

Factors Hindering Religious Freedom: International Evidence

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the socioeconomic factors that hinder religious freedom. In doing so, we model religious regulation as a function of several socioeconomic variables for 142 countries. We find that both social and economic factors hinder religious freedom. Interestingly, our results illustrate that Christianity exerts a negative effect and Islam a positive effect on regulation of religion. However, the practice of Buddhism/Hinduism yields no significant effect on religious control. We argue that governmental regulation of religion may be modified by a regime change or constitutional reform. It is plausible that a progressive government or a reformed constitution to advocate religious freedom. Even with the softening of governmental control, cultural prejudices hostile to newer or diverse religions could prevail for many years.

Key Words: Culture, Religious Regulation, Socioeconomic Factors, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism

1. Introduction

The prominence of religion in international political economy is well-documented. Many researchers have considered the role of religion in the explanation of democracy and development (e.g., Huntington, 1984; Pourgerami, 1988; Grammy, 1996; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2000 and 2003; Reynal-Querol, 2002; and Barro and McCleary, 2006). In particular, Grim and Finke (2006) focused their attention on the issue of measuring religious regulation in cross-national research.

In this paper, we will use the Grim and Finke's index of religious regulation to model the socioeconomic factors that hinder religious freedom in 142 countries in 2006. We will also investigate the extent to which Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam affect regulate religious practices. In section 2, we will summarize the measurement of religious regulation. In section 3, we will model factors that hinder religious freedom. In section 4, we will present our empirical results and further examine the link between religion and religious regulation. Section 5 will include our concluding remarks.

2. Measurement

Grim and Finke (2006) measure religious regulation for cross-national research. They construct indices of religious regulation based on data from an extensive coding of the *International Religious Freedom Report* for 196 countries and territories. Using a series of tests to evaluate the new data, they find that their measurements are reliable and valid. They indicate that these indices would allow researchers to measure governmental regulation of religion as well as restrictions placed on religious freedom by social forces beyond the government.

To measure religious regulation, Grim and Finke (p. 6) define *religion* as "explanations of existence based on supernatural assumptions that include statements about the nature and workings of the supernatural and about ultimate meaning." They assert that religious groups are collectives that promote religious beliefs, symbols, and practices supporting these explanations.

In particular, Grim and Finke (p. 19) define social regulation as “restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by other religious groups or associations or the culture at large.” They argue that the questions involving religious regulation focus on social attitudes toward religion and actions of social movements and religious institutions toward other newer, foreign, or minority religions. To construct an index for social regulation of religion, Grim and Finke (pp. 19-21) find answers to a set of five qualitative questions:

- Does the society show negative attitudes toward other or nontraditional religions?
- Does the society show negative attitudes toward conversion to other religions?
- Does the society show negative attitudes toward proselytizing?
- Do the existing religions try to shut out newcomers?
- Are there social movements against certain religious brands?

Grim and Finke’s database on *Social Regulation of Religion* has a range of 0 to 10; where 0 indicates the least amount of regulation and 10 the most. This measurement has a mean of 4.0 and standard deviation of 3.2.

3. Model

To model religious regulation, we employ the Grim and Finke’s index of *Social Regulation of Religion* as the dependent variable and the following determinants of religious control they have introduced as explanatory variables to construct a database for 142 countries:

- *Income Distribution* measured by the Gini Index: 0 for perfect income equality and 1 for perfect income inequality
- *Living Standard* is the level of real per capita income. Value: 1 for less than \$5,000; 2 for \$5,000 to \$10,000; 3 for \$10,000 to 20,000; 4 for \$20,000 to \$30,000; and 5 for greater than \$30,000
- *Country Size* is the mid-year number of individuals living in a given location. Value: 1 for less than 5 million; 2 for 5 to 20 million; 3 for 20 to 50 million; 4 for 50 to 100 million; and 5 for more than 100 million.
- *Life Issues* measures the extent to which the state defers to the religious authority on life and death issues. Value: 1 for yes; 0 for no.
- *Religious Incarceration* is the extent to which the state arrests people for their religious belief or activity. Value: 0 for never; 1 for on occasion; 2 for at all times.
- *Social Movement* measures the extent to which social movements follow religious agenda. Value: 0 for no; 1 for yes, but inactive; 2 for yes and active
- *Regional Segregation* is the extent to which certain regions or cities of the country are strongly associated with particular religions. Value: 0 for not at all; 1 for yes, but tension is not evident; 2 for yes and tension is evident
- *Ethnic Identity* measures the extent to which ethnic identity is related to religious affiliation. Value: 0 for not at all; 1 for somewhat; 2 for on occasion; 3 for all the time
- *Forced Conversion* is the extent to which individuals are forced to convert to the predominant religion of the country. Value: 0 for no; 1 for yes
- Additionally, we define three binary variables to determine the effect of the type of religion on religious regulation:
 - *Christianity*: Value: 1 for countries where the majority of population is Christian, 0 for otherwise.
 - *Islam*: Value: 1 for countries where the majority of population is Muslim, 0 for otherwise
 - *Buddhism/Hinduism*: Value: 1 for countries where the majority of population is Buddhist or Hindu, 0 for otherwise.

4. Results

We estimated the *Social Regulation of Religion* as a function of all explanatory variables defined above. In doing so, we performed the Goldfeld-Quandt test to find out that the residuals are homoscedastic; we also found no significant evidence of collinearity. We tabulated the estimation results with 7 specifications in Table 1.

We find all variables – except *Living Standard*, *Social Movement*, and *Forced Conversion* - have significant partial regression coefficients. In addition, results of the Wald test failed to reject the null hypothesis that coefficients of these deleted variables are jointly equal to zero.

In subsequent estimations of the model, when we drop the abovementioned variables, the explanatory power of the model and the significance level of all other coefficients do not considerably change.

While coefficients of *Country Size*, *Life Issues*, *Religious Incarceration*, and *Regional Segregation* are significant at least at the five percent level; those of *Income Distribution* and *Ethnic Identity* are significant at the ten percent level.

The effect of the type of religion on religious regulation leads to interesting observations. The coefficient of *Islam* is positive and highly significant. In contrast, *Christianity* shows a significantly negative coefficient. However, the effect of *Buddhism/Hinduism* on *Social Regulation of Religion* remains statistically insignificant. We also note that the explanatory power of the model increases with the addition of *Islam* and the model specification that includes *Islam* performs “the best” since it has the lowest Finite Prediction Error (FPE) than other specifications.

Using data shown in Table 2, we take a closer look at the link between religion and religious regulation. We observe that Muslim countries have greater mean and standard deviation than non-Muslim countries. These differences result in larger deviations about the mean ($\mu \pm \sigma$) or smaller variations relative to the mean (σ/μ) for Muslim countries.¹

Next, we construct four groups of countries. Group one consists of countries that apply “harsh” religious control. They have an index value *greater than* the mean *plus* one standard deviation about the mean: (7.2, 10.0). The next group includes countries that exercise “strict” religious regulation. Countries in this group have an index value *within* the interval of the mean *plus* one standard deviation about the mean: (4.0, 7.2). For the third group, we identify countries that practice “gentle” religious regulation. They have an index value *within* the interval of the mean *minus* one standard deviation about the mean: (0.8, 4.0). The final group is comprised of nations that implement “soft” religious regulations. Countries in this group have an index value *less than* the mean *minus* one standard deviation about the mean: (0.0, 0.8).

In this exercise, we observe that 75 percent of Muslim countries exert “harsh/strict” control and 25 percent implement “gentle/soft” regulation. As shown in Tables 3-4, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran lead Muslim countries practicing “harsh/strict” regulation, whereas Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau are the forerunners of Muslim nations with “gentle/soft” control. Conversely, 31 percent of non-Muslim nations wield “harsh/strict” religious control and 69 percent use “gentle/soft” religious regulation. Myanmar, Laos, and China lead non-Muslim countries applying “harsh/strict” control, whereas Denmark, Norway, and Australia are praised for their “gentle/soft” approach to regulating religious practices.

To further explore the effect of the type religion on religious regulation, we divide our database into 44 Muslim countries and 98 non-Muslim nations. Then, we re-estimated specification 4 of the model shown in Table 1, where all explanatory variables yield significant coefficients. Results presented in Table 5 reveal that coefficients of *Country Size*, *Life Issues*, *Religious Incarceration*, *Income Distribution*, *Regional Segregation*, and *Ethnic Identity* are statistically significant in the entire sample (All) and the subsample of Muslim countries. In the subsample of non-Muslim countries, the abovementioned variables have significant coefficients, except for the variable representing *Ethnic Identity*, which exerts no significant effect on *Social Regulation of Religion*.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we find that both social and economic factors affect religious regulation. Variables representing *Country Size*, *Life Issues*, *Religious Incarceration*, *Regional Segregation* and *Ethnic Identity* exert significant positive effects on *Social Regulation of Religion*. In contrast, the significantly negative effect of *Income Distribution* asserts that, all being equal, greater degrees of income inequality help lessen religious regulation. Hence, individuals with more resources can invest in activities that help avert religious demands of the culture.

Additionally, we find that the effect of the type of religion on religious regulation is rather striking. The positive and significant effect of *Islam* states that, all being equal, religious regulation is more prevalent in countries where the majority of the population is Muslim.

¹ Here, Muslim countries refer to nations in which the majority of population follows the religion of Islam and non-Muslim countries indicate otherwise. Source: *The World Factbook*

In contrast, the negative and significant effect of *Christianity* asserts that, all being equal, the practice of this religion helps alleviate religious control. Equally interesting, we find that the practice of *Buddhism/Hinduism* has no effect on religious regulation.

Furthermore, we discovered that a greater percentage of Muslim countries apply “harsh/strict” religious control than countries where Islam is not the predominate religion. Interestingly, the variable representing *Ethnic Identity* (i.e., the extent to which ethnic identity is related to religious affiliation) shows no significant effect on *Social Regulation of Religion* in non-Muslim countries.

Governmental regulation of religion may be modified by a shift of power from one group of political elite to another or by a popular constitutional reform. It is plausible that a progressive government or a reformed constitution advocate religious freedom. Even within that framework, cultural influences – deeply rooted in social norms and attitudes – could remain hostile against newer or diverse religious traditions. Under these conditions, fanatical and unwavering cultural behavior, which takes a long time to evolve, could motivate members of the predominant religion to take actions against minority groups or inhibit religious freedom and diversity of tradition. Even with the softening of governmental control, cultural prejudices could continue to prevail for decades.

Table 1: Modeling Religious Regulation							
Variable / Specification	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Constant	1.26 (1.16)	1.26 (1.17)	1.39 (1.29) ^c	2.06 (2.17) ^b	1.78 (1.97) ^b	2.70 (2.73) ^a	2.09 (2.18) ^b
<i>Life Issues</i>	2.74 (5.80) ^a	2.71 (5.80) ^a	2.73 (5.84) ^a	2.75 (5.87) ^a	1.99 (3.93) ^a	2.31 (4.54) ^a	2.76 (5.85) ^a
<i>Income Distribution</i>	-0.03 (-1.67) ^c	-0.03 (-1.67) ^c	-0.03 (-1.66) ^c	-0.03 (-1.68) ^c	-0.03 (-1.82) ^c	-0.03 (-1.70) ^c	-0.03 (-2.63) ^a
<i>Living Standard</i>	0.15 (1.05)	0.16 (1.13)	0.16 (1.15)	-	-	-	-
<i>Country Size</i>	0.47 (2.40) ^b	0.44 (2.37) ^b	0.47 (2.62) ^a	0.48 (2.64) ^a	0.55 (3.10) ^a	0.52 (2.85) ^a	0.48 (2.63) ^a
<i>Social Movement</i>	0.19 (0.90)	0.19 (0.95)	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Religious Incarceration</i>	1.97 (4.66) ^a	1.94 (4.65) ^a	1.95 (4.66) ^a	1.85 (4.46) ^a	1.53 (3.74) ^a	1.59 (3.70) ^a	1.87 (4.43) ^a
<i>Regional Segregation</i>	0.71 (2.49) ^b	0.70 (2.46) ^b	0.75 (2.67) ^a	0.63 (2.36) ^b	0.69 (2.68) ^a	0.60 (2.29) ^b	0.63 (2.35) ^b
<i>Forced Conversion</i>	-0.47 (-0.49)	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Ethnic Identity</i>	0.28 (1.65) ^c	0.29 (1.66) ^c	0.29 (1.67) ^c	0.31 (1.65) ^c	0.26 (1.66) ^c	0.30 (1.73) ^c	0.31 (1.73) ^c
<i>Islam</i>	-	-	-	-	1.62 (3.40) ^a	-	-
<i>Christianity</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-0.98 (-2.12) ^b	-
<i>Buddhism/Hinduism</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-0.22 (-0.27)
ESS	675.30	676.55	680.78	704.05	647.82	681.02	703.65
N	141	141	141	141	141	141	141
R ²	0.53	0.53	0.52	0.52	0.55	0.53	0.51
F	16.16 ^a	18.26 ^a	20.78 ^a	23.17 ^a	23.07 ^a	21.02 ^a	19.73 ^a
FPE	4.15	4.22	4.31	4.52	4.10 ^d	4.31	4.45

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the critical t-values and ^a denotes 1%, ^b 5%, and ^c 10% level of significant for a two-tailed test. ^d The model with smallest FPE.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Measures of Religious Regulation

	Mean	St. Deviation	Mean ± Deviation	St.	Coefficient of Variation	Count
<i>Social Religious Regulation:</i>						
All Countries	4.0	3.2	0.8 – 7.2	0.80		142
Muslim Countries	6.1	3.3	2.8 – 9.4	0.54		44
Non-Muslim Countries	3.0	2.7	0.3 – 5.7	0.90		98

Table 3: Social Regulation of Religion - Muslim Countries

Harsh	Strict	Gentle	Soft
Saudi Arabia	Lebanon	Turkmenistan	Gambia, The
Pakistan	Nigeria	Kyrgyzstan	Senegal
Iran	Niger	Albania	Guinea-Bissau
Afghanistan	Mauritania	Mali	Sierra Leone
Azerbaijan	Bangladesh	Tajikistan	Burkina Faso
Egypt	Guinea	Kazakhstan	
Indonesia	Brunei		
Iraq	Libya		
Chad	Oman		
Tunisia	Bosnia and Herzegovina		
Uzbekistan	Djibouti		
Algeria			
Jordan			
Kuwait			
Malaysia			
Morocco			
Syria			
Turkey			
Yemen			
United Arab Emirates			
Bahrain			
Qatar			

Table 5: Modeling Religious Regulation by Countries

Variable	All	Muslim	Non-Muslim
Constant	2.06 (2.17) ^b	2.58 (2.66) ^b	1.15 (0.55)
<i>Life Issues</i>	2.75 (5.87) ^a	1.86 (3.27) ^a	3.37 (4.31) ^a
<i>Income Distribution</i>	-0.03 (-1.68) ^c	-0.05 (-2.73) ^b	-0.03 (-1.75) ^c
<i>Country Size</i>	0.48 (2.64) ^a	0.56 (3.04) ^a	0.41 (2.69) ^b
<i>Religious Incarceration</i>	1.85 (4.46) ^a	1.45 (2.49) ^b	1.95 (3.21) ^a
<i>Regional Segregation</i>	0.63 (2.36) ^b	0.87 (2.64) ^b	0.99 (2.20) ^b
<i>Ethnic Identity</i>	0.31 (1.65) ^c	0.24 (1.72) ^c	0.18 (0.31)
ESS	704.05	375.93	189.80
N	141	43	98
R ²	0.52	0.58	0.46
F	23.17 ^a	12.66 ^a	8.44 ^a

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the critical t-values and ^a denotes 1%, ^b 5%, and ^c 10% level of significant for a two-tailed test. ^dThe model with smallest FPE.

Table 4: Social Regulation of Religion – Non-Muslim Countries

Harsh	Strict	Gentle	Soft
Myanmar	Ukraine	Thailand	Bolivia
Laos	Belarus	Argentina	Burundi
China	Bulgaria	Jamaica	Cambodia
Armenia	Greece	Japan	Switzerland
Vietnam	Nepal	Mexico	Czech Republic
Singapore	Mongolia	Moldova	Dominican Republic
Georgia	Tanzania	Peru	Ecuador
	India	Sri Lanka	Estonia
	Central African Republic	Germany	Honduras
	Colombia	Ghana	Ireland
	Ethiopia	Israel	Korea, South
	Macedonia	Italy	Lesotho
	Romania	Lithuania	Malawi
	Russia	Panama	Namibia
	Rwanda	Swaziland	Netherlands
	Zimbabwe	Gabon	New Zealand
	Cote d'Ivoire	Spain	Nicaragua
	Cameroon	Chile	Papua New Guinea
	Kenya	Croatia	Paraguay
	Latvia	Guatemala	Poland
	Liberia	Hungary	Portugal
	Uganda	Slovak Republic	South Africa
	Georgia	Slovenia	Costa Rica
		Belgium	Venezuela
		Botswana	Uruguay
		Brazil	Sweden
		China-Hong Kong	France
		El Salvador	United Kingdom
		Madagascar	United States
		Mozambique	Canada
		Philippines	Finland
		Trinidad and Tobago	Austria
		Zambia	Australia
			Norway
			Denmark

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