

Paradoxes of Pluralism, Privilege, and Persecution: Explaining Christian Growth and Decline Worldwide

Nilay Saiya*,[•]

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Stuti Manchanda

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

This article examines the effect of church–state relations on rates of Christian population growth or decline worldwide. It makes the paradoxical argument that contexts of both pluralism and persecution do not impede Christian growth rates. In these environments, Christians do not have the luxury of becoming complacent. On one hand, pluralism means that Christianity must actively compete with other faith traditions in order to gain and maintain adherents. On the other hand, persecution can, paradoxically, sometimes strengthen Christianity by deepening attachments to faith and reinforcing solidarity among Christians. Rather, it is a third type of relationship—privilege, or state support for Christianity—that corresponds to the greatest threat to growth in Christianity. Countries where Christianity is privileged by the state encourage apathy and the politicization of religion, resulting in a less dynamic faith and the overall decline of Christian populations. We test these propositions using a cross-national, time-series analysis of a global sample of countries from 2010 to 2020. Our findings provide support for our theory that Christianity suffers in contexts of privilege but not in environments of pluralism or persecution. The finding is robust to a number of model specifications and statistical approaches.

Why do religions experience growth or decline? For decades, the standard answer to that question held that because religion represents a superstitious and anachronistic system of unfounded beliefs—the result of a failure on the part of societies to modernize properly—economic development, advances in science and technology, and greater access to education would enable people to transfer

*Direct correspondence to Nilay Saiya, Public Policy & Global Affairs, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. E-mail: nilay.saiya@ntu.edu.sg.

© The Author(s) 2021. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com.

their allegiances from primordial loyalties like ethnicity and religion to the nation-state of which they were a part (Berger [1967] 1990; Bruce 2002; Wilson 1982). As observed by one prominent proponent of the “secularization thesis,” as society progresses, individuals act less in response to religious motivation, and instead “assess the world in empirical and rational terms, and find themselves involved in rational organizations and rationally determined roles” separate from religion (Wilson 1969:10). The founding fathers of modern social science—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim—expected that people would lead progressively secular lives and that religion’s influence in society would eventually disappear altogether. The wealth accompanying advances in science and technology would result in people becoming less reliant on a supernatural being for their daily bread. Sociologist Peter Berger’s (1968) reading of the global context of the late 1960s led him to confidently predict that by “the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a world-wide secular culture...The predicament of the believer is increasingly like that of a Tibetan astrologer on a prolonged visit to an American university” (*New York Times* 1968). As observed by sociologist Rodney Stark, “There is universal agreement that modernization is the causal engine dragging the gods into retirement” (Stark 1999:251).

Yet the evidence shows that the world as a whole has *not* become more secular (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Fox 2001; Fox and Sandler 2004; Shah, Stepan, and Toft 2012; Stark 2015; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011). Even today, nearly 85% of the global population subscribes to some form of religious belief (Pew Research Center 2012). What is more, there is evidence that the process of modernization is hastening religion’s *resurgence* rather than its demise (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011). Faced with the constant uncertainties inherent in globalization processes, many in the developing world retreated to the safety of those things with which they were most familiar. Religion, in particular, became a renewed source of identity against the homogenizing forces of globalization and the materialism, corruption, and immorality that came with it (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003). By 1999, Peter Berger had come full circle, humbly recanting his belief that the world was becoming more secular. He now conceded that the world is “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” (Berger 1999:6).

At the same time, though, some regions of the world *are* becoming more secular, in terms of both believing and belonging. However, the secularization that has occurred in these places may not be attributable to the causes posited by proponents of the secularization thesis. If not modernization or a lack thereof, then what lies behind religion’s resurgence in some places and its decline in others? Drawing on the theory of “religious economies,” we relate religious growth or decline to religion–state arrangements. Simply put, we make the paradoxical argument that contexts of pluralism (where the government’s protection of religious freedoms allows, in principle, for the emergence and flourishing of minority faith traditions) and persecution (discrimination against religious minorities) do

not weaken religion. Conversely, in environments of privilege (unbalanced religious support for majoritarian religions), religions tend to lose their dynamism, eventually turning people from the faith altogether.

Our analysis builds on previous studies in five ways. First, much of the previous work on the effect of religion–state arrangements on religious vitality has focused on indicators of belief rather than absolute rates of religious growth or decline as we do here. While these efforts are laudable, the sporadic nature of the survey data used or the focus on specific local religious communities in these analyses necessarily restricts the generalizability of their findings. Second, we add nuance to previous studies, which argue that general levels of religious regulation encourage religious apathy. We argue instead that it is a very specific form of regulation—privilege in the form of state favoritism of religion coupled with discrimination against minorities—that corresponds to religious decline. Third, we also test the effect of minority religious discrimination (persecution) on rates of religious growth or decline, finding that government persecution of religious minorities does not generally have the effect of weakening a faith. Fourth, this study employs cross-sectional *and* cross-temporal analysis to a literature dominated by point-in-time analyses, thus bringing more rigorous methods to bear on the question of how religion–state arrangements affect religious vibrancy. Finally, while most of the existing scholarship focuses on Western countries, we examine a global sample of countries; in this way, we are able to gain additional leverage for our hypotheses. Taken together, these contributions build upon and strengthen the theory of religious markets.

We focus here on global Christianity. Because Christianity is the largest and most diffused religion in the world, it comprises the majority faith tradition in vastly different parts of the world, thus allowing for higher order insight and balance. In other words, Christianity has a stronger presence in more countries than any other faith tradition. While we believe that the insights of our analysis theoretically could apply to all faith traditions, focusing on a single religion keeps the analysis manageable, while allowing for its expansion in future work.

This article proceeds in four parts. The next section discusses the paradoxes of pluralism, privilege, and persecution. It argues that state favoritism of Christianity results in declining Christian populations, while contexts of both pluralism and persecution do not impede Christian growth rates. The following section discusses the data and methods used in the analysis, while the third section discusses the results. A fourth section concludes.

PARADOXES OF PLURALISM, PRIVILEGE, AND PERSECUTION

Why was the secularization thesis ultimately proved incorrect? Perhaps the greatest error made by secularization theorists was their nearly exclusive focus on religious *demand* instead of religious *supply* (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Whereas these scholars contended that modern, enlightened, and rational

individuals would no longer have any need for religion, they virtually ignored the role played by the state in creating a demand for religion in the first place—that is, supply may create its own demand. In this framework, secularization reflects not a weak demand for spiritual things but a weak supply stemming from state regulation of religion.

Building off these insights, we make three paradoxical claims. First, we contend that environments that in principle allow for the emergence and flourishing of religious pluralism have had a *salubrious* impact on Christianity by promoting healthy competition among religious groups via religious economies unencumbered by state patronage. Contrariwise, the second argument is that government support for Christianity often corresponds to a *decline* in Christian vitality—that is, the politicization of Christianity has served to do a great deal of harm to proselytization efforts by encouraging apathy among Christians. Third, Christianity has generally *not been weakened* in contexts of anti-Christian discrimination and persecution (Ekelund and Tollison 2011). Thus, the father of the early church Tertullian reached the astounding conclusion that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Let us take a closer look at each of these paradoxes in turn.

First, contexts of pluralism made possible through religious freedom stimulate religious growth and vitality. The most important proponent of this argument was Adam Smith, which he promulgated in his landmark work *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith [1776] 1937). Smith argued that just as a market economy spurs competition, innovation, and vigor among firms by forcing them to compete for market share, an unregulated “religious economy” would have the same effect on the institutions of faith. In religious economies, religious groups and institutions act as “firms” competing for “customers” (faith believers) who make rational choices among available products (Bankston III 2002). Religious economies are subjected to varying levels of regulation: some exist virtually unregulated; others are moderately restricted; and in others, the state imposes a religious monopoly (Finke and Stark 1988). To the extent that religious economies are unregulated, pluralism often thrives as competition between differing religious firms intensifies. Any particular religious firm can flourish only if it provides a commodity at least as attractive as that of its competitors (Iannaccone 1991). Pluralistic competition thus stimulates religious economies because religious firms are motivated to produce efficiently for fear of losing adherents and in hopes of luring them from competitors (Iannaccone 1992a). Just as an unregulated market economy encourages growth in individual firms by promoting healthy competition, the same occurs in unregulated religious economies. Even religions with unconventional doctrines and behaviors can flourish in these settings (Iannaccone 1992b).

The United States serves as an example. The American Founding Fathers wanted to free their country from the religious monopolies found in Europe. Finke and Stark (2005) use the concept of religious economies to provide a compelling account of what they call the “churching of America.” They claim that an unregulated religious economy in the United States reduced the costs of religious

institutions to enter the religious marketplace, increased the supply of both denominations and clergy, and fuelled competition, which, in turn, generated unremitting innovation as these institutions competed for souls. Accordingly, religious pluralism in the United States motivated churches to develop effective membership recruitment and retention techniques like Sunday School. The context of pluralism allowed religiosity to thrive across the board. Writing of the United States, French diplomat [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) [1835, 1840] 2002:279–80) noted a little less than 200 years ago that religion in America was comparatively vivacious and powerful compared to religion in Europe because it did *not* have an official or political role.

On the other hand, while competition stimulates religiosity, state favoritism of religion inadvertently suppresses it. When the state or the religion it favors perceives a threat stemming from religious minorities, they may, often in collaboration, take steps to restrict the practices and institutions of these groups ([Barro and McCleary](#) 2005, 2006; [Koesel](#) 2014; [North and Gwin](#) 2004). As explained by [Gill](#) (2008), states go along with the wishes of the dominant religious community in an attempt to ensure political stability through increased political support, to assert control over religious communities, and to prevent challenges to their regimes from religious sources. [Sarkissian](#) (2015:90) argues that in these countries, the “majority religion [benefits] from government favoritism that is not offered to other religious groups.” Such privilege can include funding from the state for religious purposes, special access to state institutions, and exemptions from regulations imposed on minority religious groups ([Sarkissian](#) 2015:90). For example, the Russian state has extended numerous privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church—funding for sacred sites, access to state institutions, and autonomy over its own affairs—even as it imposes restrictions on the Orthodox Church’s competitors—the denial of visas to foreign clergy, deportations of missionaries, and the withholding of land rights ([Koesel](#) 2014).

Paradoxically, though, the state’s privileging of a majority faith tradition in this manner does not end up helping the favored religion. The lack of competition in these environments causes the state-supported religion or religious group to become “lazy,” owing to the fact that state support has removed the incentive for religious producers to be responsive to religious consumers ([Gill](#) 1999). Religious institutions attempting to curry the favor of the state become distracted from their sacred missions as they become engrossed in the things of Caesar rather than in the things of God in order to maintain their privileged stations. True, favored religions may use their privileged positions to exert influence over the rest of society, but this is accomplished primarily through rituals and symbols—civil religion—rather than spiritual fervor ([Bellah](#) 1967). For this reason, state-supported churches can become bereft of the spiritual substance that people who practice the faith find valuable, leading lay people to leave. As discussed below, though, we also argue that minority religions in these contexts do not necessarily experience the same loss in vitality as majority faith traditions, *precisely because they do not curry privilege with the state.*

Consider the case of Europe. Scholars of religion have long noted that trends towards secularization appear strongest in the countries of the West, particularly in Europe, where the church for centuries played a major role in people's lives (Knippenberg 2005). Our argument posits that European countries today are relatively secular not despite the widespread support governments of these states offer for Christianity but *because of it* (Fox 2006, 2015). State favoritism of religion in the form of legal privileges, material resources, and other forms of support is also associated with higher levels of discrimination against other religious groups (including heterodox Christian groups) present in these countries (Finke 2013; Finke, Martin, and Fox 2017). Owing to these arrangements, many European churches do not have to worry about competing with religious competitors on an equal playing field. Yet despite this support, church attendance in European countries remains the lowest in the Christian world. These churches have taken on a largely ceremonial function, playing little role in peoples' everyday lives. Davie (2006) has argued that in Europe, the church exists as a "public utility" rather than as a source of creedal belief and spiritual values. Resplendent cathedrals designed to cater to hundreds of people typically welcome only a handful of worshippers in their normal Sunday services. Numerous polls have documented the comparatively weak levels of creedal belief and attendance at religious services (Crabtree 2010; Pew Research Center 2018a, 2018b). For example, a 2004 Gallup poll reported weekly attendance at religious services to be below 10% in France and Germany, and between 10% and 15% in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Of the 27 member countries of the European Union, in only nine do at least 20% of adults participate once a week in institutionalized religious activities. In only one country, Ireland, do a majority of citizens attend weekly church services (Manchin 2004). Despite some positive developments in church–state relations in recent years, the religious economies of Europe remain unbalanced in that many states maintain onerous barriers to entry for religious competitors of state churches.

Finally, environments of persecution, like contexts of pluralism, do not necessarily weaken religion, and in some cases can even strengthen it (Abdullah 2016a, 2016b; Ridge 2020). In these countries, we see the inverse of religious privilege—the state discriminates against Christianity by privileging non-Christian faith traditions. Like healthy religious competition, religious persecution, for entirely different reasons, does not allow faith believers to become complacent. To be sure, in some cases, anti-Christian persecution has greatly damaged Christianity, such as in seventh-century North Africa, seventeenth-century Japan, and modern-day Iraq. Yet in many other contexts of discrimination and persecution (short of genocidal violence), the church has defied the odds, not only continuing to exist, but in some cases, even thriving. In these environments, believers turn to their faith as a source of strength, and this devotion attracts those outside of their faith. In contexts of persecution, the church fiercely clings to its sphere of autonomy from where it protects its freedoms of belief and practice from a predatory state. In more than a few cases, the church has demonstrated astonishing resilience in the face of discrimination and persecution.

Perhaps China provides the most startling example of the paradox of persecution in the modern world. During the first three decades of communist rule in China, the church was subjected to severe persecution, especially during the era known as the “Cultural Revolution” from 1966 to 1976. Launched by Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution sought to preserve communism in China by waging war against its perceived enemies, especially religion. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, perished during this time. Yet Christianity persisted by going underground (Lian 2010). Remarkably, Protestant Christianity even witnessed sizeable growth by the end of the Cultural Revolution. Yang (2011) has documented the accelerating growth of Christianity in the face of extraordinary state repression of religion. He notes that since 1950 Protestant Christianity has grown by a factor of 23 and that at least 5% of China’s population of nearly 1.5 billion people subscribes to Christianity today (Yang 2018; Zhou 2017). He predicts that number will grow exponentially over the next several years, so that by 2030, China will have more Christians than any other country in the world. By 2050, half of China could be Christian (Phillips 2014).

The above discussion yields three hypotheses with respect to religion–state arrangements and rates of Christian growth or decline:

- H_1 : In Christian-majority countries where Christianity is forced to compete with other faith traditions on a balanced playing field, the rate of Christian growth will increase.
- H_2 : In Christian-majority countries where the state privileges Christianity over other faith traditions, the rate of Christian growth will decrease.
- H_3 : In non-Christian countries where the state persecutes Christianity as a minority faith, the rate of Christian growth will increase.

In summary, the actions of government can play an important role in the realm of religion. Over the past two decades, some sociologists of religion have revived a very important insight from Adam Smith, who argued that when states support religion, they create suboptimal religious economies that have a negative impact on the vitality of religion, manifesting in lower rates of religious participation, even among those belonging to the majority faith tradition. Heavily subsidized religion and a lack of healthy competition among religious groups thus encourage complacency and inefficiency, resulting in religiously apathetic populations (Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark 1997). The upshot is that people turn from their religion altogether. Environments of religious pluralism, by contrast, stimulate religious vitality and growth by forcing religious groups to fend for themselves in the absence of state support. Finally, persecution by the state against minority faith traditions often energizes these religions while enervating favored ones.

DATA AND METHODS

To reiterate our theory, we expect that the growth or decline of Christianity is mediated by its relationship to the state. Specifically, we believe that in

countries where Christianity experiences religious competition from other faith traditions or where it endures discrimination and persecution by the state, it will *not* experience decline and perhaps even grow. On the other hand, where Christianity retains the favor of the state, it is likely to see its population decline.

In order to test for the above hypotheses, we run eight statistical models in two separate analyses. The first and second hypotheses are tested by examining countries where Christianity is the religion of the majority, while the third hypothesis is tested by examining countries where Christianity is a minority religion. The first four models examine the effect of pluralism and privilege on Christian growth and decline, while the latter four examine the effect of discrimination and persecution on the same.

Data were arranged into a cross-sectional, time-series format for the time period 2010–2020. The dataset includes information on 166 countries in total. Ninety-seven of these cases are Christian-majority countries and 69 are non-Christian-majority countries. The unit of analysis is the country-year. Given the longitudinal nature of the dataset, relatively large observation size, and inclusion of time-invariant regressors, we use GLS panel regression with maximum likelihood random effects (Bai and Li 2014). Operationalization of the dependent variable, independent variable, and other covariates used in the models is discussed below.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is the annual rate of Christian population growth or decline (*Christian Growth Rate*) in a given country from 2010 to 2020. The measure is sourced from the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, an endeavor which analyzes religious change and its impact on societies around the world (Pew-Templeton 2020). This is the dependent variable used for all the models.

Independent Variable

Our theoretically central independent variables are measures of state favoritism of and discrimination against Christianity. In the first four models, our independent variable is a measure of discrimination against minority religions in Christian-majority countries. For this variable, we turn to a measure of minority religious discrimination (*Discrimination Against Minorities*) sourced from the Religion and State Project (Fox 2008, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). This index gauges 27 types of discrimination, acts of prejudices, harassment, and violent actions against minority religions. The Religion and State Project evaluates each of the 27 restrictions on the following scale:

- 3 = This action occurs on a substantial level against members of most or all minority religions.
- 2 = This action occurs on a substantial level against members of one or a few minorities but not most or on a minor level to all or most minorities.

1 = This action occurs on a minor level against one or a few minorities but not most.

0 = There are no reported incidents of this type of action against any minorities.

We sum the total *Discrimination Against Minorities* score for each country on an annual basis. From this single variable, we are able to obtain proxies for a state's commitment to pluralism and its level of religious privilege. First, in Christian-majority countries with low minority religious discrimination scores, *government commitment to religious pluralism is high* and *state privileging of Christianity is low* in that the state does not restrict the activities and practices of Christianity's competitors. Conversely, in Christian-majority countries with high minority religious discrimination, *government commitment to religious pluralism is low* and *state privileging of Christianity is high* in that the state restricts the activities and practices of Christianity's competitors, but not those of the majority Christian tradition itself.

For the next four models (Models 5–8), the independent variable is a measure of discrimination against Christians (*Discrimination Against Christians*) in non-Christian-majority countries. This variable, obtained from the Religion and State Project's Minorities Module, is a summative index of 36 types of discrimination against Christians. It has been evaluated on the following scale:

2 = The activity is significantly restricted or the government engages in a severe form of this practice.

1 = The activity is slightly restricted, or the government engages in a mild form of this practice.

0 = Not significantly restricted or the government does not engage in this practice.

In non-Christian countries where anti-Christian discrimination is high, the state restricts the activities and practices of Christians but not those of the dominant faith tradition. If our theory is correct, higher minority religious discrimination in Christian-majority countries (privilege) will have a *negative* effect on Christian population growth; lower minority religious discrimination in Christian-majority countries (a state's commitment to pluralism) will have a *positive* effect on Christian population growth; and higher anti-Christian discrimination (persecution) in non-Christian-majority countries will have a *positive* or *neutral* effect on the growth rate of Christianity.

Control Variables

We have included a host of control variables in the models that might also be related to the growth or decline of religion in a country. To account for economic progress and development, we have controlled for annual GDP growth of each country (*GDP Growth Annual*) as well as log of per capita GDP each year (*Log GDP Capita*). In line with the predictions of the secularization thesis, it may be

expected that greater levels of overall development and higher rates of economic growth will reduce religious population growth, while lower (or negative) rates will have the opposite effect (Norris and Inglehart 2004). We have also controlled for yearly change in population, derived as the difference in total population between year t and year $t - 1$ per 100,000 people in each country (*Population Change*). Countries with negative population growth are likely to experience slower or declining growth rates of their Christian subpopulation as well. These three variables have been sourced from the World Bank Development Indicators (World Bank 2020). To account for variations among Christian countries dominated by different denominations that may affect population growth rates, we have also included controls for predominantly Catholic countries (*Catholic Majority*) and predominantly Orthodox countries (*Orthodox Majority*), while predominantly Protestant countries act as a reference category. Dummy variables are used to code countries into these categories. In addition, the models include a covariate for relations among different religions in society (*Societal Relations*). This variable ranges from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater religious hostilities. Finally, in all models, we include a covariate for religious legislation to account for a measure of official state support for religion *in general* (as opposed to unbalanced religious support in the form of discrimination against minority religions) (Fox and Tabory 2008). The variable is sourced from the Religion and State Project. For the models pertaining to non-Christian-majority countries, we include additional covariates, *Muslim Population*, which is the proportion of the Muslim population in a given country-year and *Muslim Majority*, which is a binary variable coded as 1 if Muslims comprise a majority share of the total population and 0 otherwise. The summary statistics are given in table 1.

RESULTS

Our theory makes three predictions. First, where Christianity has to compete with other faith traditions on an even playing field—a condition of implicit religious pluralism—the Christian population will increase. Second, in countries where Christianity enjoys preferential treatment by the state—a condition of privilege—the Christian population will decline. Third, in countries where Christianity experiences discrimination by the state, the Christian population will grow or at least remain the same. In order to test these claims about the effect of pluralism, privilege, and persecution, respectively, on Christian rates of growth and decline, we ran separate analyses, one for Christian-majority countries (to test for the effect of pluralism and privilege on Christian growth and decline) and one for non-Christian-majority countries (to test for the effect of persecution on the same).

In the first analysis, we ran four different model specifications, which vary according to the different covariates included. Model 1 includes the main independent variable, *Discrimination Against Minorities*, along with two control

TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in the Study

Variables	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Christian Growth Rate</i>	2,574	0.843	1.342	-1	16
<i>Discrimination Against Christians</i>	836	12.010	11.850	0	47
<i>Muslim Population</i>	2,585	22.300	35.970	0.1	99.7
<i>Catholic Majority</i>	2,585	0.455	0.498	0	1
<i>Orthodox Majority</i>	2,585	0.097	0.297	0	1
<i>Protestant Majority</i>	2,585	0.311	0.463	0	1
<i>Religious Legislation</i>	1,967	10.790	8.224	1	46
<i>Muslim Majority</i>	2,596	0.220	0.415	0	1
<i>GDP Growth Annual</i>	1,822	3.300	5.479	-62.080	123.100
<i>Log GDP Capita</i>	1,401	0.865	0.960	-6.187	4.802
<i>Societal Relations</i>	1,959	2.447	2.857	0	10
<i>Population Change</i>	1,721	3.893	12.580	-15.020	160.100

Note: Country-years are the unit of analysis.

variables related to economic development along with the *Population Change* variable. Model 2 further includes variables for Catholic-majority countries and Orthodox-majority countries. Model 3 additionally controls for social relations between religions. Model 4 adds an additional covariate for *Religious Legislation* to the rest.

As seen in [table 2](#), the results present strong support for our first two hypotheses. The negative sign of the regressor *Discrimination Against Minorities* indicates that preferential treatment by the state towards Christians in Christian-majority countries is associated with a *decline* in population growth rate among Christians. The variable holds statistical significance at the .1% level in the first three model specifications and at the 1% level in the fourth model specification. The other variables holding statistical significance are variables for population change, Orthodox-majority countries, and religious legislation. The positive coefficient of *Population Change* indicates that countries with higher positive growth in their total populations are, expectedly, likely to experience higher growth rates among Christians as well. The negative coefficient of Orthodox majority means that countries where Orthodox Christians comprise the majority of the population are likely to see more deceleration in Christian growth relative to those with Protestant majorities. The negative sign of *Religious Legislation* indicates that countries with higher levels of overall religious support experience a deceleration in Christian population growth. Other covariates lack statistical significance. Regarding substantive effects, the coefficients of $-.04$ in Model 1, nearly $-.03$ in Models 2 and 3, and $-.02$ in Model 4 for the *Discrimination Against Minorities* summative score indicate that a one-unit increase in the minority religious discrimination score is associated with a *deceleration* in the growth rate of the Christian population by 4%, 3%, and 2% per year, respectively.

TABLE 2 GLS Panel Regressions with Maximum Likelihood Random Effects for Christian Growth Rates in Christian-Majority Countries

Christian growth rate	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Discrimination Against Minorities</i>	-.040*** (.007)	-.029*** (.009)	-.028*** (.009)	-.023** (.009)
<i>GDP Growth Annual</i>	.011 (.009)	.012 (.009)	.012 (.010)	.011 (.009)
<i>Log GDP Capita</i>	-.013 (.022)	-.012 (.022)	-.013 (.023)	-.011 (.022)
<i>Population Change</i>	.025** (.010)	.026** (.010)	.026** (.010)	.024** (.009)
<i>Catholic Majority</i>		-.167 (.173)	-.168 (.173)	-.243 (.166)
<i>Orthodox Majority</i>		-.623** (.316)	-.575* (.348)	-.722** (.335)
<i>Societal Relations</i>			-.0176 (.0543)	.014 (.052)
<i>Religious Legislation</i>				-.066*** (.021)
Constant	.969*** (.112)	1.048*** (.154)	1.059*** (.157)	1.548*** (.219)
Proportionate Reduction of Error	33.54	36.06	36.44	42.51
Observations	614	614	614	614

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, $p < .1$.

The second analysis likewise includes four different models, based on different variable specifications (table 3). The major difference between Models 1–4 and Models 5–8 is that the latter look at Christian growth rates in *non-Christian* countries. In these cases, Christians are the ones being discriminated *against*. Model 5 includes variables for anti-Christian discrimination, economic growth rate, log of GDP per capita, and change in population. Model 6, in addition, includes two variables pertaining to Islam: the first is a binary variable denoting Muslim-majority countries; the second is a variable measuring the total Muslim population in a country. These two variables were included in the analysis to account for the argument that Christians face the greatest threat to their survival in the Muslim world (Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea 2013). To these covariates, Model 7 adds the variable for social relations among different religions, while Model 8 further includes the variable for religious legislation in addition to the other variables.

The results of the second analysis provide moderate support for our third hypothesis that environments of persecution can strengthen Christianity. This analysis finds that *Discrimination Against Christians* has a positive sign with statistical

TABLE 3 GLS Panel Regressions with Maximum Likelihood Random Effects for Christian Growth Rates in Non-Christian Countries

Christian growth rate	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
<i>Discrimination Against Christians</i>	.033 ⁺ (.018)	.031 ⁺ (.018)	.027 (.020)	.015 (.020)
<i>GDP Growth Annual</i>	.001 (.003)	.001 (.003)	.001 (.003)	-.001 (.003)
<i>Log GDP Capita</i>	.001 (.023)	.001 (.025)	.001 (.026)	.002 (.026)
<i>Population Change</i>	-.001 (.008)	.001 (.008)	-.001 (.008)	-.001 (.008)
<i>Muslim Population</i>		.002 (.017)	.008 (.017)	.000 (.017)
<i>Muslim Majority</i>		.196 (1.384)	.170 (1.392)	-.005 (1.363)
<i>Societal Relations</i>			.058 (.094)	-.028 (.106)
<i>Religious Legislation</i>				.048 ⁺ (.029)
Constant	.804* (.333)	.546 (.488)	.487 (.499)	.359 (.493)
PRE (%)	3.71	4.80	5.73	9.70
Observations	424	424	419	419

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, ⁺ $p < .1$.

significance at the 10% level in Models 5 and 6 but lacks statistical significance (but remains positively signed) in Models 7 and 8. While the lack of statistical significance means we cannot confidently conclude that Christianity experiences growth in these countries, we can safely infer that it does not generally experience decline. In short, unlike contexts of privilege, environments of persecution appear not to hinder Christian growth.

Robustness Checks

In order to assess the validity of our analysis and results, we performed several robustness checks: eight using different model specifications and two using alternative methodological techniques. Our first set of checks pertain to other possible explanations for the paradoxes we attempt to explain. First, it could be the case that Christian rates of growth and decline are being driven by linear trends in Christian growth. To account for this possibility, we added a time trend variable for cases of both Christian-majority and non-Christian-majority countries. Our results continued to hold in support of all our hypotheses (see [Supplementary Table A1](#)). Second, we also controlled for time effects to account

for any developments in particular years that might have affected population growth rates (including religious growth rates) for multiple countries, for instance a global recession, regional famine, or transnational violence. It was found that even after accounting for these effects, our results persisted ([Supplementary Table A2](#)). Third, it may be the case that education levels affect the population growth of Christians. It could be argued that education instills tolerance and respect for those of different faith traditions. Hence, we included enrollment in secondary school as an additional covariate ([World Bank 2020](#)). The results for all models remained unchanged after controlling for education ([Supplementary Table A3](#)). Fourth, it may also be the case that effects of privilege or discrimination on Christian population growth manifest after a lag of some time period. To check for this possibility, we lagged the predictor variables by a period of two years ($t - 2$) and ran the same regressions. It was found that even after accounting for delayed effects, minority religious discrimination continued to exert a negative and statistically significant influence on Christian growth rates in Christian-majority countries. Similar to previous results, there was no evidence of a decline in Christian populations for non-Christian-majority countries ([Supplementary Table A4](#)). Fifth, to account for the differential impact of inter-denominational discrimination among the different Christian groups and to confirm that it is not driving our results, we included covariates of interaction terms between discrimination and Orthodox-majority countries as well as between discrimination and Catholic-majority countries. Even after controlling for these effects, our central independent variable *Discrimination Against Minorities* retains a negative coefficient and is statistically significant at the 5% level ([Supplementary Table A5](#)). Sixth, we included in all the models an additional variable for general population growth rate. We include this variable in order to account for the fact that countries have different baseline populations. Changing the modeling in this way does not alter the main result ([Supplementary Table A6](#)). Seventh, it could be argued that including both Muslim majority and Muslim proportion variables in the same models could be skewing the results. We thus ran Models 5–8 again with these variables included separately instead of together. The results remain the same ([Supplementary Table A7](#)). Lastly, we also ran the regressions without any population variables and found that our results continued to hold ([Supplementary Table A8](#)). The results of these robustness checks bear out the main findings of this study.

We also ran two methodological robustness tests. First, we checked for multicollinearity by tabulating the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and found it to be less than four for all the predictors in the case of Christian-majority countries and less than eight in the case of non-Christian-majority countries. Hence, multicollinearity is not found to be a problem ([Supplementary Table A9](#)). Second, to account for potentially skewed distributions and to verify that the results are not biased due to heterogeneous or outlier observations, we conducted bootstrap regressions and found that are results continued to display evidence in support for our hypotheses ([Supplementary Table A10](#)).

In summary, our analysis reveals three key findings. First, in Christian-majority countries where the government does not favor Christianity by discriminating against its competitors, Christianity itself thrives. As we theorized, this is likely because environments of religious competition made possible by unregulated religious economies require Christians to compete with other faith traditions on an even playing field, keeping the faith sharp and vibrant as it seeks to retain its members from the pull of rival religions and to convert members of other faith traditions. This is the *paradox of pluralism*. While some recent work has shown a negative relationship between religious diversity and religious participation in certain local contexts, this does not appear to be the case at the country level (Lim and de Graaf 2021; Olson et al. 2020). Second, higher levels of minority religious discrimination against non-Christians in Christian-majority countries result in contracting Christian populations, even when accounting for other explanations. This is the *paradox of privilege*. Third, discrimination against Christians in non-Christian countries does not result in contracting Christian populations and sometimes even coincides with its growth. Like pluralism, persecution prevents religions from becoming lethargic. This is the *paradox of persecution*. All of our findings remain robust to different model specifications and different statistical approaches.

CONCLUSION

One of the key takeaways of this analysis is that Christian rates of growth and decline respond, in part, to relations between church and state. This insight carries potentially important ramifications for both people of faith and political leaders. Those worried about the loss of spiritual vibrancy in their societies will find encouragement in the fact that it may be possible to reverse trends towards secularization. This requires institutions of faith to shun the temptation of privilege and not see religious competition as threatening and something to be shut out of the religious economy. Indeed, some countries historically marked by privilege have been moving in the direction of church–state separation. In 1999, the Swedish government disestablished the Church of Sweden, discontinuing guaranteed public subsidies. Taxpayers now contribute funds to the Church on a voluntary basis. In Norway, church leaders are no longer state employees. If states in Europe continue to disassociate church from state and allow for free and equal access of all religious groups to the religious market, we might expect rates of Christianity to gradually increase over time. Conversely, it is also the case that countries where Christianity has historically been robust, like the United States, could experience declines in their Christian populations over time as church and state move closer together. Indeed, there is accumulating evidence for this view in some recent works in political science, which explore how politics shapes religious behavior (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger 2018; Margolis 2018; Saiya 2018, 2019).

Our analysis also matters for states. Political leaders discriminate against and persecute religious minorities because they see minority groups as a source of problems that needs to be controlled. They might also enact restrictions on minority religious communities in order to appease their own. Our study, however, suggests that efforts by states to subjugate minorities do not stunt the growth of these communities. Indeed, the evidence presented here indicates that in some cases persecution can even *strengthen* minority religious groups. In short, persecution tends not to achieve its desired effects.

It is also worth noting that our analysis provides additional support against the idea that religious decline stems centrally from a lack of proper development. For example, [Norris and Inglehart \(2004\)](#) have presented an updated version of the secularization theory, arguing that in societies where large swaths of the population experience “existential insecurity”—usually the result of improper development—traditional cultural norms steeped in religion are likely to persist. According to this line of argumentation, as countries experience greater development and material security, they become less religious as people grow less reliant on a supernatural power for their daily sustenance ([Norris and Inglehart 2004](#)). Our analysis finds, contrariwise, that neither economic development nor educational attainment offers a satisfactory explanation for the growth or decline of religious faith, in this case Christianity.

While this study takes an important step forward in our understanding of the effects of religion–state arrangements on religion itself, future work can build upon this analysis in several ways. First, it can expand the analysis to evaluate if the thesis holds beyond Christianity. Might it be the case, for example, that the same paradoxes of pluralism, privilege, and persecution hold for Islam? Second, qualitative work in the form of in-depth case studies will be important in further illuminating the causal mechanisms at work linking privilege to religious decline, and pluralism and persecution to religious vitality. Especially interesting here would be studies of cases where persecution by the state resulted in the strengthening of minority religious communities. Third, future scholarship would benefit from employing a longer time series than we have used here. This, however, would require collecting a good deal more data not presently available. Nevertheless, we expect that the results would be even more pronounced using an earlier base year.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary data are available at *Sociology of Religion* online.

REFERENCES

- “A Bleak Outlook Is Seen for Religion.” *New York Times*, 25 February 1968.
- Abdullah, Walid Jumblatt. 2016a. “Managing Minorities in Competitive Authoritarian States: Multiracialism and the Hijab Issue in Singapore.” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 44(129): 211–28.

- . 2016b. "Of Co-optation and Resistance: State-Ulama Dynamics in Singapore." *Journal of Church and State* 58(3): 462–82.
- Almond, Gabriel A., R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, eds. 2003. *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Bai, Jushan, and Kunpeng Li. 2014. "Theory and Methods of Panel Data Models with Interactive Effects." *The Annals of Statistics* 42(1): 142–70.
- Bankston, Carl L III. 2002. "Rationality, Choice and the Religious Economy: The Problem of Belief." *Review of Religious Research* 43(4): 311–25.
- Barro, Robert J., and Rachel McCleary. 2005. "Which Countries Have State Religions?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120(4): 1331–70.
- . 2006. "Religion and Political Economy in an International Panel," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45(2): 149–75.
- Bellah, Robert Neelly. 1967. "Civil Religion in America." *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96(1): 1–21.
- Berger, Peter L. [1967] 1990. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor.
- . 1999. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Bruce, Steve. 2002. *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crabtree, Steve. 2010. "Religiosity Highest in World's Poorest Countries." Gallup, August 31. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>.
- Davie, Grace. 2006. "Is Europe an Exceptional Case?" *The Hedgehog Review* 8(1–2): 23–34.
- Djupe, Paul A., Jacob R. Neihsel, and Kimberly H. Conger. 2018. "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious?" *Political Research Quarterly* 71(4): 910–22.
- Ekelund, Robert B., and Robert D. Tollison. 2011. *Economic Origins of Roman Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Finke, Roger. 2013. "Origins and Consequences of Religious Restrictions: A Global Overview." *Sociology of Religion* 74(3): 297–313.
- Finke, Roger, Robert R. Martin, and Jonathan Fox. 2017. "Explaining Discrimination and Religious Minorities." *Politics and Religion* 10(2): 389–416.
- Finke, Roger, and Rodney Stark. 1988. "Religious Economies and Sacred Canopies: Religious Mobilization in American Cities, 1906." *American Sociological Review* 53(1): 41–9.
- . 2005. *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fox, Jonathan. 2001. "Religion as an Overlooked Element in International Relations," *International Studies Review* 3(3): 53–74.
- . 2006. "World Separation of Religion and State into the 21st Century." *Comparative Political Studies* 39(5): 537–69.
- . 2008. *A World Survey of Religion and the State*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2015. *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2016. *The Unfree Exercise of Religion A World Survey of Religious Discrimination Against Religious Minorities*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2019. *The Correlates of Religion and State*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2020a. *Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me: Why Governments Discriminate Against Religion*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

- . 2020b. “Religion and State Project.” <http://www.religionandstate.org/>.
- Fox, Jonathan, and Shmuel Sandler. 2004. *Bringing Religion into International Relations*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Fox, Jonathan, and Ephraim Tabory. 2008. “Contemporary Evidence Regarding the Impact of State Regulation of Religion on Religious Participation and Belief.” *Sociology of Religion* 69(3): 245–71.
- Gill, Anthony. 1999. “Government Regulation, Social Anomie and Religious Pluralism in Latin America: A Cross-National Analysis.” *Rationality and Society* 11(3): 287–316.
- . 2008. *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. 1991. “The Consequences of Religious Market Structure: Adam Smith and the Economics of Religion.” *Rationality & Society* 3(2): 158.
- . 1992a. “Religious Markets and the Economics of Religion.” *Social Compass* 39(1): 123–31.
- . 1992b. “Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives.” *Journal of Political Economy* 100(2): 271–91.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R., Roger Finke, and Rodney Stark. 1997. “Deregulating Religion: The Economics of Church and State.” *Economic Inquiry* 35(2): 350–64.
- Knippenberg, Hans, ed. 2005. *The Changing Religious Landscape of Europe*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Het Spinhuis.
- Koesel, Karrie J. 2014. *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Lian, Xi. 2010. *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lim, Chaeyoon, and Nan Dirk de Graaf. 2021. “Religious Diversity Reconsidered: Local Religious Contexts and Individual Religiosity.” *Sociology of Religion*. 82(1): 31–62.
- Manchin, Robert. 2004. “Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews.” Gallup, September 21. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/13117/religion-europe-trust-filling-pews.aspx>.
- Margolis, Michelle. 2018. *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marshall, Paul, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea. 2013. *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2004. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- North, Charles M., and Carl R. Gwin. 2004. “Religious Freedom and the Unintended Consequences of State Religion.” *Southern Economic Journal* 71(1): 103–17.
- Olson, Daniel V. A., Joey Marshall, Jong Hyun Jung, and David Voas. 2020. “Sacred Canopies or Religious Markets? The Effect of County-Level Religious Diversity on Later Changes in Religious Involvement.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59(2): 227–46.
- Pew Research Center. 2012. “The Global Religious Landscape” [last modified December 18]. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.
- . 2018a. *Being Christian in Western Europe*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.
- . 2018b. *Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.
- Pew-Templeton. 2020. *Global Religious Futures Project*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Centre. <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/>.
- Ridge, Hannah M. 2020. “State Regulation of Religion: The Effect of Religious Freedom on Muslim’s Religiosity.” *Religion, State and Society* 48(4): 256–75.

- Saiya, Nilay. 2018. *Weapon of Peace: How Religious Liberty Combats Terrorism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2019. "Religion, State, and Terrorism: A Global Analysis." *Terrorism & Political Violence* 31(2): 204–23.
- Sarkissian, Ani. 2015. *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shah, Timothy Samuel, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft, eds. 2012. *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Adam. [1776] 1937. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. New York: Modern Library.
- Stark, Rodney. 1999. "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion* 60(3): 249–73.
- . 2015. *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious Than Ever*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books.
- Stark, Rodney, and Laurence R. Iannaccone. 1994. "A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the 'Secularization' of Europe." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33(3): 230–52.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. (1835, 1840) 2002. *Democracy in America*, translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Toft, Monica Duffy, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah. 2011. *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Phillips, Tom. 2014. "China on Course to Become 'World's Most Christian Nation' by 2050." *The Telegraph*, April 19. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>.
- Wilson, Bryan. 1969. *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment*. London: C.A. Watts & Co.
- . 1982. *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- World Bank. 2020. *World Bank Development Indicators*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- Yang, Fenggang. 2011. *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . 2018. "Is China the New Roman Empire? Christian Growth in China and Its Global Implications." Lecture at College of the Holy Cross, October 15. <https://www.holycross.edu/faith-service/mcfarland-center-religion-ethics-and-culture/fenggang-yang-china-new-roman-empire>.
- Zhou, Viola. 2017. "China's Underground Churches Head for Cover as Crackdown Closes In." *South China Morning Post*, September 10. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2110433/chinas-underground-churches-head-cover-crackdown-closes>.