

# Religiosity and Religious Public Policy: A Cross-National Comparison

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## 1 Preface

The 20th century was a pivotal period for the development of religions around the world. It was a turbulent time for new religious movements and revival movements throughout the globe: the mass suicide of close to 900 members of the People's Temple in the Guyanese rainforest in 1978 (Melton 1999: 220) and the 1995 sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo underground by the Aum Shinrikyo sect shocked the world. Soon after we entered the 21st century we witnessed the 911 attacks on the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, after which Islam and terrorism have become, in many people's minds, virtually synonymous. This last event apparently fulfilled predictions made by Samuel P. Huntington in his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, published in 1996.

There is also a sense, however, in which religions have played a very positive role in the public sphere. From the early Moral Re-armament (MRA) movement to the anti-nuclear, environmental protection and world peace movements, religion has been becoming increasingly influential, and religious groups have been seeking to further expand their influence on public life. Naturally, for religion to move beyond the private sphere into the public, it would require a democratic, pluralistic social system, together with assurances of religious freedom, if it is going to make its influence felt in society. Just how to deal with the question of religion in any kind of public policy involving the public sphere is, in itself, a public policy issue. The aim of this paper is to investigate, with the aid of data from cross-national surveys, the reactions of the public in seven Asian countries to public policy related to religion; whether or not members of the public in those countries react differently to these policies depending on their relationship to religion; and the factors influencing these reactions.

## 2 Literature Review

One of the major debates in the sociology of religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century involves secularization theory, an idea that has dominated this area of sociology in the Western world from the 1960s on (Beckford 1990: 55). The term has frequently been used in academic

circles, although there has been a considerable amount of confusion as to exactly what it means (Dobbelaere 1984: 200). The debate remained a major topic in the sociology of religion right up to the late 1980s. While it is less discussed in the literature on the subject in the US now, it is still necessary to look into the topic if we are to investigate changes in religious belief.

As far as the origins of the concept is concerned, Berger points out that the term “secularization” itself referred to the removal of property or territory from the ecclesiastical authorities and their transferral to secular state institutions in the wake of the Wars of Religion, and that it often carried with it ideological and judgemental significance (1967:106). The Italian scholar Franco Ferrarotti identified the earliest appearance of the concept of secularization as the year 1648 (Ferrarotti 1993), at a time when Roman Catholics and Protestants within the region of Westphalia were engaged in fierce fighting. The subsequent signing of the Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War led to the emergence of the idea of secularization, essentially the process by which the Roman Catholic property was to be removed and confiscated. Warner (1993) and Dobbelaere (1981:8-9) come to the same conclusions.

In fact, every author working in the sociology of religion has their own interpretation of the concept of secularization, both in its theoretical and practical application. For Berger, secularization refers to the process by which the social and cultural spheres become divorced from the religious system and religious symbolism, effectively coming out from under the "sacred canopy." However, when one talks of the social and the cultural being divested of the religious, one is also implying a secularization of consciousness. That is to say, progressively fewer people view the world about them and their everyday existence within a religious framework (1967: 107-8). Berger calls the former objective secularization and the latter subjective secularization, although the two are interrelated (Berger 1967: 129-130).

One of the major contemporary proponents of secularization theory is Bryan Wilson. In his first work (Wilson: 1979) he vociferously argues for the inevitable demise of religion, although he subsequently concedes that religion will continue to exist as a personal choice, albeit having very little influence in society. The secularization model, then, does not predict the terminal decline of religions, just that it shall continue to exist within the private sphere, and will perhaps emerge in new forms of expression. Consequently, the secularization of religion also implies the privatization of religion.

Dobbelaere (1981) has identified three different levels of secularization, which he termed laicization, religious change and less church involvement. Laicization refers to the fact that

religion no longer functions as an institution that can legitimize or consolidate, and was no longer capable of one of social control or socialization. Religion's importance to society has receded over time, to the point where it has retreated back into the private sphere and is no longer intimately involved in the public sphere. Religious change refers to the process following the Church's loss of its religious monopoly, at which point all religious groups were obliged to package their teachings as a "religious commodity" in the pluralistic market of religions. This required the religions to change their organizational structure so that it was more bureaucratic and professional, and for them to make compromises with their teachings, incorporating modern values of various kinds. Less church involvement refers mainly to the dilution of an individual's personal involvement with a church or feelings of a religious nature, in which said individual goes to church to worship less often, and participates in fewer church activities.

In general, secularization describes people's retreat from engagement with religion and the fact that they no longer view the world in supernatural terms, in addition to the fact that religion can no longer dictate what happens in public affairs, political or economic, within a society, and that culture and the arts (and, it goes without saying, education) are no longer beholden to the proscriptions of religion. In other words, one of the major repercussions of secularization is the gradual loosening of religion's hold over the various spheres of life in society. Secularization, then, essentially involves the privatization of religion.

In *The De-secularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, a collection of lectures published in a book by Peter Berger (Berger 1999), the secularization theory was essentially debunked as something that was now really only relevant in academic circles. Casanova (1994) argued that it was by no means a foregone conclusion that a given society would move in the direction of secularization, and that this was contingent on structural conditions and historical factors. He also noted a trend of religions all over the world re-engaging in the public sphere or public affairs. He called these religions "public religions."

Religions can bring certain things to public affairs as they become engaged in this sphere, including their teachings, the commitment of their members, and the actual resources they have at their disposal. These can provide the ideological basis for democratic, economic justice and religious movements, just as they can provide the practical resources these movements require (Sherkat and Ellison: 1999). In addition, the very engagement of religious groups in the public sphere can have the effect of creating social capital (Chang 2004). However, if religions are to participate in public matters, and to have any kind of influence in public life, they require a democratic, pluralistic society that offers guarantees of religious freedom, frequently one that has a separation of church and state, that allows religious groups the freedom of religious belief,

the right of association and the right of expression. That is to say, in taking an interest in other people or in society, religious believers or religious groups might well maintain that this is an issue on the level of the individual, but the individual influencing one person after the next is sufficient to cause changes to occur in society. In addition, it is also possible that people come to the conclusion that if they want to realize their good intentions, the most effective way to do this is by influencing public policy.

At one point religious believers or religious groups may come to feel that their religious freedoms are coming under threat, or that religious equality or religious freedoms need some form of guarantee in public policy. It is often at this time that such social activity becomes a public policy issue, but it can also happen the other way around: the fact that this activity becomes a public policy issue can be the thing that makes individuals and groups aware of the problem. Of course, religious freedom can also be intimately tied up with the cultural freedoms of minority groups (Wellens 2009), as the culture of a certain ethnic group can be closely related to a certain religion. When a certain ethnic group feels its culture has become subject to repression, the importance of religious freedom becomes all too apparent.

Generally speaking, in the West, religious freedom is known as the “first freedom.” It is regarded as the standard by which all others, which, to some extent, exist as a result of it, are measured. Marty (2000: 49) notes that these other freedoms naturally follow in places where religions are allowed to flourish. An awareness of public policy issues often springs from an awareness of religious issues and of religious freedom. In the East, the general populace and religious believers have a different approach and attitude to religion than their counterparts in the West. The question is, compared to other public issues, what factors influence the way the general population and religious believers view public issues related to religion? This is what this paper seeks to explore.

### **3 Research Methods**

#### **(1) Data**

In this paper we shall use the 2006 AsiaBarometer survey data for statistical analysis and comparison. AsiaBarometer is a large scale sampling survey of countries in Asia, including East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and South Asia, developed, and coordinated by, Professor Takashi Inoguchi, the renowned Japanese sociologist. The surveys commenced in 2003, and consist of face-to-face interviews based on questionnaires of corresponding content localized and translated into the language of the country in which it is carried out by local survey companies. The questionnaires cover everyday aspects of the daily lives of the general

populace, including questions on family life, neighbors, work, social and political systems, and the economy. The headquarters is located in the Tokyo Satellite Office of the University of Niigata Prefecture, and the project is organized by the Research and Information Center for Asian Studies, Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo. The 2006 survey covered seven countries, including China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam. The sample size was approximately 1000 for each country, with the exception of China, which had a sample size of 2000 due to the size of its population.

## (2) Independent and dependent variables

For this survey the dependent variables were respondents' awareness of issues related to religion as well as their attitudes towards it. The 2006 AsiaBarometer survey included four questions on public issues related to religion itself, these being question numbers 25, 27, 31 and 44. Question 25 asked, "*Which, if any, of the following issues cause you great worry? Please choose all issues that cause you serious worry.*" Item 27 on this list of issues was "*religious fundamentalism.*" In Question 27 respondents were given the statement "*Any society has some kinds of inequality*" and then asked, "*In which of the following areas do you think equality should be most eagerly promoted in your society? Please indicate three that are most important to you.*" "*Religion*" was the sixth item on the list. Question 31 asked, "*How well do you think the [your country's] government is dealing with the following issues?*" Item (i) on the following list of options was "*religious conflict.*" Finally, Question 44 went, "*Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Please select two you consider to be most important.*" "*Religiosity*" was the seventh item.

Of these dependent variable questions, Questions 25, 27 and 44 were multiple response questions, of which one option was related to religion, and this was in each case treated as a dichotomous variable during statistical analysis. Question 31 was an ordinal variable, and for the purposes of binary logistic regression analysis the four options were changed to either "*well*" or "*not well.*"

The independent variables section of the survey included questions on gender, age, level of education and nationality, as well as five other sections which included options on the religious idea, religious practices, how people identified with religion, people's trust in religious groups, and the particular religion they affiliate with, if any.

Religious ideas were dealt with in one question, Question 49, which asked, "*Do you believe in an unseen spiritual world that can influence events in the world we see around us?*" and required the respondent to choose from "*I definitely believe*"; "*I somewhat believe*"; "*I do not*

*really believe*”; or *“I do not believe at all.”* The subject of religious practices was restricted to one question only, this being, *“How often do you pray or meditate?”* with possible answers of *“Daily”*; *“Weekly”*; *“Monthly”*; *“On special occasions”*; or *“Never.”*

Issues related to religious identity were dealt with in three questions, mainly on the individual's assessment of the importance of religion. Question 19, for example, was, *“Throughout the world, some people also see themselves as belonging to a transnational group (such as Asian, people of Chinese ethnicity, people who speak the same language or practice the same religion). Do you identify with any transnational group?”* with option four being, *“Religious group that I am believing in and practicing.”* In Question 21\_1 respondents were asked, *“Which of the following social circles or groups are important to you?”* and Question 21\_2 followed with *“Of those, which one is the most important to you?”* Option 12 was *“religion.”*

The variables obtained from the options ticked by respondents in the answers to these three multiple response questions were added together to calculate the total score for independent variables.

The respondents' trust in religious groups and religious professionals was addressed in Question 24, which asked, *“For each of the following events, please rate the importance of having a religious institution (such as mosque, church, temple, and shrine) or a religious professional (such as imam, priest, and monk) involved.”* The specific events listed were births; weddings; festivals or holidays; and funerals. These counted as four ordinal variables and were followed by the four options *“Very Important”*; *“Somewhat Important”*; *“Not really Important”*; and *“Not at all important.”* The answers for all four events were added together and converted into the independent variable *“trust on religious professionals.”*

The specific religion the respondent affiliated with was addressed in Question F9, which asked, *“Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If yes, which?”* This question was designed to discover the respondent's subjective identification with a particular religion. It included a total of 14 options to choose from, including *“none.”*

### (3) Research Hypotheses

According to the aim of this research and the dependent and independent variables, the present paper puts forward the following hypotheses.

Hypotheses 1: The stronger an individual's religious ideas, the more they are likely to feel that religion is an important public issue.

Hypotheses 2: The more an individual is engaged in religious practices, the more they are likely to feel that religion is an important public issue.

Hypotheses 3: People with a religious belief are more likely to feel that religion is an important public issue.

Hypotheses 4: Respondents from different religious traditions do not all view the move towards making public policy on issues related to religion in the same way.

#### **4 Data analysis and Research Findings**

1. The degree of concern about religious issues by respondents from each country.

As part of this survey respondents were asked whether they were concerned about religious fundamentalism; whether they thought their government should be doing more to promote religious equality; whether they felt satisfied with how their government was dealing with religious conflict; and whether they considered religiosity to be a worthwhile value to teach children at home. These four questions, taken as dependent variables, were used to investigate the degree of concern respondents in the various countries had about issues related to religion.

In all, of the 29 issues, respondents from the countries included in the survey were most concerned with the issue of poverty (51.0%), followed by health (47.1%). Only 5.9% of respondents said they were concerned about religious fundamentalism, only marginally higher than those concerned about the fast pace of technological change (4.3%) or the dominance of corporate power (5.7%). There was, however, considerable variance in the degree of concern felt about religious fundamentalism depending on the country. Table 1 shows that respondents from Singapore and Japan were more concerned about this issue than respondents from other countries were.

In terms of which types of equality should be eagerly promoted in society, the highest proportion selected income/ wealth equality (61%), followed by equal opportunities in education (62.7%). Only 6.6% of respondents felt that religious equality should be eagerly promoted. Again, by country, the highest proportion of respondents selecting the religious option were those in Singapore, with 15.4% believing that religious equality should be promoted more.

There was, however, considerable differences to how survey respondents answered the question on the government's handling of religious conflict. Overall, 36% of respondents were unsatisfied with how their government was dealing with religious conflict, but the figure was much higher in Japan and South Korea, at 72.1% and 60.8%, respectively. In Singapore, by contrast, only 4.7% of respondents were unhappy with the way their government was

handling religious conflict.

On average, 3.7% of survey respondents thought that religiosity was a worthwhile quality to encourage children to learn at home, significantly less than those who considered honesty (38.5%), independence (37.4%), or diligence (32.8%) worthwhile. A proportionately slightly higher number of respondents from South Korea and Singapore, 7.1% and 8.4%, respectively, agreed that religiosity was a worthwhile quality to encourage children to learn at home.

Table 1 Percentage of Agreement between Survey Respondents in the Four Dependent Variables

	Fundamentalism	Religious Equality	Religious Conflict	Religiosity
Taiwan	36 (3.60%)	68 (6.80%)	562 (60.20%)	30 (3.00%)
Hong Kong	45 (4.50%)	46 (4.60%)	678 (75.40%)	45 (4.50%)
Japan	72 (7.20%)	68 (6.80%)	209 (27.90%)	24 (2.40%)
Korea	28 (2.70%)	54 (5.30%)	359 (39.20%)	73 (7.10%)
Singapore	120 (11.60%)	160 (15.40%)	930 (95.30%)	87 (8.40%)
China	127 (6.40%)	139 (7.00%)	1379 (70.40%)	32 (1.60%)
Vietnam	46 (4.60%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	6 (0.60%)
Overall	474 (5.90%)	535 (6.60%)	4117 (64.00%)	297 (3.70%)

Statistically, the differences between the countries in the survey in the above four questions did attain a level of significance, demonstrating that differences do indeed exist in the attitudes the people of these countries have towards the four questions. All in all, however, regardless of the differences in their respective political and social systems, the majority of the countries in the survey have already attained a high degree of secularization, and religious issues are not seen as overly important. The notable exception was with the question about religious conflict, in which respondents from both Japan and South Korea demonstrated a considerable level of concern, expressing low levels of satisfaction with their respective governments in how they were dealing with religious conflict.

## 2. Factors influencing concerns about religious issues

In order to ascertain the effect of each independent variable on the four dependent variables, we undertook binary logistic regression analysis on each, the results of which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Binary Logistic Regression Analysis on the Four Dependent Variables

Logistic Regression	Fundamentalism		Religious Equality		Religious Conflict		Religiosity	
	B	significance	B	significance	B	significance	B	significance
Country**		<b>.000</b>		<b>.004</b>		<b>.000</b>		.311
Hong Kong	.493	.072	-.283	.228	1.242	<b>.000</b>	15.482	.990
Japan	.355	.180	.025	.912	-.747	<b>.000</b>	15.370	.990
Korea	-.805	<b>.008</b>	-.633	<b>.008</b>	-.460	<b>.000</b>	-.219	1.000
Singapore	1.018	<b>.000</b>	.216	.290	2.954	<b>.000</b>	14.025	.991
China	.722	<b>.003</b>	.056	.778	.996	<b>.000</b>	13.319	.991
Vietnam*	.269	.321	-18.628	.989			-1.047	1.000
Gender**	.345	<b>.001</b>	.419	<b>.000</b>	.086	.179	-.532	.408
Age	.001	.766	-.009	<b>.040</b>	.006	<b>.032</b>	-.060	<b>.039</b>
Education**		<b>.000</b>		.206		<b>.001</b>		.127
Mid Education	.285	<b>.049</b>	-.185	.152	.219	<b>.008</b>	-1.391	.083
High Education	1.009	<b>.000</b>	-.235	.098	.332	<b>.000</b>	-1.673	.084
Unseen Spiritual World	-.092	.122	-.107	.066	-.026	.478	.049	.891
Pray or Meditation	-.060	.230	-.158	<b>.000</b>	.029	.358	-.239	.367
Trust of Religious Organization	.366	<b>.000</b>	.011	.865	-.534	<b>.000</b>	.279	.496
Religious Identity	.556	<b>.000</b>	.607	<b>.000</b>	-.121	.173	.032	.971
Importance of Religious Professional Religion**	-.006	.737	-.030	.095	.019	.082	.209	.059
Other Christian	.584	<b>.012</b>	.264	.222	.005	.975	-14.311	.992
Muslim (Sunnah)	1.103	<b>.000</b>	.232	.393	-.123	.746	-14.883	.996
Muslim (Shiah)	-18.315	.999	1.049	.399	19.745	.999	-12.694	.999
Hindu	.081	.862	.636	.065	-.780	.111	-14.612	.997
Buddhist (Mahayana)	.227	.140	.217	.147	.037	.681	.425	.599
Buddhist (Theravada)	1.104	.153	-14.356	.998	-20.816	1.000	.613	1.000
Confucian	-17.809	.999	2.205	<b>.009</b>	-1.506	.129	-11.301	.999
Sikh	-18.884	.999	.649	.621	18.693	.999	-14.241	.999
Taoism	.399	.168	.094	.695	.557	<b>.000</b>	-12.868	.993
Shintoism	-18.424	.999	.401	.616	-.681	.324	-15.017	.999
Catholic	1.125	<b>.000</b>	-.347	.332	.258	.245	1.509	.224
Other	.979	<b>.006</b>	-.892	.145	-.200	.475	-14.639	.997
Constant	-4.676	.000	-1.323	.002	.734	.007	-19.477	.987

\* Vietnam is omitted from the item of religious conflict in the survey.

\*\* Reference points for variables as follows: for nationality, Taiwan; for gender, female; for education, a low level of education; for religious affiliation, "none."

Table 2 shows that religious idea had no impact on the four dependent variables, and that the impact of the frequency of religious practices such as praying or meditation was also negligible. The only effect that reached levels of significance was that regarding religious equality, with a negative regression coefficient, showing that the higher the frequency of religious practices, the less the respondent believed that the government should be eagerly promoting religious equality. The independent variable of the importance of religious professionals did not produce any impact on the four dependent variables. Trust in religious organizations did have an impact on concerns about religious fundamentalism and religious conflict, and identification with a religious group also had an impact on concerns about fundamentalism and religious equality. The more trust respondents had in religious organizations, and the more they identified with religious groups, the more they were concerned about the problem of religious fundamentalism. Also, the more they trusted religious organizations, the less satisfied they were with the way their governments were dealing with religious conflict.

When we look at the type of religion we see that, largely speaking, this had very limited effect on the four dependent variables. Certain findings were quite surprising. For example, Christians, Sunnah Muslims, Catholics and followers of other religions were more concerned with the issue of fundamentalism than were respondents with no religious affiliation; Confucians were more likely to feel that their government should be doing more to promote religious equality; and Taoists felt more satisfied with how their government was dealing with religious conflict.

Next we come to three sociological/ demographic variables of gender, age and level of education. The impact of age on the three dependent variables of religious equality, religious conflict and religiosity did reach levels of significance, albeit with very low regression coefficients. Gender only affected attitudes towards religious fundamentalism and religious equality, with males tending to be more concerned. Education only had an effect on religious fundamentalism and religious conflict: the higher the level of education, the more concerned respondents were with religious fundamentalism, but the more satisfied they were with the way their government was dealing with religious conflict. There seems to be a contradiction here that is not easily explained.

We can use Taiwan as a reference point for the nationality variable. The impact of this

variable was only really observed on the religious fundamentalism and religious conflict dependent variables. A comparatively higher proportion of respondents in Singapore and China believed religious fundamentalism to be cause for concern, and a comparatively lower proportion felt this way in South Korea. In terms of governments' handling of religious conflict, every country showed different results to Taiwan's. A higher proportion of respondents in Japan and South Korea, compared to those in Taiwan, expressed dissatisfaction with their governments' dealing with the problem, and a higher percentage of those in Hong Kong, China and Singapore, again compared to those in Taiwan, said they were satisfied.

## **5 Conclusion and Discussion**

This study took the four questions of whether respondents were concerned about religious fundamentalism; whether they thought their government should be doing more to promote religious equality; whether they felt satisfied with how their government was dealing with religious conflict; and whether they considered religiosity to be a worthwhile value to teach children at home, as dependent variables to investigate seven countries in a 2006 survey. We discovered that these religious issues did not receive a high level of concern, far different from with other secular issues, and that a low proportion of respondents considered that religiosity was a worthwhile value to encourage children to learn at home. In general we can consider these seven countries, despite the considerable differences in their respective political and social systems, to be highly secular societies.

Religious ideas and religious practices had no discernible impact on the four dependent variables. Analysis using respondents with no religious affiliation as a reference point revealed that religious believers are no more concerned about religious issues, nor will they place more importance on religiosity as a desirable value to encourage their children to learn at home. The differences in these four dependent variables are mainly concentrated in the dependent variables of religious fundamentalism and religious conflict, with the dependent variables of level of education and nationality having a relatively large impact. Higher levels of education is one of the achievements of secularization, so a higher level of concern about religious fundamentalism is to be expected, and the impact of nationality reflects the differences in the respective political and social systems of each country. The type of religion had a negligible influence on the four dependent variables. No support was found for any of the four hypotheses proposed in this paper.

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