

DONALD B. HOLSINGER

SEARCHING FOR THE DIVIDENDS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY: WHO BENEFITS AND WHO PAYS?¹

Abstract

Although recent research has established that there are positive correlations among indicators of religious freedom and social capital and economic development, the question addressed in this paper has to do with the evangelistic success of three outreach-oriented churches with worldwide membership bases. This preliminary investigation uses only the Average Quinquennial Growth Rate (AQGR) as the dependent variable of interest.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons (or, interchangeably, LDS) and Seventh-day Adventists all share a great deal in common. They are strict in the sense of requiring adherence to behavior peculiar to their religious tradition and uncommon to the cultures in which they are embedded. They also rely heavily on worldwide evangelism to spread their message and acquire new adherents. All three religions have approximately fifty-year histories in a wide range of countries, and employ active proselyting methods for spreading their message to attract new adherents. These religions are all active in the promotion of freedom of religion in the legal and social contexts in which they perform their evangelizing activities.

The central question addressed in this paper is whether religious liberty has affected membership growth in a sample of 170 countries over a period of the past fifty years. Scholars have hypothesized a negative relationship but this has never been demonstrated empirically to our knowledge. We were unable to find a significant association between a range of religious liberty measures and our indicator of membership growth for any of the three religious groups under consideration. Our large 50-year (1960 to 2010) and 170 country database did show statistical associations between membership growth and human development (strongly negative), and also with economic development (also negative), providing some support for the modernization theory of religious growth.

Introduction

Recent research by Grim and Finke has established that there are positive correlations among indicators of religious freedom and economic development.² Many, but not all, modern states understand the benefits that accrue to them from a legal climate of religious freedom and a social culture free of social hostilities toward religious bodies. Still the question of the impact of religious liberty on the ability of organized religion to succeed in their core mission has yet to be examined.

¹ This is a revised draft of a paper that was originally prepared for the October 2011 annual meeting of the Association of Universities for Democracy in Dubrovnik, Croatia. This early revision is currently in preparation at the Geneva office of the Kennedy Center for International Studies.

² See Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied; Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*; Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Specifically, do Christian evangelizing religions benefit directly from religious liberty? This paper addresses an issue of interest to social scientists who study religious growth factors and to religions that defend religious liberty on the grounds that their survival is at stake.

Modernization theorists have maintained that the inherent attraction of religion declines with the rise of secular society. But some faith-based organizations disagree: *"For years, it was assumed, certainly in the West, that, as society developed, religion would wither away,"* said Tony Blair in a January 2, 2012 blogpost *"Faith in a Globalized Age,"* published on *New Europe Online*. *"But it hasn't,"* said the former British Prime Minister, *"For many Europeans brought up in the 1960s and 1970s there was a single equation: as society progressed, religion would decline. It hasn't happened. The global numbers of those espousing a faith has increased and what's more has increased even in many nations enjoying strong prospects of development."*

Tony Blair doesn't explicitly identify freedom of religion as a causal factor in the rise of religious identification but others have.

If religious freedom is merely a public cover for the rise of socially divisive schisms, who really benefits from its presence? If not the tax-paying public then who? Do religions themselves benefit? Christian religions typically invest heavily in the legal defense and promotion of religious freedom even though there is scant evidence that its presence or absence materially affects the success of their evangelistic endeavors.

Religious bodies, we assume, defend freedom of religion, because they benefit from it. This paper is an attempt to examine that very relationship. It asks whether or not three specific Christian religions, well known for their strict observance and proselytism, benefit from high levels of freedom of religion. To our knowledge this proposition has never before been put to an empirical test. Outstanding research by Grim and Finke have lead to the conclusion that there are many tangible benefits to society of religious liberty and that where it is in jeopardy and declining, a host of social ills are sure to follow.

Modernizations theorists have argued that as societies evolve from predominately rural agrarian to urban industrial their denizens will likewise change from reliance on religion to fulfill their communal needs and provide answers to natural phenomena to scientists and people enlightened by higher humanistic learning. How can religions survive then in an era of ever increasing urbanization, secular education, widespread and low cost availability of knowledge? Is freedom of religion a necessary element, a sort of ancient buffer zone in which religions take refuge in the modern age?

Opponents of religious freedom point to the persistence of religious related violence. They reason that eliminating the opportunity for religions to operate would also decrease the levels of inter-religious warfare. Such opposition to freedom of religion often appears in the argument that religions fight tooth and nail for freedom of religion because they, and only they, benefit from it. We all know of an instance somewhere, or suppose we do, where a victory for one religion or another was a loss for agnostics or atheists. Non-religious people, this line of reasoning assumes, are forced to pay for religious freedom but derive no benefits from it. In

the absence of evidence, these arguments are difficult either to sustain or debunk. In the face of intuition and anecdotal evidence, it is always good to look at data.

What is Freedom of Religion?

Freedom of Religion or Belief is explicitly acknowledged in the United Nations as a human right. This right was enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has been used throughout the free world as the basis for legal opinions and customary law. Legal scholars and social scientists from a variety of disciplines have in recent years pointed to a range of threats to religious liberty stemming from both courts and legislative bodies at the national and international levels. Among many others, one recurring concern about the effects of the erosion of religious liberty is the impact this might have on the ability of some faiths to carry out the work that is a central feature of their existential rationale. This study intends to cast empirical light on the strength and validity of the relationship between measures of religious liberty on the one hand and religious success on the other.

Again, the central question is how religious success is affected by the presence or absence of religious liberty. Scholars suspect that the two have a direct positive relationship but this has never been demonstrated empirically to our knowledge. Freedom of Religion, the subject of a huge literature in the field of International Law and religious studies generally, is not commonplace in the Sociology of Religion. It is not prominent in the religious economies model, which seems an oversight given the contextual prominence of both government regulation and social restrictions on the observance of religion as a practical, daily matter.

Methods

This research draws heavily on ARDA³ and Freedom House data to quantify the nature of religious freedom present in a given year in most countries of the world. ARDA data refer either to government laws, regulations and established practice, or to social acceptance or rejection of religion by the citizens of a nation state. The 60 variables that are collected by ARDA are combined into three composite measures. We use the composite indicators in this work. Variations in the degree of religious freedom, as summarized by the composite or scale score, are related statistically to variation in religious success. Due to the limited time frame covered by the ARDA data, we found it necessary to also use a source for estimates of religious freedom prior to 2000. The best data source was Freedom House, whose “civil liberties” variable is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has a substantial proportion of questions devoted to freedom of religion and belief.

For purposes of this study three religions are compared: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons or alternatively LDS), Seventh-day Adventists (SDA) and Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW). These well-known Christian religions all have western (American) origins and rely heavily on worldwide evangelism to

³ The Association of Religious Data Archive (ARDA) is a collection of surveys, polls, and other data submitted by researchers and made available online by the ARDA.

spread their message, acquire new adherents, and establish themselves as recognized religious organizations for legal and tax purposes.

In this preliminary investigation, we use membership growth as a proxy measure of evangelistic success. The annual number of new adherents added to membership roles in a given country is one fair, and perhaps the most commonplace denominator, of success. Throughout most of the Christian community, membership growth denotes the effective spreading of the Christian gospel as understood by a particular Christian denomination.

Membership Data Sources and Constraints

Initial efforts to compile a working data set included 210 countries. Many of these were not members of the United Nations and others were very small with populations of less than 50,000. Eventually the decision was taken to limit our attention to countries with populations of greater than 250,000. This decision left us 170 countries and allows us to focus on countries that are most likely to act independent of larger neighbors. This decision excludes less than .5 percent of the world's population.

Religion membership data for total annual membership over the fifty-year time frame (1960 to 2010) are available from a number of sources; however, this paper relies on officially published "membership" numbers. Membership is defined differently even among these three religions that otherwise have much in common. Total membership may include annual increases from natural internal births and from converts reported for a given year. Or it may focus on measures of religious practice or observance, as illustrated best by Jehovah's Witnesses or the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

Analysis and Results

The first step in a long process was to calculate the growth rates or, more precisely, the Annual Average Quinquennial Growth Rates. Bearing in mind our decision to use a five-year clustered rate called a "quinquennium" the rate is expressed as the average, compound five-year growth rate for a group or hereafter the AQGR. Membership data were exhaustively checked against many reliable sources.

The AQGR were calculated by year, country and religion. The results reveal a clear pattern in the 50-year decline in growth rates. For the LDS, for example, the 24.1 AQGR for the first five-year period (Q60 or 1960 to 1965) declines to 4.3 AQGR for Q05, the last period beginning in 2005 and ending in 2010. The JW growth rate decline is similar but starts lower at 8.4 and ends lower at just 0.7. So the downward trend in growth rates is substantial and unmistakable. Remembering that this is still positive growth, the worldwide decline at the same time for three completely independent religious bodies is suggestive of an external cause rather than an internal policy shift. At this point we do not attempt to "explain" this change, merely to note its existence.

Findings on the Impact of Religious Freedom on Membership Growth

The principal objective of this research is to discover the impact of religious liberty on the ability of three strict, proselyting Christian religions to increase their memberships worldwide. Are the religious membership growth figures different for our 170-country population when controlling for religious liberty reported in each country for a particular five-year time period?

Examination of data from all three religions revealed a consistent pattern in which the relationship between measured religious liberty and growth rates were, with very few exceptions, low and negative. Expressed differently, the growth rates for the LDS are higher when the country-level freedom of religion measures are slightly lower. We see that the Freedom of Religion increases slowly overtime in a straight moderately rising trend line. The 40-year⁴ trend line for the LDS AQGR rises slightly to 1975 and followed thereafter by a steady sharp downward decline.

The analysis was repeated for Jehovah's Witnesses data. The JW results are consistent and little affected by the separation into homogenous religious liberty categories. Initially it appears that there is a small benefit from high level of religious freedom; but that advantage is not found by 1975 and there appears to be the opposite relationship in Q95 and subsequent years. In other words, similar to the LDS finding, JW membership growth is negatively associated with religious freedom—the more freedom observed the lower the growth rate. These relationships are not large but consistent at every time period.

We next turned to the Seventh-day Adventist data. The analysis for Adventists once again revealed the same clear pattern of association between religious liberty and membership growth. Like the other two denominations, the most prominent features are the slow but inexorable decline in the growth rates and the negative association with religious liberty. When we looked at the Adventist country level data divided into three freedom groupings (low, medium and high religious liberty) we again were surprised to discover that, in most five-year periods, the Adventists grew faster in countries displaying the lowest levels of freedom of religion.

At this point, the analysis leads to the conclusion that while religious liberty, however measured, is slowly but steadily improving worldwide, with several glaring exceptions, the same cannot be said for religious membership growth that presumably benefitted from it. Freedom of Religion is a demand side variable, outside the direct control of religious bodies themselves. If membership growth rates are declining steadily in the face of small advances in freedom of religion, the connection between the two is problematic at best. The absence of statistically significant correlations between the two sets of variables even when measured contemporaneously, gives support to the view that freedom of religion has not played a large role in membership growth, in either direction.

⁴ Since the Freedom House data begin with 1972, this analysis was limited to a 40-year timeline rather than 50 as we had planned to have.

Are There Any Demand-Side Variables Affecting Religious Membership Growth?

Even if freedom of religion is not related to membership growth, are there no contextual or demand side country characteristics that are? There were two possibilities: the Human Development Index or HDI and familiar indicators of national prosperity such as GDP per capita. Both had been reported to be association with the growth of new religions worldwide.

At the risk of detracting from the emphasis on freedom of religion, we found these demand side characteristics to be strongly related to religious membership growth. The Human Development Index stands out as a particularly high correlation with membership growth for all three religions. The strength and direction of this relationship caught our attention. The high religious membership growth countries have **lower HDI scores** than do the low growth countries—so the relationship is negative and strong. Most of these correlations between HDI and religious growth are statistically significant at the .05 level and many of them are quite large. These correlations reveal a truly remarkable negative association between the Human Development Index and membership growth and this relationship has been in place for a long time and is the same for all three religions.

There is a powerful story here—we just don't know exactly what it is. What has been shown is that some demand side characteristics of a country are related to growth. But of the three we examined here, Human Development Index, Wealth per capita, and Freedom of Religion, only the last one, Freedom of Religion, shows small empirical association with membership growth—the other two demonstrate quite robust associations.

Discussion

It is not logical to suppose that most people, when asked to provide reasons for their religious conversion, would look to demand side variable in providing an answer. One would not likely expect to hear a new convert describing his or her lack of secondary education or poor access to preventive health care or abundant religious freedom as a motivating factor in the decision. This is not to doubt that there are many predisposing demand-side, contextual variables. Still it is instructive to examine reasons that are actually given. The recent Pew Institute publication "Mormons in America" provides just this sort of opportunity for one country. What it does not do is provide a comparative analysis of conversion factors across many countries and over long periods of time.

For the United States, when Pew survey researchers asked sample respondents to describe in their own words their reasons for converting to Mormonism, 59 percent of American converts to Mormonism cite the religion's beliefs as a reason.⁵ The most common responses within this category are general statements about the religion being true or making sense (38 percent), as well as statements about the Book of Mormon or other scriptures (13 percent). Mormonism's emphasis on the family and family values is cited as a reason for converting by 5 percent of converts,

⁵ *Mormons in America: Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society*, The Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life; January 12, 2012.

and 3 percent cite the faith's specific teaching that families can be bound together for eternity.

Although it is tempting to speculate that reasons for joining a new faith in the Democratic Republic of Congo may be different from reasons in the United States, we are not confident that such differences exist. In short, we conclude that the often-acknowledged difficulty in disentangling supply and demand side characteristics in explanations of religious membership growth exists for us.

Conclusions

Religious liberty has a peculiar relationship to membership growth. The peculiarity is less a matter of having a negative or positive influence and more a question of being hard to find at all. When viewed from an "economics of religion" perspective, where religious liberty shows an influence on membership growth at all, it is a slightly negative one. As a demand-side variable (characteristics of the country not controlled by the religion), its impact probably is indirect through formal state recognition or registration, allowing the entry of missionaries and in providing an enabling legal environment of property ownership and tax exemptions.

Once a church presence has been established, often through foreign-born missionaries, membership growth is predominately a function of supply side variables (aspects of the faith that they control). Religious liberty, of course, isn't a supply side variable and consequently has little to do with predicting how well the religion performs in terms of adding proselytes or in establishing a strong institutional capacity, for example, new stakes or temples.

This isn't intuitively obvious. Many casual observers have been tempted to conclude that strictures against religion such as proselyting bans, restrictive registration laws, strong bias against non-majority religions, are at least as important as any inherent attraction that a new religion might itself provide. We find no evidence for these conclusions.

Dr. Donald B. Holsinger
Professor Emeritus of International Development Studies at Brigham Young
University's David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies
Kennedy Center, Geneva, Switzerland office
KCIS.Geneva.UN@gmail.com