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Measuring the Social Perception of Religious Freedom: A Sociological Perspective

Olga Breskaya [1,*] and Giuseppe Giordan [2]

[1] University Human Rights Centre, University of Padova, via Martiri della Libertà, 2, 35137 Padova, Italy
[2] Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, via Cesarotti 10, 35123 Padova, Italy; giuseppe.giordan@unipd.it
[*] Correspondence: olga.breskaya@phd.unipd.it

Abstract: This article discusses the construction of the measuring instrument for the study of social perception of religious freedom (SPRF). We provide an overview of existing definitions of religious freedom from a social-science perspective, which ground the empirical research of religious freedom and describe the conceptualization of SPRF. We focus on the operationalization model and introduce the operational variables for the SPRF research, also emphasizing the political, religious, and human rights contexts of independent variables. Finally, the results of exploratory factor analysis that allow to construct the balanced model of SPRF based on statistically weighted factors and scales are presented. The theoretical and statistically tested instrument is discussed as a result of this analysis.

Keywords: religious freedom; sociology of human rights; sociology of religious freedom; empirical research

1. Introduction

The central argument of this article is that the study of the social perception of religious freedom (SPRF) allows to identify religious freedom as a multidimensional concept keeping the heuristic tension between its societal and subjective meanings. Drawing on the sociological definition we introduce in this article that sociopolitical structures, personal meanings, and individual choices and experiences mediate the process of construction of religious freedom meaning, the research of SPRF aims to integrate five conceptual domains producing it. We suggest that the multidimensional concept of SPRF compounds the definition of religious freedom as (1) an individual and religious groups' autonomy; (2) a societal value; (3) a principle of religion–state governance; (4) an international human rights standard; and (5) an impact of judicialization of religious freedom. In addition, the shared religious freedom meaning in society is produced by intergroup dynamics—by social actors with various civil, political, religious, and nonreligious identities—favoring one dimension of the concept more than the other. It is the robust task for sociology to understand these dynamics behind the religious freedom meaning and, thus, to track the socioreligious and sociopolitical processes challenging its future.

Sociology of law, political sociology, and sociology of religion together with the other social-science disciplines, including legal studies, addressed anew the topic of religious freedom in the last three decades (Finke 1990; Richardson 2006, 2007, 2015; Sullivan 2005; Gill 2008; Wuthnow and Lewis 2008; Banchoff and Wuthnow 2011; Grim and Finke 2011; Finke 2013; Finke and Martin 2014; Fox 2015; Sandberg 2011, 2014; Hefner 2015; Hurd 2015; Mayrl 2018). However, the sociological potential of research on this topic remains untapped. One of the reasons for the insufficient attention is that religious freedom is approached through the prism of limitations and violations. In that kind of analysis, the research focuses on the role of nation-states, national, and international organizations as duty-bearers and advocates of human rights. Being associated with violations of human rights,

religious freedom has been treated by sociology with a theoretical caution. The normative and legal nature of rights distanced sociology from engagement with human rights research until recently (Somers and Roberts 2008; Morgan 2009; Breskaya et al. 2018). However, exactly from the study on human rights and religion through approaching the topics of gender, peacebuilding, and legal pluralism (Possamai et al. 2015; Durham and Clark 2015; Giordan and Zrinščak 2018; Giordan and Breskaya 2018), the sociological dimensions of religious freedom analysis are evolving focused on pluralism policies, interfaith dialogue, empowerment of women, and sustainable development.

The sociological study of new religious movements in the West (Barker 1990; Beckford 2003; Beckford and Richardson 2003) and increased interest to the topic of new religions and religious minorities in post-communist societies (Barker 1999; Borowik and Tomka 2001; Zrinščak 2011) merged the theoretical interest to religious phenomena with religious freedom concerns. The issues of violence, exclusion, and spiritual awakening were often considered together with the sociopolitical context, even though religious freedom was not articulated or presented explicitly.

For sociology, in order to break through to the sociological dimension of religious freedom analysis, it is necessary to make certain efforts and overcome the barriers of human rights language, normativity, and sometimes the dominance of historical conditionality. Sociology has much more to explore over these contexts. It is also worth mentioning that religious freedom is mostly viewed in the realm of religious issues, while the formulation of the Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and practice of its application is much wider in its scope (see Sandberg 2011). Behind the sociolegal debates on the meaning of the freedom to have and to manifest thought, conscience, and religion, there is a strong social dynamic of modern societies. It is related to the increasing number of religious 'nones', challenging religious freedom issues in refugee asylums, increasing diversity in university campuses, growth of fundamentalism and religious hatred, and many other sociological issues. The novelty of global challenges for religious freedom creates a new task for sociologists—to consider existing approaches to religious freedom analysis and revise its sociological definitions.

2. In Search for Sociological Theories and Definitions of Religious Freedom

Among the social scientists who deal with the topic of religious freedom, there is no agreement on the definition, as every school of religious freedom research has a particular focus of analysis. For instance, sociologist Roger Finke stated that "religious freedom refers to the unrestricted practice, profession, and selection of religion" (Finke 2013, p. 299). Political scientist Jonathan Fox introduced the definition, which stressed that "Religious freedom can be defined as the right for everyone to be able to practice their religion as well as set up and maintain religious institutions without unreasonable interference from the government[1] or other sources" (Fox 2015, p. 136). While the former definition relies on a socioreligious theory of religious economy (Finke 1990; Finke and Stark 1992), the latter develops the theoretical perspective of political secularism (Fox 2015) with emphasis on the increasing public role of religion in a global society.[2]

In 2006, sociologist of law and religion, James T. Richardson, proposed a new interdisciplinary approach of the sociology of religious freedom, which was defined as "a structural and socio-legal analysis that examines historical, sociological, and cultural factors that have given rise to and promoted the idea of religious freedom in modem human societies" (Richardson 2006, p. 271). Within that theoretical framework, he defined religious freedom as a "social construct that is relatively new in human history, and one with meanings that have varied over time and place" (Breskaya et al. 2018, p. 425). This definition kept strong theoretical linkage with the social constructivist theory and highlighted the imbedded dynamics in the religious freedom concept. In Richardson's approach, the autonomous

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[1] Fox (2015) suggested four main dimensions for government religion policy: Official religion policy, religious support, religious restrictions, and religious discrimination.

[2] Fox (2015) defined political secularism as "an ideology or set of beliefs advocating that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics and/or public life" (Fox 2015, p. 28).

judiciary is seen as a structural condition for religious freedom maintenance, together with the growth of pluralism. These elements highlight the importance of institutional analysis in conjunction with research on the sociocultural context and contribute to understanding religious freedom as a social construct. Thus, the social constructivism perspective allows to consider historical, sociological, and cultural conditions of the judicial system, which controls religious freedom production in a society. Sociologist Mayrl (2018) developed further the idea of "judicialization" (Richardson 2015) of religious freedom. He highlighted the expanding scope of religious freedom meaning produced by the judiciary system, enhancing the role of national courts and the European Court of Human Rights in this process.

The schools described above introduced the topic of religious freedom to sociology and political sciences. They elaborated on definitions of religious freedom for the institutional level of research, where the policy of the state, role of religions, or decisions of independent judiciary can be monitored and measured. These studies contributed to the social constructivist perspective as they depicted the societal meaning of religious freedom without reducing it to legal or historical dimensions solely. Let us give a more detailed explanation of what this kind of nonreductionism means. For instance, a recent study of Roger Finke, Dane Mataic, and Jonathan Fox on religious restrictions provided a good example for that. They clarified how the legal mechanisms of registration of religious groups "offer an effective avenue for monitoring and controlling religious groups" (Finke et al. 2018, p. 721) which are used by the nation-states. The issue of registration could be seen as purely belonging to legal domain; however, the understanding of reasoning and explanation of why and how the legal mechanisms of registration are "used for reducing religious freedom" goes beyond the legal perspective. Finke et al. showed that in order to understand "how the registration process can contribute to the denial of freedom for some or all religions", (Finke et al. 2018, p. 721), it is important to examine political regimes, types of political secularisms and nationalism, as well as a type of religious competition within the country or regionally. Thus, the analysis of the legal mechanism of registration has to be integrated with the sociopolitical research of religious freedom context.

A recent significant development of the sociological study of religious freedom was a theoretical contribution of Peter Berger. In his last book *Many Altars of Modernity* (Berger 2014), Berger developed the conception of religious freedom intertwined with the process of pluralization of societies. Berger stated that:

> "The confluence of two modern developments, the wide diffusion of pluralism as a fact and of religious freedom as a political norm, has by now become a global phenomenon. An argument can be made, on strictly utilitarian grounds, that a measure of religious freedom is a practical necessity under these conditions." (Berger 2014, p. 47)

In his interpretation of religious freedom, Berger considered normative, human rights, political, social, and individual aspects of the concept. The references to the ideas of state neutrality, theological doctrines, philosophy, or political interest are implemented in his definition of religious freedom. What is most important for the sociologists is that Berger put together the human rights dimension and subjective meaning of religious freedom. This definition can be seen as a particular sign that sociology overcame the fear of applying human rights language in religious freedom research:

> "There are good empirical reasons to be in favor of religious freedom in the context of a religiously neutral state. However, it is important to emphasize that political utility is not the principal reason why most people who favor freedom of religion (myself definitely included) do so. A theological argument can also be made, as was done very cogently at the Second Vatican Council, and since then in the teachings and practice of the Roman Catholic Church. I think a similar argument can be made by other Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers. There is also a philosophical argument, independent of religious presuppositions, with which agnostics or atheists could agree. It touches on the key perception of what it means to be human. Pascal described the human condition as standing at the midpoint between "the nothing and the infinite" (le neant et l'infini). This situation is shrouded in mystery. Human

beings have wondered at this mystery throughout history. Religion has been the principal vehicle for this wonder: Why is there something rather than nothing? What does it all mean? Where do I come from? What may I hope for? How should I live? Who am I? Freedom to pursue this wonder is a fundamental human right. This freedom sets a limit to the power of the state; it is a fundamental right that predates and outweighs democracy or any particular form of government. It requires no instrumental justification. If, as is the case, religious freedom also turns out to be politically useful, this may be looked upon as a benefit to be grateful for". (Berger 2014, p. 92)

The stress on the search for the life meaning in Berger's conception of religious freedom put his definition close to the other socioreligious approach, which from the 1960s onward discussed similar questions of "gradual establishment of the freedom of choice of the subject" (Giordan 2016, p. 201). An obvious similarity in posing questions by Berger in the analysis of religious freedom and pluralism in a modern world, from one hand, and sociology of spirituality and pluralism, on the other hand, leaves many sociological questions open. How can the subjective meaning in religious freedom analysis be studied together with the societal one? How can the linkage among religiosity, spirituality and religious freedom be investigated together with the analysis of the normative and political nature of religious freedom?

3. Five Dimensions of Religious Freedom Meaning

The study of SPRF aims to measure the interplay of the subjective meaning of religious freedom with the other layers of its construction as well as consider the possible sociopolitical and socioreligious factors that foster and impede its perception. Below, we introduce the conceptualization of social perception of religious freedom (SPRF), suggesting that it is constructed at the intersection of five domains of meaning. Similar to the concept of social perception in social psychology, which describes the impressions and psychological factors that influence the process of interpersonal understanding during the social interaction, social perception of religious freedom considers the various individual and structural factors that affect the construction of the meaning of religious freedom in society. These five domains are:

(1) *Religious freedom as individual and religious groups' autonomy.* Deriving from Peter Berger's definition (Berger 2014), religious freedom *as an individual autonomy* refers to the idea that the principal meaning of religious freedom is grounded in the entitlement of every human to search for life meaning, the mystery of life, and truth, and pursue spiritual fulfillment. *Religious groups' autonomy* is seen as a development of the individual autonomy but taking its social forms—in the form of community, church, or organization (Robbers 2001).

(2) *Religious freedom as a societal value.* Religious freedom has strong societal meaning and value related to pluralism (Giordan and Pace 2014; Richardson 2006), interreligious dialogue, tolerant and peaceful coexistence (Durham and Clark 2015), religious and cultural diversity recognition, and equality (Gedicks 2015). Modern societies support religious freedom concern with built-in social dynamics with its gravitation poles to pluralism, spiritual experiences, fulfillment, and democratization of the sacred (Berger 2014; Heelas 2008; Giordan 2007).

(3) *Religious freedom as a principle of religion–state governance.* Religious freedom as a normative concept is intertwined with religion–state governance patterns (Durham 2012) and interpreted through the prism of secularization or secularism theoretical discourses by social scientists (Asad 2003; Casanova 1994; Calhoun et al. 2011; Sullivan 2010; Fox 2015) The empirical study of religion–state policies (Fox 2008, 2012, 2015) revealed how patterns of religion–state governance produce difference in religious freedom regimes. This topic seen through the prism of government and social restrictions (Grim and Finke 2011) provides further considerations about religious freedom as a normative and a sociological concept.

(4) *Religious freedom as an international human rights standard*. From the post-WWII time, the international human rights regime (Evans 2001) has advanced religious freedom globally guided by Article 18 of Universal Declaration of Human rights, Article 18 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international documents. With the European Court of Human Rights (Guide to Article 9 2019) guided by the European Convention on Human Rights, this standard advances religious freedom with normative and political powers. The history of conceptualization of religious freedom (Digest 2011) from a human rights perspective reflected global dynamics of religious freedom claiming (Hurd 2015).

(5) *Societal impact of judicialization of RF.* The processes of ruling religious freedom cases by national and international courts are crucial for the construction of societal meaning of religious freedom in a particular national context (Richardson and Lee 2014; Richardson 2015; Mayrl 2018). For instance, the Lautsi *vs* Italy case in Italy can be seen as a reference point for public discussions on religious symbolism in Italian public schools and in the public sphere in general.

4. Operationalization of Indicators for SPRF Research

The five theoretical dimensions of SPRF were elaborated on with indicators and operational variables. In the questionnaire, the variables were grouped in the thematic sections. The formulation of the answers (statements) did not contain the wording of 'religious freedom' in a majority of the cases (see Appendix A), as it was incorporated in the questions preceding the list of statements. Below, we present the items which measured each theoretical domain of the 5-dimensional concept of SPRF, adding the wording 'religious freedom' for better understanding of the operationalization procedure:

I. Religious freedom as individual and religious groups' autonomy:

A. *Religious freedom as individual autonomy:*

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1. Religious freedom means the freedom to choose my worldview;
2. Religious freedom means the freedom to choose my religious/non-religious identity;
3. Religious freedom is connected with the idea of human dignity;
4. Religious freedom is connected with search for individual truth;
5. Religious freedom allows everyone to pursue their personal spiritual fulfillment;
6. Religious freedom is not important for me;
7. Religious freedom is important, but other forms of freedom are more important.

B. *Religious freedom as religious groups' autonomy:*

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1. Religious freedom means that the state does not interfere with the core beliefs and religious teaching;
2. Religious freedom means that the state does not interfere with the core ministry including matters of liturgy, confession, education of clergy;
3. Religious freedom means that the state does not interfere with the core administration including the right to appoint and dismiss religious employees, church discipline, and financial issues.

II. Religious freedom as a societal value

A. *Societal function of religious freedom leaning to pluralism:*

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1. Religious freedom promotes interreligious dialogue between religions;
2. Religious freedom means non-violent coexistence for all religions in every society;
3. Religious freedom is important for tolerant and peaceful co-existence of religions;
4. Religious freedom promotes religious and cultural diversity in society;
5. Religious freedom promotes non-discrimination on the basis of religion;
6. Religious freedom is connected with protecting vulnerable people.

B.　*Societal challenges for religious freedom:*

1.　It is important to promote religious freedom at a time of increasing religious diversity in my country;
2.　The growth in Orthodox Christians in my country makes religious freedom a more important issue;
3.　The growth of Muslims in my country makes religious freedom a more important issue;
4.　The growth of refugees in my country makes religious freedom a more important issue;
5.　Debates about public policy such as abortion, homosexuality, cloning, and euthanasia make religious freedom a more important issue in my country.

III. Religious freedom as a principle of religion–state governance:

A. Religious freedom as a legal–political principle:

1.　Religious freedom means non-discrimination for religious minorities on the basis of religion;
2.　Religious freedom means equality of various religions in society before the law;
3.　Religious freedom is an important right in a democratic society;
4.　Religious freedom promotes liberty as a principle of democratic citizenship;
5.　Religious freedom is an important legal principle for secular state.

B. Religious freedom and religion–state governance patterns:

1.　The state provides favorable conditions only for the Catholic Church;
2.　The state provides equal conditions for the Catholic Church and religious minorities;
3.　The state provides equal conditions for Catholics and non-religious people;
4.　The state does not favor any religious group;
5.　The state manages religious issues very well.

IV. Religious freedom as an international human rights standard:

A. Religious freedom as a freedom to have and to change religion:

1.　Religious freedom allows everyone to be free to change their religion;
2.　Religious freedom means freedom to have no religion;
3.　Religious freedom means freedom to have inner personal religious convictions.

B. Religious freedom as a freedom to manifest religion:

1.　Religious freedom means freedom to worship;
2.　Religious freedom means freedom to speak on religious matters openly and freely;
3.　Religious freedom means freedom to have religious education;
4.　Religious freedom means freedom to establish a religious group;
5.　Religious freedom means freedom to express religious views in the media;
6.　Religious freedom means freedom to write, issue, and disseminate religious publications;
7.　Religious freedom means freedom to teach a religion in places suitable for these purposes;
8.　Religious freedom means that everyone should be free to teach their religion, either in public or in private;
9.　Religious freedom means that children should be brought up in the religion chosen by their parents;
10.　Religious freedom means that everyone should be free to observe dietary practices prescribed by their religion;
11.　Religious freedom means that everyone should be free to have a wedding in conformity with their beliefs;
12.　Religious freedom means that everyone should be free to wear religious symbols and clothes openly in public.

C. Religious freedom and modes of religious expressions:

1. It is important for me to express my religion alone in private;
2. It is important for me to express my religion alone in public places;
3. It is important for me to express my religion with a community in public (in church, temple, mosque, synagogue, during public religious gathering);
4. It is important for me to express my religion with family and friends in private;
5. It is not important for me to express my religion.

D. Negative and positive obligations of the state:

1. The state should educate the public to accept religious freedom;
2. Protection from state interference on religious issues;
3. The state should not interfere with missionary activities in both majority and minority religions;
4. The state should not interfere with public activities of majority and minority religions.

V. Impact of judicialization of religious freedom was operationalized with the following variables covering various cases of religious freedom in the country:

1. In my country, people should not be allowed to wear religious clothes and religious symbols at the workplace;
2. In my country, no religious symbols of any religion should be allowed in public schools;
3. In my country, students should be offered time, space, and a room in schools to do their prayers;
4. In my country, the state should not prevent female teachers from wearing a headscarf for religious reasons;
5. Religious freedom means freedom to wear religious clothes/symbols in public places.

In the questionnaire, the task to integrate theoretical dimensions of religious freedom was considered, and some questions combined operational variables from different dimensions. For instance, designing the question about the meaning of religious freedom allowed to suggest answers that covered and integrated ideas from various theoretical domains. The same logic was behind the question about the foundational ideas for religious freedom. The sixty variables measuring SPRF were grouped into ten questions (See Figure 1). They are: "Meaning of religious freedom" (with 8 items); "Human rights meaning of religious freedom" (9 items); "Modes of religious expressions" (according to Art. 18) (5 items); "Variety of religious expressions under the religious freedom scope" (9 items); "Grounding ideas for religious freedom" (12 items); "Cases of religious freedom in the country" (4 items); "Societal challenges for religious freedom" (5 items); "Religious groups' autonomy" (3 items); "Religion–state governance patterns" (5 items). The constructed questionnaire suggested thematic sections that measured sociodemographic characteristics (34 items),[3] religious freedom issues (60 items), attitudes towards religion (12 items), human rights (25 items), and society (56 items).[4]

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[3]   They include 10 sociodemographic features, 2 items on political participation and awareness, 1 item on perceived social isolation, 16 items on religion and religious education, and 5 items on human rights and religious freedom education.

[4]   They include 6 items about political inclusion and social networking, 30 items about the function of religion in society, 4 items on positioning towards immigration, 7 items on religion, state, and society relationship, 4 items on religious and cultural diversity, and 5 items on political interest and trust in religious and political institutions.

Control variables	Independent variables		Dependent variable
Sociodemographic characteristics Gender; Age; Citizenship; Study level; Parents' education level; Place of birth; Place of parents' birth; Social milieu.	**Socioreligious context** *Individual level:* Religious affiliation; Religiosity/spirituality; Religious practices; Religious education. *Group level:* Family socialization. *Institutional level:* Role of religion in society Societal level: Religious diversity and pluralism.	I.	**Religious Freedom (RF)** Individual and religious groups' autonomy
		II.	**Societal value** A. *Societal function of RF leaning to pluralism;* B. *Societal challenges for RF.*
	Human rights context Civil–political rights; Socioeconomic rights; Awareness of human rights key-issues; Intersecting rights and vulnerable groups; Human rights education; Religious freedom knowledge and education.	III.	**Religious freedom as a principle of religion–state governance** A. *RF as a legal-political principle;* B. *RF and religion–state governance patterns.*
	Sociopolitical context *Individual level:* Social exclusion: Perceived social isolation; Participation; Social networks; Political membership; Political awareness. Self-inclusion in country context. *Societal level:* Political secularism; Trust in political and religious institutions; Importance of democracy; Religion–state relations; Issues of migration; Equal citizenship and assimilation.	IV.	**Religious freedom as an international human rights standard** A. *RF as a freedom to have and to change religion;* B. *RF as a freedom to manifest religion;* C. *RF and modes of religious expressions;* D. *Negative and positive obligations of the state.*
		V.	**Impact of judicialization of RF**

Figure 1. Operationalization model for the study of social perception of religious freedom (SPRF).

The socioreligious, human rights, and sociopolitical contexts were operationalized to understand the relationship between collective identities and the patterns of SPRF they produce (see Figure 1). The 'socioreligious context' was operationalized with the concepts of religious affiliation, religiosity, spirituality, religious education, family socialization, role of religion, religious diversity, and pluralism. The 'human rights context' allowed to measure the intersecting rights effect by correlation between religious freedom and civil-political, socioeconomic rights, and effects of human rights education and awareness on that topic. At the societal level, the 'sociopolitical context' allowed to measure the predictive power of attitudes towards political secularism, trust in political and religious institutions, importance of democracy, religion–state relations, and current issues of migration towards religious freedom meaning in society. At the individual level, the sociopolitical context was designed to measure perceived social isolation, civic participation, social networks, political awareness, and the concept of 'equal citizenship and assimilation' (see Modood and Kastoryano 2007).

5. Testing the Multidimensional Concept of Religious Freedom

The elaborated instrument for the analysis of SPRF was tested in Italy. The data were collected in May–October 2018 at the University of Padova. The questionnaire was submitted to 1035 students between 20–21 years old. Among them, ninety-one percent were born in Italy, five percent in other European countries, and four percent in Africa, America, and Asia. Ninety-three percent of respondents hold Italian citizenship. Thirty percent of the sample identify themselves with no religion, sixty-four with Roman Catholicism, and six with various religious minorities, including Muslims (2.4%) and Christian Orthodox (1.7%). Twenty-one percent of young people in our survey were not certain about the statement "I believe in God", thirty-four percent disagreed with it, and forty-five percent confirmed their agreement.

The theoretical model for the societal meaning of religious was tested by computing the principal components method of factor analysis with Varimax rotation. Factor loadings below the threshold of 0.45 were suppressed. Table 1 suggests the results of the exploratory factor analysis. This model explains 61% of the variance of the concept of SPRF, and we can conclude that the three first factors

together explain around one-third of the variance. The first interesting observation is that many items downloaded were in accordance with the theoretically constructed concepts and question' groupings. However, some new latent factors appeared as items from different operational indicators downloaded in the same factor—for instance, Factor 3 and Factor 7. We explore them below.

Table 1. Exploratory factor analysis for the concept of 'SPRF'.

Factor	Variable	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability
Societal function of RF (factor 1)	It promotes interreligious dialogue between religions	0.766	0.828
	It promotes nondiscrimination on the basis of religion	0.763	
	It promotes religious and cultural diversity in society	0.726	
	It is important for tolerant and peaceful coexistence of religions	0.697	
	It promotes liberty as a principle of democratic citizenship	0.673	
Modes of religious expressions (factor 2)	It is important for me to express my religion with family and friends in private	0.838	0.838
	It is important for me to express my religion alone in public places	0.827	
	It is important for me to express my religion with a community in public (in church, temple, mosque, synagogue, during public religious gathering)	0.800	
	It is important for me to express my religion alone in private	0.783	
Sociolegal function of RF (factor 3)	Nondiscrimination for religious minorities on the basis of religion	0.785	0.725
	Equality of various religions in society before the law	0.706	
	Nonviolent coexistence for all religions in every society	0.639	
	Freedom to speak on religious matters openly and freely	0.546	
	An important right in a democratic society	0.500	
Human rights aspects of RF (social) (factor 4)	Freedom to establish religious group	0.758	0.697
	Freedom to express religious views in the media	0.717	
	Freedom to write, issue, and disseminate religious publications	0.632	
	Everyone should be free to teach their religion, either in public or in private	0.590	
Religion–state governance patterns (factor 5)	The Italian state does not favor any religious group	0.778	0.741
	The Italian state provides equal conditions for the Catholic Church and religious minorities	0.768	
	The Italian state manages religious issues very well	0.721	
	The Italian state provides equal conditions for Catholics and nonreligious people	0.715	
Societal challenges for RF (factor 6)	The growth of Muslims in Italy makes religious freedom a more important issue	0.877	0.774
	The growth in Orthodox Christians in Italy makes religious freedom a more important issue	0.776	
	The growth of refugees in Italy makes religious freedom a more important issue	0.764	
Subjective meaning of RF (factor 7)	It is connected with search for individual truth	0.842	0.717
	It allows everyone to pursue their personal spiritual fulfillment	0.788	
	It is connected with the idea of human dignity	0.498	
Religious groups' autonomy (factor 8)	The core ministry including matters of liturgy, confession, education of clergy	0.843	0.550
	The core beliefs and religious teaching	0.816	
	The core administration including the right to appoint and dismiss religious employees, church discipline, and financial issues	0.495	
Impact of judicialization of RF (factor 9)	In Italy, people should be allowed to wear religious clothes and religious symbols at the workplace	0.778	0.595
	In Italy, the state should not prevent female teachers from wearing a headscarf for religious reasons	0.738	
	Freedom to wear religious clothes/symbols in public places	0.621	
Human rights aspects (belief and practice) (factor 10)	Freedom to have no religion	0.793	0.595
	Freedom to worship	0.607	
	It is important for everyone to be free to change their religion	0.475	

Explained variance: 60.765 KMO = 0.842. Explained variance by factor 1: 18%; factor 2: 8.31%; factor 3: 5.92%; factor 4: 5.38%; factor 5: 5.06%; factor 6: 4.54%; factor 7: 4.17%; factor 8: 3.55%; factor 9: 2.99%; factor 10: 2.86%.

This model of factor loadings provides us with interesting insights about the latent relationship between the constructed theoretical domains. As a result, we observe ten factors explaining the societal meaning of religious freedom presenting a particular structure of the variables. The first factor, which can be called the "Societal function of RF", suggests considering that religious freedom is primarily associated with the ideas of interreligious dialogue, nondiscrimination, religious and cultural diversity, peace, tolerance, liberty, and democratic citizenship. The indicator "Modes of religious expressions" downloaded as a second factor revealed that the "expressionism" impulse of the Article 18 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights with a particular division of public and private spaces is at the core of religious freedom meaning. The third factor referred to the societal function of religious freedom; however, the variables downloaded in this factor—nondiscrimination for minorities, equality of religions before the law, freedom of religious speech, important right in a democratic society—suggested that it had a stronger sociolegal connotation than the first factor. We named it "Sociolegal function of RF".

The fourth factor grouped variables from the "Human rights meaning of RF", mostly of a social nature, and the fifth factor grouped variables of the indicator "Religion–state governance patterns". The sixth factor presents the dimension of "Societal challenges for RF", integrating the statements about the increasing Cristian Orthodox and Muslim communities and number of refugees in Italy. The theoretical dimension of individual and religious groups autonomy loaded as the seventh and eighth factors. The former was named as the "Subjective meaning of RF", and it merged ideas of search for individual truth, pursuit of personal spiritual fulfillment, and human dignity, confirming the linkage between freedom, dignity, and spiritual search. This latent factor highlighted that the respondents associated human dignity with the ideas of personal autonomy and search for the meaning.

The ninth factor is called "Impact of judicialization of RF". It refers to the wearing of religious symbols and clothes at the workplace, school, and other public places, and it can be seen in light of the recent ECtHR case on religious symbols in public schools in Italy. The tenth factor was named "Human rights aspects (belief and practice)" as loaded together items revealed important elements of human rights formulations of RF for the individual to change religion, to have no religion, and to worship. Figure 2 presents the constructed concept of SPRF based on statistical testing of the respondents' responses.
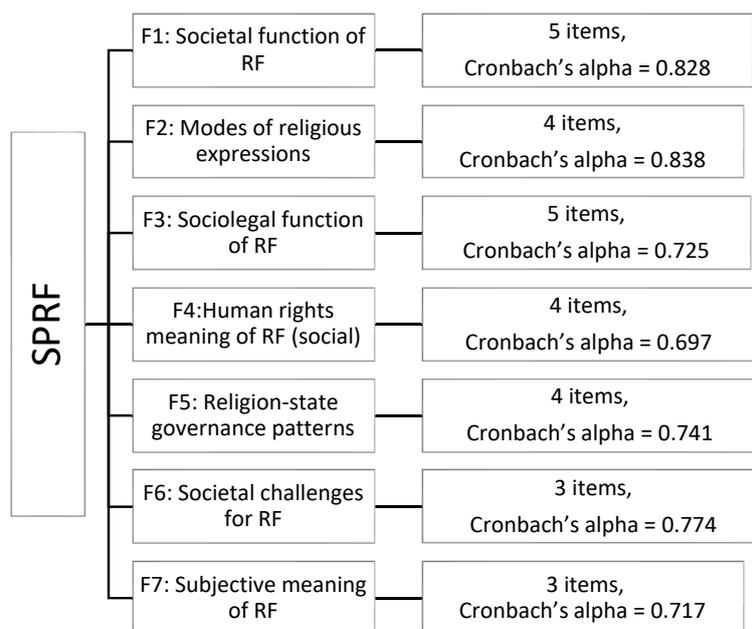

Figure 2. The structure of the concept of social perception of religious freedom (SPRF).

Thus, the structure of SPRF tested statistically is a build-up of thirty-seven individual variables and ten scales. The reliability of six scales is above 0.70, and factor 4 "Human rights meaning of RF" is slightly below that value. Together, the seven scales were selected to form the structure of the SPRF index for further analysis.

6. Social Perception of Religious Freedom and Intergroup Dynamics

How does the understanding of religious freedom meaning structure the relationship between political and religious identities and actions? Or, vice versa: How do political, civil, or religious engagement and identities matter for the construction of religious freedom meaning in a society? This inquiry refers to the post-IIWW debates in political theory about the idea that human rights require realization and understanding of Hanna Arendt's principle of "the right to have right"[5]. Exclusion from the political community and absence of citizenship rights are crucial for the understanding and implementation of other human rights. Similarly, religious freedom can be seen as a specific right for those who are engaged with religious institutions and communities.[6] These arguments suggest considering whether religious people favor religious freedom more or it is most appreciated by nonbelievers due to the growth of religious nones in modern societies. Both political and religious engagements are important to consider together, as the SPRF has to be considered in intergroup dynamics.

For the purposes of our research—to understand intergroup dynamics in the process of construction of shared religious freedom meaning—we briefly describe the independent variables from socioreligious and sociopolitical contexts and compute the linear regression analysis to explore the statistical relationship between the contexts and the societal meaning of religious freedom. Table 2 below suggests the description of the sample, taking into consideration citizenship status, political engagement, religious and spiritual identities, and sociopolitical views towards secularism and diversity.

Table 2. Socioreligious and sociopolitical contexts of respondents (means, and reliability, Cronbach's Alpha).

	Mean	Cronbach's Alpha
Political engagement		0.772
I am interested in politics.	3.59	
I feel that I am included within political life in Italy.	2.89	
How often do you follow politics?[7]	3.37	
Religious practices		0.775
Frequencies of prayer[8]	2.02	
Frequencies of attendances the religious services[9]	2.03	
I am spiritual		0.889
I am a spiritual person.	3.18	
My spiritual beliefs give my life a sense of significance and purpose.	2.83	
My spiritual beliefs have a great influence on my daily life.	2.69	
I am religious		0.928
I am a religious person.	2.61	
My religious beliefs give my life a sense of significance and purpose.	2.46	
My religious beliefs have a great influence on my daily life.	2.32	
I believe in God	3.06	
Political secularist views		0.329
Passive secularist views	4.06	
Assertive secularist views	3.59	
Equal citizenship and cultural assimilation attitudes		0.069
Assimilation-oriented model	2.83	
Diversity-oriented model	4.03	

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[5]   The necessity of recognition of inviolable rights of citizens and importance of membership in a political community were described in the classical work of Hannah Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarism* (1951) as robust preconditions for human rights advancement.

[6]   Roger Finke noted that "[r]eligion is often so infused within the institutions, history, and identity of a nation that ensuring religious freedoms for all is perceived as challenging the cultural identity as a whole" (Finke 2013).

Two independent variables, 'political secularist views' and 'equal citizenship and cultural assimilation' attitudes were used to specify the modes of citizenship and political views that the respondents share. Applying the theoretical perspective of Ahmet T. Kuru, the concept of secularism was operationalized with the variables of 'passive,' and 'assertive' secularism. While the former "demands that the state play a "passive" role by allowing the public visibility of religion" (Kuru 2009, p. 11), the latter "requires the state to play an "assertive" role to exclude religion from the public sphere and confine it to the private domain" (Kuru 2009, p. 11). Two operational variables: "State should be neutral, treat equally all religions, and allow them to be present in public sphere" (passive secularism) and "State should be neutral, treat equally all religions, and confine religious expression to private sphere" (assertive secularism) were elaborated on to measure political secularists' views of the respondents.

The linkage between the concepts of 'equal citizenship' and cultural assimilation was elaborated on by Modood and Kastoryano (2007). They described the modes of relationship between these concepts with two kinds of strategies: (1) "The right to assimilate to the majority/dominant culture in the public sphere; and toleration of 'difference' in the private sphere", and (2) "The right to have one's 'difference' (minority ethnicity, etc.) recognised and supported in the public and the private spheres." (Modood and Kastoryano 2007, p. 23). These two conceptions of equality were not interpreted as mutually exclusive; however, for their operationalization, we used a formulation in a slightly opposing manner to highlight the semantic division. The first one was formulated as follows: "We should tolerate differences in private sphere but assimilate "different culture or religion" to major/dominant culture." This statement measures the assimilation-oriented model. The second statement (diversity model-oriented) was left with its original formulation.

The descriptive statistics reveal that our respondents follow politics with a frequency which oscillates from weekly to monthly, while their religious practices are much less frequent. The 'political interest' of the respondents (M = 3.59) is assessed with the greater value of the mean than their identification with the category "I am a spiritual person" (M = 3.18) or "I am a religious person" (M = 2.61). Both spiritual (M = 2.83) and religious perspectives (M = 2.43) are important in the search for life significance, even though only 34.5% of young Italians agree about the significance of spiritual beliefs and 23% about the significance of religious beliefs in that matter. At the same time, political secularism attitudes are valued much higher, and preference is given to state neutrality, equal treatment of all religions, and allowance to religious presence in the public sphere (M = 4.06). The salience of religious diversity and its presence in public and private is highly valued by young people (M = 4.03). We have described how the religious, political, and civil identities interplay to proceed with the next step of analysis—how the SPRF reflects this dynamics and structure relationship between collective identities. The results in Table 3 aim to respond to this inquiry.

The linear regression models computed for each dimension of religious freedom tested statistically, showed significant influence of political engagement on the 'Societal function of RF', 'Sociolegal function of RF', and 'Human rights meaning of RF (social)' scales of SPRF. In a lesser degree, we observed this influence on the 'Subjective meaning of RF'. The concept 'religious practices' had no predictive power for the religious freedom construct with one exception: There was a negative significant influence of 'religious practices' on 'Religion–state governance patterns'.

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9   This item was scored in the following manner: Never (1); sometimes (2); at least once a year (3); at least six times a year (4); at least once a month (5).

8   This item was scored in the following manner: Never (1); occasionally (2); at least once a month (3); at least once a week (4); nearly every day (5).

7   This item was scored in the following manner: Never (1); occasionally (2); at least once a month (3); at least once a week (4); nearly every day (5).

Table 3. Regression models testing SPRF and intergroup dynamics.

	Societal Function of RF	Modes of Religious Expressions	Sociolegal Function of RF	Human Rights Aspects of RF (Social)	Religion–State Governance Patterns	Societal Challenges for RF	Subjective Meaning of RF
Political engagement	0.123 **	NS	0.179 ***	0.126 ***	NS	NS	0.062 *
Religious practices	NS	NS	NS	NS	−0.152 ***	NS	NS
Noncitizens (ref. citizens)	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Religious nones (ref. Catholics)	NS	NS	0.094*	NS	NS	NS	NS
Religious minorities (ref. Catholics)	NS	NS	NS	NS	−0.077 *	NS	NS
I am spiritual (scale)	0.080 *	0.175 ***	.079*	NS	NS	NS	0.208 ***
I am religious (scale)	NS	0.151 *	NS	NS	0.309 ***	NS	0.163 **
I believe in God	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	−0.142 *	NS
Assertive secularist views	NS	NS	NS	−0.073 *	NS	NS	NS
Passive secularist views	0.234 ***	0.074 *	0.214 ***	0.211 ***	NS	0.098 **	0.123 ***
Equal Citizenship: Assimilation-oriented model	−0.064 *	0.066 *	NS	NS	0.102 **	NS	NS
Equal Citizenship: Diversity-oriented model	0.192 ***	0.063 *	0.204 ***	0.135 ***	NS	0.234 ***	0.132 ***
Male (ref. female)	NS	NS	−0.097 **	NS	NS	NS	NS

$N = 1035$, * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

While the citizenship status had no predictive power for religious freedom perception, the identification with "no religion" had a significant positive effect for 'Sociolegal function of RF'. Identification with Catholicism had a significant positive effect on the perception of 'Religion–state governance patterns'. There was a similarity between the impact of spiritual and religious identities for the perception of 'Subjective meaning of RF' and 'Modes of religious expressions'. Both spiritual and religious identity had predictive power for these dimensions of religious freedom, even though the correlation for spirituality is slightly stronger. Religiosity had a strong predictive power on 'Religion–state governance patterns' dimension, while spirituality predicted 'Societal function of RF' and 'Sociolegal function of RF'. It is important to underline that two concepts—'passive political secularist views' and 'diversity-oriented model' of citizenship—had predictive power for mostly all dimensions of religious freedom. Gender is significant only in one case: The female respondents considered the dimension of 'Sociolegal function of RF' to be more important in comparison with male students.

We can observe that theoretical scales of religious freedom are much more sensitive to political secularist and diversity-related civil positions than to religious affiliation or citizenship status. There were more similarities between political engagement and spirituality in their impact on various dimensions of the meaning of religious freedom than were found between political engagement and religiosity. The study of specific differences and similarities that independent variables produce in their effect on religious freedom ideas allows us to better understand the construction of shared meaning of religious freedom through the interplay of political, civil, and socioreligious factors. At the same time, the variance in predictive power of spirituality, religiosity, political interest, and civil positions showed that SPRF is less dependent on religious or civil statuses but more on value-based civil and political attitude leaning to diversity, state neutrality with claiming equality, and necessity for public presence of religion. The importance of spiritual and religious experiences in life made a difference in the understanding of religious freedom meaning. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the dimension of 'Sociolegal function of RF' produced a more significant effect from different independent variables than other theoretical dimensions of religious freedom.

7. Conclusions

In this article, we presented a model of operationalization of the meaning of religious freedom, applying the constructivism perspective both in sociological and interdisciplinary research. Testing of the theoretical model and understanding of the relationship between the collective identities and religious freedom perception highlighted that particular ideas of religious freedom correspond better to specific social groups and their values. For instance, the concept of 'Modes of religious expressions' is more important for spiritual people, while the concept of 'Human rights aspects of RF' correlated neither with religious nor with spiritual identities, but with a political one. The multidimensional concept of religious freedom takes its shape through the understanding of intergroup dynamics behind it.

An important conclusion is that religious freedom has strong societal functions which cannot be separated from its normative and sociopolitical meanings. Societal functions of religious freedom, which suggest strong linkage with the values of interreligious dialogue and cultural and religious diversity ('Societal function of RF') and with values of democracy, equality before the law, and freedom ('Sociolegal function of RF') can be seen as complementary. Our initial theoretical model, where the societal value of religious freedom was conceptualized through the relationship with pluralism and spiritual fulfillment, finds particular support in empirical results. The 'Subjective meaning of religious freedom' corresponds to that theoretical model as well, albeit showing the linkage between the idea of individual autonomy, spiritual fulfillment, and human dignity. Without the reduction of the meaning of religious freedom to either individual or structural dimensions, SPRF suggests a balanced model of theoretical and empirical analysis of construction of shared religious freedom meaning in society.

In the process of theoretical elaboration of the instrument for SPRF measurement, it became evident that certain variables can fall into more than one theoretical dimension. The challenges related to that problem made the statistical analysis and understanding of the latent relationship between the variables an important step in its clarification and preparation of the shorter version of the measuring instrument. The factor-analysis results revealed the explanatory 'weakness' of some variables. As the objective of this study was to integrate various theoretical perspectives towards the analysis of religious freedom meaning, it became important to observe that the majority of theoretically grounded indicators were reflected in respondents' answers. However, some theoretical dimensions and indicators were 'lost' during the testing stage. This leaves us with the task of considering better the operationalization of 'Impact of judicialization of RF' or 'Religious groups' autonomy' 'for further research of religious freedom meaning. Considering that the results of this research are limited to the study conducted in Italy, it will be important to test the SPRF instrument in other sociopolitical and religious contexts. Meanwhile, the analysis of SPRF in Italy showed the clear structure of the constructed concept and statistical relationship between dependent and independent variables.

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Appendix A

1. **For me, Religious Freedom means:**

    (a)   Freedom to choose my worldview.
    (b)   Freedom to choose my religious/non-religious identity.
    (c)   Freedom to speak on religious matters openly and freely.

　　(d)　　Protection from the state interference on religious issues.
　　(e)　　Non-discrimination for religious minorities on the basis of religion.
　　(f)　　Equality of various religions in society before the law.
　　(g)　　An important right in a democratic society.
　　(h)　　Non-violent co-existence for all religions in every society.

2. **Please indicate how much you agree with the following aspects of Religious Freedom:**

　　(a)　　It is important for everyone to be free to change their religion.
　　(b)　　Children should be brought up in the religion chosen by their parents.
　　(c)　　Everyone should be free to teach their religion, either in public or in private.
　　(d)　　Everyone should be free to observe dietary practices prescribed by their religion.
　　(e)　　Everyone should be free to have a wedding in conformity with their beliefs.
　　(f)　　Everyone should be free to wear religious symbols and clothes openly in public.
　　(g)　　The state should educate the public to accept religious freedom.
　　(h)　　The state should not interfere with missionary activities in both majority and minority religions[10].
　　(i)　　The state should not interfere with public activities of majority and minority religions.

3. **How much do you agree with the following statements?**

　　(a)　　It is important for me to express my religion alone in private.
　　(b)　　It is important for me to express my religion alone in public places.
　　(c)　　It is important for me to express my religion with a community in public (in church, temple, mosque, synagogue, during public religious gathering).
　　(d)　　It is important for me to express my religion with family and friends in private.
　　(e)　　It is not important for me express my religion.

4. **How much do you agree that the following aspects of Religious Freedom are important for you?**

　　(a)　　Freedom to have inner personal religious convictions.
　　(b)　　Freedom to have no religion.
　　(c)　　Freedom to worship.
　　(d)　　Freedom to have religious education.
　　(e)　　Freedom to wear religious clothes/symbols in public places.
　　(f)　　Freedom to establish religious group.
　　(g)　　Freedom to express religious views in the media.
　　(h)　　Freedom to write, issue, and disseminate religious publications.
　　(i)　　Freedom to teach a religion in places suitable for these purposes.

5. **How much do you agree that Religious freedom is important because:**

　　(a)　　It is connected with the idea of human dignity.
　　(b)　　It is connected with search for individual truth.
　　(c)　　It allows everyone to pursue their personal spiritual fulfillment.
　　(d)　　It promotes non-discrimination on the basis of religion.
　　(e)　　It promotes religious and cultural diversity in society.

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[10]　The items 2h, 2i, 6c, and 6d were introduced from the measuring instrument elaborated within the international research project "Religion and Human Rights" (Van der Ven and Ziebertz 2012).

(f)　　It promotes interreligious dialogue between religions.

(g)　　It promotes liberty as a principle of democratic citizenship.

(h)　　It is connected with protecting vulnerable people.

(i)　　It is important for tolerant and peaceful coexistence of religions.

(j)　　It is an important legal principle for secular state.

(k)　　Religious freedom is not important for me.

(l)　　Religious freedom is important, but other forms of freedom are more important.

6.　**How much do you agree with the following cases related to Religious Freedom protection in your country?**

(a)　　In my country, people should not be allowed to wear religious clothes and religious symbols at the workplace.

(b)　　In my country, no religious symbols of any religion should be allowed in public schools.

(c)　　In my country, students should be offered time, space, and a room in schools to do their prayers.

(d)　　In my country, the state should not prevent female teachers from wearing a headscarf for religious reasons.

7.　**How much do you agree with the following statements related to current situation with Religious Freedom in your country?**

(a)　　It is important to promote religious freedom at a time of increasing religious diversity in my country.

(b)　　The growth in Orthodox Christians in my country makes religious freedom a more important issue.

(c)　　The growth of Muslims in my country makes religious freedom a more important issue.

(d)　　The growth of refugees in my country makes religious freedom a more important issue.

(e)　　The debates about public policy related to the topics of abortion, homosexuality, cloning, and euthanasia make religious freedom a more important issue.

8.　**How much do you agree that the state should not interfere with the following affairs of religious groups?**

(a)　　The core beliefs and religious teaching.

(b)　　The core ministry including matters of liturgy, confession, education of clergy.

(c)　　The core administration including the right to appoint and dismiss religious employees, church discipline, and financial issues.

9.　**How much do you agree with the following claims about how the state regulates religions in your country?**

(a)　　'The (country's name) state' provides favorable conditions only for the Catholic Church.

(b)　　'The (country's name) state' provides equal conditions for the Catholic Church and religious minorities.

(c)　　'The (country's name) state' provides equal conditions for Catholics and non-religious people.

(d)　　'The (country's name) state' does not favor any religious group.

(e)　　'The (country's name) state' manages religious issues very well.

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