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THE NECESSARY RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION¹

Summary

In this essay, I justify the importance of religious literacy in Public Administration. After a brief review of the causes of religious illiteracy in academia, I will present its implications for the full respect of the right to religious freedom.

My central thesis is that insufficient understanding of the right to religious freedom makes many violations of this right go unnoticed, which means that victims do not receive help.

Introduction

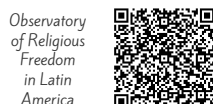
With great fanfare, social scientists led by Peter Berger announced during the 20th century that the world was secularizing (1968). Religion would never completely disappear, but the process of secularization would be inevitable. And if the influence of religion is waning, why take the time to study it? The consequence is obvious. Because the social sciences have long ignored the subject of religion, they do not sufficiently understand the role of religion in society or its importance for religious people. This "religious illiteracy" is not only a problem in academia but also in other sectors such as the media or public administration, where people trained in the same academia work.

Since then, Peter Berger returned to his conclusions, recognizing that religion continues to have a strong presence in society (Berger, 2009). He has observed, however, that religion has taken on new forms. In recent years, the social sciences have regained interest in religion, partly due to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the trend of "radical Islamic revivalism" that discredited the secularization theory (Philpott, 2002; Thomas, 2005; Patterson, 2011). As a consequence, programs that are interested in religion multiply in universities around the world.

Despite the above, the lack of religious culture continues to be a major social problem in many areas. In this essay, I will stress the importance of religious literacy and religious freedom literacy.

By the concept of religious literacy, I mean a minimal level of understanding of religion as a social fact, the role of religion in society, and the sensitivities of religious people. Religious freedom literacy corresponds to understanding the implications of the right to religious freedom, as defined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in all its dimensions.

When governments, public officials, the judiciary, development organizations, and societies in general do not adequately understand religion's social role and meaning and do not sufficiently recognize the right to religious freedom, religious groups are vulnerable.



1. This article combines elements of two papers delivered by the author in 2021: "La alfabetización religiosa en las formaciones de la Administración Pública" (II Congreso Iberoamericano Educación, Sociedad y Cultura: El papel de la universidad en Iberoamérica ante el desafío de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible 2030, Universidad Católica de Manizales-Universidad de Salamanca, 3-5 September) and "Creencias religiosas y territorio: la necesaria alfabetización religiosa en la administración pública" (VI Congreso Nacional y I Congreso Internacional de Etnografía de la Religión: Santuarios y Peregrinaciones, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2-4 June).

First, I briefly review the causes of religious illiteracy in academia before discussing its implications for the right to religious freedom. Using my own research in Latin America (Petri, 2020) and that of my colleagues at the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, I argue that insufficient understanding of the right to religious freedom makes many violations of this right go unnoticed, which it keeps victims from receiving help. I will conclude by emphasizing the necessary religious literacy in Public Administration.

1. The marginal interest of religion in the social sciences

Interest in religion in the social sciences can be considered marginal (Wald & Wilcox, 2006; Fink, 2009). This can be explained by the influence of Marx's reductionist approach to religion, classical liberalism that restricted religion mainly to church-state relations, the influence of secularization theory, and the decline in personal religiosity of academic staff (Fox, 2001; Philpott, 2009; Dieckhoff & Portier, 2017).

This observation is shared by numerous authors, who point to a systematic disinterest in religion in political science, international relations, and conflict studies (Johnston & Sampson, 1994; Fox, 1999; Grim & Finke, 2011; Wellman & Lombardi, 2012; Philpott & Shah, 2017; Baumgart Ochse et al., 2017).

The Marx-inspired approach to religion can be described as functionalist, which means that religion is considered solely as a tool (or a weapon) in the hands of political and social actors to achieve their goals. There are, of course, many historical examples of elites who have abused religion for their power purposes. Still, it is going too far to consider religion simply as "opium for the people."

This view overlooks the vital role that religion plays in the lives of billions of people and the importance it has had and continues to have in many aspects of society.

The restriction of religion to church-state issues within classical liberalism is equally reductionist because it ignores other dimensions of this important right. Let us remember that religious freedom constitutes a right whose exercise has individual and collective dimensions, is at the intersection of several fundamental rights (including freedom of worship, assembly, association, expression, and conscience), and enjoys special legal recognition.

Classical liberalism also includes the idea that religion can be reduced to the private sphere, indicating a one-sided understanding of what religion entails. In some countries, this idea has led to policies that seriously impede the participation of religious actors in public debate. Wilson (2017) goes further by arguing that the epistemological dominance of secularism in both science and public policy constitutes an "ontological injustice" because it leads to the subordination and marginalization of non-secular worldviews. This is contrary to the principles of neutrality and universality that secularism itself propagates.

The influence of these movements within the social sciences cannot be underestimated, nor can secularization theory, which remains highly influential.

The lack of interest in religion in the social sciences is problematic for two reasons. The first reason is simply that it discourages the study of religion. The second is the challenge posed by the secularization of academics, which appears to have led to a degree of "religious illiteracy." This creates a growing misunderstanding within the academic world about what religion is and its role in society, including the nature of the relationship between religion and politics (and society in general) and the practical meaning of the concept of religious freedom (Prothero, 2007; Dinham & Francis, 2015; Smith, 2017). The direct consequence of this is that important issues related to religion are not sufficiently recognized, which indirectly affects public policies on religion.

There are also epistemological challenges related to the definition and operationalization of religion (Fox, 2001; Philpott, 2009; Wellman & Lombardi, 2012). These conceptual challenges are even more significant in the case of "academics with little exposure to religion," as stated by Wald & Wilcox, especially considering the growing number of religious movements and tendencies (2006: 526). Since religion is a complex variable to conceptualize, it is also difficult to measure. Therefore, it is often not measured, or only relatively basic indicators are used (Fox, 2001). The lack of attention to religion only reinforces this problem since it "provides a poor basis on which to develop variables" (Fox, 2001: 58). This has implications for observing the vulnerability of religious minorities, as I analyze in the next section.

2. The consequences of ignorance and indifference to religion

As I have argued previously, religion is a blind spot in the social sciences for several reasons. Fortunately, academic interest in religion has grown in recent years. For example, there is research on the role of religious actors in promoting justice (Appleby, 2000; Mwaura, 2008; Grim, 2016; Baumgart-Ochse et al., 2017). However, there is still little research on the relationship between the civic engagement of religious actors and their vulnerability to human rights violations.

Denying the role of religion can have far-reaching consequences. In this section, I detail four areas where these consequences can be observed. First, religious illiteracy is an obstacle to evidence-based policy, which seems to be the keyword in public policy lately. In particular, it can cause the needs and concerns of religious groups to be disregarded when developing and implementing public policies.

For example, public health measures to combat COVID-19 have led to objective restrictions on some of the collective dimensions of religious freedom in most Latin American countries. The ease with which many public officials dismissed religious services as “non-essential activities” is concerning and shows an evident lack of sensitivity to the needs of religious communities and low religious culture.

Indeed, with nuances depending on the country, religion received discriminatory regulatory treatment in the declaration of sanitary measures. When restrictions began to be lifted, religious services were almost always among the last to be considered by the authorities, who sometimes did not respect the internal autonomy of religious institutions. In Brazil, the police have raided religious services on several occasions.

As Petri & Osorio (2021) point out, ignorance of the urban implications of religious freedom is problematic because “places of worship, more than physical spaces built with different materials, are also scenarios of symbolic construction. Thus, not only their architecture, but also the appropriation of the territory depends on the way its members inhabit the space.” Decisions made by urban planners can then directly or indirectly violate the freedom of religion or belief of those who establish places of worship in urban spaces. Identifying and understanding the factors related to such violations is especially important in situations where religion is not a major concern for planners (Osorio, 2019).

On the same subject, the Cuban case can be mentioned where, since the 1959 revolution, with few exceptions, no construction permits have been issued for places of worship, which forces the faithful to congregate in houses. The problem is that these “house churches” can be accused of violating zoning regulations, which at first glance does not constitute a violation of the right to religious freedom because their formal designation is residential and not religious. However, the regime does not offer legal alternatives for the celebration of religious services (Petri, 2020).

Travel permits have been denied to clergy in Chile, and important humanitarian work by faith-based organizations on the US-Mexico border has been interrupted. Some governments, such as those of Cuba and Nicaragua, even took advantage of the situation to increase their repression of religious groups (Petri & Flores, 2022).

It should be remembered that the United Nations Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment 22 of 1993, stipulated that religious freedom is a “far-reaching and profound” right that “cannot be derogated from, even in time of public emergency.”

Limitations on the right to religious freedom are only allowed “to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others,” but not arbitrarily: they must be “prescribed by law” and “necessary.” Noting that the health measures that were taken to curb the spread of the coronavirus constituted effective restrictions on several essential dimensions of religious freedom, the question arises whether the international regulatory framework on religious freedom was fully respected. Governments may not have been able to balance the imperative of public health and the protection of the right to religious freedom (Flores & Muga, 2020; Petri & Flores, 2022).

An example prior to the COVID-19 era is the zoning laws of urban planners, which, for example, prohibit the establishment of places of worship in residential areas without taking into account the needs of followers of certain religions (Guardia, 2010).

Religious literacy is not only a key to conceptualizing effective development strategies, but also a moral imperative, considering the sociological reality that many peoples have religious preferences - more than 80% of the world's population is religious. The protection and the enforcement of the right to religious freedom implies, therefore, taking into account the specific needs of religious groups and acting on violations of human rights related to religion.

Third, another consequence of the lack of religious literacy is that the contribution of religious groups to development is not recognized or capitalized upon. In recent history, it is enough to cite the names of Reverend Martin Luther King in the United States and of Monsignor Romero in El Salvador to understand the impact that religious groups have had on the progress of our societies, not to mention the countless initiatives of religious organizations in areas such as education, health, humanitarian work, democratization, and human rights.

The philosopher Govert Buijs even argues that the concept of civil society arose in the religious context of the Judeo-Christian worldview (2012). Due to their implantation in communities, religious groups can be more effective in responding to social problems in some areas, particularly when the State lacks capacity. The Mexican government recognized this when it declared that "churches and religious associations can make an important contribution to rebuilding the social fabric, spreading a culture of legality and reinforcing principles and values.³ Religious organizations are also a reservoir of altruism and resilience. Studies have shown that they are more inclined to help other minorities (Braun, 2016).

Fourth, higher levels of religious literacy allow governments to act more precisely on human rights violations related to religion, thus avoiding costly mistakes.

This is important when considering that people with a strong commitment to justice, including many people with religious convictions, are also highly vulnerable (Nussbaum, 1986).

Finally, it may also be relevant to reduce the vulnerability of religious minorities, helping them become aware of their position and reflect on coping mechanisms. Hopefully, these studies will provide valuable insights into the local, national, and international promotion of religious freedom, as it gradually becomes part of the foreign policy of democratic nations. This is especially relevant for Latin America, where religious freedom does not appear to be a political priority. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a body of the Organization of American States, does not have a rapporteur on religious freedom and does little follow-up on the issue (OLIRE, 2021), despite religious freedom being enshrined in the American Convention on Rights Humans.

Religious freedom is also not a political priority for most Latin American governments, except for Brazil (Freston, 2018). Special attention needs to be paid to the specific vulnerability of religious minorities in all state reform and democratization efforts. Finally, human rights organizations and governments, including Latin Americans, should include religion in their monitoring efforts.

Some promising initiatives can be mentioned. The Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom, decreed by the Colombian Ministry of the Interior in 2017, can be analyzed as a "good practice" because it includes a mechanism for consulting religious groups on public policies that constitutes a very effective model to prevent religious conflicts.

This vulnerability can be understood as a consequence of religious convictions that lead them to commit injustice and, therefore, puts religious activists in danger.

3. The necessary religious literacy in Public Administration Programs

A comprehensive understanding of the nature of vulnerability of religious minorities is essential to promote religious literacy for public officials so they can respond to human rights violations related to religion (Joustra, 2018). It is also key to informing civil society organizations that focus on caring for victims of religious persecution to respond to issues of vulnerability of religious minorities that have been neglected so far.

In the case of human rights organizations in general, religious literacy is equally important, as they often do not recognize the religious element in the behavior of, for example, human rights activists, the environment, or the fight against corruption (Marshall, Gilbert and Green, 2009).

3. Speech of Paulo Tort Ortega, the Director of the Religious Associations division of the Ministry of the Interior of Mexico at the Seventh World Congress of the International Religious Liberty Association in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic from 24-26 April 2012.

Different local governments have implemented similar policies in their jurisdictions, which directly associate religious communities with the elaboration of municipal and departmental policies. Of course, these institutional mechanisms cannot prevent religious freedom blind spots from appearing, but they help to keep public institutions focused on religious concerns.

Religion is also gradually being included in the international cooperation agenda. The United States Institute of Peace, in association with the development agency USAID (United States Agency for International Development) created the Closing the Gap project that aims to analyze the relationships between religious freedom, political stability and economic development, and in this way it integrates the religious component in its programmatic planning.

Also, beginning in the 1990s, various national governments have created specialized divisions focused on religion or religious freedom within their foreign and domestic ministries. In addition, several Western parliaments have launched initiatives to promote religious freedom (Petri, 2020).

As promising as these initiatives are, they are insufficient, considering the intersectionality of the right to religious freedom that has implications beyond religious policy. Religious freedom is not only by policy but by many other policy areas. Indeed, religious freedom has implications for public health, refugee policy, foreign policy, infrastructure, urban planning, or security policy (Petri & Buijs, 2019).

In other words, religious freedom has to be a cross-cutting policy issue, very similar to gender or the environment. Political documents around the world speak of "the gender perspective" and the "environmental perspective." While this is naturally important, the "religious freedom perspective" is often missing. In this sense, it is imperative to promote religious literacy in Public Administration.

This can only happen through the inclusion of religious literacy and religious freedom literacy in university curricula. Only in this way will we have officials capable of recognizing and capitalizing on the role of religion in society, observing all dimensions of religious freedom, and developing public policies "with a religious freedom perspective."