

# ***Religion and National Values: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Denmark, Iran, South Korea, and Thailand***

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses a comparative analysis of the national cultures of Denmark, Iran, South Korea, and Thailand, utilizing Hofstede's, GLOBE, and World Values Survey (WVS) cultural dimensions. It details how each country's predominant religion—Christianity in Denmark, Islam in Iran, Confucianism in South Korea, and Buddhism in Thailand—influences various cultural metrics such as power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance. Denmark is highlighted for its low power distance and high individualism, indicative of a culture that values equality and individual rights. Iran is depicted as highly collectivistic, emphasizing family and community cohesion. South Korea is described as valuing hierarchical order and community well-being, reflecting its Confucian roots. Thailand is recognized for its high humane orientation and respect for social hierarchies, influenced by Buddhist teachings. The analysis points out the significant implications these cultural dimensions have for international business practices, stressing the need for cultural sensitivity and adaptability in global market strategies.

**Keywords:** national cultures, Hofstede's and GLOBE Dimensions, World Values Survey

## **1. Introduction**

In the era of globalization, understanding the complex interplay between religion and national values is essential for navigating international interactions, be they political, social, or economic. This paper seeks to explore how predominant religions in Denmark, Iran, South Korea, and Thailand—Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and Buddhism, respectively—influence the national cultural dimensions and values of these countries. Utilizing Hofstede's GLOBE and the World Values Survey (WVS), this comparative analysis highlights the distinctive cultural frameworks that shape behaviors and societal norms in these diverse contexts.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory**

Hofstede's framework remains a cornerstone in cross-cultural research, providing insights into how culture influences societal values and organizational behaviors. Previous studies have utilized this model to examine how religious beliefs correlate with dimensions like power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance [1]. The application of Hofstede's theory has revealed

significant cultural variances across countries that reflect their unique historical and religious backgrounds [2].

## **2.2. GLOBE Study**

The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Project extends Hofstede's work by exploring additional dimensions such as performance orientation and humane orientation, which have been identified as critical in understanding the role of leadership in different cultures [3]. This study provides a nuanced view of how cultural practices and societal expectations are shaped by underlying religious values, demonstrating variances in societal effectiveness and desirable leadership attributes.

## **2.3. World Values Survey**

The World Values Survey (WVS) offers a broader sociological perspective, mapping cultures along axes of traditional versus secular values and survival versus self-expression values. The WVS data enables a deeper understanding of how religions influence these axes, affecting everything from gender roles to political ideologies and social welfare attitudes [4].

## **3. Analysis**

### **3.1. National values scores of four countries with different major religions compared and contrasted using data from Hofstede's and GLOBE National Culture Dimensions**

Denmark, Iran, South Korea, and Thailand are the countries chosen to be compared through Hofstede's and GLOBE National Culture Dimensions because of their different predominant religions, which respectively are Christianity, Islam, Atheism with Confucianist influence, and Buddhism.

Using Hofstede's dimensions, the comparison highlighted that Denmark scores lower than the other countries on Power Distance. The reason might be its Christian influence that emphasise the salvation of individual souls and spurs employees' belief in independence and equal rights and their need for autonomy at work [5]. Conversely, Denmark has the highest score on Individualism, and the government has better human rights protections. Moreover, centralization is popular in the other three countries, and a high Power Distance reflects the importance of hierarchies. In terms of masculinity, all four countries are below the world average of 50 but Denmark has the lowest score in the sample, as it fosters values such as cooperation among social classes and equity [6]. Finally, Uncertainty Avoidance in Denmark and South Korea differ significantly. Denmark, with its high individualism and less predictability, excels in innovation and design. South Korea instead focuses on long-term goals, morality, and practicality. Danish culture seeks immediate success and lacks a long-term view, making it indulgent, optimistic, and less concerned with savings. In contrast, South Korean culture is more restrained, suppressing desires and emphasizing leisure time.

The GLOBE dimensions analysis highlights Denmark's highest scores on Future Orientation, Gender Egalitarianism, and Uncertainty Avoidance. Denmark is primarily Christian and emphasises the importance of individualism, personal responsibility, hard work, and concern for the future [7]. Culturally, there is an emphasis on comfort and happiness. Denmark is also a politically stable, high-welfare state, and people have developed a sense of trust in their system which proved to be stable over the years [6]. According to GLOBE dimensions, Denmark has also the highest willingness for Gender Egalitarianism among the countries examined, with a score of 5.08.

Iran differs significantly in In-group and Institutional Collectivism. With Islam as its main religion, Iranian culture values family bonds and community ties. However, due to international sanctions and

domestic policies, resources are scarce. Political centralization and control result in lower practice scores than value scores. Iranian culture emphasises group loyalty, but the social and political systems may not promote resource redistribution [8], explaining the difference in collectivism scores in GLOBE dimensions.

South Korea ranks high in Assertive practices and Institutional Collectivism, with Confucianism playing a key role in its culture, promoting hierarchy, order, and thoughtfulness. The economy fosters self-confidence, competitiveness, and entrepreneurship. South Korean society emphasises collectivism and collective well-being, rooted in Confucian values and cooperative agricultural communities. Social pressure, as a manifestation of Institutional Collectivism, influences individual behaviour through social norms and expectations. This country scored the lowest among gender-egalitarian countries because Confucian teachings distinguish between gender roles, with men being the breadwinners and women caring for household chores [7]. South Korea's blend of ancient traditions and modern pressures have resulted in complex behaviours and values. Confucianism and its historical trajectory have been essential in shaping these values.

Finally, Thailand scores highest in human orientation and power distance, with Buddhism as the dominant religion, promoting compassion, kindness, and altruism [9]. As a constitutional monarchy, respect for the monarchy is ingrained in Thai culture, influencing the societal hierarchy. People anticipate more from the country, resulting in a Future Orientation Value score of 6.2 [10]. Thailand also has high scores in Humane Orientation and Power Distance, which may be attributed to a complex interplay of Buddhist teachings and deeply rooted cultural norms and traditions emphasising hierarchy, respect, and empathy.

### **3.2. National values scores of four countries with different major religions compared and contrasted using data from the World Values Survey (WVS)**

Based on data from the World Values Survey [11], the Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map 2023 represents cultural differences between countries, positioning them along two axes, based on their dominant cultural values: traditional vs. Secular values and Survival vs. Self-Expression values.

According to WVS Thailand shows a balance between Traditional and Secular values, but positions itself closer to South Korea and Iran for Survival values. South Korea instead is dissimilar to Denmark in Survival values and is also dissimilar to Iran for its Secular-Rational values. The divergence between South Korea and Denmark lies in Denmark's better performance in terms of life standards, as Korea scores lower than Denmark on factors crucial to existential security such as environment, community, work-life balance, and life satisfaction [12]. Divergence with Iran can instead be explained as follows: while Iran has a Muslim society where religion influences many aspects of everyday life, South Korea has a Confucian inheritance but is an atheist country [13]. This allows for a more open interpretation of various aspects of life.

The most significant insight from WVS map is the opposite positions of Denmark and Iran, that reflect the profound cultural, historical, socio-economic, and political differences between the two countries. The following are the main reasons for this significant disparity [14].

#### **3.2.1. Historical and cultural background**

Denmark has a deep-rooted Protestant tradition that has emphasised individualism, civil rights, and a decentralized church structure for centuries. This history has bred a more secular and individualistic culture. On the contrary, Iran was first influenced by Persian civilization and then by Islamic traditions (particularly Shia Islam). Iranian cultural and social norms are closely intertwined with religious teachings and principles [15].

### 3.2.2. Socio-economic development

Denmark is a highly developed country, performing among the best in the world according to OECD's Better Life Index that gather data on welfare, education, and a standard of living [12]. This socio-economic stability points to self-expression and secular rationalism values [11]. While, even if Iran is endowed with rich resources and has experienced a period of rapid development, it also faces economic challenges, sanctions, and geopolitical tensions. These economic pressures and uncertainties result in Survival values.

### 3.2.3. Political system and governance

As a democratic country, Denmark has a long history and strong institutions, and encourages civic engagement, freedom of speech, and individual rights, which are more in line with the value of Self-Expression. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic republic where religious leaders hold significant power. This intertwining of spiritual principles and governance amplifies Traditional values in public life.

### 3.2.4. Religion and secularism

Even if most Danes are nominally members of the Lutheran Church, attendance is low, reflecting a more secular society. Conversely, Islam, particularly the Shia sect, plays a central role in the daily lives of Iranians, influencing law, governance, and social norms.

### 3.2.5. Globalization and exposure

Denmark's high levels of education, tourism, and global exposure, coupled with a small, open economy, have made them more receptive to global influences and cultures, propelling it towards Self-Expressive values. While Iran is not isolated, international sanctions and political tensions have limited Iran's global integration compared to Western European countries.

Thus, the wide gap between Denmark and Iran on the Inglehart-Welzel map reflects the culmination of historical, religious, political, and socio-economic trajectories that have shaped each country's unique values and cultural landscape.

## 4. Conclusion

Even if some values are coherent across the three models, especially between Hofstede and GLOBE's dimensions, the data are often discordant. For example, Denmark's Uncertainty Avoidance is low in Hofstede, while its practice is high according to GLOBE. A similar consideration applies to South Korea's Long Term Orientation and Future Orientation dimensions. Moreover, Thailand and Iran are both high in terms of Power Distance in Hofstede's dimensions, but low in Power Distance Values according to GLOBE's. Data become even more divergent when WVS dimensions are considered. Even if WVS results are coherent with the other frameworks for Denmark, they are discordant in the case of South Korea and Iran, as in the first country a high Power Distance would be coherent with Traditional values, that foster hierarchy, and not with Secular-Rational ones. While in Iran, GLOBE's score in terms of low Power Distance and average Gender Equality, are more in line with Self-Expression and Secular-Rational values, rather than Traditional and Survival ones.

Three reasons explain the divergence across these frameworks. The first one concerns the demographics used to gather data for each dimension. Hofstede and GLOBE are based on data collected mainly from managers [1][3] while WVS has a broader reach [11]. This could explain the incoherence observed in Thailand and Iran between GLOBE and WVS dimensions, as managers might have more secularized values than the broader population. The second reason for discordant

data is the period the surveys were conducted. Hofstede's data were collected originally in 1968-1973 [2], while GLOBE's in 2004 [3] and WVS' wave 7 data in 2017-2022 [11]. Divergences might then be the result of cultural shifts towards more secular and individualistic values [2]. The third reason is to be found within the choice of dimensions and their definitions. For instance, Denmark scores low in Uncertainty Avoidance in Hofstede, but high in terms of Practice in GLOBE. The reason might be the different definitions of that dimension: while Hofstede focuses on the threat that unknown situations represent [16], Globe focuses on people's trust in norms and rules to avoid unexpected events [17]. Similarly, Hofstede's Long Term Orientation focuses on the relevance of time from a values-related perspective [16], while GLOBE on the propensity to seek future gratification [17]. To note is also the difference in category wideness: GLOBE uses more dimensions and distinguishes between Values and Practice. Thus, a dimension as Hofstede's Individualism is dissected into In-group and Institutional Collectivism, and possibly Human Orientation. Finally, WVS spread its findings across 4 categories with an even wider range, and significantly its definitions reflect its social perspective and not a commercial one [4].

These considerations have significant implications concerning the use of those frameworks for business decision-making, as their divergences point to important flaws that should not be ignored. Hofstede's findings might diverge from today's reality, while combined with GLOBE's findings, they might reflect only the managerial culture of a nation and no other social realities. On the contrary, WVS might be useful from a sociological perspective, but its "dimensional reductionism" [2] is unsuited to identifying and tackling specific cultural problems within a business. Moreover, Hofstede's and GLOBE's frameworks tend to exaggerate cultural differences, and they are not valid on the individual or group level [18]. Having taken all of this into account, these frameworks might be used to elaborate first guesses when managers are confronted with different cultural realities but have to be adjusted to the specific individuals, groups, and circumstances the decision maker is facing [19].

Delving into more specific implications, Denmark is known for preferring flexibility and adaptability in uncertainty avoidance, which means that they are comfortable with ambiguity and change [20]. On the other hand, South Korea, Iran and Thailand seeks structure and predictability, meaning they prefer clear rules and guidelines. The WVS emphasizes Denmark's secular, self-expression values in contrast to Iran's traditional, survival values. This difference means that Denmark places more emphasis on individualism, tolerance, and personal fulfillment, while Iran emphasizes traditional values such as family, religion, and social order [11]. These cultural insights have significant implications for international businesses that operate across diverse cultural contexts. To succeed in these markets, companies must possess cultural intelligence, market segmentation, localization, adaptable leadership, ethical considerations, and thorough risk assessments. By understanding the cultural values and norms of their target markets, businesses can tailor their products, services, and marketing strategies to meet the needs and expectations of local consumers. Additionally, businesses must be aware of the potential risks and challenges associated with operating in different cultural contexts, including legal, regulatory, and ethical issues. By adopting a culturally sensitive and adaptive approach, businesses can build strong relationships with local stakeholders and achieve long-term success in global markets [21].

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