as emphasized by Cox (2015) and Sherwood (2021), the relationship between issues of defamation of religion, blasphemy, freedom of expression, and violence is complex, involving socio-political and legal contexts. As Sherwood (2021, p. 11) noted: “Blasphemy is never purely about content. . . many blasphemies seem to have registered as ‘blasphemies’ because they targeted the nation and the complicity between church and state”.

2.2. Protecting Private Religious Practice and Non-Recognized Religions

By identifying the linkage/boundaries between claims to religious freedom by individual believers and systems of religious views, the UN Special Rapporteur specified another important misconception regarding the relationship between systems of beliefs and the diverse modes of practicing them—in particular, whether the latter are recognized by public authorities. Shaheed noted that “individuals have the right to publicly manifest their religion or belief, alone or together and the prerogative of deciding whether they wish to manifest their religious convictions” (Shaheed 2017, p. 9). Such a liberal approach to the profession of religious creeds may be seen as challenging to those religious traditions that require obligatory practices or strictly prescribed forms of practicing rituals and ceremonies from their adherents, since it opens up space for deviations and innovations from these norms.

Such an understanding of religious freedom questions the relationship between the individual's beliefs and collective practices of religion, thus problematizing the role of religious/secular communities, organizations, and networks in the formation of individual convictions. The idea that religion is an "entirely personal matter, discounting the role of any wider community" and that "this is partly because of contemporary preoccupation with human rights" (Trigg 2012, p. 104) needs to be seen in connection with a conception of religious freedom that does not juxtapose communal and individual dimensions of religious life. Instead, such an approach must always provide secure spaces for less protected and more vulnerable subjects.

Such a way of conceptualizing the relationship between a believer and their claims to have beliefs and to manifest them raises an important normative issue of balancing the subjective perspectives of religion/belief with a religion's public, communal, and external dimensions. Similarly, among legal scholars (see Peroni 2014), there is a tendency to moderate the binary perspective of forum internum and forum externum in conceptualizing religious freedom, since individuals may decide that their beliefs and practices are equally essential for them. The observations of sociologists of religion concerning limitations on worship activities during the 2020–2021 lockdowns around the globe made it more evident that the issues of collective religious worship or individual prayer are essential needs for human beings (Giordan 2021; Shah 2021).

Moreover, "[i]t is ultimately up to the individual to decide" (Shaheed 2017, p. 10) whether the manifestation of one's religious convictions takes place in private or public environments. This is also important to emphasize because "the right to freedom of religion or belief is not contingent upon recognition or registration by the State" (Shaheed 2017, p. 10). Meanwhile, international law does not provide a definition of what a religion is; the scope of what is protected by the right to freedom of religion or belief must be construed broadly, covering theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief (General Comment 1993). That is to say, from a human rights perspective, it is not legitimate to grant protection under this right only to traditional, dominant, or state-endorsed or -recognized religions. As noted by Bielefeldt (2016, p. 6):

One should add that freedom of religion or belief also covers the rights of members of large and small communities, minorities and minorities within minorities, traditionalists and liberals, converts and reconverts, dissenters and other critical voices and, last but not least, women, who sadly still occupy marginalized positions within many religious traditions.

Moreover, the freedom to have no religion, not to teach religious perspectives, or not to practice religious belief, i.e., all negative components, have to be considered together with the positive aspects. Otherwise, the "liberating essence of freedom of religion or belief" would be compromised (Bielefeldt 2013, pp. 49–50). The consequences of conceptualizing religious freedom claims in such an integral and inclusive way lead to the increasing importance of giving individuals the right to change, choose, and replace religion, or "to adopt atheistic views, as well as the right to retain one's religion or belief" (Shaheed 2017, p. 10).

Limitations to these aspects of the right to freedom of/from religion leads to discrimination and persecution, as well to limited access to various spheres of social life, including health, education, employment, and family events. Therefore, misconceptions about the right to change one's religion (Bielefeldt 2012b)³ may also lead to an undue burden or unreasonable interference in the development of "religious or belief-related identities, to bear witness to one's beliefs freely communicating with fellow believers or non-believers, to organize and enjoy community life based on common or shared beliefs, formal and informal education" (Shaheed 2017, p. 10).

In the same way, Bielefeldt (2013) warns of the possibilities of misinterpreting religious freedom as protecting only private and individual religion, i.e., the discourse of "enforced privatization of religion" (Bielefeldt 2013, pp. 49–50). He reminds us about the importance of protecting religion "in the general public space". Otherwise, leaving open only the

space of private life for religious convictions and manifestations threatens democratic and pluralistic societies and leads to the establishment of authoritarian rules, which exclude religious/non-religious perspectives from collective and public spheres.

2.3. Religious Freedom as a “First-Order” and Secularism as a “Second-Order” Concept

The 2017 UN Report identified global trends and relevant processes to which religious freedom, as an international standard of human rights, has to respond. Amidst growing intolerance, a conceptual framework is necessary to address religious and cultural diversity, pluralism, security, solidarity, societal harmony, and multiculturalism. Practical responses addressing these challenging realities of contemporary societies are also required.

Among other issues, the 2017 report shed light on the importance of differentiating secularism *as an ideology* from secularism *as a policy* of some states. The former may result in “discrimination against persons who do not accept the official ideology or oppose it” (Shaheed 2017, p. 11), regardless of whether the ideology under question is one of the dominant and/or official religion (e.g., Saudi Arabia), a secular one (e.g., Kemalist Turkey), or an antireligious one (e.g., the Soviet Union). Secularism *as a state policy* refers to nondiscriminatory practices of state governance with regard to religious issues, which work to advance religious freedom (Bielefeldt 2012a, p. 56). It is pivotal to understand the difference between these two meanings of secularism, because the first meaning, i.e., “doctrinal secularism” and the second meaning, i.e., “political secularism”, have to be conceptualized in relation to religious freedom in order to discern their features. Introducing this difference, Bielefeldt (2012a) noted:

While doctrinal secularism, once guiding state activities, may claim an ideological priority over the freedom of religion and belief, the secular state in the understanding of political secularism sees itself as operating in the service of a non-discriminatory implementation of freedom of religion or belief of everyone. This is an important difference, indeed a difference not solely of degree but of principle. (Bielefeldt 2012a, pp. 55–56)

Within this perspective, political secularism and state neutrality have to be seen as “second-order” principles, which prioritize non-identification and non-discriminatory policies of the state, whereas religious freedom has to be seen as the “first-order” principle that protects dignity, freedom, and equality. Existing patterns of political secularism in modern societies or a “multiple secularism” perspective (Stepan 2010, 2012) suggest that it is important to differentiate between the concept of state neutrality and freedom of religion. However, there is a dynamic relationship (Lefebvre and Brodeur 2017) between the two concepts, suggesting the variety of configurations they may imply to a global world.⁴ Moreover, the link between religious freedom and secularism implies that the “discourse of secularism does not position itself against the religious as such, it has the power to regulate, to transform, and to delimit it”. Moreover, “the limits put on religious freedom can vary according to the type of secularism embraced by a specific state” (Barras 2012, p. 264).

Different interpretations of this link can be found not only at the level of national governmental policies but also at the level of international human rights bodies (Barras 2012). For instance, regarding the rulings of the ECtHR and UN bodies and their opinion on the cases concerning the wearing of religious symbols, it is important to distinguish between the two types of secularism, since they are “exercising dissimilar authority on the religious. That is how interpretations of secularism regulate and enable different types of religious sensibilities, and the implications this has for the (in)ability of plaintiffs to get their religious freedom claims acknowledged and redressed” (Barras 2012, p. 264).

The research on decisions and approaches performed by the ECtHR and the UN in adjudicating the cases involving religious symbols (Barras 2012) suggested a consideration of the following aspects: the role of the state and human rights experts in decision making, the character of discrimination against minority religions or favoring dominant religion and culture, and the scope of limits. Cases like *Sahin v. Turkey* and *Lautsi v. Italy* as well as the French law banning conspicuous religious symbols in public schools reveal various

perspectives on secularism, illustrating that religious freedom may serve to protect state secularism in a Muslim-majority country (*Sahin v. Turkey*), ban religious minority symbols in a secular society (French law), or oppose the secular claims of the individual (the plaintiff in *Lautsi v. Italy*) to predominantly Christian culture.

The answers to the question—to what degree the secular interest of the state may prevail upon the principle of non-discriminatory exercise of freedom of/from religion—disclose “diverging readings of secularism” by the international bodies, showing that UN experts favor a “passive secularism” model, whereas the ECtHR promotes an “assertive secularism” approach (Barras 2012; Kuru 2009). Thus, analysis of judicial practices and expertise on human rights, provides a complex picture of how state secularism “rather than creating an inclusive space for religious pluralism on a non-discriminatory manner . . . could engender activities that reduce the space for religious or belief pluralism” (Shaheed 2017, p. 11).

3. Method

3.1. Hypotheses and Research Questions

The complexity of defining the concept of religious freedom and particularly its misconceptions noticed by human rights experts and academics have received little attention in empirical analysis (Doise et al. 1999; Staerklè et al. 2015; Breskaya and Giordan 2019). Meanwhile, understanding how the idea of religious freedom is interpreted and perceived by individuals highlights the relevance of normative principles of religious freedom and human rights to the broader cultural values of societies (Ziebertz and Sterkens 2018).

This study explores how understanding of misconceptions of religious freedom is shaping the perceptions of this right and other human rights. In particular, we focus on perceptions of competing claims of religious freedom with gay rights, women’s rights, and freedom of speech. We do not specify at the beginning our hypothesis about the relationship between each misconception of religious freedom and more or less favorable perceptions of human rights. Meanwhile, we suggest that awareness of religious freedom concepts is coherent with endorsement of (a) societal value of religious freedom; (b) its socio-legal meaning; (c) both individual and collective manifestations of religious freedom; (d) and broader human rights. That is to say that the growing awareness of religious freedom concepts is associated with positive perceptions of these rights. Consequently, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How do participants assess the misconceptions of religious freedom? (2) Whether the awareness of religious freedom principles can predict the endorsement of religious freedom as a societal value, its socio-legal meaning, and human rights principles? (3) If and how the awareness of religious freedom can contribute to a holistic perception of human rights which may compete with religious freedom?

3.2. Procedure and Instrument

We use the data from the empirical research on social perceptions of religious freedom (SPRF) to trace the answers about the misconceptions of religious freedom among university students (Breskaya and Giordan 2019, 2020, 2021). A convenience sample of participants of the survey (N = 1035) was composed of students at bachelor’s and master’s levels in social sciences and humanities. The participation in the survey was anonymous. The timing for filling in the questionnaire was up to 40 min.

The questionnaire was developed to measure social perceptions of religious freedom including the statements examining an understanding of misconceptions of this right (Table 1). A list of misconceptions of religious freedom was operationalized in close reading of Mr. Shaheed’s Report (Shaheed 2017) and selected items were rephrased in a negative way to be sure that the participants are consistent with their responses. A Likert-type scale from 1 to 5 was applied for all items concerning religious freedom considering that 1 = “I disagree strongly”, 2 = “I disagree”, 3 = “I am not certain”, 4 = “I agree”, 5 = “I agree strongly”.

Table 1. Misconceptions of religious freedom.

Religious freedom is aimed more to protect religious institutions than individuals (<i>reverse coding</i>)
Religious freedom is aimed to protect individuals even against their religions
Religious freedom only protects religions recognized by state (<i>reverse coding</i>)
Religious freedom of religious minorities should be restricted during public emergencies (<i>reverse coding</i>)
Secular states should put principles of secularism over the right to freedom of religion (<i>reverse coding</i>)

Perceptions of religious freedom and a broader set of women's, refugee, civil-political, socio-economic, and gay rights were operationalized seeking to understand the association between awareness of religious freedom principles, perceptions of its dimensions and attitudes towards other rights (see Appendix A for scales and items on human rights)⁵. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5 from strong disagreement to strong agreement.

3.3. Participants

The questionnaires were completed by 1,035 Italian university students ranging in age from 19 to 24 years with an average age of 20.8. In terms of religious affiliation, nearly one-third (30%) described themselves as having no religion, 64% identified with Roman Catholicism and 6% identified with religious minorities including Muslims (2.4%), Orthodox Christians (1.7%), Buddhists (0.4%), Pentecostals (0.4%), and others. The majority of participants (89.7%) agreed and strongly agreed with the importance, for them, of living in a democratically governed country and 66% expressed their interest in politics. Around a half of the sample (45%) confirmed that they are believers in God and 19% prayed at least weekly or more often, while 43% confirmed that it was important for them to grow up in a religious family.

4. Results

4.1. Religious Freedom Awareness

The starting point of our research is with the evaluation of misconceptions, i.e., participants' awareness of religious freedom principles. After re-coding the items from negative to positive formulations, Figure 1 displays that more than half of respondents have a proper understanding of religious freedom misconceptions. The prevalence of protecting more vulnerable individuals over protection of religious institutions was expressed by 60% of participants, while one-fifth (21%) did not agree with that idea. Overall, 62% of participants confirmed that religious freedom aims to protect individuals even against their religions, while around 13% had opposite views.

The first two statements caused less uncertainty compared to the rest of the misconceptions (Figure 1). Around half of the participants agreed with the idea that religious freedom protects religions even if they are not recognized by the state (51%), while 21% did not support this statement. It is interesting to observe that the participants were aware of the principal meanings of religious freedom and most of the misconceptions were perceived following the human rights approach to their conceptualization proposed in the 2017 Report. The statement "Religious freedom of religious minorities should not be restricted during public emergencies" received more agreement (54%) than uncertainty (35%) in responses.⁶ It is worth noting that the questionnaire was administered before the public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the limitations of religious freedom engendered numerous public discussions and controversial policies around the globe.

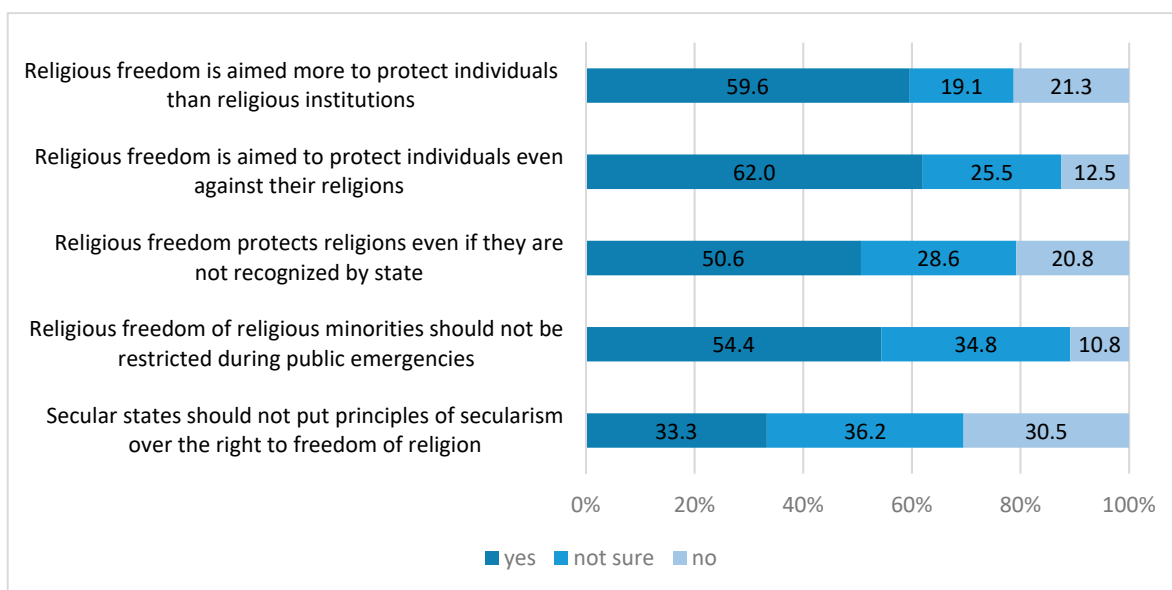


Figure 1. Perceptions of selected list of misconceptions of religious freedom (n = 1035, %). Note: yes = sum of the agree and strongly agree responses; no = sum of the disagree and strongly disagree responses.

The uncertainty in participants’ evaluation of the list of misconceptions of religious freedom ranged from 19% to 36%. The statement about the prevalence of principles of secularism upon the right to freedom of religion produced the most ambiguity in responses. Among the participants, 36% were not certain if the principle of religious freedom should prevail over political secularism, while agreement and disagreement with this statement showed nearly the same level of support (33% agreed and 31% disagreed with this statement).

The following step in data analysis employed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with the principal component method of extraction and Varimax rotation for five items of the concept “Misconceptions of religious freedom” with the further aim of developing the scale of religious freedom awareness (RFA). In the model of EFA, we considered the eigenvalues and controlled for the reliability of latent factors. We used a value of 0.50 as the minimum threshold acceptable for the eigenvalues. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy indicated that the strength of the relationships among variables was mediocre (KMO = 0.63). Based on the results (Table 2), we selected the three items retrieved in the first latent factor to proceed with the development of the scale of Religious Freedom Awareness (RFA).

Table 2. Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation for ‘misconception of religious freedom’.

How Much Do You Agree That:	Factor Loading	
	1	2
Religious freedom is aimed more to protect individuals than religious institutions	0.65	−0.04
Religious freedom is aimed to protect individuals even against their religions	0.24	0.84
Religious freedom only protects religions recognized by state	0.73	0.02
Religious freedom of religious minorities should not be restricted during public emergencies	0.68	0.04
Secular states should not put principles of secularism over the right to freedom of religion	0.43	−0.58

We considered the internal consistency of the scale with the value of the Cronbach's alpha, which showed that the scale is slightly improved if we delete the item "Secular states should not put principles of secularism over the right to freedom of religion". The Cronbach's alpha for the scale which is composed of the three items extracted in the first factor was 0.53 indicating relative internal consistency of the scale; however, we decided to keep these three items together, taking into account the explorative aim of our research and controversial character of misconceptions offered for the assessment.

Moreover, since the statement "Secular states should not put principles of secularism over the right to freedom of religion" was excluded from the scale, we decided to compute a Pearson correlation coefficient between this statement and two types of political secularism measured in this survey (Table 3). The two types of political secularism were operationalized for the study of social perceptions of religious freedom (SPRF) based on the theoretical perspective of Kuru (2009) designating its 'passive' and 'assertive' types. By assessing the relationship between these statements, we found that, the participants while considering the relationship between religious freedom and secularism intended passive secularism type, which can be defined through the principles of state neutrality, equality of all religions, and possibility of their presence in public sphere ($r = 0.09, p < 0.00$). Instead, the assertive secularism, which confines religious expression to private sphere only, was negatively associated with the statement ($r = -0.11, p < 0.00$).

Table 3. Correlation between the principles of political secularism and religious freedom.

	Secular states should not put principles of secularism over the right to freedom of religion
State should be neutral and treat equally all religions and allow them to be present in public sphere (passive secularism)	0.09 **
State should be neutral and treat equally all religions and confine religious expression to private sphere (assertive secularism)	-0.11 **

Note: Correlations are significant at $p < 0.00$ (**).

4.2. Religious Freedom Awareness and Perceptions of Human Rights

Holistic understanding of human rights (Bielefeldt et al. 2016), as it was considered in the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, highlights the universality and interdependence of all human rights. However, this does not preclude the situations of collision of various rights with FoRB. In this regard "Freedom of religion and belief is sometimes invoked to request protection for religious feelings against offensive speech acts, thus apparently limiting the scope of freedom of expression" (Bielefeldt et al. 2016, p. 29). Moreover, "One of the most controversial topics in the context of freedom of religion or belief concerns its relationship to gender issues. Since the 1990s the debate has been broadened to also include questions of sexual orientation and gender identity" (Bielefeldt et al. 2016, p. 31).

In practical terms, indivisibility of human rights and their interrelation have been considered in detail within the framework of communication of Special Rapporteurs on FoRB, specifying human rights instruments and findings from reports.⁷ For instance, intersecting rights with FoRB were considered in a variety of reports questioning the relations with freedom of expression (Bielefeldt 2015), rights of the child (Bielefeldt 2015), LGBT+ rights (Shaheed 2020a), and others. Moreover, the measurable indicators of FoRB for monitoring its implementation by the state⁸ were recently elaborated in compliance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Shaheed 2020b) and Special Rapporteur's Digest on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Digest 2023).

In this regard, understanding of common religious freedom misconceptions can be equally important for the stronger perceptions of various dimensions of religious freedom and other human rights as well. This section addresses the inquiry—if and how religious

freedom awareness may contribute to the holistic understanding of human rights (Table 4). Using empirical evidence, we consider the intersectionality of RFA with other human rights. In this section, we discuss below the data on the associations between the scale of ‘Religious Freedom Awareness’ (RFA) and other civil–political and socio–economic rights, as well as the rights of women, refugees, and LGBT+ individuals (See Appendix A for description of scales).

Table 4. Correlations (Pearson’s r , 2-tailed) between the RFA scale and human rights (n = 1035).

	RFA (r)	Mean Value
RFA—Religious Freedom Awareness (scale)	1.00	3.47
Societal value of religious freedom (scale)	0.25 **	4.06
Socio-legal aspects of religious freedom (scale)	0.24 **	4.51
Human rights aspects of religious freedom (collective) (scale)	0.08 *	3.54
Human rights aspects of religious freedom (individual) (scale)	0.17 **	4.49
Freedom of speech (scale)	0.07 *	4.28
Gay rights (scale)	0.21 **	4.39
Refugee rights (scale)	0.26 **	4.01
Welfare rights (scale)	0.11 **	4.70
Women’ rights (scale)	0.15 **	4.78

Note: Correlations are significant at $p < 0.00$ (**) or $p < 0.05$ (*) level (2-tailed).

The participants who have sensibility to religious freedom misconceptions (Table 4) are at the same time in favor of the values which religious freedom brings to society ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.00$). Thus, the RFA scale is associated with values of cultural and religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, tolerant and peaceful coexistence of religions, equality, and liberty. (See Appendix A). Similar association we find with the socio-legal aspect of religious freedom which were developed to measure the perceptions of non-discrimination, equality of religions before the law, non-violent coexistence for all religions, freedom to speak openly on religious matters, and importance of religious freedom claims in a democratic society ($r = 0.24$ **, $p < 0.00$).

Two scales measuring perceptions of collective and individual aspects of religious freedom (Appendix A) are positively associated with the RFA scale. However, the individual aspects of religious freedom (to have no religion and to change religion) are stronger associated with the RFA scale ($r = 0.17$ **, $p < 0.00$) than with collective aspects of this right ($r = 0.08$, $p < 0.05$). The latter were assessed as freedom to establish a religious group, to express religious views in media, to write, issue, and disseminate religious publication, and to teach religion freely either in public or in private.

It is not surprising that the RFA scale is positively associated with the positive participants’ perception of various dimensions of religious freedom. What is more important for our analysis, that the ARF scale shows stronger degree of association with the endorsement of the refugee’s rights ($r = 0.26$ **, $p < 0.00$), gay rights ($r = 0.21$ **, $p < 0.00$), and women’s rights ($r = 0.15$ **, $p < 0.00$). As the following step of analysis, we consider the predictive power of the RFA scale vis à vis various dimensions of religious freedom and human rights (Tables 5 and 6).

We first present the results about the predictive power of the RFA scale vis à vis the perceptions of various dimensions of religious freedom (Table 5). The first important observation is that awareness of religious freedom principles contributes to the support of three from four dimensions of the concept of religious freedom measured in this study (see for details Breskaya and Giordan 2019). Along with the statistical effect of the RFA scale, we can observe that the views of passive secularism and participants’ interest in politics were robust predictors of all four dimensions of religious freedom perceptions.

Table 5. Linear regression model: The RFA scale and perceptions of religious freedom (n = 1010).

	Societal Value of RF	Socio-Legal Aspects of RF	Collective Aspects of RF	Individual Aspects of RF
Religious minority (ref. religious nones)	0.00	0.00	0.00	−0.08 *
Catholic (ref. religious nones)	−0.05	−0.05	−0.09 *	−0.04
I am a religious person	0.00	−0.08	0.01	−0.22 ***
I am a spiritual person	0.13 ***	0.11 **	0.06	0.03
RFA (scale)	0.19 ***	0.18 ***	0.02	0.12 ***
Passive secularism	0.26 ***	0.25 ***	0.23 ***	0.20 ***
Frequency of prayer at home	−0.01	0.01	0.02	−0.06
Frequency of attendance of a worship service	−0.01	−0.02	0.03	0.03
Importance of expressing religion alone in private	−0.01	−0.07	−0.03	0.07
Importance of expressing religion with a community in public	0.03	0.11 **	0.12 **	0.01
I am interested in politics	0.11 ***	0.16 ***	0.12 ***	0.07 *
Level of your mother’s education	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.01
Level of your father’s education	−0.06	0.02	0.01	−0.02
Age	−0.01	0.02	−0.02	0.01
Female (ref. male)	0.03	0.06	0.03	−0.01
Citizenship status	−0.02	0.06	0.02	0.01
Explained variance	15%	17%	9%	13%

Note: N = 1010, NCath = 648, Nnones = 304, Nmin = 58; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; References: Religious minority (ref. nones) = having no religious affiliation, Catholics (ref. nones) = having no religious affiliation.

Table 6. Linear regression model: RFA and human rights (n = 1010).

	Freedom of Speech	Gay Rights	Refugee Rights	Welfare Rights	Women’s Rights
Religious minority (ref. nones)	−0.05	−0.14 ***	−0.02	0.04	0.05
Catholic (ref. nones)	−0.05	−0.01	−0.12 **	0.03	0.01
I am a religious person	−0.03	−0.17 ***	−0.12 *	−0.07	−0.08
I am a spiritual person	−0.00	0.02	0.08 *	−0.03	−0.03
RFA (scale)	0.03	0.12 ***	0.18 ***	0.07 *	0.13 ***
Passive secularism	0.16 ***	0.17	0.26 ***	0.13 ***	0.10 ***
Frequency of prayer at home	−0.04	−0.04	0.01	0.03	−0.07
Frequency of attendance of a worship service	−0.02	−0.16 ***	0.04	0.01	−0.02
Important to express religion alone in private	0.06	0.03	0.01	0.06	0.05
Important to express religion with a community in public	0.03	−0.03	−0.01	−0.02	0.02
I am interested in politics	0.06	0.08 *	0.12 ***	0.07 *	0.07 *
Level of your mother’s education	−0.08 *	−0.03	0.01	−0.04	−0.07
Level of your father’s education	0.04	0.00	0.07 *	−0.02	−0.00
Age	−0.05	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
Female (ref. male)	0.04	0.16 ***	0.06 *	0.15 ***	0.21 ***
Citizenship status	−0.06	0.04	−0.01	0.08 *	0.11 **
Explained variance	4%	21%	16%	5%	10%

Note: N = 1010, NCath = 648, Nnones = 304, Nmin = 58; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; References: Religious minority (ref. nones) = having no religious affiliation, Catholics (ref. nones) = having no religious affiliation.

Second, the finding on the absence of the statistically significant impact of the RFA scale for the perceptions of the collective aspects of religious freedom is an important indicator of the dynamics behind religious freedom claims and their dependence on socioreligious contexts and spiritual needs of the participants (Breskaya et al. 2021). The possible explanation of these data might be found if we consider other factors from the regression model. Individual aspects of religious freedom are predicted by their stronger endorsement by religious nones compared to the adherents to religious minorities. Moreover, those who are defining themselves as religious persons less support the individual aspects of religious freedom. Instead, it was important to express religion in community in public and follow politics for those who were more supportive to collective aspects of religious freedom.

Third, regarding the perceptions of religious freedom as societal values and sociolegal aspects, along with the robust statistical effect of the RFA scale, we found that the more spiritual young people are, the more they endorse these two dimensions. Importance of

expressing religion with a community in public predicts the endorsement of the sociolegal aspects of religious freedom.

The multivariate analysis yielded the trend of significance of the RFA scale for the perceptions of four from five human rights measured in this study (Table 6). The impact of the RFA scale was stronger for the refugee rights ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.001$), women's rights ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$), and gay rights ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.001$); however, there was no statistical impact for the perception of the freedom of speech. Even though we did not find any negative statistical influence of. The RFA scale on the perceptions of human rights, the absence of the impact can be considered within the ongoing debate on the antagonisms existing between freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief (Bielefeldt et al. 2016). The data suggested that passive secularism, interest in politics, and gender have significant positive effects on perceptions of all human rights measured in this study. More females are supportive of various types of rights compared with males.

Regarding the socioreligious context of the participants, the more religious the individuals consider themselves to be, the less they support gay rights and refugee rights; the more spiritual they consider themselves, the more they support refugee rights. Frequency of attendance of religious services has statistical negative influence on perceptions of gay rights. The higher level of father's education influences the endorsement of refugee rights, whereas we find the opposite effect for the mother's education on perceptions of freedom of speech. The factor of holding Italian citizenship has statistically significant positive influence on welfare and women's rights.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article was designed to advance the sociological study of religious freedom and human rights with a particular focus on the misconceptions of religious freedom. Our aim was twofold: to overview the theoretical debates around key misconceptions of religious freedom and develop some of their measures for empirical research. In doing so, we developed the RFA (Religious Freedom Awareness) scale and tested its impact on the perceptions of human rights including those with competing claims to religious freedom. This is explorative research which tends to address the question if and how does the RFA scale contribute to a holistic understanding and advancement of the culture of human rights in society.

First, the findings showed that the RFA scale was correlated with the perceptions of societal and sociolegal dimensions of religious freedom. Second, the RFA scale was less associated with collective aspects of religious freedom than with the individual claims. This finding has to be considered along with the observation that for the sample of university students, freedom to have no religion, to change religion, and to worship were stronger endorsed compared to other claims. For instance, 95% of the participants (see Appendix A) agreed that freedom to have no religion is important for them and 96% agreed that it is important for everyone to be free to change their religion. Meanwhile, 50% supported the idea that everyone should be free to teach their religion, either in public or in private and 57% confirmed that it is important for them to have freedom to establish a religious group. Support for the individual dimension of religious freedom (Table 3) was higher for the scale ($M = 4.49$) compared to the collective aspects ($M = 3.54$).

The regression analysis provides even more clear evidence about the relationship between the awareness of religious freedom and perceptions of various dimensions of this right. The RFA scale has predictive power vis-à-vis societal, sociolegal, and individual aspects of religious freedom and has no effect on the collective aspects of religious freedom. Moreover, we found that among three groups we identified for this study (Catholics, religious minorities, and religious nones), the individual aspects of religious freedom were more important for religious nones. Moreover, support of refugee rights was stronger endorsed by religious nones in the sample than by the Catholics. This is important finding (see Table 6 if we take into account ongoing processes of secularization of Italian society, particularly considering its effects within the cohort of young Italians (Breskaya et al.

2022a), along with the growth of religious nones and multiplication of patterns of secular spiritualities, (Giordan 2007, 2009; Blasi et al. 2020; Berzano 2023). Similar tendencies were recently depicted not at the level of perceptions but within the context of judicialization of religious freedom, for instance, in the U.S. while protecting spirituality of religious nones against the background of increasing disaffiliation and individualization of religious practices and beliefs (Movsesian 2023).

Third, the awareness of religious freedom' misconceptions goes hand in hand with the support of other human rights. Specifically, this regarded the endorsement of refugee rights, welfare rights and those potentially colliding with religious freedom including women's rights and gay rights. The latter is interesting if compared with the endorsement of freedom of speech, which had weaker association with the RFA scale compared to other competing claims with religious freedom. That is to say, sensitivity to the misconceptions of religious freedom opens broader perspectives to the understanding of the rights of migrants and refugees, gender equality, protection of private life, and socio-economic claims. The absence of statistically significant effect of the RFA scale on the freedom of speech can be explained if we consider the challenges of the holistic approach to religious freedom: "Freedom of religion or belief is sometimes invoked to request protection for religious feelings against offensive speech acts, thus apparently limiting the scope of freedom of expression" (Bielefeldt et al. 2016, p. 29).

Finally, even though FoRB is "sometimes perceived as being 'less liberal' and 'less egalitarian' than other human rights" due to caution concerning phenomenon of religion expressed by some secularists (Bielefeldt et al. 2016, p. 3), and also may present "a provocation, which can cause anxiety, feelings of loss, and concomitant resistance" for traditional believers (Bielefeldt et al. 2016, p. 2), our explorative research added some interesting findings to this debate. Sensitivity toward the controversial and complex nature of religious freedom, which we aimed to measure with the RFA scale, contributes to the endorsement of human rights culture, and its more holistic perception.

Negotiation of the meanings of freedom of and from religion is an uneasy exercise for human rights scholars and experts; however, the process of conceptualizing and defining the misconceptions is salient for the promotion of this right, as it assists understanding what religious freedom "encompasses (and does not encompass)" (Shaheed 2017, p. 9). And, this is also relevant at the level of empirical analysis of social perceptions of religious freedom and potentially colliding rights, which suggests that misconceptions of religious freedom have to be studied taking into account contexts of political engagement, secularist views, and spiritual identities of individuals.

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Appendix A. Measures of Human Rights

Scale	Measures of Scale	Yes (%)	Reliability of Scale
Societal value of religious freedom	It promotes interreligious dialogue between religions	81.1	0.83
	It promotes non-discrimination on the basis of religion	78.3	
	It promotes religious and cultural diversity in society	87.4	
	It is important for tolerant and peaceful co-existence of religions	85.9	
	It promotes liberty as a principle of democratic citizenship	72.4	
Socio-legal aspects of religious freedom	Non-discrimination for religious minorities on the basis of religion	95.5	0.73
	Equality of various religions in society before the law	90.1	
	Non-violent co-existence for all religions in every society	95.5	
	Freedom to speak on religious matters openly and freely	92.9	
	An important right in a democratic society	89.8	
Religious freedom (collective)	Freedom to establish a religious group	56.9	0.70
	Freedom to express religious views in the media	54.6	
	Freedom to write, issue, and disseminate religious publications	66.3	
	Everyone should be free to teach their religion, either in public or in private	49.5	
Religious freedom (individual)	Freedom to have no religion	94.7	0.69
	Freedom to worship	94.8	
	It is important for everyone to be free to change their religion	95.9	
Freedom of speech	People should be free to express any opinion on any subject	89.1	0.78
	People should be free to discuss all moral ideas, no matter what	82.8	
Gay rights	Homosexuals should have the right to hold any public office	93.8	0.70
	Homosexuals should have the right to become religious leaders	75.3	
Refugee rights	The government should guarantee refugees freedom to travel	68.6	0.82
	The government should provide a decent standard of living for refugees	80.2	
	Refugees should have access to medical care	90.2	
Welfare rights	The government should provide health care for the sick	98.1	0.74
	The government should provide a decent standard of living for the old	98.0	
	State should guarantee a decent living for all citizens and their families	94.7	
Women's rights	Women should have the right to be equally paid for equal work	98.1	0.87
	The state should protect women's right to adequate job opportunities	98.1	
	Women should have the same rights during the dissolution of marriage	98.0	

Note: yes = sum of the agree and strongly agree responses.

Notes

- ¹ Professor Heiner Bielefeldt held a mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief from 2010 till 2016.
- ² Mr. Ahmed Shaheed held the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief from 2016 till 2022. For details, see Section III "Addressing misconceptions about the right to freedom of religion or belief" of his Report ([Shaheed 2017](#)). In 1986, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance for independent expertise in the sphere of religious intolerance, discrimination on the basis of religion, violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and its promotion. In 2000, the UN Commission on Human Rights changed the title of the mandate holder to UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- ³ From a human rights perspective, the right to conversion has to be differentiated in its scope. Bielefeldt highlighted four dimensions or subcategories of the right to convert by specifying the right to change one's own religion or belief; not to be forced to convert; to try to convert others by means of non-coercive persuasion; and the rights of the child and of his or her parents concerning conversion ([Bielefeldt 2012b](#)).
- ⁴ See the comparative study of [Lefebvre and Brodeur \(2017\)](#) *Public Commissions on Cultural and Religious Diversity. Analysis, Reception and Challenges*. This study examines the process of establishing and operating Public Commissions on regulating religious diversity in Great Britain, France, Canada (Quebec), Belgium, Norway, and other countries. The authors, through the examination of national reports, drafts, outcomes, media coverage, and various publics' reaction to reports, suggest important findings uncovering the complex and multifaceted nature of the concepts of cultural and religious diversity and the mediating roles of Public Commissions in collective identity-building. Moreover, various types of secularism are observed including the "open secularism" in Canada, "flexible secularism" in Singapore, and "strong secularism" (laïcité) in France. The letters to the Public Commissions are notable, as they gave insights into the theoretical perspectives implemented in the reports. For example, the letter from a Christian organization sent in 1998 to the Parekh commission "Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain", questioned if the model of secular society provides the best public space for equality and tolerance, arguing that in such a model, religion is marginalized and is a matter of private affairs. The letter says that: "Islamophobia and anti-Semitism merge with a more widespread rejection of religion which runs through a significant part of "tolerant" society, including the educated middle class and the progressive media". The role of "progressive media" was questioned in that research, showing that the publication of the report in 2000 in Britain met extremely negative media coverage and brought a "horrifying experience" ([Lefebvre and Brodeur 2017](#), p. 60) for the commissioners.

- ⁵ Some of the measures of human rights were developed following the instrument suggested the measure within the empirical research on Religion and Human Rights (see [van der Ven and Ziebertz 2012, 2013](#)).
- ⁶ Among various misconceptions and controversies regarding the framework of religious freedom, Mr. [Shaheed \(2017, p. 10\)](#) noted a particular dimension when: “Internal dimension of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief (often referred to as *forum internum*), which enjoys unconditional and unqualified protection and cannot be restricted, limited, interfered with or derogated from under any circumstances, including during times of public emergency”. We operationalized it with a more specific formulation questioning the opinion of participants about targeting religious minorities during public emergencies.
- ⁷ See the list of Annual reports of the Special Rapporteur on the FoRB: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/Annual.aspx> (access on 3 August 2023).
- ⁸ See the list of FoRB indicators which are specified in the document as structural indicators, process indicators, and outcome/performance indicators: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/forb-indicators.docx> (access on 3 August 2023).

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