


***Religious Minorities at Risk*, by Mathhias Basedau, Jonathan Fox, and Ariel Zellman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023, 326 pp.; ISBN: 978-0-19-769394-0, \$83.00**

**Miro Leporanta<sup>1</sup>**   
*University of Helsinki*  
*Finland*

*Religious Minorities at Risk* is a momentous book. It focuses on an important question: does some kind of discrimination against religious minority groups lead to conflicts? Short answer would be – yes. However, as Basedau, Fox and Zellman emphasizes numerous times, scholarly literature seems quite ambivalent about this connection. Thus, the main intention of this book is to establish a much more nuanced picture of this connection.

Basedau, Fox and Zellman have achieved an enormous task of systemizing and categorizing themes, concepts and findings. Although the book comes from a long line of religion and conflict literature, it manages to present its findings systematically in a new light, based on rigorous use of large sets of data. These data help us to navigate the contemporary meanings religion, minorities and their relationship to conflicts have in his day and age. Moreover, data also helps to make more sense of the previous research in the field, whose results seem to be both inconclusive or at best, conflicting. For a reader not too familiar with these kinds of datasets or statistical methods, the long explanations and statistical models can seem heavy and confusing, but they are vital to understanding the importance of this research to the field.

Basedau, Fox and Zellman explore what things led to the mobilization of religious minorities, and then how this mobilization led to conflict. *Religious Minorities at risk* combine two different lines of research to answer this question. First is the research about the links and interplay between religion and conflict. The second is about the question of what role grievances play in kinds of conflict behavior by minorities. By grievances, the authors mean a set of feelings of

---

<sup>1</sup> Miro Leporanta is a Doctoral Researcher in Contemporary Church History at the University of Helsinki - Faculty of Theology (Finland). Contact E-mail: [miro.leporanta@helsinki.fi](mailto:miro.leporanta@helsinki.fi)

resentment or causes of complaint. Grievances in part are caused by a set of acts or phenomena of what the writers label as DDI: deprivation, discrimination and inequality, “differential treatment, status, or outcomes where a minority is singled out for a form of restriction that is not placed on the majority”. The research proposes that DDI needs usually the form grievances to cause mobilization and conflict – the conflict does not have a straight teleological line from DDI.

Structurally, this book is divided into introduction, four analysis chapters, and conclusions. In the introduction, Basedau, Fox and Zellman establish the key problem of why and in what conditions religious minorities express grievances and how these differ if they are treated by the state or the society at large. The analysis chapters are divided into a discussion of the definitions, measurements and examples of DDI and grievances (chapter 2), an examination of the effect of DDI on grievances (chapter 3), an examination and discussion of the theoretical debate about the link between grievances and conflict behaviour (chapter 4) and discussion and of the empirical testing between data and links between grievances and conflict behaviour (chapter 5). Within conclusions, the authors offer and discuss the theoretical, empirical and political implications of the findings of the previous chapters.

Basedau, Fox and Zellman explain the background of the research through a look at the former research about religion and conflict as well as grievances, in which the writers seem to acknowledge the common strengths and weaknesses. Especially the methodological applications, contradicting results and in many cases also a lack of focus strictly on religion were the main features. They also establish that in their case, they do not see that only religious diversity or religious identity alone causes conflicts.

The crux of the introduction lies in elucidating the genesis and utility of the dataset, Religious Minorities at Risk (RMAR), which serves as the cornerstone of the research. RMAR encompasses a vast repository of data spanning 771 religious minorities across 183 countries from 2000 to 2014. Notably, for each of the 183 countries, a meticulously curated report was generated, delving into the intricate dynamics of religion-state relationships and governmental policies about religious minorities.

Basedau, Fox and Zellman assert that RMAR stands out as a unique dataset for several reasons. Firstly, it adopts the religious minority as its primary unit of analysis, thereby offering a comprehensive perspective on minority dynamics. Unlike conventional sampling approaches, RMAR includes all relevant minorities, ensuring a holistic representation of the diverse religious landscape. Moreover, the dataset incorporates measures of deprivation, discrimination, and inequality (DDI), alongside grievance indicators and other pertinent factors such

as group capacity. This multifaceted approach enables a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between various variables and conflict behaviour.

Of particular significance is the segmentation of religious minorities into three distinct scales: their political organization outside the government, their representation in the country's legislature, and their influence over executive policymaking. The authors emphasize a crucial distinction between the latter two scales, highlighting the disparity between mere presence in legislative bodies and actual legislative power. This differentiation underscores the nuanced nature of political representation and the varying degrees of influence wielded by religious minorities in different socio-political contexts.

In essence, the introduction sets the stage by foregrounding the unparalleled richness of the RMAR dataset and its pivotal role in facilitating a comprehensive analysis of minority-group dynamics. By leveraging this robust dataset, the subsequent chapters delve into a nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in the relationship between religion, minorities, and conflict, thereby advancing our understanding of these critical socio-political phenomena.

The fundamental insight gleaned from the study is the critical importance of grievances in understanding the behaviour of minority groups. Deprivation, discrimination, and inequality (DDI) serve as catalysts for the formation of grievances, which are subsequently vocalized by group leaders or organizations in pursuit of resolution. These grievances manifest across three distinct themes: political, social, and economic. DDI, encompassing governmental religious discrimination (GRD), societal religious discrimination (SRD), inclusion levels of religious minorities in the policymaking process (PMP), and economic status (ES), serve as the underlying cause of these grievances.

The study elucidates correlations between specific forms of DDI and resultant grievances: GRD primarily leads to religious and political grievances, while SRG predominantly engenders political and economic grievances. Notably, the inclusion of religious minorities in the policymaking process tends to mitigate all types of grievances, while improvements in economic status primarily address economic grievances. Grievances, in turn, precipitate various forms of mobilization: religious grievances often culminate in non-violent or rioting mobilizations, political grievances lead to both non-violent and violent actions including violence against civilians, while economic grievances spur rioting, violence against civilians, and even rebellion.

The answers that the research provides are threefold: first, "the observed importance of accounting for collective expressions of grievance is relevant for understanding the conflict behaviour of all minority groups". The research shows that if grievances are noticed and taken into account, they help us understand

the causes and effects of conflict behaviour. The second finding is that different types of grievances have different kinds of effects, especially considering whether the action taken is a peaceful or violent kind of mobilization. The third finding is that religious minorities behave very much like other minorities. Fourth finding, which seems obvious, but is vital and now backed up by data is that to understand the conflict behaviour of religious minorities is that religious factors need to be taken into account *but* conflict behaviour is not explained by religious factors alone.

Such nuanced understanding of the interplay between DDI, grievances, and mobilization underscores the multifaceted nature of minority conflict behaviour. By delineating the specific mechanisms through which grievances arise and their subsequent impact on mobilization strategies, the study provides invaluable insights into the complexities of minority-group dynamics within the broader socio-political landscape.

In conclusion, *Religious Minorities at Risk* offers a compelling analysis of the interplay between religion, society, and politics, supported by robust datasets and rigorous methodology. While the book may pose challenges for readers less familiar with statistical methods, its contributions to the field are undeniable. It will surely serve as an essential resource for scholars in religious studies, particularly those interested in understanding the complexities of conflict behaviour among religious minorities. Furthermore, its emphasis on the importance of data-driven analysis sets a valuable precedent for future research in the field.