

Research Notes

Religiosity and Social Problems in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study analyzes the views of Malaysian teenagers on selected aspects of religion and its impact on their involvement in social problems. Religiosity is conceptualized as consisting of ideological, ritualistic, intellectual, experiential and consequential dimensions. It is measured in two ways: 1) the overall measure of religiosity (for both Muslims and non-Muslims which excludes ideological), and 2) the measure of religiosity for Muslims only (which includes ideological). The research, based upon a questionnaire administered to 2869 secondary school children, found that each component is positively correlated with the overall measure of religiosity. It also reveals that the more religious the person is, the less he or she becomes involved in social problems. Thus, religion plays an important role in contemporary Malaysian society and it should be given due emphasis in Malaysia's nation building and developmental activities.

Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has undergone several phases of development.¹ As a result, the nation achieved a remarkable level of progress especially in the economic, physical and material aspects. The pace of development has been rapid as the country has shifted

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from a commodity-based economy to one based on manufacturing and industry with an emphasis on information, communication and knowledge. The country, however, is also witnessing an increasing number of social problems such as crime, drug addiction, loafing and juvenile delinquencies. Reported cases of crimes involving juveniles have increased by 62% from 2,408 cases in 1980 to 4,012 cases in 1995.² On drug addiction, a total number of 1,288 drug abusers were detained under Section 39(B) of *Akta Dadah Berbahaya* 1952, 2,216 under Section 39(A), 1,112 under other sections of the same act and 7,857 under other acts related to drugs in 1996.³ A research conducted on Malay and Chinese students in the Klang Valley in 1996 found that 40% of youths aged between 13 and 21 years have watched pornographic videos, 28% were involved in gambling, 14% in heavy drug addiction, and 70% in smoking.⁴

To arrest these problems, a number of recommendations have been made ranging from the need for greater parental control to the reintroduction of public caning in schools. These emergency measures may be useful, but more concerted and definite long term strategies need to be formulated to address these social problems.

It has been mentioned many a time that the deviant behaviours of teenagers is very much influenced by the negative exposure to the media and peer pressure, lack of religious knowledge, and lack of parental supervision. Therefore, it is important to study the relationship of these factors with social problems since they can directly contribute to the prevalence of social ills. This study attempts to investigate the relationship between teenagers' level of religiousness and their involvement in various kinds of social problems.

Definition and Measurement of Religiosity

Discussions of religion often trigger controversies. The discussion becomes more controversial when it pertains to one's or society's religiousness or religiosity. This partly explains why scholars interested in the study of religion focus less on the aspects of measurement compared to those more "qualitative" ones. This can be seen, for example, in the field of sociology.

In traditional sociology, religion is viewed as one of the social institutions. It is normally discussed as a separate topic besides culture,

social stratification, social change and others in most introductory sociology books. Although Sociology of Religion pays more attention to discussing religion from the sociological perspective, most books on Sociology of Religion do not make 'measurement' as its focus. In fact, most of them do not even include it as one of the topics. Instead, their elaboration focus more on theories, concepts and definitions of religion in order to provide insights into the different aspects of religion such as the one by Hamilton.⁵

Most scholars define religiosity in one way or another as "an individual's or group's intensity of commitment to a religious belief system." Unlike physical or material achievement, religiousness is very difficult to measure. One such difficulty relates to the different perspectives of religion and religiosity of people. As remarked by McGuire:

... individuals differ in their ways of being religious, one person might express religion by meditating regularly, another by attending church, another by reading certain literature, another by participating in a civil rights demonstration.⁶

Despite the difficulties, there are scholars who attempt to discuss the possible ways of measuring one's or society's religiosity. However, it is found that most of them characterize religiosity only by a single measure such as one's religious affiliation or preference.⁷ This has made the measure of religiosity incomprehensive. We believe that a complete picture of religiosity should be derived from a multi-dimensional measure. Renzetti and Curran, based on Stark and Glock's theory, suggest that a more comprehensive religiosity can be measured on five dimensions termed as ritualistic, experiential, ideological, consequential and intellectual religiosity.⁸ As the term suggests, ritualistic religiosity looks at the religious rites and rituals observed by a person such as attendance to mosque, church or temple. Experiential religiosity measures how strongly a person feels attached to his or her religion. Ideological religiosity concerns with the degree of commitment to religious doctrine or teachings. The extent to which religion affects the way a person conducts his or her daily life is best described as consequential religiosity. Lastly, intellectual religiosity measures a persons' knowledge of the history and teaching of his or her religion.⁹

Although researches have been conducted using Stark and Glock's

concept and measure of religiosity, this study does not adopt their original scale to measure religiosity. Instead, we use the same dimensions but develop our own items for measuring each of the said dimensions. This is necessitated by the nature of our study which in its larger version, investigates 'Values and Social Problems' among teenagers, and that it is only meant to infer general reflections of religiousness among respondents.

Preference for the Stark and Glock's dimensions of religiosity is due to the fact that there has been obvious paucity of works on measurement of religiosity by Muslim scholars. Moreover, our review of works on religion and religiosity by Muslim scholars reveal that the dimensions proposed by Stark and Glock are found to be closer to the comprehensive view of religiosity envisioned in Islam, at least in its general concept if not in detail. This is indicated, for instance, by Md. Ilyas who proposes that Muslims should have a relatively different scale to measure religiosity because "... the Islamic concept of religion is fundamentally different from the above mentioned concept of religion (that is limited only to the ritual aspect)."¹⁰ Since the scope of religion is defined by the very concept of religion, "... the content dimensions of religiosity vary considerably with Judeo-Christian religious tradition."¹¹ According to Ilyas, the true reference to religiosity can be represented by the Qur'ānic term *taqwā* (lit. piety) - a multidimensional concept of religiousness that includes *ma'rifah* (knowledge), *īmān* (belief), *'amal* (practice), *natījah* (consequence) and *ihsān* (realization of excellence). According to him, these dimensions of Islamic religiosity are derived from the Qur'ān and Sunnah and the writings of Muslim scholars like al-Ghazālī and Mawdūdī.

Upon closer analysis, we find general similarities between Glock and Ilyas' conception of religiosity. *Ma'rifah* dimension seems to be similar in principle to the Glock's intellectual dimension, *natījah* to consequential, *īmān* to ideological, *'amal* to ritualistic and *ihsān* to experiential. As mentioned earlier, although each dimension in Md. Ilyas' view of religiosity does not necessarily correspond exactly to that of Glock, both share a common perception on the nature of religiosity, which is multi-dimensional. As such, it can be concluded that the study is inspired by the ideas of Stark and Glock as well as those of Md. Ilyas in formulating a framework for measuring more comprehensive dimensions of religiosity. Based on this premise, we

have constructed some questions to measure each of those aspects of religiosity. Admittedly, the items included in the questionnaire to measure each dimension are quite limited in number. A more comprehensive measure of religiosity would require a more comprehensive list of items to be developed for each dimension. It must be noted here that, in this study, ideological religiosity was measured for Muslim respondents only. The questions related to this were on the number of times the respondents pray a day, and the number of days they missed fasting without valid/ permissible reasons in the month of *Ramaḍān* in the previous year. Their responses to these two statements were measured against the benchmark values which are 5 and 0 respectively. Although similar questions were given to non-Muslim respondents, their responses could not be used to compute their level of ideological religiosity since there were no benchmarks to compare them to. Due to this, the responses from Muslim and non-Muslim respondents on ideological religiosity are not comparable.

Therefore, for the overall level of religiosity, i.e., for both Muslims and non-Muslims, we used the mean value of only four aspects of religiosity, namely, ritualistic, experiential, consequential and intellectual. For Muslims, we computed the mean value of all the five aspects of religiosity including ideological. Thus Muslim respondents had two measures of religiosity while non-Muslim respondents had one. Both of these measures are based on a scale of 0 to 3 where values closer to 3 indicate high religiosity, and values near 0 denote low religiosity.

Definition and Measurement of Social Problems

There is plethora of scholarly works on social problems especially in social sciences. However, they are normally confined to such topics as definitions, theories, causes and solutions. In other words, they are more conceptual and theoretical than applied. With the availability of more improved tools of analysis, investigations of social issues such as social problems and religion tend to be more applied and quantitative.

Social problems are normally seen from two main perspectives - the subjective and the objective. The common belief of subjective theorists is that motivational or subjective intention of action is an indispensable criterion for determining social situations. Spector and Kitsuse, representing this perspective, define social problems as "...

the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions.”¹² The works of Max Weber, George H. Mead, Herbert Blumer, Howard S. Becker and Peter L. Berger also contain elements of this perspective.

In contrast, the objective perspective views social problems through an observational and empirical investigation. Objective theorists, however, do not seem to have a uniform definition of social problems. Horton and Leslie, for instance, define the phenomenon of social problems as

... a condition affecting a significant number of people in ways considered undesirable, about which it is felt something can be done through collective social action.¹³

This idea is shared by Zastrow and Maris who look at social problems as behaviours which are incongruent with an “influential group” or “charismatic individuals.”¹⁴ At any rate, none of these definitions seems to relate social problems literally to value. Rubington and Weinberg fill this gap by defining social problem as “... an alleged situation that is incompatible with the values of a significant number of people who agree that an action is needed to alter the situation.”¹⁵

Based on the views of subjective and objective theorists, we consider a condition to be a social problem when it: a) exists objectively, b) is considered undesirable and negative because of its incompatibility with the values held by the people, c) affects a significant number of people, d) is perceived as undesirable by a significant number of people, and e) is believed to be remediable through collective efforts.

For the same of measurement, a list of social problems was constructed based on the report by the Ministry of National Unity and Community Development, Malaysia.¹⁶ These problems are as listed in Section 11 of the student questionnaire. Respondents were then requested to indicate the number of times they were involved in each of the social problems - never, once, 2-3 times, 4-5 times, and more than 5 times. For each respondent, we assigned the value 0 for never, 1 for once, 2.5 for 2-3 times, 4.5 for 4-5 times and 6 for more than 5 times. This measure for extent of involvement will probably be an underestimation of the true value since we used the (minimum) value 6 for those who responded more than 5 times.

Sample

This study selected secondary school students to represent teenagers. These students were chosen from Forms 1, 3 and 5 representing respectively above average, average and below average classes to capture the various age groups as well as academic ability. The sampling frame, a list of all government secondary schools in Johor, the southern state of Malaysia bordering Singapore, was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The schools were listed according to the various districts in the state. Based on the number of schools in each district, we selected four districts that have the largest number of schools. These are Johor Bahru, Muar, Batu Pahat and Segamat. A total of 10 schools were randomly chosen with the following specifications: 3 schools each from Johor Bahru and Muar, and 2 schools each from Batu Pahat and Segamat, and in each district, at least one rural school is chosen and another urban. These procedures ensure that the sample is representative and proportionate to the actual population.

The chosen schools were requested to select three classes (above average, average and below average) from Forms 1, 3 and 5, and to provide a copy of the class register of the selected classes. All the students in the selected classes were included in the sample. Thus, the study obtained a sample size of 2,869 of whom 33.9 percent were form one, 33.6 percent from form three and 32.5 percent from form five representing Malay (68.1%), Chinese (26.9%), Indians (4.7%) and others (0.3%). In terms of religion, Islam outnumbered the rest with 68.6 percent, followed by Buddhism (24.2%), Hinduism (4.2%), Christianity (2.3%) and others (0.7%). The sampled students came from four districts: Segamat (19.0%), Muar (31.0%), Batu Pahat (20.5%) and Johor Bahru (29.5%). About 60 percent of these schools were situated in the rural areas and the remaining 40 percent in the urban centers. The sample was almost equally distributed between male (50.7%) and female (49.3%).

Findings

As indicated earlier, we used two measures of religiosity in our analysis to suit the Malaysian situation and they are shown in Table 1. One excluded the ideological dimension which is computed for all respondents, and the other included all the dimensions and used to compute religiosity of Muslim respondents only. We denote the first

one as R1 and the second R2. A look at the correlation between each component of religiosity with the two overall measures of religiosity shows that each component is (at 1 percent level) positively correlated with the overall measures.

Table 1: Correlation Coefficients of Overall Religiosity with Individual Components

Individual Components	Overall Religiosity	
	R1	R2
Ritualistic religiosity	.584	.595
Experiential religiosity	.664	.433
Ideological religiosity	.261	.549
Consequential religiosity	.657	.578
Intellectual religiosity	.762	.642

Table 2 reports the mean scores of religiosity for all students and for R1 and R2 groups separately. On a scale of 0-3, students scored relatively high on religiosity, with a mean of 2.06 for the first measure of overall religiosity (which does not include ideological religiosity, and measured for all respondents). The score was even higher for the second measure (which includes ideological religiosity, and computed for Muslim students only) with a mean of 2.27.

As far as the relationship between religiosity with social problems is concerned, the findings can be reported as in Table 3 which shows the correlation coefficients of each social problem with religiosity. Using the religiosity measure that includes ideological religiosity, R2 (for Muslim students), we find that teenagers with higher religiosity levels were less involved in all social problems considered in this study.

Similar findings are obtained for the other measure of religiosity, R1, with one exception. Smoking is positively correlated with religiosity, i.e., students with higher religiosity levels were more involved in smoking than those with lower religiosity levels. This result appears to be inconsistent with the result we obtained earlier for the other religiosity measure, R2. One possible explanation for this is that in Islam, smoking is not encouraged, thus the more religious ones will refrain from smoking. However, smoking may not be seen as a negative behaviour in other religions, thus smoking was not used as one of the factors to assess one's religiosity.

Table 2: Mean Values of Religiosity

		Religiosity	
		R1	R2
All		2.0649	2.2730
Gender	Male	2.1121	2.3010
	Female	2.0172	2.2441
Form	1	2.1280	2.3014
	3	2.0459	2.2786
	5	2.0230	2.2345
Ethnicity	Malay	2.1922	2.2743
	Chinese	1.6366	1.7725
	Indian	2.1494	2.0950
Place	Segamat	2.1392	2.2684
	Muar	2.0666	2.3036
	B. Pahat	2.0594	2.3186
	J. Bahru	2.0208	2.2119
School	Urban	2.1206	2.3057
	Rural	2.0281	2.2490
Class	Below average	1.9870	2.1684
	Average	2.0970	2.2815
	Above average	2.0981	2.3584

Table 3: Religiosity and Social Problems

Social Problem	Overall Religiosity	
	R1	R2
Drinking liquor	-.237***	-.079***
“Bohsia”	-.041**	-.112***
Stealing	.020	-.114***
Drugs	.013	-.057**
Cohabitation	-.247***	-.099***
Gambling	-.059***	-.161***
Running away from home	-.078***	-.093***
Loafing	-.029	-.110***
Illegal motorbike racing	-.047**	-.097***
Truancy	.030	-.157***
Smoking	.074***	-.074***
Vandalism	.004	-.097***
Gangsterism	-.070***	-.100***
Sex	-.039*	-.097***
Pornographic videos	-.032	-.128***

***significant at 1 percent level; **significant at 5 percent level; *significant at 10 percent level.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The data obtained from the survey of 2,869 children from 10 randomly selected secondary schools in Johore reveals that religion is an important factor in inculcating good values and preventing social problems in Malaysia. Therefore, religion in the context of contemporary Malaysia needs to be emphasized in order to develop a moral society as proposed and envisaged in Vision 2020. In order to achieve this, the following measures may be proposed:

1. More religious programs should be aired. These programs need to address actual day-to-day practical problems faced by the society.

2. Inter-religious discussions and dialogues meant for promoting universal values should be initiated. These programs can either be aired through the electronic media or in the form of public lectures.

3. Publication of and access to quality reading materials on religion should be promoted.

4. Talks related to religion, for both Muslims and non-Muslims, should be included in any staff development programs at the workplace.

5. Parents should stress the importance of religion in every aspect of life. They must ensure that their children receive at least the basic religious and moral education. In this respect, the government must provide the necessary infrastructure to facilitate this process.

6. In schools, religion should not be taught in isolation from other courses. It should be integrated, as far as possible, in all courses, since religion should be, and is applicable in all aspects of life.

7. Religious scholars (of any religion) should be given their due honour and respect in the society to enable them to effectively play their role in nation building.

Overall, the younger generation should be encouraged to acquire an in-depth religious knowledge.

Notes

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Pembangunan Keluarga Darul Takzim) for providing us the research grant for this study.

2. Malaysia, "Ringkasan Eksekutif Laporan Isu-isu Sosial Masa Kini" (Executive Summary Report on Current Social Issues), (paper presented by The Chief Secretary, Ministry of National Unity and Community Development, Malaysia, *Sessi Percambahan Fikiran Mengenai Isu Dan Masalah Sosial Di Negeri Johor (Brainstorming Session on Social Issues and Problems in the State of Johor)*, Kota Tinggi, Johor, Malaysia, 6-8 March, 1997).
3. *Utusan Malaysia*, 18 January 1997.
4. *Berita Harian*, 15 February 1997.
5. See Malcolm B. Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1995).
6. M. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 3rd ed. (California: Wadsworth Inc., 1992), 102.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Renzetti and Curran's suggestion seem to have been taken from Charles Y. Glock's ideas. See M. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 102-4.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Quazi Shamsuddin Md. Ilyas, "Dimensions of Muslim Religiosity: Measurement and Considerations" in *Qur'ānic Concept of Human Psyche*, ed. Zafar Afaq Ansari, (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1992), 99-114.
11. *Ibid.*, 105.
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14. C. Zastrow, *Social Problems: Issues and Solutions*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1988), 6; see also R. Maris, *Social Problems* (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988), 8.
15. E. Rubington and M. Weinberg, *The Study of Social Problems: Seven Perspectives*. 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.
16. See, Malaysia, "Ringkasan Eksekutif Laporan Isu-isu Sosial Masa Kini."