

Globalisation has contributed to declining levels of religious freedom across the world

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What factors affect religious freedom? As [Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom](#) and [Gizem Arikan](#) write, there is evidence that restrictions on religious freedom have increased globally in recent decades. Using data from a recent study, they highlight the role that processes of globalisation have had on this trend. The results indicate that globalisation is a contributing factor to the increase in restrictions on religious freedom, with this partly being explained by the perceived threat communities feel when they are exposed to members of other religions.



Restrictions on religious freedom are on the rise. [Empirical evidence](#) suggests that the average level of religious discrimination in the world rose by 11.4 per cent between 1990 and 2002, and that the number of countries that interfere with worship or other religious practices, as well as the number of countries that regulate religious symbols, religious literature, or broadcasting, further increased between 2006 and 2009. While state control of, and restrictions on, the free exercise of religion in non-democratic countries do not come as a surprise, the recent trends of limiting religious freedom appear even in established democracies, with the “burqa ban” in several European countries being one of the most notorious examples.

What explains the rising levels of restrictions on religious freedoms? Existing theories seem to be more successful in explaining the cross-national variance in levels of religious freedoms than in accounting for changes in the level of religious freedoms over time. A [recent study](#) we have conducted with Udi Sommer is designed to fill this gap. Our findings suggest that the higher universal level of globalisation plays an important role in explaining the trend away from religious freedom observed in the past two decades.

The role of globalisation in declining religious freedom

While some scholars have emphasised the positive contribution of globalisation in diffusing ideals of freedom and democracy, others have stressed that existing traditions, values, and identities are increasingly being challenged as a result of growing levels of communication and interaction between different societies and cultures.

We contend that the thriving of alternative value systems and cultures in a globalised world induces perceived threats to a hegemonic religion, and its values, cohesiveness, positive distinctiveness, and resources. In turn, the fear of loss of identity and the sense of a disintegrating community lead to a retreat into the religious or cultural group of origin, accompanied by a tendency to become more protective of the group’s values and more resistant to other value systems, such as other religions.

Indeed, studies in political psychology have repeatedly shown that perceived threat is a significant factor in the emergence of in-group bias, ethnocentrism, and exclusionism. By increasing the threat perceptions of the masses and raising demands for restrictions on minority religions and for greater religious and cultural homogeneity, globalisation creates conditions that lead policymakers to restrict the religious activities of minority groups. We thus expect increasing levels of globalisation to be associated with greater legislation and restrictions curbing minority groups’ religious freedom.

Further, perceived threat to the majority religion may also be related to internal societal dynamics, such as the visibility of minority religions. The traditions legitimating religious identity and homogeneity in a country are further challenged by an additional set of competitive symbolic claims accompanying the visible presence of each additional minority religion. The core values, norms, and networks that enhance the nation’s social capital are increasingly threatened as more and more out-groups enter the public sphere. Accordingly, we expected greater restrictions on

religious freedoms as the visibility of minority religions in a country increases.

We tested these expectations using time-series, cross-sectional data from Round 1 of the [Religion and State \(RAS\) Project](#), which covers the period between 1990 and 2002. The results show that religious legislation (an index tapping how much control governments exert on religious groups and to what extent they regulate lifestyle and religious practices) and religious discrimination towards minorities (an index combining various aspects of restriction on the practice of religion by minorities) increase with overall levels of globalisation, when controlling for other explanatory factors such as democratic conditions, economic development, denominational fractionalisation, religious pluralism, or Communist legacy, as well as the hegemonic religious traditions.



Credit: Matthew Fearnley (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The globalisation measure is a weighted average of social, economic, and political globalisation. When this measure is unpacked into its three components, we see that both social globalisation (a measure that includes personal contacts, information flows, and cultural proximity) and economic globalisation (measured by restrictions on trade and capital such as tariff rates, and by actual flows of trade and investments) have positive effects on religious legislation and discrimination, while the effect of political globalisation is statistically insignificant. In addition, we find that the number of minority religions is positively related to religious legislation and religious discrimination. That is, all else being constant, as the visibility of minority religions in a country increases, religious freedoms will be likewise curbed.

To provide an indirect test of our underlying assumption that it is perceived threat that links globalisation to restrictions on religious freedom, we conducted a mediation analysis at the individual level using data from the European Social Survey's 2002 wave. In this supporting analysis, we tested whether perceived cultural and realistic threats mediate the relationship between opposition to globalisation and rejection of other religions. Results show that both realistic and cultural perceived threats mediate the effect of opposition to globalisation on support for cultural and religious homogeneity and opposition to religious diversity at the individual level, although cultural perceived threat plays a larger role.

Overall, these results indicate that globalisation systematically predicts increases in religious legislation and religious discrimination towards minorities. Social and economic globalisation is especially important for the trends observed. The supporting analysis demonstrates that the effect of globalisation on opposition to religious freedom stems at least partly from perceived threat. While this finding is important in its own right, it may also offer explanations for other global trends such as rising religious fundamentalism, religious terrorism, religious wars, and other types of religious tension.

For a longer discussion of this topic see the author's recent article in [Political Studies](#)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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