

Mathew Mathews

Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

National University of Singapore

**Title: Religious People in Five Southeast Asian Nations: How they differ on Civic Engagement, Family Values and Government Intervention**

**Introduction**

In trying to understand the larger question of what allows people to live together well in an increasingly narcissistic society, Bellah and his associates (1996) argue for the importance of civic engagement and family values. While they concede that the restoration of these two pillars of society will curb the many societal problems ultimately caused by alienating individualism, they caution against viewing current maladies as located in the narrow space of the family and local community. Rather they advocate the need for public involvement spearheaded by the government to address these ills.

Scholars examining the institution of religion in society have increasingly noticed the relationship that religion has with the three areas that Bellah and his associates have pointed out. Religious beliefs and practices as Durkheim's (1912) classical sociological treatise pointed out, provides important norms and values needed for societal integration. While Durkheim (1912) conjectured that the change from mechanical to organic solidarity would downplay the impact of religion in society, such a consistent steady decline in religion's impact is not easily observable even in societies most leaning towards the characteristics of organic solidarity. Instead, religion asserts itself in a pendulum like fashion, suddenly asserting itself under conditions where it seems to have been sidelined (Bainbridge, 2004).

*Religion and Civic Engagement*

Civic engagement, often understood as a sense of personal responsibility that individuals hold towards safeguarding community interest, is vital in democracies (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999). This ethic drives individuals to contribute to their society through volunteering their time and talent and finding meaningful ways to address societal problems through a range of methods ranging from activism to electoral participation. However such engagement has been decreasing. Putnam (1995) in his examination of associational membership in the US notices that civic membership, an important aspect of such engagement has severely declined in the US. Most groups ranging from Parent Teachers Associations to unions are experiencing severe decline. While technology has allowed groups to form in cyberspace, these he argues do not sustain civic engagement and instead mobilise private opinion and trades on "anxiety, anger and distrust, all of which are deadly to civic culture".

Religion however has not gone through a major decline in membership at least in America, where the apparent loss of membership in mainline denominations has resulted in rapid growth in newer, evangelical forms of religion (Ammerman, 1994). Membership in religious organizations has also been associated with increased participation in civic organizations, voluntarism and informal helping behaviours (Putnam, 2000). Attending religious meetings provides participants with religious teachings that advocate community engagement, opportunities to network with like-minded individuals who are passionate about social causes and a general awareness of community needs and concerns (Putnam, 2000; Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995; Wuthnow, 1999). Besides this religion also provides social capital endowment, in greater proportions than even education (Putnam, 2000). Fukuyama (1995) pointing particularly to the impact of Protestantism highlights that its norms allow for the development of a culture of trust within society. Doctrines of common grace, human potential and goodness encourages adherents of such religious beliefs to adopt postures of trust towards their societies and thus find a rationale for community engagement (Welch et al, 2004).

### *Religion and Family Values*

In contrast to the ideology of individualism where one's status is invariably related to one's personal accomplishment often in relation to the market, familism locates the individual to the social obligations and demands of the family unit, stressing that family is the "most fundamental unit of social order in society" (Edgell, 2006:12) Families are viewed as agents of social control and reproduction and as such fulfil important societal functions. The breakdown of the institution of the family is often cited as a root cause of many social pathologies ranging from troubled children to delinquency and crime (Stacey, 1997). The challenge to family as an institution is often centred around new liberal norms steeped in individualistic tendencies which seek to re-define family to nothing more than a loosely held social organization rather than relations sealed by blood ties and legal sanctions (Castles, 2003, Stacey, 1997). In the wake of such decline, some quarters have championed the importance of valuing family in terms of commitments to marriage and other family responsibilities (Wilcox & Chaves, 2004)

There is little question at least in American society that religion continues to be a very important force in shaping the family. In many ways religion and family are in mutual dependency. Religious institutions for centuries have depended on families to pass down long held religious traditions and beliefs through prescribed celebrations and rituals while at the same time families have relied on religious institutions to ensure the moral socialization of children (Edgell, 2006).

Religious institutions have also been instrumental to holding onto family values, especially traditional values which emphasise the importance of the heterosexual family unit, strong marriages (Bartkowski, 2001; Lockhart, 2001), involved parenting (Mahoney et al. 2003) and procreation and sexual intimacy within the confines of marriage (Thornton, Axinn & Hill, 1992).

Essentially as Mahoney et al (2003) argue, religious institutions “sanctify” aspects of the family, in that they psychologically imbue characters of sacredness onto family processes.

### *Religion and Government Intervention*

The role of religion in politics has sparked substantial interest in recent years. Religion has been known to “divert social grievances into both passive quietism and social activism to demand changes “ (Williams 1996: 368). Within the broader debates of the trust that societies have of state intervention, religious groups have been rather divided. The strong conservative Christian tradition in the US associated with the Republican party which often is opposed to large government and the concomitant increase in taxes champions for the resilience of local communities and individuals (Wilcox, 2006). On the other hand many liberal religious traditions strongly advocate for state intervention accepting that the a form of equalization within society is a religious virtue (Barker, 2000).

Research based on the World Values Survey for instance provide important ideas about how religious involvement relates to views on many aspects of political life. Results for instance show that those who are more religiously involved have sometimes greater preferences for the increased role of religion in politics, hold stricter views of socio-economic issues in some cases such as Arab Muslims a greater preference for a centralised vertical power stetm within the United Nations (Pettersson, 2010)

### *Religion as Identity*

While there is little question that religion has an important impact in many areas of social life, it is often questionable whether the association is purely a product of religious affiliation. In many cases just because religious beliefs and practices are present within a religious tradition does not mean that a religious affiliate will conform to all religious prescriptions. Studies of managers and their ethical behaviour questions such simple linear relationships (Weaver & Agle, 2002) as do attitudinal studies of mass populations where religious affiliation is sometimes used to explain different attitudes to morality (Voert, Felling & Peters, 1994).

Rather, as has been well explored those who feel a greater self identification with such a belief system are more apt to make religious prescriptions normative in their own lives. Social psychologists assert that it to the degree of how much religion constitutes a central part of self identity that various expectations intricately linked with this identity is mobilised (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010). Individuals then comply with prescriptions since to not do so can be emotionally uncomfortable due to the strong levels of cognitive dissonance experienced (Festinger, 1957). Common religious identity expectations include engaging in certain rituals and an allegiance to a code of beliefs often related to ethical and supernatural possibilities.

The centrality of such an identification can however only be understood by comparing between various other possible social identities, often done through comparing rankings in self-descriptions (Stryper & Serpe, 1982). Race, gender and nationality have often been accorded high explanatory value and have been often researched by social scientists. However there are renewed calls to include more rigorous examination of religion as a social identity (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010).

### **Aims & Hypothesis**

Considering the importance of religion on variables associated with attempts to address societal ills, the objectives of this study was to examine whether those who identified with religion were different in their attitudes compared to those who did not place such salience on their religious identity.

This study examines this question in the context of several democratic Southeast Asian societies namely Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The region while culturally diverse has had a historic relationship to religion with Malaysia and Indonesia often regarded as Muslim countries, Thailand as a Buddhist society and Philippines as a Roman Catholic nation. While Singapore distinguishes itself among its Southeast Asian neighbours because of its high levels of modernization, it along with its other neighbours see high religious participation and affiliation (Pereira, 2005). Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and Brunei although Southeast Asian nations and all members of the regional grouping ASEAN, differ in their form of governance, either deviating considerably from democratic ideals or attempting to put such structures in place in very recent years.

Arguably a religious identity among individuals in the countries selected for this study propels them with a certain level of interest to engage broader society. More canonical forms of religion in Asia such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam extol the virtues of religious people contributing to their world. However at the same time, the trend at least in some religions, particularly the monotheistic ones, where religious resurgence has wielded a more conservative form of belief, there seems to be a commitment to forge moral communities which favour in-group behaviour (Roteutscher, 2008). Under such conditions where religious groups attempt to set purity standards, thereby condemning the decadence of society, this form of isolationism may result in a disengagement the needs of the broader community (Welch et al., 2004). While this does not seem impossible though, examinations of conservative Christianity in the United States seems to suggest that despite their interest in orthodoxy, faith communities are also determined to be engaged within their societies (Smith et al, 1998).

A religious identity is also congruent with an identity which supports family values. Notably in Asia most religions have been intricately related to the life cycle rituals of births, marriages and funerals. These rituals engage families with religious specialists and practices, all of which

ultimately making family life sacred. Moreover Islamic and Christian discourse throughout Southeast Asia is highly prescriptive of the type of family form and what is expected from each person in the family.

Finally embracing a religious identity may also result in those who hold such an identity to be more trusting of their governments and favour their increased intervention to correct social ills. The Southeast Asian countries in this study with the exception of Singapore have all found ways to use the dominant religion in their nation to endorse their government. At the same time though, religious individuals have mounted strong protests against governments which have been viewed as corrupt as can be seen in the case of the Philippines during the rule of Marcos. In Indonesia and Malaysia religious based political parties have been opposed to the tendencies of secular parties which have dominated the politics in both countries. Despite this though, the general commitment of a religious identity to social order rather than risk, then places greater likelihood on those who identify with religion to be supportive of the government of the day.

Based on the objectives which have been enumerated above, four sets of hypothesis are provided.

#### Hypothesis 1

Those who identify with religion are more likely to display higher levels of civic engagement seen in their concern for social issues, personal priority to contribute to society, their desire to see their children contribute to society and viewing education as useful because of its ability to help them contribute to society and its development. This group compared to those who do not identify with religion are more likely to show greater trust to community members and be willing to engage in pro-social helping behaviour.

#### Hypothesis 2

Those who identify with religion are deemed to also be more likely to embrace family values particularly prioritising time spent with their family and raising children as important life goals. This group compared to those who do not identify themselves with religion are more likely to view that the greatest accomplishments that they want from their children is to be family minded persons who care for their family.

#### Hypothesis 3

Those who identify with religion are more likely to be positive towards government intervention to aid with the needs of society. This group compared to those who do not identify themselves with religion are more likely to place greater levels of trust in their governments to work for the best interest of society and to advocate their greater spending in promoting increased social well being despite the threat of higher taxation.

#### Hypothesis 4

It is also hypothesised that due to the different forms of religion and contextual features of the different societies in this study, the patterns of association will differ across different Southeast Asian societies.

## **Methodology**

The data for this paper is derived from the Asia Barometer, a series of large scale surveys conducted since 2003 in different parts of the world, primarily continental Asia. I have used data from the 2006 to 2007 series which includes data from Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. Approximately 1000 respondents were obtained in each of these countries using a quota sampling method. While such a method does not attain the gold standard of random sampling, it provides enough basis to conduct reasonably rigorous hypothesis tests.

## **Measures**

### *Religious Identity*

The main dependant variable in our analysis was religious identity. This variable was derived from a question in the instrument which asked about the social circles or groups that were of importance to the respondent. Respondents were provided a list of 13 possible social circles they could identify with including family, relatives, place of work, school they attended, neighbourhood, language group, hobby and religion. Respondents who selected religion were classified as having a religious identity. While there was a question asking respondents to provide their most important social circle, this response was not used since invariably for a very high proportion of respondents (nearly 98%) their family identity was most salient.

### *Government Intervention*

Support for government intervention was derived from two sets of questions. The first question asked respondents whether they would like to see more government spending in a number of areas, bearing in mind that this may require heavier taxation. The list of items used were centred on spending which was meant to relieve social problems and as such included items such as old age pensions, unemployment benefits and the improvement of the social status of women. These items were measured on a 5 item Likert scale ranging from Spending much more to Spending

much Less. It was assumed that those who would advocate greater government spending even at the risk of a heightened tax burden were more open to the possibility of state intervention in ensuring that public goods were well distributed. Cronbach alphas for this scale across countries in our study ranged from .59 to .73 and it was deemed that the scale was suitable.

Another scale that was constructed which directly questioned the extent that respondents trusted government institutions to operate in the best interests of society. Several items were used to compute this scale – the central government, local government, Parliament and the legal system. A 4 item Likert scale which ranged from Trust a Lot to Dont Trust at All was used. Cronbach alphas for this scale was decent across countries ranging from .63 to .85.

### *Civic engagement*

Several items examining civic engagement were used. Civic mindedness, an important component of civic engagement was measured using a list of items where respondents were asked whether the items caused them great worry. Items used in this study included issues which often transcend the respondents own personal situation to social concerns of a larger societal level. These included poverty, economic inequality in society, wars and conflicts, unemployment, social welfare system in your country, the fast pace of change in technology advancing too quickly and the threat of corporate power dominating human activities. These items while constituting more than one factor in some societies when a Factor analytic procedure was used still provided a decent alpha cronbach score of between .59 to .71 when grouped together.

Respondents were also asked to select among 27 items 5 items that were important to them. Those who selected the item “Contributing to your local community or society” were considered to place high priority on an ethic which prioritised their communities. In the same vein, priority for contributing to society was also derived from questions asking respondents to select the top two accomplishments they wanted their son and daughter to make. The item becoming a loving and charitable person was again considered as being part of this ethic. Further a question asking about education where those who picked up the purpose of education as essentially to allow one to contribute to their society or the prosperity of their country was also deemed as indicating a ethic of prioritising community needs.

Since civic engagement also requires a component of personal trust failing which individuals are less likely to want to be an aid to their communities, a question asking respondents whether they thought people can be trusted was asked. The response was coded following the original instrument into two dichotomous variables where 1 denoted most people can be trusted and 2 that one had to be careful in dealing with people.

Finally as part of the measurement of civic engagement, pro-social behaviour was considered. This was a simple ordinal scale where respondents were asked if they saw somebody on the street looking lost, would they stop to help them. The question was scaled from 1 to 3 with 1 indicating a constant willingness to stop to help the person in need while 3 indicating a general reluctance to do so.

### *Family Values*

In order to examine the importance of family values, several questions were asked. Using a similar part of the instrument as mentioned above, respondents who selected the items “Spending time with your family” or “Raising children” as their top 5 items of importance out of 27 other items were deemed as having high priorities for family. Similarly those who indicated that they wanted their children to become a person who cares about family as one of their top two accomplishments were also denoted to hold onto a high priority of family.

## **Results**

In Muslim societies such as Indonesia and Malaysia, more than half of the respondents chose a religious identity as an important part of their overall social identity. In the Philippines, a predominantly Roman Catholic society, 60.7% of the respondents similarly chose a religious identity. All this was in contrast to Singapore and Thailand where 33.6% and 26.6% of respondents chose a religious identity. The majority of those who chose a religious identity in Indonesia and Malaysia were Muslim while the great proportion of them in the Philippines were either Catholic or Protestant. In Singapore among those who chose a religious identity the largest proportion were Muslim followed by Buddhist although it was notable that 24% were either Protestant or Catholic. In Thailand, 95.5% of those who held a religious identity were Buddhist.

A hierarchical logistic regression model was utilised to examine the statistical significance of different variables and their relationship to choosing a religious identity. Such a model is superior to presenting bivariate relationships since many such relationships when controlled by other important social and demographic variables may no longer hold statistical significance. This analysis was conducted separately for each of the five countries in this study. While a multi-level model to control for the effects of societal variables may be desirable, in this current paper, such an aim is not a priority.

Variables were inserted into the regression model in steps with variables related to government intervention first, followed by variables related to civic engagement and then family values. A number of demographic variables – age, gender, educational level and income group were also included at the fourth stage.

The results of the analysis showed that with regards to the involvement of government in managing social needs in the population, those who had identified with religion in both



Singapore and Thailand were significantly more likely to advocate greater government spending on social needs despite the possible tax increases. In Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia while there were significant relationships between those who identified with religion and their trust for government institutions, the direction of this association was different. In Indonesia and Thailand among those who identified with religion there was less trust for government institutions while in Malaysia there was more trust by those who identified with religion.

On the area of civic engagement, there was a significant relationship in all countries studied apart from Singapore where those who identified with religion were more concerned about social problems. In Thailand, those who identified with religion were more likely to desire that their children grow up to be charitable, while in both Singapore and Philippines education was seen by those who identified with religion as a means to contribute to the well being of their society. In Indonesia those who identified with religion were more likely to have a more trusting view of others within society and they were also more likely to engage in prosocial helping behaviour as were Singaporeans.

Among those who identified with religion in the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, they were more likely to prioritise spending time with their family. In the Philippines they also saw their life priority in raising their children.

## **Discussion**

It is evident that those who identified with religion differed at least in some ways from those who did not in all five Southeast Asian societies which were studied. In all these countries, those who identified with religion were likely to. While it was expected that those who identified with religion would be more trusting of government institutions, the cases of Indonesia and Thailand where substantial corruption and mismanagement of funds occurs, religious individuals are more discerning of their government's failure to address the larger concerns of society. In Malaysia this was not the case perhaps because of how Islam and the nation state in Malaysia are closely fused together unlike the case of either Thailand and Indonesia. This may perhaps account for these Malaysians, most likely Muslims to trust their government.

On the area of civic engagement it was apparent that those who identified with religion across the Southeast Asian countries studied held more positive attitudes at least in some ways to contributing to society. Many of these religious persons were likely to be concerned about social issues that their societies faced. Interesting this was not the case in Singapore where among both those who identified with religion and those who did not, their level of concern for social issues was considerably higher than the other countries in this study. This probably is related to the more educated population in Singapore who are more likely to be literate and informed of the challenges that their community is faced with. As such religious identity do not contribute substantially more to their understanding. This is unlike the case in other societies where those

who identify with religion are probably more likely to be informed about social concerns through their involvement in religious circles which invariably discuss societal woes.

Family values while greatly associated with religion at least in the West seems to be much ore part of the social fabric in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. This is in contrast to places like Singapore, Philippines and Thailand where religious populations may need to make renewed attempts to safeguard this area.

In essence it is a rather daunting task to provide a clear explanation of why different countries deviate from the model in terms of how those who identify with religion behave. Perhaps the nature of the different religions embraced in these different societies may provide some clue on such deviation. Moreover the contexts of these different societies where perhaps some virtue is being destabilised resulting in those who self identify with religion to make greater strides to correct such tides. As Tittle and Welch (1983:672) argue when secular moral guidelines are unavailable, in flux, or have lost their authority and hence their power to compel, the salience of religious proscriptions is enhanced.” Nonetheless this study has pointed out clearly that religion as a social identity has at least some bearing in populations in Southeast Asia.

**Table 1 Proportion of those who self-identify with religion in 5 Southeast Asian Societies**

	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
Proportion of Population who self identify with religion(%)	61.7	51.9	60.7	33.6	26.6

**Table 2 Proportion of those who self-identify with religion in 5 Southeast Asian Societies and their religious affiliation**

	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
Roman Catholic (%)	3	.4	82	8.3	.8
Protestant Christian (%)	5	15	14	15.8	.4
Muslim (%)	89.5	79.6	1.3	39.5	3.5
Buddhist (%)	0	11.8	0	19.5	95.5

**Table 3 – Logistic regression coefficients on the relationship between religion as social identity and support for government intervention, civic engagement and family values**

	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
<b>Government Intervention</b>					
More government spending on social problems	-.050	-.007	-.011	-.096***	-.081**
Trust for government institutions	.098**	-.153***	-.016	.008	.075*
<b>Civic Engagement</b>					
Concern for social problems	.299***	.336***	.211***	.024	.082*
Life priority to contribute to society	-.241	-.399	-.046	-.768	-.073
Desire for children to be charitable	.235	.224	-.093	.210	.473**
Education as means to contribute to society	.169	.258	.604***	.468***	-.002
Trust in people	-.360*	-.142	-.355	.078	.086
Altruistic/Prosocial behaviour	-.381**	.073	-.288	-.303*	-.069
<b>Family Values</b>					
Life priority to spend time with family	-.288	.061	-.318*	-.428**	-.505**
Life priority to raise children	-.043	-.387	-.152*	-.185	-.015
Desire for children to care for their family	-.318	-.029	-.164	.209	-.159
Gender	-.028	-.020	-.177	-.003	-.015
Age	-.001	-.005	.013*	-.006	-.009
Education Level	.058	-.010	.114	-.041**	-.097
Income group	.202	-.186	.126	-.275	-.103

\*\*\* p<=.001 \*\*p<=.01 \*p<=.05