Article

Two Models of Political Secularism and Religious Freedom in Italy and Croatia: Findings from a Survey among Youth

Asia Leofreddi

Human Rights Centre Antonio Papisca, University of Padova, 35122 Padova, Italy;
alessia.leofreddi@studenti.unipd.it

Abstract: Interest in political secularism is growing, due to its proven relevant role in affecting people's political behaviours and attitudes toward human rights. However, until now, only a few studies have analysed its influence on religious freedom and those which exist do so mostly from a governmental-policy perspective. Drawing upon the sociology of religious freedom, this article seeks to address this gap. Comparing two Catholic EU countries, Italy and Croatia, and adopting an empirical perspective, it aims to understand whether the endorsement of political secularism enhances or limits support for religious freedom. More specifically, the study draws a key distinction between two models of secularism, 'institutional' and 'ideological', whose impacts on different aspects of religious freedom are assessed. In doing so, this research presents the results of a cross-national survey on Social Perception of Religious Freedom (SPRF) that was carried out among university students in Italy (=714) and Croatia (=603). The results show the strong positive influence of moderate forms of political secularism in shaping a positive culture of religious freedom. At the same time, they validate the hypothesis that it is necessary to consider political secularism's multiple facets to fully understand its influence on support for religious freedom in different countries.

Keywords: political secularism; religious freedom; cross-national survey; Italy; Croatia

1. Introduction

Since the 2000s, religious freedom has started to become a sociological topic. A large group of studies have emerged investigating the legal, social, and cultural factors that promote or hinder the implementation of Art.18 (UDHR) in different contexts, at both institutional and societal levels (e.g., Breskaya and Botvar 2019; Breskaya and Giordan 2019; Breskaya et al. 2021a; Finke 2013; Finke and Martin 2014; Finke et al. 2018; Fox 2015a, 2020; Grim 2008; Grim and Finke 2011; Richardson 2006). These studies have been accompanied by large cross-national data collections, which have allowed them to overcome the lack of empirical evidence that for years 'severely handicapped social sciences' ability to study the topic' (Grim and Finke 2007, p. 654).

Recently, in this scholarly domain, the question of the role of political secularism has also emerged. The rise in Western democracies of governmental restrictions on religious practices, with regard, for instance, to women's religious dress, the display of religious symbols, or the circumcision of boys (Pew Research Center 2019), has led scholars to question whether and to what extent political secularist ideologies, entrenched in states and societies, support religious freedom or restrict it, effectively privileging irreligiousness and the protection of other human rights over religious freedom. Even though studies on the topic are still few at the moment, those that do exist have two main limitations. On the one hand, most of them address political secularism as a 'competing ideology' to religion (Durham 2012; Fox 2015b, 2018, 2020; Fox et al. 2021; Glendon 2018), and little space is given to the comparative empirical analysis of political secularism's more moderate or radical manifestations, even though that distinction is well studied in both sociological (Baubérot 2015; Casanova 2009, 2011) and political theory (Modood 2010), as well as in comparative

politics (Kuru 2009; Philpott 2019). On the other hand, the majority of studies examine the relationships between political secularism and religious freedom from a governmental policy perspective (e.g., Fox 2015b, 2020). Academic works dealing with people's views are still practically absent, despite the proven important role of political secularism in affecting people's political behaviours and attitudes towards human rights (see, e.g., Arzheimer 2023; Beard et al. 2013; Campbell et al. 2018; Di Marco et al. 2020).

　　This article seeks to respond to these gaps in knowledge. Adopting an empirical perspective, it aims to assess whether and how the endorsement of political secularism, conceived as a normative concept concerning the separation of religion from politics, enhances or limits the support for religious freedom in two EU Catholic countries, Italy and Croatia.

　　In doing so, firstly, we argue that political secularism is a multidimensional concept which cannot be reduced to a political ideology opposed to religion. Therefore, following Casanova (2009, 2011), we draw a key distinction between two political secularist models, which are labelled 'institutional' and 'ideological'. We hypothesise that they produce different effects on religious freedom: while the former increases the support for religious freedom, the latter lowers it.

　　Secondly, we analyse Italy and Croatia's similarities and differences with regard to their political and socio-religious features. Both EU members and predominantly Catholic, Italy and Croatia are two interesting cases for the purposes of this study. First, they have experience with two different forms of political secularism. In Italy, after Catholicism was recognized as the State religion for a long period of history, a *concordatarian* Church and State model has been established since the mid-20th century. On the other hand, from 1945 to 1991, Croatia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which, at least in its initial phase, established a strict separation between Churches and State, marginalising religion from public life. Second, concerning their current socio-religious features, although they now have very similar Church–State arrangements, the two countries diverge at the social level in terms of both their religious demography and the types of pluralism and inter-religious relations that they feature. Italy exhibits a more consolidated pattern of religious pluralism and longer-standing practices of interreligious dialogue. In contrast, after the fall of socialist Yugoslavia and the war of the 1990s, Croatia turned into a highly religiously homogeneous country, with inter-religious relations marked by divisions and conflicts, such that Fox et al. (2018) placed it 'near the top of countries in scores of societal discriminations' against religious minorities (Fox et al. 2018, p. 20).

　　Within this framework, we present the results of a cross-national survey on the social perception of religious freedom conducted among 1317 university students in Italy (=714) and Croatia (=613), where we address the following research questions:

RQ₁: Are there any differences in how Italians and Croats perceive political secularism?
RQ₂: Are there any differences in how Italians and Croats perceive religious freedom?
RQ₃: Does endorsement of the 'institutional' or 'ideological' secularism model influence support for the right to religious freedom among Italians and Croats?

　　The analysis points to two main results. First, although some slight differences exist, it shows the large convergence between Italians and Croats in their perceptions of both political secularism and religious freedom, thus envisaging the emergence of a common European pattern, at least among the young generations. Second, consistent with the theories on this topic, it provides empirical evidence regarding, on the one hand, the predictive ability of 'institutional' or moderate forms of political secularism in shaping positive perceptions of religious freedom, and on the other, the conflicting relationship between 'ideological' or radical secularism and the public aspects of religious freedom, both in Italy and Croatia.

　　It is worth mentioning that, in the framework of the social perceptions of religious freedom theory (SPRF) (see Breskaya and Giordan 2019), two attempts to test the impact of political secularism on social perceptions of religious freedom have already been made in both Italy (Breskaya et al. 2021b) and Russia (Breskaya et al. 2022). This study can in

part be considered their conceptual replication, as it adopts their same theoretical approach to religious freedom and leaves the research question unchanged, but it uses different data sets and a different research design, especially concerning the measurement scales of political secularism.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

Political secularism is a key concept concerning relations between the religious and political spheres. From an institutional perspective, in its minimal definition, it calls for the separation between religion and politics and State and religious institutions (Jakelić 2022). Its core value is the 'political autonomy' of the State from 'religious authority, religious purposes or religious reasons' (Modood 2015, p. 1); an autonomy which 'lies in the distinction between a private sphere of values and beliefs, where religious organisations can exercise their moral authority, and a public sphere based on recognizing shared rules' (Giorgi 2007, p. 37).

The study of the link between political secularism and religious freedom has created a longstanding debate in the social sciences. Two contrasting perspectives have emerged on the topic. On the one hand, scholars have stressed political secularism's origins as a democratic impulse, and its normative purpose of 'creating a public sphere open to all individuals as equal citizens, regardless of their particular identities' (Jakelić 2022, p. 360). In this scholarly perspective, political secularism represents a mode of organising contemporary political communities, managing their growing religious and 'moral pluralism' (Maclure and Taylor 2011), with the aim of avoiding religious domination (Bhargava 2009, 2011; see also Milot 2011). On the other hand, others have emphasised political secularism's anti-religious and hegemonic character, questioning its fairness even in Western democratic countries, especially with regard to non-Western religious minorities (e.g., Calhoun 2008; Modood and Kastoryano 2007). According to these scholars, secularism's Western roots and the separation of religion from politics that it mandates, with the relegation of religion to the private sphere, ends in the privilege of non-religious beliefs or privatised forms of Western-style Christianity (e.g., Asad 2003; Hurd 2004; Mahmood 2016).

In this study, we start with two assumptions. First, political secularism is not 'one thing' but at least two (Beard et al. 2013), in the sense that it does not 'relate to religions solely through power contestations and conflicts but through shared moral sources as well' (Jakelić 2022, p. 364; see also Bhargava 2011). Second, only by acknowledging political secularism's different forms, which entail more moderate or radical interpretations of the role of religion in politics and society, is it possible to fully understand the relationship between political secularism and religious freedom.

The idea of 'multiple secularisms' (Stepan 2011) is not new, especially to political theory and comparative politics. Among others, the political theorist Tariq Modood (2010), distinguishes between 'moderate' and 'radical' forms of political secularism, where the former admits 'points of symbolic, institutional, policy, and fiscal linkages between religion and the State', while the latter argues for their absolute separation (Modood 2010, p. 5). Still, from the perspective of political theory, Maclure and Taylor (2011) also draw a distinction between 'strict' forms of political secularism and more 'open' ones, explicitly establishing a link between these two forms and religious freedom protection:

> A more rigid form of secularism allows greater restriction on the free exercise of religion, in the name of a certain understanding of the State's neutrality and the separation of political and religious powers. Conversely, an "open" secularism defends a model centred on the protection of freedom of conscience and of religion, as well as a more flexible concept of separation and neutrality. (Maclure and Taylor 2011, p. 27)

In comparative politics, Ahmet T. Kuru (2009) differentiates between 'assertive' and 'passive' forms of secularism. Both entail separation between State and religion, yet while 'assertive secularism' demands that the State take an active role in confining religion to the private sphere, 'passive secularism' asks the State to allow the presence of religion in the

public sphere. Unlike Modood (2010) and Maclure and Taylor (2011), Kuru examines the two forms of political secularism from a bottom-up perspective: not as State doctrines but as ideologies, carried by political elites. His main interest is to understand why policies on religion varied across countries. In particular, he studies the cases of the U.S., France, and Turkey. He argues that the policies of these states towards religion are the result of ideological struggles between passive and assertive secularists and the prevalence of one or the other group in different historical periods. Although states often embody a seemingly monolithic model of secularism, the two types of ideologies always coexist within the same context and are engaged in a constant struggle that explains why 'state policies towards religion experience several exceptions, contradictions, and changes' (Kuru 2009, p. 14).

The idea that states are not monolithic regarding political secularism has found room even in sociology. According to Jean Baubérot (2013), political secularism can be subdivided into four 'ideal-typical indicators': freedom of conscience (and its different relations with freedom of religion), equality (more or less strong) of rights without religious conditions (principle of non-discrimination), separation, and neutrality (and the different ways of interpreting it). Conceptually, these four aspects are strongly interrelated, however, social actors—by which he means states, groups, or individuals—may have different visions of secularism and favour one or the other of its aspects, depending on personal interests (Baubérot 2013, p. 35). In France, Baubérot (2015) identifies as many as seven historical models of laïcité, including the minoritarian anti-religious form of political secularism that has existed in the country since 1905, the 'open' form of political secularism, especially endorsed by religious groups, and the identitarian political secularism, more political in nature—originally left-wing, now carried out by the right wing for anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant purposes.

The coexistence between institutional and individual forms of political secularism is also underlined by the sociologist Barry A. Kosmin (2011). In short, the former refers to the institutional form of secular principles in the political and public sphere, and the latter to 'personal identification with secular ideas and traditions as a mode of consciousness' (Kosmin 2011, p. 3). In Kosmin and Keysar's (2007) view, secularism may be placed on a continuum from 'hard' to 'soft'. The first describes individual stances and Church–State arrangements which are profoundly anti-religious, equating religion to superstition and considering it politically dangerous; the second describes approaches to religion driven by tolerance, promoting individual choice and accepting the accommodation of religious identities even in the public sphere.

For this article's purposes, the sociologist José Casanova (2009, 2011) provides a useful approach. He distinguishes between two types of secularism: (1) secularism as principle of statecraft and (2) secularism as ideology. The former refers to 'some principle of separation between religious and political authority, either for the sake of the neutrality of the State vis-a-vis each and all religions, or for the sake of protecting the freedom of conscience of each individual, or for the sake of facilitating the equal access of all citizens, religious as well as nonreligious, to democratic participation' (Casanova 2009, p. 1051). It does not encompass any substantive definition of religion and is potentially compatible with an approach to religion as a moral source. This is its elemental difference from the second concept, secularism as ideology. According to Casanova: 'Secularism becomes an ideology the moment it entails a theory of what "religion" is or does. It is this assumption that "religion", in the abstract, is a thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects' (Casanova 2009, p. 1051). The ideology of secularism may be divided into two types. Into the first type, called 'philosophical-historical' secularism, fall all secularist theories of religion 'grounded in some progressive stadial philosophies of history that relegate religion to a superseded stage'. By contrast, the second type of theory is named 'political secularism' and presupposes that 'religion is either an irrational force or a non-rational form of discourse that should be banished from the democratic public sphere' (Casanova 2009, p. 1052).

Although political secularism and its relationship with religious freedom are well-studied on a theoretical level, empirical studies dealing with people's views are still practically nonexistent. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, two exceptions are Breskaya et al. (2021b) and Breskaya et al. (2022). There, the authors adopted Kuru's distinction between 'passive' and 'assertive' secularism. In the framework of SPRF theory, which understands religious freedom as a multidimensional and socially constructed concept (Breskaya and Giordan 2019), they test the impact of these two types of secularism on several aspects of religious freedom. In the Italian study, they distinguished five: (1) individual and religious groups' autonomy; (2) societal value; (3) principle of State–religion governance; (4) international human rights standard; and (5) impact of judicialization. In the Russian study, however, they distinguished only four: (1) individual autonomy; (2) socio-legal aspects of religious freedom; (3) human rights aspects of religious freedom (social); (4) human rights aspects of religious freedom (belief and practice). In the Russian one, to these four, they added a fifth variable named 'General perception of religious freedom', which measured the importance attached to religious freedom in general. They found that while passive-type secularism is a robust predictor of support for religious freedom, the assertive type had no statistically significant impact on this right, discovering similar patterns even in very different countries such as Italy and Russia.

We recognize the heuristic value of Kuru's (2009) theory, especially because it empirically proves the effects of the two models of political secularism on the formation of different systems of institutional governance of religion. However, in this study, we opted to rely on Casanova's conception of secularism, and this is for two reasons. First, for its more sociological approach: as Casanova explicitly claimed, his interest was to detect the 'secularist assumptions that permeate the taken-for-granted assumptions and thus the phenomenological experience of ordinary people' (Casanova 2009, p. 1052). Second, because, following Jakelić (2022) and Bhargava (2011), we hold that political secularism is not always a political ideology but can also be a 'moral disposition' (Jakelić 2022) or 'ethical orientation' (Bhargava 2011), 'whose concerns relating to religion are similar to theories that oppose unjust restrictions on freedom, morally indefensible inequalities, and inter-communal domination and exploitation' (Bhargava 2011, p. 105). In this perspective, we believe that Casanova's definition of 'secularism as statecraft principle' is the sociological approach to the concept that better grasps this 'nonpolitical manifestation' of secularism (see Fox 2015b, p. 28).

Before proceeding to hypothesis formulation, a terminological clarification is needed. As mentioned above, Casanova (2009, 2011) makes explicit mention of political secularism only in reference to its ideological expression. However, in accordance with the definition of political secularism we gave at the beginning of this paragraph, we believe that both types can fall under the term political secularism. Therefore, in this article, to summarise, we will refer to 'secularism as statecraft principle' as 'institutional secularism' and will call 'secularism as ideology' 'ideological secularism', considering both as two dimensions of political secularism.

In agreement with these assumptions, finally, we may present our two main hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H$_1$): The endorsement of the 'institutional secularism' model enhances the support for religious freedom.

Hypothesis 2 (H$_2$): The endorsement of the 'ideological secularism' model diminishes the support for religious freedom.

3. Case Selection: Italy and Croatia

This study explores political secularism and religious freedom in two EU Catholic countries, Italy and Croatia. Although both are democratic states and very similar in terms of the institutional features currently characterising their Church–State relations, they are

actually marked by very different political and religious histories, adding perspective to the study of 'multiple secularisms' and the social construction of religious freedom in the region[1].

Italy was one of the founding states of the European Union, while Croatia only entered in 2013, after a long and bloody war (1991–2001) that marked the final collapse of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). These different historical paths had repercussions in terms of the establishing of democratic values and implementing the rule of law in the two countries. According to Democracy Index[2] both Italy and Croatia may be classified as 'flawed democracies', however, they score differently in the index: on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 refers to 'authoritarian regime' and 10 to 'full democracies', Italy received a mark of 7.35, while Croatia of 6.50[3]. The same difference is reported concerning the respect for civil liberties in the two countries: from 1 to 10, Italy scored 7.35 and in contrast Croatia scored 6.76 (Democracy Index 2022). These indicators are relevant potential predictors of religious freedom since, as previous studies have shown, there is a strong positive correlation between democracy and human rights implementation. According to them, therefore, we may hypothesise that Italy will show a slightly higher positive perception of religious freedom compared to Croatia.

However, in this contribution, to interpret the data, we will mainly consider similarities and differences between these two countries in terms of their institutional and social management of religion. In the scholarly domain of the sociology of religious freedom—within which, as mentioned, this study falls—several scholars have highlighted the importance of socio-religious variables, such as the presence of a dominant religion (Finke 2013), patterns of religious pluralism (Richardson 2006), and high social restrictions and government favouritism for select religions (see, e.g., Finke and Martin 2014), to predict the institutionalisation of religious freedom in different contexts.

3.1. Legal Framework

In terms of religious demography, Italy and Croatia are both predominantly Catholic. In Italy, Catholics amount to about 76% of the population (Garelli 2020), while in Croatia, they account for 79% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2021). While in Italy, minorities amount to around 8% and non-religious people to 16% (Garelli 2020), in Croatia, the former count nearly 10.8% of the population, while the latter amount to around 5%, and religiously "unknown/undeclared" respondents are around 3.9% (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

In both countries, the strong predominance of Catholicism is reflected in the legal framework regulating their Church–State relations. Based on the typology proposed by legal scholars (see, e.g., Robbers 2005; Ferrari 1995), Italy and Croatia fall among the so-called concordatarian states, which means states 'characterized by a simple separation of state and church coupled with the recognition of a multitude of common tasks which link state and church activity, which are often recognized in the form of agreements, treaties, and Concordats' (Sandberg 2008, p. 3).

In Italy, State–religion relationships are regulated by Articles 7 and 8 of the Constitution. The first concerns the relationships between the Italian State and the Catholic Church, while the second regulates the relations between the State and all religions other than the Catholic one. Article 7 mentions the Lateran Pacts, the agreements signed in 1929 between the Fascist government and the Catholic Church and then revised in 1984 (Villa Madama agreements). In their current form, although the separation between the Church and State is stated, the predominant role of the Catholic Church in Italian cultural and religious life is also guaranteed. In contrast, Article 8, after recognising in its first part the equality of all religions before the law, makes reference to the Intese, agreements that the Italian State could stipulate with denominations other than the Catholic one, and which are the only instrument that other religions have to obtain legal recognition, political and economic benefits, and above all a sort of status of 'social respectability' (Annicchino and Giorgi 2017).

In Italy, the principle of political secularism is not mentioned in the constitution, but it is addressed in the Constitutional Court's sentence n.203 of 1989. In the judgement, the

Court defines *laicità* as a supreme principle of the State and argues that it does not imply 'indifference on the part of the State to religions', but rather 'a guarantee by the State to safeguard freedom of religion, in a regime of confessional and cultural pluralism'. Nevertheless, in the absence of a well-defined legal framework, in today's Italy, Catholicism continues to enjoy relevant legal, political, and social privileges (Garelli 2006), such that scholars talk of 'fragments' of secularism (Salih 2009) or 'baptised secularism' (Ferrari 2008b), i.e., 'a secularity based on the implicit norm that continues to recognise to Catholicism a pontifical role in the process of societal integration and, consequently, a regime of privilege in perfect continuity with Italy's nature as a nation-state and not as a state-nation' (p. 1124).

Unlike Italy, Croatia's constitution explicitly states the separation between religion and the State. The first part of Art. 41 states: "All religious communities shall be equal before the law and separate from the state". However, in the second part, the article reads: "Religious communities shall be free, in compliance with the law, to publicly conduct religious services, open schools, colleges or other institutions, and welfare and charitable organisations and to manage them, and they shall enjoy the protection and assistance of the state in their activities". It therefore combines the idea of separation with one of cooperation, protection, and assistance (Zrinščak et al. 2014).

In the Croatian legal framework, the relations between the government and the dominant Catholic Church are regulated by the four bilateral agreements signed by the two parties between 1996 and 1998. They concern crucial areas such as religious education, spiritual care of the military and police forces, and cooperation on legal and economic issues. The treaties opened a longstanding debate that still continues today, especially among legal scholars, who question whether they were compatible with the autonomy of the Croatian State (Zrinščak et al. 2014).

Concerning religious minorities, their legal status is regulated by the Act on the Legal Status of Religious Communities, promulgated in 2002, a few years after the end of the 1990s war and the signing of the agreements between the governments and the Holy See. In the Act, the government recognised religious communities as autonomous social organisations and established that they were largely free from legal and administrative regulations. To be recognised, religious communities must fulfill some formal requirements, such as proving that they have at least 500 members and have been registered as an association for a minimum of five years[4]. Today, Croatia has 55 registered religious communities, and among these, the government has signed agreements with 19 Churches and religious communities. These latter guarantee more defined forms of cooperation with the State to the religious communities who benefit from them, in crucial areas such as marriage or public education, and allow them to access State funds for religious activities (U.S. State Department 2021).

The legally recognised prominence of the Catholic Church in both Italy and Croatia makes these two states complex systems in terms of the institutional management of religious pluralism. They can be called four-tier (Ferrari and Ferrari 2010) or hierarchical (Richardson 2006) systems, as they handle religion according to a pyramidal system which has at the top the dominant religion and then the other religions, grouped into several categories, which, scaled up, correspond different statuses and a gradually decreasing amount of privileges. As pointed out by several scholars of religious freedom, these kinds of models can pose serious problems to the implementation of religious freedom. In Italy and Croatia, although religious freedom is recognized by the Constitution, many problems persist in the reality of its implementation. Most of the problems concern the registration of religious minorities in Croatia (Zrinščak 2004), or the attainment of the Intese in the Italian case (Annicchino and Giorgi 2017), religious education (for Italy, see Ventura 2013; for Croatia, see Zrinščak et al. 2014), and the difficult enactment of laws or recognition of rights in areas that conflict with official Church doctrine (see, e.g., for Italy, Ozzano 2015; for Croatia, Kuhar 2014).

3.2. Societal Challenges

According to Richardson (2006), hierarchical models are very common in Europe, and shared by Western and former communist countries. However, they do not produce in every case the same patterns of religious freedom, as other historical or political forces may intervene. This is the case for Italy and Croatia, which, although they are very similar in terms of institutional arrangements, are at the same time marked by very different societal trends concerning religion. These differences are due both to the role that religion has played in their nation-building and to the recent histories of these two countries. In both Italy and Croatia, religion has played a fundamental role in the construction of national identity, yet the Catholicism–nationality binomial has been constructed in different ways. While in Italy Catholicism has become 'a way of believing in one collective identity' (Pace 2007) in a country otherwise devoid of a sense of collective belonging and perennially distrustful of public institutions (Garelli 2014) in Croatia, by contrast, Catholicism was always the only element able to mark a boundary of ethnic belonging in a multi-ethnic region such as the Balkans, subjected to continuous dominations. In the 1990s, the war transformed religion into the political instrument of ethnic nation-building, increasing the link between religion and nationalism and the social distance between majority and minority religions (Perica 2002). The war, together with a newfound centrality of religion, turned religious confessions into a hallmark of nationhood, and to be Catholic started to mean to be Croat, just as to be Orthodox meant to be Serbian. This also led to a process of revitalization of religion which Croatia shares with other post-communist countries, characterised by a dramatic rise in both individual and collective religiosity (Črpić and Zrinščak 2010). While in 1987 64.9% of Croats declared themselves Catholic and 27.4% non-affiliated, in 1999, Catholics made up 87.97% and non-religious about 5% of the population. By contrast, starting from the 1970s, Italy has been marked by a process of secularisation and laicisation (Ferrari 2008a), i.e., the hardening of 'the confrontation between public powers and the monopolist Church', in which a dramatic decline of Catholic religious affiliations was accompanied by a rise of non-religious people (Garelli 2020).

The socio-religious landscape of Italy and Croatia is now also complicated by a new religious pluralism stemming mainly from migrations, which is causing all of the blind spots of their respective systems to emerge (Giordan and Zrinščak 2018; Stipišić 2022). In Croatia, it is still not possible to talk about a new pluralism: non-European migration flows are a recent phenomenon, and the number of newcomers is still very low. Moreover, 'strong nationalist ideas and the ethnic-centred character of the nation-building process in the 1990s, led to a strong sense of national and religious "we-ness", which is reflected in the migratory policies of Croatia and an inability to accept cultural differences, thus producing a rejection towards the migrant population' (Stipišić 2022, p. 7). In contrast, Italy, which for a long time was a mono-confessional country with a Catholic majority, has in recent decades experienced a pluralisation of the religious sphere, due above all to the arrival of migrants bringing new confessional identities (Ambrosini et al. 2018) and the rise of non-religious people (Garelli 2020). The new Italian pluralism is characterised not only by the numerical growth of new faiths but also by an unexpected dynamism of some of these new religious communities. With their strong ties to cultural identity and capacity to mobilise people, especially second-generation immigrants, these communities are claiming new religious and citizenship rights and changing the public image of an inherently Catholic Italy (e.g., Mezzetti and Ricucci 2019). Indeed, the entry and settlement of immigrants from different countries is contributing to a revitalization of religious experience and is promoting institutional and theological transformations (Ambrosini et al. 2018). Although this process still finds resistance from both the government and the Church, it has found fertile soil at the societal level, where spaces for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue have already been opened (Ercolessi 2009).

Needless to say, all these trends have dramatically affected the position of the Catholic Church, and Catholicism more generally, in the two countries. In Croatia, the high number of Catholics and the low number of non-believers and minorities do not significantly

challenge the critical points of a system that still grants the Catholic Church a privileged role in many crucial areas (Staničić 2019). In Italy, instead, although the Catholic Church is still able to influence social and political dynamics, the pluralisation of the cultural and religious public sphere is challenging it from below (Martino 2014).

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1. Data

This study uses data from a comparative cross-national survey that involved a convenience sample of 1317 bachelor's and master's students at the Universities of Padua (Italy) and Zagreb (Croatia). They were asked to respond anonymously to a revised version of the Social Perception of Religious Freedom (SPRF) questionnaire (Breskaya and Giordan 2019), re-named 'Religion and citizenship in Italy/Croatia', co-developed by an international research team based at the Human Rights Centre of the University of Padua and pre-tested in a pilot study that involved a sample of 400 university Italian students[5].

The data were collected between September 2021 and January 2022. At first, the plan was to collect all the questionnaires using the paper-and-pencil method. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic lasted longer than was expected and all the university classes were online only until winter 2021 in both Italy and Croatia, in order to have the data in time, it was necessary to turn to a mixed-mode study. In Italy, 168 questionnaires were collected through telephone interviews and 546 through the paper-and-pencil method; in Croatia, all 603 questionnaires were collected by submitting an online survey. In all three cases, the questionnaire was always the same. It took around 45 min to be completed, and in any case, no incentives were provided for participation.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Institutional and Ideological Secularism (Independent Variables)

In Section 2, we hypothesised that political secularism had at least two dimensions, representing two different patterns of State/religion/society arrangements. We labelled them 'institutional' and 'ideological' secularism. In this section, we build two multi-item scales to measure support for these two models in our samples and assess their impact on the endorsement of religious freedom.

First, we select items from the questionnaire 'Religion and citizenship in Italy/Croatia' to use as indicators. Second, we perform a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) on the selected items to see how they are related to the 'institutional' and 'ideological' models. Finally, we measure the reliability of the two newly computed scales.

In Breskaya et al. (2021b) and Breskaya et al. (2022), the concepts of 'passive' and 'assertive' secularism were operationalized through two items: 'State should be neutral, treat all religions equally, and allow them to be present in the public sphere' (passive secularism), and 'State should be neutral, treat all religions equally, and confine religious expression to the private sphere' (assertive secularism). However, Casanova's (2009, 2011) concept of secularism emphasised not only the institutional but also the social dimension of the concept and its ideological component, holding together in each of the two concepts both normative positions on the relationship between State and religion and those on the role of religion in society. Based on these theoretical assumptions, we found within the questionnaire other items that we thought could serve as indicators of the variables as we had conceptualised them. We operationalise the concept of 'institutional secularism' with three items taken from the questionnaire 'Religion and citizenship in Italy/Croatia'. The three questions (labelled from x_1 to x_3) made references to three aspects of political secularism: separation or neutrality of the State towards religion (x_1), the participation of institutional religions in the political and cultural life of the country (x_2), and the presence of religious identities in the public sphere (x_3) (see Table 1).

In the case of 'ideological secularism', we chose two items (y_1—y_2). The first one (y_1) is specular to the first one of 'institutional secularism' (x_1): while it refers to the neutrality of the State, it claims to confine religion to the private sphere. On the other hand, the second

(y_2) places even greater emphasis on expelling religion from the public sphere at the hands of a State that controls and limits its expressions (see Table 2).

Table 1. Indicators of the concept of 'institutional secularism'.

1. The State should be neutral and treat equally all religions and allow them to be present in the public sphere (x_1).
2. The State should be legally separated from all religions but support religious pluralism and participation of various religions in political and cultural spheres (x_2).
3. The right to have one's 'difference' (minority religiosity, ethnicity, etc.) should be recognised and supported in the public and private sphere[6] (x_3).

Table 2. Indicators of the concept of 'ideological secularism'.

1. State should be neutral and treat equally all religions and confine all religious expressions to the private sphere (y_1).
2. It is better if the State controls religions and does not allow it to be present in the public sphere (y_2).

All the items were measured with a five-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly; 2 = disagree; 3 = not certain; 4 = agree; 5 = agree strongly).

A PCA was conducted on the five items listed above. Before extracting the components, two tests must be performed to assess the factorability of the data set. These tests are the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. According to Williams et al. (2010), the KMO's index ranges from 0 to 1, with 0.5 considered suitable for the analysis, whereas Bartlett's Test should be significant ($p < 0.05$) in order to perform the analysis (Pallant 2016). In our case, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy had a value of 0.67, while Bartlett's test indicated statistical significance ($p < 0.001$).

Applying the Varimax rotation, we found two factors with 61% of total variance explained. Table 3 shows that those items selected as indicators of 'institutional' secularism (x_1—x_2—x_3) were strongly related to Component 1 and weakly to Component 2. The same goes for the items representing 'ideological' secularism (y_1—y_2), which proved to have a large (y_1) or moderate (y_2) positive loading on Component 2 and a weak influence on Component 1. It is different in the case of the question 'It is better if State controls religions and does not allow it to be present in the public sphere' (y_2), which loads 0.66 in Component 2 and a marginal-relevant score in Component 1 (−0.44). The negative sign makes us feel more confident in attributing this item to Component 2. However, this finding might indicate that the question must be designed more clearly in future research, specifying, for instance, whether "religions" makes reference to minority or majority ones.

According to these results, we may state that PCA gave the first key result, confirming the existence in our samples of the 'dichotomous separation of types of secularism' (Beard et al. 2013, p. 15).

Concerning the reliability of the 'institutional' and 'ideological' secularism scales, while Cronbach's alpha coefficient was measured for the three-item scale of the former, Spearman–Brown was calculated for the two-item scale of the latter. Cronbach's alpha for the institutional secularism scale obtained a value of 0.63. Even though the threshold to consider the scale reliability as very good is Cronbach's alpha > 0.70, according to Pallant (2016), a value above 0.6 also may be considered acceptable and indicates a moderate level of reliability. Spearman–Brown's coefficient was calculated for the two items of ideological secularism. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between the two variables, r (1185) = 0.23, p = 0.01[7].

Table 3. Component loadings from principal component analysis (models of political secularism).

Questions	Component 1 (Institutional Secularism)	Component 2 (Ideological Secularism)
The State should be neutral and treat all religions equally and allow them to be present in the public sphere (x_1)	0.74	−0.15
The State should be legally separated from all religions but support religious pluralism and participation of various religions in political and cultural spheres (x_2)	0.74	0.11
The right to have one's 'difference' (minority religiosity, ethnicity, etc.) should be recognised and supported in the public and private sphere (x_3)	0.72	−0.14
The State should be neutral and treat all religions equally and confine all religious expressions in the private sphere (y_1)	0.13	0.88
It is better if the State controls religions and does not allow it to be present in the public sphere (y_2)	−0.41	0.66

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation.

4.2.2. The Three Dimensions of Religious Freedom (Dependent Variables)

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, concerning religious freedom, we rely on the theory of the social perception of religious freedom (SPRF) developed by Breskaya and Giordan (2019). The starting point of their theoretical work is that religious freedom is a multidimensional concept whose meaning is socially constructed based on structural and individual factors. In their pilot study on SPRF, Breskaya and Giordan (2019) performed an EFA on a vast group of items and extracted ten latent factors. According to them, this result confirmed the multidimensional nature of religious freedom as a concept, and in particular the five dimensions of religious freedom they had hypothesised from a theoretical perspective[8].

Bearing in mind the multidimensional nature of religious freedom, in this work, we have decided to focus on only three of its dimensions, of which we have selected some aspects. Based on our formulation of the concepts of political secularism—which emphasises both Church and State separation and the role of religion in the public sphere—it seemed to us that the aspects of religious freedom on which it was most interesting to measure their impact were religious freedom as a societal value (Rf as a societal value), that is, the importance of religious freedom in guaranteeing equality and peace between majority and minority religions and between religions and non-religious people; religious freedom as an individual autonomy (Rf as an individual autonomy), namely understanding religious freedom as an individual right, related to personal spiritual fulfilment; and finally, its conception as the right to express belief publicly (Rf as the freedom to express religion). The latter, in particular, is a central point since, as we have seen, the two forms of secularism are distinguished precisely by whether or not they support religion as a participant in the public sphere.

For every dimension, we have selected a number of indicators, yet differentiated our selections from those made in the original SPRF model (see Table 4). All the items were measured with a five-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly; 2 = disagree; 3 = not certain; 4 = agree; 5 = agree strongly).

As in the case of the independent variables, a PCA was performed to validate the scales (Appendix A).

Concerning their reliability, all the scales showed good reliability: Cronbach's alpha for the four-item scale of Rf as a societal value was 0.82, while for both the three-item scales of Rf as an individual value and Rf as the freedom to express religion, it was 0.75.

Table 4. Indicators of the three dimensions of religious freedom.

[Rf as a societal value]

1. Freedom to choose my religious/non-religious identity.
2. Non-discrimination for religious minorities on the basis of religion.
3. Equality of various religions in society before the law.
4. Non-violent co-existence for all religions in every society.

[Rf as an individual autonomy[9]]

1. It is connected with the idea of human dignity.
2. It is connected with the search for individual truth.
3. It allows everyone to pursue their personal spiritual fulfilment.

[Rf as the freedom to express religion]

1. Freedom to write, issue and disseminate religious publications.
2. Freedom to express religious views in the media.
3. Freedom to wear religious clothes/symbols in public places.
4. Freedom to worship.

4.3. Participants

Overall, 75% of participants in the survey were females (N = 991), with only 25% males (N = 324). Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, with a mean age of 19. Most students were studying for a bachelor's degrees (78%), and the remaining 22% for a master's. In Croatia, respondents studied law, economics, as well as social sciences, while in Italy they studied international relations, political sciences, humanities and cinema, music, and art sciences.

Most participants held Croatian or Italian citizenship (99% in Croatia and 94% in Italy), while 94% of participants were born in Croatia and 91% in Italy.

Concerning religious affiliation, in both countries, most of the participants identified themselves with Catholicism (54% in Italy, and 77% in Croatia). However, while No Religion amounted to 39% in Italy, in Croatia, it was 19%. The same for religious minorities: while in Italy they covered 7% of the sample, in Croatia, only 3%. In Italy, participants that belonged to minorities were Muslims (2%), Orthodox Christians (2%), Protestants (1%), members of other Christian traditions (0.4%), Pentecostals (0.1%), Sikhs (0.1%), and others (1%). In Croatia, they were Muslims (1%), Orthodox Christians (0.2%), Protestants (0.2%), Jews (0.2%), members of other Christian traditions (0.2%), and others (1%). In the inferential statistics, we decided to use a reduced version of the variable, summarising the multiple groups into three: non-religious, Catholics, and minorities.

Regarding political orientation, to measure it we used a 10-point scale where 1 corresponds to the Left and 10 to the Right. While around 63% of the Italian respondents declared to recognize themselves between 1 and 4, 26% between 5 and 6, and 11% between 7 and 10, most Croatian students (around 44%), placed themselves between 5 and 6, with 37% between 1 and 4, and the remaining 19% between 7 and 10.

5. Results

In this section, we present the results of the statistical analysis that we have conducted using the SPSS software v. 27. We report the descriptive statistics of the two models of political secularism and the three dimensions of social perception of religious freedom. Moreover, we compare the two countries by providing the results of the *t*-test. Finally, we present the results of the general linear regression models that we have built to assess the impact of the models of institutional and ideological secularism on social perceptions of religious freedom in Italy and Croatia. For all inferential analyses, the significance level was set at alpha = 0.05.

5.1. Institutional and Ideological Secularism Models in Italy and Croatia

First, we focused on how the Italian and Croatian respondents valued political secularism and religious freedom.

The descriptive data and the results of the *t*-test on 'institutional' and 'ideological' secularism models are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5. Perceptions of political secularism by Italians and Croats (means, standard deviations, *t*-test).

	Italy		Croatia		*t*-Test
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	
Institutional secularism	4.13	0.37	3.95	0.03	4.34 **
Ideological secularism	2.87	0.89	2.85	0.03	−0.48

Notes: ** $p < 0.001$.

It is interesting to observe that descriptive statistics revealed similar patterns among Italian and Croatian respondents concerning their endorsement of the two models of political secularism. In both samples, while the average mean of 'institutional' secularism is in a high positive range, 'ideological' secularism is in a negative one.

Two *t*-tests were performed to see whether there was a significant difference between the two groups—Italian and Croatian—in support of the 'institutional' and 'ideological' models of secularism. Concerning 'institutional' secularism, the average score of the Italian sample was 4.13 (SD = 0.37), while in the Croatian one, it was 3.95 (SD = 0.03). The *t*-test showed that the difference was statistically significant, $t (1184) = 4.34$, $p < 0.001$. This means that, although in both countries the participants in the survey, on average, supported 'institutional' secularism, in Croatia, it found significantly lower support than in Italy. For 'ideological secularism', the *t*-test results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in support of 'ideological' secularism.

5.2. Comparing Social Perceptions of Religious Freedom in Italy and Croatia

Since the study focused on the impact of political secularism on social perceptions of religious freedom, we also explored the general patterns of these social perceptions in the two samples and their main differences. Table 6 reports the results of descriptive statistics and *t*-test for the Italian and Croatian samples.

Table 6. Perceptions of religious freedom by Italians and Croats (means, standard deviations, *t*-test).

	Italy		Croatia		*t*-Test
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	
Rf as a societal value	4.77	0.37	4.54	0.66	7.91 **
Rf as an individual autonomy	3.95	0.78	3.99	0.69	−1.03 **
Rf as freedom to express religion	4.08	0.72	3.89	0.82	4.33 *

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$.

For all three dimensions, the means of the scales were all in high positive ranges, showing that the value of religious freedom was widely shared among the respondents of both samples. In the Italian sample, the dimension which found less agreement was 'Rf as individual autonomy' (M = 3.95, SD = 0.78), while the dimension with which the students agreed the most was 'Rf as a societal value' (M = 4.77, SD = 0.37). In the Croatian sample, on the other hand, whereas 'Rf as a societal value' (M = 4.54, SD = 0.66) was once again the aspect with which the respondents agreed the most, 'Rf as freedom to express religion' was the one valued the least (M = 3.89, SD = 0.82).

From descriptive statistics, it is possible to observe slight differences among the average mean values of the two groups. The *t*-tests confirmed that all of them were statistically significant. Concerning the variable 'Rf as a societal value', Italian students turned out

to support this dimension of religious freedom significantly more than the Croatian students, $t(1307) = 7.91$, $p < 0.001$. By contrast, Croatian students (M = 3.99, SD = 0.69) supported significantly more than Italian students the idea of 'Rf as an individual autonomy', $t(1304) = -1.03$, $p < 0.001$. Finally, it was the young Italians who were significantly more in favour than the Croatian ones of the idea of 'Rf as the freedom to express religion' publicly, $t(1305) = 4.33$, $p = 0.001$.

5.3. Assessing the Impact of Institutional and Ideological Secularism on Religious Freedom in Italy and Croatia

In order to assess the influence of 'institutional' and 'ideological' secularism on the three dimensions of religious freedom, three general linear regression models (GLM) were constructed with robust estimates of the standard errors, in order to limit the heteroskedasticity of the residuals due to the negative asymmetry in the constructs. GLMs are mathematically identical to multiple regression analysis, yet they permit the accommodation of both quantitative and qualitative variables. The term "univariate" does not refer to the number of independent variables, but dependent ones.

We have built one model for each one of our dependent variables. In these models, 'institutional' and 'ideological' secularism served as explanatory variables, while sex, religious affiliation, and political orientation served as control variables.

All models had a statistically significant F-index value ($p < 0.05$) and it was, therefore, possible to proceed to the analysis of the individual regression coefficients, which is presented later in the chapter.

Table 7 presents the results of the regression analysis which we performed on the Italian sample.

Table 7. Results of the regression analysis assessing the influence of political secularism on religious freedom (Italy).

	Rf as Soc. Value	Rf as Indiv. Auton.	Rf as fr. to Expr. Rel.
	B	**B**	**β**
Non-religious (ref. Catholics)	0.06	−0.07	0.04
Minorities (ref. Catholics)	−0.16	−0.01	0.15
Political orientation	−0.04 ***	0.02	−0.04 *
Sex (ref. female)	0.01	0.001	−0.02
Institutional secularism	0.08 ***	0.29 ***	0.30 ***
Ideological secularism	−0.01	−0.09	−0.12 ***
	$R^2 = 0.115$	$R^2 = 0.106$	$R^2 = 0.160$

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$. Rf as soc. value = Rf as a societal value. Rf as indiv. auton. = Rf as an individual autonomy. Rf as fr. to expr. religion = Rf as the freedom to express religion.

First, we observed that, in Italy, 'institutional' secularism significantly explains all of the three dimensions of religious freedom. The endorsement of this secularist model positively influences the support of 'Rf as a societal value' (B = 0.08, $p < 0.001$), 'Rf as an individual autonomy' (B = 0.29, $p < 0.001$), and 'Rf as the freedom to express religion' (B = 0.30, $p < 0.001$). In the case of the Italian sample, therefore, the findings largely confirmed our first hypothesis (H_1).

In contrast, 'ideological' secularism significantly predicts only one of religious freedom's dimensions but has a negative impact on it (H_2 partially confirmed). This means that the more respondents held ideological secularist positions, the less they supported 'Rf as the freedom to express religion' (B = −0.12, $p < 0.001$).

Concerning the control variables, one unexpected finding was the statistical irrelevance of religious affiliation in determining the support of religious freedom. At the same time, it was interesting to note the negative correlation between political orientation and two of the three dimensions of religious freedom. The more respondents were right-wing-oriented,

the less they positively perceived 'Rf as a societal value' (B = −0.04, $p < 0.001$) and 'Rf as the freedom to express religion' (B = −0.04, $p = 0.021$).

In the Croatian sample, it was possible to note both similarities and differences with the results obtained in the Italian one (Table 8).

Table 8. Results of the regression analysis assessing the influence of political secularism on religious freedom (Croatia).

	Rf as Soc. Value	Rf as Indiv. Auton.	Rf as fr. to Expr. Rel.
	B	**B**	**B**
Non-religious (ref. Catholics)	0.12 *	−0.21 *	−0.33 **
Minorities (ref. Catholics)	0.03	−0.03	0.31
Political orientation	−0.03 *	0.02	0.01
Sex (ref.female)	−0.002	0.11	−0.01
Institutional secularism	0.25 ***	0.22 ***	0.27 ***
Ideological secularism	−0.03	−0.06	−0.18 ***
	$R^2 = 0.104$	$R^2 = 0.073$	$R^2 = 0.125$

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Rf as soc. value = Rf as a societal value. Rf as indiv. auton. = Rf as an individual autonomy. Rf as fr. to expr. religion = Rf as the freedom to express religion.

Before commenting on them, one point should be raised. In both Italy and Croatia, the linear general regression models showed reduced predictive power, as the values of the coefficient of determination R^2 were all lower than 20% for both countries. In other words, less than 20% of the overall variance of the response variable was explained by the independent and control variables included in the single linear regression models. However, in social sciences, even low R2 may be considered acceptable, since "the goal of most social science research modelling is not to predict human behaviour", but rather, "to assess whether specific predictors or explanatory variables have a significant effect on the dependent variable" (Ozili 2023, p. 1). In order to not be discarded, a model with a low R2 should have a value higher than 0.10 and some or most of its explanatory variables should be statistically significant (Ozili 2023). While in the Italian sample, these conditions were always met, in the Croatian one we obtained too low an R2 on the model referred to as 'Rf as an individual autonomy' ($R^2 = 0.073$). We have thus been obliged to reject it. We left the results in the table to have an overview of what we have obtained, however, we will not take it into consideration in the discussion of the results. In contrast, the other models were all considered acceptable.

Concerning the similarities with the Italian findings, we first observed that, in the Croatian sample as well, the 'institutional' secularism variable had a statistically significant strong positive influence on all of the three dimensions of religious freedom, further confirming our first hypothesis (H_1). The same goes for the 'ideological' secularism variable, which showed the same effects as in Italy: it showed hardly any significant influence on 'Rf as a societal value' (although the sign of the relation was negative), while it turned out to have a strong negative influence on 'Rf as the freedom to express religion' (B = −0.18, $p < 0.001$).

Perhaps the most striking differences from the Italian case emerged from the analysis of the control variables. Here, religious affiliation and political orientation obtained very different results between Italy and Croatia. First, the statistical significance of being non-religious stood out. While in the Italian sample religious affiliation did not have any effect, in Croatia, compared to being Catholic, being non-religious led to significantly more support for 'Rf as a societal value' (B = 0.12, $p = 0.045$) and significantly less for 'Rf as the freedom to express religion' (B = −0.33, $p = 0.002$).

Second, different patterns of correlation between political orientation and religious freedom compared to Italy were also observed. Indeed, while the variable was negatively correlated with two of the three dimensions of religious freedom in Italy, in the Croatian case it appeared to have little influence. While it turned out to have a low significant

negative influence on 'Rf as a societal value' (B = −0.03, *p* = 0.041), it did not show any effect on 'Rf as the freedom to express religion'.

6. Discussion

The aim of this article was to assess whether and to what extent the endorsement of political secularism enhances or reduces the support for the right to religious freedom in Italy and Croatia. We started from the idea that political secularism is a multidimensional concept, and that to understand its influence on cultures of religious freedom we needed to look at its multiple expressions comparatively. Our theory distinguished between two models of political secularism, which we labelled 'institutional' and 'ideological' and we hypothesised that while endorsement of the former would increase support for religious freedom (H_1), the latter would lower it (H_2). We set three main research objectives: (1) to explore how political secularism is perceived in Italy and Croatia, (2) to explore the social perceptions of religious freedom in these two countries, and (3) to assess the influence of endorsement of the 'institutional' and 'ideological' models of secularism on support for religious freedom in Italy and Croatia.

Concerning the first research objective, we discovered that Italians endorsed the institutional model of secularism more than the Croats did, while the differences in ideological results were not statistically significant. With regard to the second objective, we found that while Italians supported religious freedom as a societal value and as freedom to express religion more than Croats did, Croats, in contrast, showed more support than Italians for religious freedom as an individual value, linked to the protection of human freedom to cultivate one's spirituality and to search for one's truth. Finally, about the third objective, we showed that, in both Italy and Croatia, endorsing the institutional model of secularism positively influenced the social perception of religious freedom in all three dimensions (H_1 confirmed), while endorsing the ideological one did not, except for the freedom to express religion, which was negatively affected by the model in both samples (H_2 partly confirmed).

We are aware of the many concerns expressed in the literature about the appropriateness of using inferential statistical techniques on non-probabilistic samples (e.g., Hirschauer et al. 2021). Therefore, we consider our results' external validity limited to our samples, even though we also hold that "nonrandom samples, allied with a replication strategy" might also "yield robust findings" (Hubbard et al. 2019, p. 96).

Concerning the results obtained on the social perceptions of religious freedom, the differences between the two samples might be explained in light of their political and socio-religious characteristics. On the one hand, as we supposed in Section 3, the overall lower positive perceptions of religious freedom shown by Croats compared to Italians could derive from the different degrees of democratic development that characterise the two countries. On the other hand, according to theories about the impact on the social construction of religious freedom of pluralism (Richardson 2006), societal discrimination against minority religions (Finke and Martin 2014), religiosity, and religious homogeneity (Fox et al. 2021) could serve as theoretical clues to understand the reasons behind these discrepancies. We are aware that all the above-mentioned theories refer to governments. However, the compatibility between them and our findings allows us to infer that they are also valid when this relationship is expressed at the level of society, suggesting further comparative research on this interplay. It is also worth noticing that the same patterns of differences were discovered by Breskaya et al. (2022) comparing Italy and Russia, thus opening up questions about the effects of a post-communist past on social perceptions of religious freedom.

Also noteworthy are the different relationships we discovered between political orientation, religious affiliation, and religious freedom in Italy and Croatia. Italians show greater politicization of human rights than Croatians, a finding that is in line with the literature on the subject, where the positive correlation between left-wing political orientations and positive attitudes toward human rights has been demonstrated (see, e.g., Cohrs et al. 2007). At the same time, the results also suggest a greater religious polarisation in the Croatian

sample. Indeed, while the variable of religious affiliation was never significant in the Italian sample, it was always significant in the Croatian one. Compared to Catholics, in fact, the non-religious were found to more strongly support the social value of religious freedom (where one question mentioned the freedom to choose one's religious/non-religious identity) and less the freedom of expression of religion in the public space. These data open up questions about the effects of the politicisation of the dominant religion on non-religious identities, which in Croatia seem to take on a specifically anti-religious character, also in reaction—we hypothesize—to "the powerful role of the Catholic Church in the public sphere and the ubiquity of religion in social life" which "create a context that non-religious people and atheists perceive unequal and discriminatory"(Bajić 2020, p. 28).

However, beyond the differences, Italy and Croatia also presented relevant similarities. Indeed, even though they are marked by different experiences of secularism and are characterised by different models of pluralism, they showed common patterns in both the perceptions of the two models of political secularism and the three dimensions of religious freedom. This similarity might serve as empirical evidence for the hypothesis, advanced by several scholars, of the emergence of a common European model of Church–State relations shared by both Western European and post-communist countries (Zrinščak 2011), and might also provide more information on the elements that make it up. Such a model, beyond just 'a trend towards disestablishment' (Zrinščak 2011), entails 'a substantial respect for individual religious freedom, the guarantee of autonomy and, in particular, self-administration of religious denominations, and a selective collaboration of states with the churches' (Ferrari 2003, p. 221, in Zrinščak 2011). Moreover, the results raise questions about the correspondence between the religious image of a country, its Church–State relations model, and the emergence of different attitudes towards the Church and the State in society (see Zrinščak 2011). Indeed, religiosity combined with religious homogeneity seems to play a crucial role in the perception of the role religion should play in the State and society. The higher support of institutional secularism as opposed to ideological secularism—and thus the recognition of a greater legitimacy for religion to intervene in the public sphere—leads us to suppose that both of the two countries' historically highly religious natures, plus the role of Catholicism in shaping national identity and historically providing for social needs, might be critical factors for the imparting of significance to the social role of Churches, even despite the acknowledgement of the democratic and modern principle that State and religion should operate in separate spheres.

With regard to the core of this study, namely the influence of political secularism on support for religious freedom, the findings on the positive impact of institutional secularism on religious freedom confirm further the idea that, methodologically and conceptually, it is not sufficient to analyse political secularism only in its guise of 'competing ideologies' to religion (Finke 2022; see also Cartabia 2012; Fox 2015b; Glendon 2018). In contrast, we should at least consider the opposite hypothesis that political secularism might consist of 'moral dispositions' that 'do not relate to religions solely through power contestations and conflicts but through shared moral sources as well' (Jakelić 2022; see also Bhargava 2011). At the same time, the negative effects of 'ideological' secularism on the dimension of religious freedom we called 'freedom to express religion' seems to provide empirical evidence for Casanova's (2009) theory, confirming the hypothesis that the most crucial discriminant difference between the two models of secularism is their stance on the role religion should play in the public sphere. Moreover, they might represent empirical evidence for all those theories (Kuru 2009; Maclure and Taylor 2011) which explicitly link different forms of political secularism to the emergence of different policies towards religion, proving that this dichotomous pattern is valid not only at a governmental or politically elite level but also at the societal one.

As mentioned in the introduction, this study may be interpreted as a conceptual replication of those studies that have investigated the relations between political secularism and religious freedom within the framework of the SPRF theory. It is also from the comparison between our and their findings that we can fulfil the need for replication that produces more

reliable outcomes from non-probabilistic samples. Our results on institutional secularism are consistent with what Breskaya et al. (2021b) found in Italy regarding what the authors, following Kuru, called 'passive secularism'. This is a model very similar to the one we refer to as institutional secularism; in their case, however, it is composed of only one item. The three authors observed the positive effect of that model of secularism on all five of the dimensions of religious freedom that they tested. However, unlike the present research, their study did not find any significant impact of the 'assertive' model of secularism on any of the dimensions of religious freedom. This discrepancy in the results may be due to the different dimensions of religious freedom that they took into account and the choice to use a single item as an indicator of the variable. The influence of 'passive' and 'assertive' secularism on religious freedom and social perception has also been tested by Breskaya et al. (2022) in Italy and in Russia. There, consistent with our own and previous research, 'passive secularism' was found to positively impact all the five dimensions of religious freedom examined in the study, in both the Italian and Russian samples. By contrast, the results of assertive secularism appeared more ambiguous and difficult to read, especially in the Russian case. Of note, however, is assertive secularism's negative impact, in the Italian sample, on what the authors call the 'Human rights aspects of religious freedom 1 (social)'. The result on this dimension, very similar to what we have named 'freedom to express religion', further confirms ideological secularism's negative predisposition toward religion's presence in the public sphere.

7. Conclusions

The intensification in Europe of the political debate on religion and the hardening of the confrontation between religious and secular groups on morality policies and religious symbols (headscarves, crucifixes, etc.) calls for placing the relationship between political secularism and religious freedom at the centre of the study of religion in contemporary societies. Within the framework of the sociology of religious freedom, the question of the role of political secularism in the implementation of religious freedom in Western-style democratic countries is actually increasing in importance. This article has been an attempt to answer this question, focusing on people's perceptions in two countries characterised by the presence of a dominant religion and different political and religious histories.

Our results show the importance of looking at political secularism and religious freedom as multidimensional and socially constructed concepts, overcoming normative conceptions of them. The present work provides empirical evidence for the hypothesis that, beyond the idea of a "crisis" of political secularism, it still has a vital role in promoting a positive culture of religious freedom. At the same time, it provides support to the idea that ideological secularism is characterised by an ambivalent relationship to this right, contrasting its public dimensions.

In spite of this study's limitations, we believe that our findings could serve to open new research questions and enhance both theoretical work on the topic and empirical explorations of it. On the one hand, we hope for a 'Europeanisation' of the study of political secularism. Since until now most studies have focused on exceptional models of politics-religion separation, such as the United States or France, we suggest deeper attention to those European countries characterised by moderate institutional forms of political secularism and the presence of a dominant religion. On the other hand, we recommend improving methodological instruments to measure the multiple and ambivalent expressions of political secularism, which are still missing, despite recent studies' ascertainment of political secularism's relevant roles in shaping political and social processes. Finally, seeing religious freedom's interaction with a broad spectrum of rights, we suggest that future research also consider the negative effects of ideological secularism on religious freedom in light of people's perceptions of other rights and their broader conceptions of freedom and equality.

Institutional Review Board Statement: After a personal consultation, the member of the Ethics Committee informed us that the types of questions used in the survey do not need the Ethics Committee review.

Informed Consent Statement: Voluntary participation in the survey was ensured. The survey was conducted in complete anonymity. All data is protected.

Data Availability Statement: Data from this study are not publicly available or archived, the data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Results of the principal component analysis for the three dimensions of religious freedom.

Questions	Component 1 (Rf as Soc. Value)	Component 2 (Rf as Ind. Autonomy)	Component 3 (Rf as fr. to Expr. Rel.)
Freedom to choose my religious/non-religious identity	0.77		
Non-discrimination for religious minorities on the basis of religion	0.84		
Equality of various religions in society before the law	0.79		-
Non-violent co-existence for all religions in every society	0.77		
It is connected with the idea of human dignity		0.78	
It is connected with the search for individual truth		0.85	
It allows everyone to pursue their personal spiritual fulfilment		0.78	
Freedom to express religious views in the media			0.80
Freedom to wear religious clothes/symbols in public places			0.75
Freedom to write, issue and disseminate religious publications			0.81

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Cut-off = 0.4. Rf as soc. Value = Rf as a societal value. Rf as ind. autonomy = Rf as individual autonomy. Rf as fr. to expr. rel. = Rf as the freedom to express religion.

Notes

[1] Their comparison is also interesting as it opens new insights on religion in Europe, responding to the lack of studies on European moderate forms of political secularism, with those studies that do exist mostly focused on 'exceptional' cases of Church and State separation, such as the United States and France (Modood 2010).

[2] The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

[3] It is worth mentioning that 'flawed democracies' are considered those states scoring from 6 to 8. It shows that Croatia is closer to a 'hybrid regime' (from 4 to 6), while Italy to a 'full democracy' (from 8 to 10).

[4] On the critical aspects of the Act see Zrinščak (2004).

[5] The same questionnaire and sample were used also in Stipišić (2022).

[6] In Breskaya and Giordan (2019), this item was considered an indicator of 'multicultural citizenship' (as conceptualised by Modood and Kastoryano 2007).

[7] We performed the Spearman–Brown's coefficient to measure the reliability of 'ideological' secularism scale in agreement with Eisinga et al. (2013), who have proved that with a two-item scale this measure is more reliable than Cronbach alpha, which requires too restrictive assumptions for such a short scale.

[8] The five dimensions were: (1) religious freedom as individual and religious groups' value, (2) religious freedom as societal value, (3) religious freedom as a principle of state-religion governance, (4) religious freedom as human rights standard, (5) societal impact of judicialisation of religious freedom (Breskaya and Giordan 2019).

[9] This scale was already validated in Giordan et al. (2022).

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