

Jonathan Fox

Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me: Why Governments Discriminate against Religious Minorities

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Reviewed by Eileen Barker, London School of Economics, INFORM

This work ranks among those ground-breaking books that both confirm and question assumptions that many of us have harboured for years or even decades. This book addresses many of the questions that can be asked about the extent and ways in which states and their apparatus discriminate against minority religions (MR). Jonathan Fox, Yehuda Avner professor of religion and politics at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, focuses on what he calls government-based religious discrimination (GRD), but to a lesser extent, he also addresses questions about societal religious discrimination (SRD). To do so, he draws on data from the third round of the Religion and State-Minorities (RASM3) dataset, which covers the years 1990–2014 and includes 771 religious minorities in 183 countries and independent territories. Fox defines GRD as ‘restrictions placed on the religious practices or institutions of minority religions that are not placed on the majority religion’ (3) and SRD as ‘societal actions taken against religious minorities by members of a country’s religious majority who do not represent the government’ (4).

About 90 percent of the world’s constitutions promise some form of religious freedom, and many have signed international treaties guaranteeing religious freedom. Few, though, would need to read this book to suspect that this promise is ‘more honor’d in the breach than the observance’ (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.4). However, we now have abundant statistics informing us of how true this is—and in what kinds of ways it is true. Fox tells us that 88.5 per cent of 183 governments have discriminated against 74.4 per cent of 771 MRs at some point—and he observes that discrimination increased over the period. Although many of us might have the impression that the liberal democracies of the West would generally be less likely than non-democracies to discriminate against MRs, we appear would to be wrong: Western democracies have engaged in more GRD than the Christian-based democracies of Asia, Africa and Latin America, where democracies and non-democracies had similar average levels of GRD. Canada was the only Western democracy that did not engage in GRD.

MRs are categorised as Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Animist or Baha’i. Countries are organised according to whether their majority is Catholic, Orthodox, other Christian, Muslim or ‘other’. Despite the book title referring to the Second Commandment or

perhaps its equivalent in non-Abrahamic faiths, the research is extended to secular ideologies, with communist states having among the highest GRD scores but below-average SDR scores.

Fox differentiates thirty-five types of GRD into four categories. The first category includes restrictions on religious practices, most commonly on the public observance of religion. Such restrictions on nearly a fifth of the MRs are found in one in three countries. Saudi Arabia has banned public observance by all religions other than the state-approved version of Wahhabi Sunni Islam. A 1997 law in Russia requires all religious organisations to register or be dissolved and does not allow many MRs to register. Other restrictions in this category concern religious publications and burial of the dead—a challenge for Muslims in Switzerland and Greece. Strict restrictions on kosher and halal slaughter of meat have become a growing issue in some Western societies.

Fox's second category covers restrictions on religious institutions and clergy, including on building, repairing and maintaining places of worship. Local governments can deny permits and use zoning rules to limit places of worship; for example, Muslims have experienced such restrictions in Australia, Belgium, Denmark and Italy. The third category includes restrictions on conversion and proselytising. These are most common in Muslim-majority countries, and in extreme cases, apostasy is considered to be a crime punishable by beheading. The final category is a mixed collection of other restrictions, such as mandatory education in the majority religion, failure to protect MRs against violence and punish perpetrators, child custody based on religion, and government declarations deeming MRs to be dangerous or 'extremist sects'.

Turning to non-governmental discrimination, Fox found that 'SRD is common, widespread and increasing. Like GRD, it is the norm rather than the exception' (88). Jews are the minority most likely to experience SRD, followed by Christians and then Muslims. SDR is most likely to occur in Orthodox-Christian-majority states, followed by Muslim-majority states. 'Thus, both as targets and perpetrators, the three Abrahamic religions are the most involved in SDR' (57). Twenty-seven types of SRD are divided into six categories: economic, speech acts, non-violent property attacks (e.g. vandalism), non-violent harassment, violence and other. Perhaps surprisingly (and distressingly), violence is common: 34 per cent of MRs experienced some form of violent SRD—and 73 per cent of countries had at least one MR that experienced violent SRD, tying with non-violent harassment for the highest score. It is, however, noteworthy (and reassuring) that only a small minority of the population engages in violence towards MRs.

RASCEE readers might be especially interested in the relatively short section of the book (164–174) focused on Orthodox-majority states. Fox finds that they have high levels of GRD and conformity in their governments' religion policy while differing significantly from other European and Western Christian-majority democracies. In fact, he finds that only three MRs in the Orthodox states have experienced no GRD: Catholics in Ukraine and Catholics and Jews in Montenegro.

To be included as an MR in the project, a religion had to make up at least 0.2 per cent of a country's population. Consequently, many new religions in most, if not all, countries were excluded from the analysis. This is a pity, but attempting to include every tiny minority would have made it impossible to carry out the study. However, those interested in the more controversial MRs may look at an article Fox co-authored with a colleague at Bar-Ilan, Eti Peretz (Peretz and Fox 2021). Using RASM data, they compared levels of discrimination by thirty-seven Western democracies against four MRs that many governments consider to be cults: the Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Scientology, Unification Church, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as Mormons. Examples include the requirement to register to be legal or receive special tax status, anti-religious propaganda in government publications, mandatory education in the majority religion and restrictions on building, leasing, repairing and maintaining places of worship. Peretz and Fox found that these religions perceived as

cults experienced higher levels of religious discrimination by governments than non-cult MRs. Moreover, such discrimination increased around the mid-1990s, which they argued indicated, at least in part, a response to a series of violent, cult-related events in the 1990s involving the Branch Davidians, Order of the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate, and Aum Shinrikyo. Although none of the four MRs in their study were involved in these violent incidents, merely being labelled as a cult could have significant consequences for a religion's institutions and members, even in countries openly committed to religious freedom. However, this need not always be the case. For example, Japan's reaction to the subway attack by Aum Shinrikyo specifically targeted that group.

The strength of both Fox's sole-authored volume and his article undoubtedly lies in the quantitative analysis. The book has eighteen figures and forty-two tables, so those who enjoy poring over the tables will certainly have their fill of fascinating data—but the discussion and myriad examples are equally fascinating. We are given not only new and valuable material but also informed suggestions about why different governments and populations discriminate against MRs and what governments and citizens might consider doing about it. This book is not cheap, but it is not exorbitantly expensive, and it should certainly be stocked in all libraries that claim to offer any literature on religion, politics, law, all the other social sciences and the rights of MRs. In short, I recommend this book without reservation.

References

PERETZ, ETI, AND JONATHAN FOX. 2021. 'Religious Discrimination against Groups Perceived as Cults in Europe and the West'. *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 22 (3–4): 415–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1969921>.

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