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Projecting Global Religious Populations, 2020–50

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Abstract

This article presents a series of projections for religious communities worldwide from 2020 to 2050. It offers details related to the projection methodology used to generate the estimates and comments on trends and patterns among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics, and atheists. It concludes with suggestions on how such projections might be improved in the future.

Keywords

demography – religions – projections – atheists – agnostics – Christians – Muslims – Hindus – Buddhists – fertility – conversions – immigration

For many, the most surprising finding of the tables and graphs in this chapter will be the projected continued resiliency of world religions into the future. By contrast, in the mid-twentieth century the demise of religion was a near-accepted fact inside and outside the academic community. However, several decades on, the strongest evidence shows that the global trend of religious resurgence is likely to continue into the near and, perhaps, distant future. In

documenting that resurgence, this chapter focuses on presenting and commenting on the findings of future projections for the world's religions.¹

In examining the future of religion, a natural place to begin is with the question of whether there has been or currently is a global resurgence of religion. Comparing today's situation to that of 120 years ago, the answer must be a resounding "no." In 1900 the world was home to very few atheists and agnostics. By 2020, they numbered in the hundreds of millions and represented 11.5% of the world's population. Thus, over the twentieth century, religionists' share of the global population declined steadily, while Communism, with its ardent promotion of atheism, expanded and secularization continued in the West. In 1900, virtually 100% of the world's population was religious, but by 2020 this figure had fallen to 88.5%. However, hidden in this 120-year trend is a profound turn-around in the religious composition of the world's population.

Examining the data more closely, one can see that the raw percentage of nonreligious people peaked around 1970 at approximately 19.2% (80.8% being religious). Since then, the percentage of religionists has risen steadily and is expected to exceed 91% by 2050. The early part of this shift (between 1970 and 1990 in the larger context of 1990–2020) is due largely to the collapse of Communism in the former Soviet Union, which was accompanied by the re-legalization of, and return of many people to, religious bodies of many kinds. Although the number of atheists and agnostics continues to rise in the Western world, the current growth of a variety of religions in China, in particular (where the vast majority of the nonreligious live today), bodes well for future demographic growth of religion. Thus, from this second point of view (1970–present), there has been a global religious resurgence in recent years, and it seems likely to continue into the future.

Two religions—Christianity and Islam—dominate religious demographics at present and seem poised to continue that dominance in the future. In 1900, these two religions represented less than 50% of the world's population; it appears that by 2050, they will claim over 63% (table 1). Islam will likely see the greatest growth, more than doubling its share of the world's population in

1 For a comprehensive overview of the sources of religious demography, see Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, *The World's Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). Descriptions of religions found in this section are adapted from *The World's Religions in Figures*, chapter 1. This article is an update of Chapter 4 in *The World's Religions in Figures*.

TABLE 1 Major world religions, 2020–50

Religion	Adherents 2020	% 2020	Adherents 2050	% 2050	Gr % 2020–50
Christians	2,506,426,000	32.2	3,334,019,000	34.2	0.96
Muslims	1,886,702,000	24.2	2,842,753,000	29.2	1.38
Hindus	1,058,245,000	13.6	1,206,856,000	12.4	0.44
Agnostics	752,135,000	9.6	707,144,000	7.3	−0.21
Buddhists	532,657,000	6.8	580,708,000	6.0	0.29
Chinese folk-religionists	466,181,000	6.0	459,195,000	4.7	−0.05
Ethnic religionists	284,527,000	3.7	282,022,000	2.9	−0.03
Atheists	149,523,000	1.9	142,879,000	1.5	−0.15
New religionists	66,614,000	0.9	61,031,000	0.6	−0.29
Sikhs	26,743,000	0.3	34,914,000	0.4	0.89
Jews	14,817,000	0.2	17,137,000	0.2	0.49
Spiritists	14,779,000	0.2	15,820,000	0.2	0.23
Daoists	8,907,000	0.1	15,035,000	0.2	1.76
Confucianists	8,719,000	0.1	10,265,000	0.1	0.55
Baha'is	8,482,000	0.1	14,328,000	0.1	1.76
Jains	6,317,000	0.1	7,919,000	0.1	0.76
Shintoists	2,823,000	0.0	2,845,000	0.0	0.03
Zoroastrians	201,000	0.0	165,000	0.0	−0.66
Total population	7,794,799,000	100.0	9,735,034,000	100.0	0.74

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

150 years (from 12.4% in 1900 to a projected 29.2% in 2050). Christianity will likely show little change, from 34.5% in 1900 to 34.2% by 2050, having passed through a low point of around 32% in 2015.

While both Christianity and Islam are flourishing in sub-Saharan Africa, present data suggest that neither faith is likely to expand as rapidly in this region in the years ahead as it did in the twentieth century, except possibly through natural population growth. There are two primary reasons for this conclusion. First, most people in the region have already committed to either Christianity or Islam, which means that in terms of percentage, the pool of potential converts from outside these two faiths has decreased dramatically. In most of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, 90% or more of the population

describe themselves as either Christian or Muslim; fewer than one in ten identify as adherents of other faiths (including African traditional religions) or no faith.

Second, there is little evidence that either Christianity or Islam is growing in sub-Saharan Africa at the expense of the other. Although a relatively small percentage of Muslims have become Christians, and a relatively small percentage of Christians have become Muslims, overall there is no substantial shift in either direction. One notable exception is Uganda, where surveys show that roughly one third of those who were raised Muslim now describe themselves as Christian, while far fewer Ugandans who were raised Christian now describe themselves as Muslim.²

On the other hand, Chinese folk-religion is projected to see the greatest 150-year decline in adherents as a global percentage, falling from 23.5% of the world's population in 1900 to only 4.7% by 2050.³ The projected decline of non-religionists' (agnostics' and atheists') share of the global population through 2050 seems equally surprising in light of past trends. From only 0.2% in 1900, together non-religionists accounted for over 20% of the world's population in 1970. However, by 2020, their share had fallen to about 11.5%, and it is projected to fall to only 8.8% by 2050.

Table 1 also allows for comparisons of projected religious growth rates from 2020–50. Only three religions are projected to have substantial growth (in percentage terms) over this period. Both Muslims and Daoists will likely grow (1.38% and 1.76%, respectively) at approximately twice the world population growth rate.⁴ Baha'is, with a robust global program of sharing their message, are expected to grow at 1.76% p.a. Zoroastrians, agnostics, atheists, Chinese folk-religionists, ethnoreligionists, and New Religionists are projected to experience net *losses* in their numbers of adherents over the same period.⁵ The worldwide Jewish community is expected to grow from 14.8 million in 2020 to about 17.1 million in 2050, though its 30-year growth rate of 0.49% p.a. is slower than that of the global population (0.74% p.a. over the same period).

2 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, April 2010, <http://www.pewforum.org/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa.aspx>.

3 The current resurgence of religion in China is mainly limited to Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam. If Chinese folk-religions experience an eventual resurgence, then this projection will be too conservative.

4 Muslims continue to experience higher than average worldwide fertility rates, whereas Daoists are growing because of a religious resurgence in China.

5 The result of losing demographic momentum through low fertility or losing members to majority world religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism.

Fortunately, Jewish demography and the future of the world Jewish population is studied in great detail.⁶

South Asia is an area of particular interest looking forward to 2050. Significantly, this region includes the countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India) forecast to have the largest populations globally of both Muslims and Hindus in 2050. The addition of a half-billion people (from a population of 1.94 billion in 2020 to 2.4 billion in 2050)⁷ is likely to compound social, economic, and religious pressures in a region already simmering from longstanding inter-communal tensions. A new generation of peacemakers at local, national, and regional levels will be challenged to bridge the divide between these religious communities.

Foundational to the reality of a changing religious landscape are the increases and decreases in religious diversity in the world's countries and regions. In 2050, most countries will be more religiously plural than they were in 2020; that is, they will be home to adherents of a greater number of religions. In 1900, Suriname was the world's most religiously diverse country, with five major religious traditions having sizeable populations of adherents there (2% or more of the population). By 2050, it is likely that China will be the most religiously diverse as a result of the religious resurgence explained above. An increase in religious diversity also will be particularly apparent in the global North, where secularization and immigration will continue to transform the religious landscape. However, in the global South, many countries will continue to see growth mainly in one religion, most likely Christianity or Islam, thus decreasing overall diversity.

1 Methodology

The starting point of future studies is natural growth of the total population of the country or region of interest, utilizing demographic projections as a baseline.⁸ Three major areas beyond natural growth were then utilized to

6 On Jewish demography, see Sergio DellaPergola, *World Jewish Population, 2010* (Storrs, CT: Mandell L. Berman Institute, 2010). On wider trends, see Michael Brown and Bernard Lightman, eds., *Creating the Jewish Future* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999).

7 This includes an increase of Hindus from 1,040 million in 2020 to 1,182 million in 2050; Muslims from 683 million in 2020 to 935 million in 2050.

8 Data for this section were obtained by using the year 2020 as a base from which to project all future figures, first using only demographic tools. Future country and regional total populations reflect United Nations projections, with all religious percentages within a country or region initially remaining unchanged. By varying only the rates of natural growth or

improve the projections. First, birth and death rates vary among religious communities within a particular country. Second, increasing numbers of people are likely to change their religious affiliations in the future. Third, immigration and emigration trends will impact a country's population over time. The results of incorporating all three of these dynamics can be applied to any religious tradition and are presented in the tables below.

The highest quality projections for religious communities are built on cohort-component projections—ones that use differential rates for each religion: age-specific fertility rates by religion, age structure in 5-year age-and-sex cohorts by religion, migration rates by religion, and mortality by religion. For instance, cohort-component projections are used for the projections at the Pew Research Center and at the Age and Cohort Change Project of the International Institute for Advanced Systems Analysis (IIASA). Unfortunately, this kind of detail is not yet available for many countries (half of censuses do not ask a question about religion).

Consequently, the projections presented in this chapter cannot solely rely on the cohort-component method. Instead, they use a hybrid projection method. First, the 2020 religious composition of each country is established as the baseline. Then, utilizing the United Nations medium variant cohort-component projections of populations for five-year periods up to 2050,⁹ future religious shares are modestly adjusted from the 2020 baseline. Adjustments are based on analysis of past differential growth rates of religious groups, factoring in historical patterns of religious switching and possible future attenuation of past trends. Finally, these projections take into account how immigrants might alter the future religious composition of country populations.

decline, an observer can then examine their effects within a particular country or region on populations of religious adherents. This yields remarkable insights into what one might expect from the most consistent sources of growth and decline in religious and non-religious adherence—births and deaths.

- 9 Data are from United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: United Nations Publications, 2019). Note that as a religious population nears 100% of a country's population, the United Nations cohort data is then applicable to the whole religious population. The challenge is estimating any variation from this in minority populations. If birth or death rates vary dramatically from the majority religious community, then the future share of that minority population can be very different from its present share.

2 Findings for the Larger World Religions

2.1 *Christians*

Projections concerning the future of global Christianity can be made based on detailed information on Christian denominations available for mid-2020, taking account of growth since mid-2000. The well-known demographic shift of Christianity to the global South is expected to continue into the future, with declining church membership projected for Europe (especially Western and Northern) and growth (through birth rates and conversion) of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By 2050, only 26% of all Christians will be found in Europe and Northern America¹⁰ (down from 33% in 2020 and 82% in 1900).

Indeed, the share of Christians who reside in Africa in 2050 could be as high as 38% (over 1.28 billion Christians). The fastest-growing regional Christian population in the world from 2020 to 2050 is expected to be that of Middle Africa (2.67% p.a.), almost 30 times faster than that of Christians in Northern America (table 2).

The percentage of the world's Christians who live in Asia is predicted to rise between 2020 and 2050, from 15.0% to 16.8%. Christian communities in China

TABLE 2 Christians (C) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50

Region	Population	Christians	%
	2020	2020	2020
Africa	1,340,598,000	654,913,000	48.9
Eastern Africa	445,406,000	292,393,000	65.6
Middle Africa	179,595,000	148,998,000	83.0
Northern Africa	246,233,000	11,668,000	4.7
Southern Africa	67,504,000	55,465,000	82.2
Western Africa	401,861,000	146,389,000	36.4
Asia	4,641,055,000	377,842,000	8.1
Central Asia	74,339,000	5,658,000	7.6
Eastern Asia	1,678,090,000	128,446,000	7.7
South Asia	1,940,370,000	75,254,000	3.9
South-eastern Asia	668,620,000	152,878,000	22.9
Western Asia	279,637,000	15,606,000	5.6
Europe	747,636,000	572,603,000	76.6
Eastern Europe	293,013,000	245,905,000	83.9

10 Bermuda, Canada, Greenland, St. Pierre & Miquelon, and the United States.

and the Philippines are expected to experience continued growth, such that in 2050, the two countries will rank third and seventh globally in total Christian population, with 202 million and 145 million Christians, respectively. Note, however, that while Christianity is the majority religion in the Philippines, the Christian community in China, although demographically significant, is a comparatively small minority.

Notably, the only European country among the “top ten” in Christian population in 2050 is predominately Orthodox Russia, ranking ninth. This would have been unexpected from the vantage point of 1970 or 1980, when Communism dominated Eastern Europe and especially the Soviet Union. The number of Christians is expected to decrease in all four of Europe’s four regions between 2020 and 2050. Even the steady stream of Christian migrants from the global South into Europe appears unable to stem the tide of secularization, mainly from the state churches.

By 2050, eight of the 10 countries with the most Christians globally will be in the global South; the list in 1900 included only Brazil from the global South (table 3). Note also that the 251 million Christians projected for the United States in 2050 includes large numbers of Christians who have emigrated from the global South.

Population 2050	Christians 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	C gr % 2020–50
2,489,275,000	1,280,641,000	51.4	2.08	2.26
851,218,000	577,014,000	67.8	2.18	2.29
382,640,000	328,208,000	85.8	2.55	2.67
371,545,000	14,724,000	4.0	1.38	0.78
87,379,000	70,990,000	81.2	0.86	0.83
796,494,000	289,705,000	36.4	2.31	2.30
5,290,263,000	559,973,000	10.6	0.44	1.32
100,250,000	5,794,000	5.8	1.00	0.08
1,617,342,000	218,347,000	13.5	−0.12	1.78
2,396,167,000	119,095,000	5.0	0.71	1.54
794,002,000	200,902,000	25.3	0.57	0.91
382,502,000	15,835,000	4.1	1.05	0.05
710,486,000	496,682,000	69.9	−0.17	−0.47
261,977,000	220,373,000	84.1	−0.37	−0.36

TABLE 2 Christians (C) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50 (*cont.*)

Region	Population	Christians	%
	2020	2020	2020
Northern Europe	106,261,000	74,919,000	70.5
Southern Europe	152,215,000	122,688,000	80.6
Western Europe	196,146,000	129,091,000	65.8
Latin America	653,962,000	602,892,000	92.2
Caribbean	43,532,000	36,616,000	84.1
Central America	179,670,000	171,979,000	95.7
South America	430,760,000	394,297,000	91.5
Northern America	368,870,000	269,524,000	73.1
Oceania	42,678,000	28,652,000	67.1
Australia/New Zealand	30,322,000	17,244,000	56.9
Melanesia	11,123,000	10,239,000	92.1
Micronesia	549,000	511,000	93.1
Polynesia	684,000	657,000	96.1
Global total	7,794,799,000	2,506,426,000	32.2

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

TABLE 3 Countries with the most Christians, 2000–50

Country		Christians	Country		Christians	Country		Christians
		2000			2020			2050
1	United States	231,041,000	United States	245,457,000	United States	251,376,000		
2	Brazil	159,453,000	Brazil	192,939,000	Brazil	201,934,000		
3	Russia	103,905,000	Mexico	123,370,000	China	200,020,000		
4	Mexico	95,102,000	Russia	119,945,000	Nigeria	187,860,000		
5	China	79,942,000	China	106,018,000	Congo DR	186,316,000		
6	Philippines	70,662,000	Philippines	99,307,000	Mexico	144,882,000		
7	Germany	60,139,000	Nigeria	95,186,000	Philippines	130,047,000		
8	Nigeria	56,551,000	Congo DR	85,061,000	Ethiopia	128,574,000		
9	Italy	45,895,000	Ethiopia	67,903,000	Russia	109,077,000		
10	India	45,181,000	India	66,316,000	India	106,500,000		

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

Population 2050	Christians 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	C gr % 2020–50
114,960,000	68,689,000	59.8	0.26	–0.29
136,648,000	98,482,000	72.1	–0.36	–0.73
196,902,000	109,137,000	55.4	0.01	–0.56
762,432,000	685,870,000	90.0	0.51	0.43
47,394,000	39,963,000	84.3	0.28	0.29
223,567,000	209,112,000	93.5	0.73	0.65
491,472,000	436,795,000	88.9	0.44	0.34
425,200,000	276,078,000	64.9	0.47	0.08
57,376,000	34,776,000	60.6	0.99	0.65
38,422,000	16,996,000	44.2	0.79	–0.05
17,469,000	16,400,000	93.9	1.52	1.58
674,000	614,000	91.1	0.69	0.61
811,000	766,000	94.4	0.57	0.51
9,735,034,000	3,334,019,000	34.2	0.74	0.96

2.2 Muslims

The world's Muslim population is expected to increase by about 47% between 2020 and 2050, rising from 1.9 billion to 2.8 billion.¹¹ Globally, the Muslim population is forecast to grow at about twice the rate of the non-Muslim population over that period—an average annual growth rate of 1.38% for Muslims, compared with 0.7% for non-Muslims.¹²

If current trends continue, Muslims will make up 29.2% of the world's total projected population of 9.7 billion in 2050, up from 24.2% of the estimated 2020 global population of 7.8 billion (table 4). Despite growing more rapidly than the non-Muslim population, the Muslim population is expected to grow more slowly between 2020 and 2050 than it did in the previous decade, as

11 See Johnson and Grim, chapters 12–14 for an in-depth analysis of the world's Muslim population, both current and future.

12 These projections are based both on past demographic trends and on assumptions about how these trends will play out in future years. Making these projections inevitably entails a host of uncertainties, including significant political ones. Changes in the political climate in North America or Europe, for example, could dramatically affect the patterns of Muslim migration.

fertility rates decline around the world. From 2000 to 2020, the global Muslim population increased at an average annual rate of 1.9%, compared with a projected rate of 1.38% for the period 2020–50.

Islam will continue to experience a shift in distribution by continent. In 2020, 29.5% of all Muslims lived in Africa, and this is expected to grow to 36.7% by 2050. Interestingly, the percentage of Africa that is Muslim is not expected to change much over the same period (table 4). Consequently, the growth can be attributed largely to higher population growth rates in Africa compared with the rest of the world. At the same time, the percentage of the world's Muslims in Western Asia and Northern Africa (the traditional “Middle East”) will level off, holding at about 25% for both 2020 and 2050 (up from just over 23% in 1900).

The majority of the world's Muslims (67%) will continue to live in the Asia-Pacific region. However, if current trends continue, 79 countries will have 1 million or more Muslims in 2030,¹³ up from 72 countries in 2010. Notably, Pakistan is expected to surpass Indonesia as the country with the single largest Muslim population in the world (table 5). India is also expected to pass Indonesia and be ranked second. The portion of the world's Muslims living in sub-Saharan Africa is projected to rise as a result of high fertility rates; a situation illustrated in 2020, as more Muslims live in Nigeria than in Egypt.

In Europe as a whole, the Muslim share of the population is expected to increase significantly, from 6.8% in 2020 to 10.4% in 2050, reflecting a 30-year growth rate of 1.26% per year. In absolute numbers, Europe's Muslim population is projected to grow from 50.6 million in 2020 to 73.8 million in 2050.¹⁴ Others have offered projections of more robust Muslim growth in Europe. For example, Eric Kaufmann offers higher estimates of Muslim populations in Europe for 2050 and 2100, but his predictions include several assumptions: resistance to secularization by Muslims, maintenance of current rates of Muslim immigration, and convergence of Muslim fertility rates with those

13 Future projections to 2050 for all religions are from data presented in Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, *World Religion Database* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

14 The greatest increases—driven primarily by continued migration—are likely to occur in Western and Northern Europe, where Muslims will be approaching double-digit percentages of the population in several countries. The Pew Research Center (2011) projects that in the United Kingdom, for example, Muslims are expected to comprise 8.2% of the population in 2030, up from an estimated 4.6% in 2010. In Austria, Muslims are projected to reach 9.3% of the population in 2030, up from 5.7% in 2010; in Sweden, 9.9% (up from 4.9% in 2010); in Belgium, 10.2% (up from 6% in 2010); and in France, 10.3% (up from 7.5% in 2010).

of native populations by 2050.¹⁵ With these caveats he projects that most large Western European countries will be 10–15% Muslim in 2050, though Sweden might approach 20–25%. In contrast, the estimates put forward in this chapter assume that Muslims will remain relatively small minorities in Europe (and the Americas) but will be expected to constitute a growing share of the total population in these regions.

Several factors account for the faster projected growth among Muslims than non-Muslims worldwide. Generally, Muslim populations tend to have higher fertility rates (more children per woman) than non-Muslim populations. In addition, a larger share of the Muslim population is in, or soon will enter, the prime childbearing years (ages 15–29). In the past few decades, improved health and economic conditions in Muslim-majority countries have led to greater-than-average declines in infant and child mortality rates, and life expectancy is rising even faster in Muslim-majority countries than in other less-developed countries.¹⁶

However, at the same time, the rate of growth among Muslims has been falling. The declining growth rate is due primarily to falling fertility rates in many Muslim-majority countries, including such populous nations as Indonesia and Bangladesh. Fertility is dropping as more women in these countries obtain a secondary education, living standards rise, and people move from rural areas to cities and towns.¹⁷

The slowdown in Muslim population growth is most pronounced in the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East-North Africa, and Europe, and less sharp in sub-Saharan Africa. The only region in which Muslim population growth is expected to accelerate through 2020 is the Americas (both Northern and Latin America), largely because of immigration. Falling birth rates will eventually lead to significant shifts in the age structure of Muslim populations. While the worldwide Muslim population today is relatively young, the so-called Muslim “youth bulge”—the high percentage of Muslims in their teens and 20s—peaked around the year 2000 and is now declining.¹⁸

15 Eric Kaufmann, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth? Demography and Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2010), 158–211.

16 See Johnson and Grim (2013) on Main Factors Driving Population Growth in chapter 12.

17 See Johnson and Grim (2013) on Related Factors section in chapter 12 for more details.

18 Pew Research Center, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population*, January 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>.

TABLE 4 Muslims (M) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50

Region	Population 2020	Muslims 2020	% 2020
Africa	1,340,598,000	556,923,000	41.5
Eastern Africa	445,406,000	98,610,000	22.1
Middle Africa	179,595,000	17,310,000	9.6
Northern Africa	246,233,000	231,451,000	94.0
Southern Africa	67,504,000	1,046,000	1.6
Western Africa	401,861,000	208,506,000	51.9
Asia	4,641,055,000	1,270,800,000	27.4
Central Asia	74,339,000	65,411,000	88.0
Eastern Asia	1,678,090,000	24,371,000	1.5
South Asia	1,940,370,000	683,121,000	35.2
South-eastern Asia	668,620,000	248,591,000	37.2
Western Asia	279,637,000	249,306,000	89.2
Europe	747,636,000	50,647,000	6.8
Eastern Europe	293,013,000	19,040,000	6.5
Northern Europe	106,261,000	5,881,000	5.5
Southern Europe	152,215,000	11,381,000	7.5
Western Europe	196,146,000	14,346,000	7.3
Latin America	653,962,000	1,773,000	0.3
Caribbean	43,532,000	119,000	0.3
Central America	179,670,000	172,000	0.1
South America	430,760,000	1,482,000	0.3
Northern America	368,870,000	5,671,000	1.5
Oceania	42,678,000	888,000	2.1
Australia/New Zealand	30,322,000	818,000	2.7
Melanesia	11,123,000	68,200	0.6
Micronesia	549,000	1,100	0.2
Polynesia	684,000	75	0.0
Global total	7,794,799,000	1,886,702,000	24.2

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

Population 2050	Muslims 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	M gr % 2020–50
2,489,275,000	1,043,699,000	41.9	2.08	2.12
851,218,000	198,812,000	23.4	2.18	2.36
382,640,000	35,421,000	9.3	2.55	2.42
371,545,000	352,943,000	95.0	1.38	1.42
87,379,000	1,342,000	1.5	0.86	0.83
796,494,000	455,180,000	57.1	2.31	2.64
5,290,263,000	1,708,609,000	32.3	0.44	0.99
100,250,000	92,781,000	92.5	1.00	1.17
1,617,342,000	33,750,000	2.1	−0.12	1.09
2,396,167,000	935,026,000	39.0	0.71	1.05
794,002,000	302,044,000	38.0	0.57	0.65
382,502,000	345,008,000	90.2	1.05	1.09
710,486,000	73,792,000	10.4	−0.17	1.26
261,977,000	23,076,000	8.8	−0.37	0.64
114,960,000	12,123,000	10.5	0.26	2.44
136,648,000	15,088,000	11.0	−0.36	0.94
196,902,000	23,505,000	11.9	0.01	1.66
762,432,000	2,699,000	0.4	0.51	1.41
47,394,000	136,000	0.3	0.28	0.44
223,567,000	277,000	0.1	0.73	1.59
491,472,000	2,286,000	0.5	0.44	1.46
425,200,000	12,551,000	3.0	0.47	2.68
57,376,000	1,403,000	2.4	0.99	1.54
38,422,000	1,320,000	3.4	0.79	1.61
17,469,000	80,300	0.5	1.52	0.55
674,000	2,200	0.3	0.69	2.39
811,000	170	0.0	0.57	2.77
9,735,034,000	2,842,753,000	29.2	0.74	1.38

TABLE 5 Countries with the most Muslims, 2000–50

	Country	Muslims 2000	Country	Muslims 2020	Country	Muslims 2050
1	Indonesia	167,285,000	Indonesia	216,409,000	Pakistan	328,467,000
2	India	143,666,000	Pakistan	213,086,000	India	265,000,000
3	Pakistan	136,531,000	India	198,477,000	Indonesia	263,272,000
4	Bangladesh	112,529,000	Bangladesh	146,254,000	Nigeria	200,000,000
5	Iran	64,771,000	Nigeria	94,517,000	Bangladesh	171,348,000
6	Turkey	62,205,000	Egypt	92,165,000	Egypt	147,028,000
7	Egypt	60,702,000	Turkey	82,996,000	Iran	101,213,000
8	Nigeria	55,261,000	Iran	82,770,000	Turkey	94,812,000
9	Algeria	30,669,000	Algeria	43,142,000	Sudan	77,074,000
10	Morocco	28,687,000	Sudan	40,197,000	Ethiopia	70,745,000

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

TABLE 6 Hindus (H) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50

Region	Population 2020	Hindus 2020	% 2020
Africa	1,340,598,000	3,555,000	0.3
Eastern Africa	445,406,000	1,939,000	0.4
Middle Africa	179,595,000	136,000	0.1
Northern Africa	246,233,000	8,600	0.0
Southern Africa	67,504,000	1,421,000	2.1
Western Africa	401,861,000	51,800	0.0
Asia	4,641,055,000	1,049,702,000	22.6
Central Asia	74,339,000	1,800	0.0
Eastern Asia	1,678,090,000	66,700	0.0
South Asia	1,940,370,000	1,039,589,000	53.6
South-eastern Asia	668,620,000	7,872,000	1.2
Western Asia	279,637,000	2,173,000	0.8
Europe	747,636,000	1,275,000	0.2
Eastern Europe	293,013,000	50,000	0.0
Northern Europe	106,261,000	730,000	0.7
Southern Europe	152,215,000	198,000	0.1
Western Europe	196,146,000	297,000	0.2

2.3 *Hindus*

While the global population is expected to grow at 0.74% per annum from 2020–50, the Hindu population is expected to grow slightly slower, at 0.44% per annum. Hindus represented about 1.06 billion adherents (or 13.6% of the world’s population) in 2020 and will grow to 1.21 billion by 2050, although their global share will decline to 12.4%. This drop is a function mainly of slowing population growth in India but also of the expected growth in India of minority religions, such as Islam and Christianity. Hindus make up 72.5% of India’s population in 2020 but this is likely to fall to 69.4% by 2050. Also, despite continued growth of the Hindu diaspora around the world, fully 98% of Hindus will likely still be resident in South-central Asia in 2050 (table 6). At the same time, growth in the Hindu diaspora is expected in Africa, Europe, Northern America, and Oceania. Not surprisingly, the list of countries with the largest Hindu populations (table 7) is expected to change very little.

Population 2050	Hindus 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	H gr % 2020–50
2,489,275,000	5,031,000	0.2	2.08	1.16
851,218,000	2,817,000	0.3	2.18	1.25
382,640,000	302,000	0.1	2.55	2.71
371,545,000	15,600	0.0	1.38	2.01
87,379,000	1,807,000	2.1	0.86	0.81
796,494,000	88,800	0.0	2.31	1.82
5,290,263,000	1,194,647,000	22.6	0.44	0.43
100,250,000	2,400	0.0	1.00	0.90
1,617,342,000	81,000	0.0	−0.12	0.65
2,396,167,000	1,182,373,000	49.3	0.71	0.43
794,002,000	9,259,000	1.2	0.57	0.54
382,502,000	2,932,000	0.8	1.05	1.00
710,486,000	1,911,000	0.3	−0.17	1.36
261,977,000	51,500	0.0	−0.37	0.10
114,960,000	1,019,000	0.9	0.26	1.12
136,648,000	410,000	0.3	−0.36	2.45
196,902,000	431,000	0.2	0.01	1.25

TABLE 6 Hindus (H) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50 (*cont.*)

Region	Population 2020	Hindus 2020	% 2020
Latin America	653,962,000	819,000	0.1
Caribbean	43,532,000	397,000	0.9
Central America	179,670,000	22,100	0.0
South America	430,760,000	399,000	0.1
Northern America	368,870,000	2,080,000	0.6
Oceania	42,678,000	815,000	1.9
Australia/New Zealand	30,322,000	565,000	1.9
Melanesia	11,123,000	250,000	2.2
Micronesia	549,000	23	0.0
Polynesia	684,000	110	0.0
Global total	7,794,799,000	1,058,245,000	13.6

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

TABLE 7 Countries with the most Hindus, 2000–50

Country	Hindus 2000	Country	Hindus 2020	Country	Hindus 2050
1 India	778,113,000	India	999,122,000	India	1,137,232,000
2 Nepal	16,160,000	Nepal	19,173,000	Nepal	21,289,000
3 Bangladesh	12,865,000	Bangladesh	15,447,000	Bangladesh	17,250,000
4 Indonesia	3,356,000	Indonesia	4,428,000	Indonesia	4,900,000
5 Sri Lanka	2,471,000	Pakistan	2,913,000	Pakistan	3,620,000
6 Pakistan	1,877,000	Sri Lanka	2,794,000	Sri Lanka	2,800,000
7 Malaysia	1,454,000	Malaysia	2,009,000	Malaysia	2,730,000
8 United States	1,178,000	United States	1,603,000	United States	2,500,000
9 South Africa	1,072,000	South Africa	1,414,000	South Africa	1,800,000
10 Myanmar	800,000	Myanmar	928,000	Myanmar	1,000,000

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

Population 2050	Hindus 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	H gr % 2020–50
762,432,000	850,000	0.1	0.51	0.13
47,394,000	375,000	0.8	0.28	–0.19
223,567,000	37,000	0.0	0.73	1.73
491,472,000	438,000	0.1	0.44	0.31
425,200,000	3,280,000	0.8	0.47	1.53
57,376,000	1,137,000	2.0	0.99	1.12
38,422,000	875,000	2.3	0.79	1.47
17,469,000	262,000	1.5	1.52	0.16
674,000	100	0.0	0.69	5.02
811,000	150	0.0	0.57	1.16
9,735,034,000	1,206,856,000	12.4	0.74	0.44

2.4 *Buddhists*

Buddhists are also expected to decline as a percentage of the world’s population, from 6.8% in 2020 to 6.0% in 2050 (table 8). This is also true of the related population of Chinese folk-religionists, who are expected to fall from 6.0% of the global population in 2020 to 4.3% in 2050. Nonetheless, these two religious communities together will represent 1 billion people in 2020 and 2050. Including Confucianists, Daoists, and non-religious Chinese who nonetheless practice Chinese religions in their daily lives, the wider Buddhist/Chinese religion community¹⁹ could exceed 1.3 billion by 2050.²⁰ Table 8 also illustrates the continued spread of Buddhists across the world; growth rates in most regions in Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Northern America exceed the rates in Asia.

19 It is well known that popular religion in China draws on the “Three Teachings,” one of which is Buddhism. This understanding of Chinese popular religion raises the suggestion that the religious group known as “Chinese folk-religionists” could be considered “Buddhists.” Such enumeration may better reflect the broader influence and inclusion of Buddhism among the Chinese. Additionally, in practice, even the nonreligious in China are seriously impacted by Buddhism in both worldview and key rituals. The concept of wider Buddhism, then, would include all professing Buddhists plus all Chinese folk-religionists and Chinese nonreligious.

20 Figures for 2050 for Chinese folk-religionists, Confucianists and Daoists are available online in Johnson and Grim, *World Religion Database*.

The list of countries with the most Buddhists (table 9) has few changes from 2020 to 2050. Notably, the United States displaces Taiwan at the bottom of the list in 2050, due mainly to the continued immigration of Buddhist Asians to North America.

TABLE 8 Buddhists (B) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50

Region	Population 2020	Buddhists 2020	% 2020
Africa	1,340,598,000	365,000	0.0
Eastern Africa	445,406,000	40,300	0.0
Middle Africa	179,595,000	11,100	0.0
Northern Africa	246,233,000	26,400	0.0
Southern Africa	67,504,000	249,000	0.4
Western Africa	401,861,000	38,900	0.0
Asia	4,641,055,000	523,537,000	11.3
Central Asia	74,339,000	95,100	0.1
Eastern Asia	1,678,090,000	321,176,000	19.1
South Asia	1,940,370,000	29,852,000	1.5
South-eastern Asia	668,620,000	171,784,000	25.7
Western Asia	279,637,000	630,000	0.2
Europe	747,636,000	1,987,000	0.3
Eastern Europe	293,013,000	631,000	0.2
Northern Europe	106,261,000	324,000	0.3
Southern Europe	152,215,000	174,000	0.1
Western Europe	196,146,000	858,000	0.4
Latin America	653,962,000	835,000	0.1
Caribbean	43,532,000	14,500	0.0
Central America	179,670,000	83,100	0.0
South America	430,760,000	738,000	0.2
Northern America	368,870,000	4,953,000	1.3
Oceania	42,678,000	980,000	2.3
Australia/New Zealand	30,322,000	951,000	3.1
Melanesia	11,123,000	19,200	0.2
Micronesia	549,000	8,700	1.6
Polynesia	684,000	610	0.1
Global total	7,794,799,000	532,657,000	6.8

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

Population 2050	Buddhists 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	B gr % 2020–50
2,489,275,000	611,000	0.0	2.08	1.73
851,218,000	73,500	0.0	2.18	2.03
382,640,000	25,200	0.0	2.55	2.78
371,545,000	43,200	0.0	1.38	1.66
87,379,000	402,000	0.5	0.86	1.61
796,494,000	66,700	0.0	2.31	1.81
5,290,263,000	566,435,000	10.7	0.44	0.26
100,250,000	158,000	0.2	1.00	1.71
1,617,342,000	340,905,000	21.1	−0.12	0.20
2,396,167,000	36,080,000	1.5	0.71	0.63
794,002,000	188,460,000	23.7	0.57	0.31
382,502,000	832,000	0.2	1.05	0.93
710,486,000	2,606,000	0.4	−0.17	0.91
261,977,000	625,000	0.2	−0.37	−0.03
114,960,000	410,000	0.4	0.26	0.79
136,648,000	265,000	0.2	−0.36	1.41
196,902,000	1,307,000	0.7	0.01	1.41
762,432,000	1,608,000	0.2	0.51	2.21
47,394,000	23,800	0.1	0.28	1.67
223,567,000	145,000	0.1	0.73	1.88
491,472,000	1,439,000	0.3	0.44	2.25
425,200,000	7,951,000	1.9	0.47	1.59
57,376,000	1,497,000	2.6	0.99	1.42
38,422,000	1,455,000	3.8	0.79	1.43
17,469,000	27,900	0.2	1.52	1.25
674,000	13,300	2.0	0.69	1.43
811,000	1,200	0.1	0.57	2.28
9,735,034,000	580,708,000	6.0	0.74	0.29

TABLE 9 Countries with the most Buddhists, 2000–50

	Country	Buddhists 2000	Country	Buddhists 2020	Country	Buddhists 2050
1	China	184,087,000	China	228,117,000	China	260,840,000
2	Japan	71,567,000	Japan	70,539,000	Japan	56,495,000
3	Thailand	54,957,000	Thailand	60,846,000	Thailand	55,854,000
4	Viet Nam	39,044,000	Viet Nam	47,334,000	Viet Nam	54,803,000
5	Myanmar	34,610,000	Myanmar	40,469,000	Myanmar	47,717,000
6	Sri Lanka	12,951,000	Sri Lanka	14,559,000	Cambodia	18,375,000
7	South Korea	11,902,000	Cambodia	14,380,000	India	14,800,000
8	Cambodia	10,627,000	South Korea	12,637,000	Sri Lanka	14,508,000
9	India	7,237,000	India	9,799,000	South Korea	12,700,000
10	Taiwan	5,736,000	Taiwan	6,304,000	United States	7,000,000

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/ BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

TABLE 10 Agnostics (A) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50

Region	Population 2020	Agnostics 2020	% 2020
Africa	1,340,598,000	8,215,000	0.6
Eastern Africa	445,406,000	1,094,000	0.2
Middle Africa	179,595,000	1,074,000	0.6
Northern Africa	246,233,000	1,611,000	0.7
Southern Africa	67,504,000	3,274,000	4.8
Western Africa	401,861,000	1,163,000	0.3
Asia	4,641,055,000	547,520,000	11.8
Central Asia	74,339,000	2,447,000	3.3
Eastern Asia	1,678,090,000	505,861,000	30.1
South Asia	1,940,370,000	17,069,000	0.9
South-eastern Asia	668,620,000	18,834,000	2.8
Western Asia	279,637,000	3,308,000	1.2
Europe	747,636,000	101,371,000	13.6
Eastern Europe	293,013,000	22,370,000	7.6
Northern Europe	106,261,000	20,628,000	19.4
Southern Europe	152,215,000	14,073,000	9.2
Western Europe	196,146,000	44,300,000	22.6

2.5 *Agnostics/Atheists*

Agnostics are expected to decline from 9.6% of the world’s population in 2020 to only 7.3% in 2050 (table 10). Atheists are also expected to decline from 1.9% in 2020 to 1.5% in 2050 (table 12). Both table 10 and table 12 show that the decreases are driven by the decline in East Asia. Elsewhere, both groups are expected to grow rapidly in Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, while maintaining modest growth in Europe and Northern America. Nonetheless, little change is expected in the list of countries with the most agnostics or atheists (tables 11 and 13). Notably, China will continue to have the largest populations of agnostics and atheists despite significant declines in both (and particularly agnostics). Also, because of the resurgence of Christianity in Russia and religion in Viet Nam, both of these countries are expected to lose large numbers of agnostics in the future.

Population 2050	Agnostics 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	A gr % 2020–50
2,489,275,000	16,509,000	0.7	2.08	2.35
851,218,000	2,479,000	0.3	2.18	2.76
382,640,000	2,203,000	0.6	2.55	2.42
371,545,000	2,532,000	0.7	1.38	1.52
87,379,000	6,665,000	7.6	0.86	2.40
796,494,000	2,630,000	0.3	2.31	2.76
5,290,263,000	430,397,000	8.1	0.44	−0.80
100,250,000	1,120,000	1.1	1.00	−2.57
1,617,342,000	374,004,000	23.1	−0.12	−1.00
2,396,167,000	26,219,000	1.1	0.71	1.44
794,002,000	23,341,000	2.9	0.57	0.72
382,502,000	5,714,000	1.5	1.05	1.84
710,486,000	112,774,000	15.9	−0.17	0.36
261,977,000	14,525,000	5.5	−0.37	−1.43
114,960,000	27,816,000	24.2	0.26	1.00
136,648,000	17,473,000	12.8	−0.36	0.72
196,902,000	52,961,000	26.9	0.01	0.60

TABLE 10 Agnostics (A) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50 (*cont.*)

Region	Population 2020	Agnostics 2020	% 2020
Latin America	653,962,000	22,594,000	3.5
Caribbean	43,532,000	2,804,000	6.4
Central America	179,670,000	4,780,000	2.7
South America	430,760,000	15,009,000	3.5
Northern America	368,870,000	64,155,000	17.4
Oceania	42,678,000	8,281,000	19.4
Australia/New Zealand	30,322,000	8,160,000	26.9
Melanesia	11,123,000	97,800	0.9
Micronesia	549,000	7,200	1.3
Polynesia	684,000	15,700	2.3
Global total	7,794,799,000	752,135,000	9.6

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

TABLE 11 Countries with the most agnostics, 2000–50

	Country	Agnostics 2000	Country	Agnostics 2020	Country	Agnostics 2050
1	China	437,503,000	China	474,394,000	China	340,000,000
2	United States	29,147,000	United States	55,493,000	United States	78,000,000
3	Russia	21,447,000	Germany	19,555,000	India	25,000,000
4	Germany	15,352,000	India	16,345,000	Germany	21,625,000
5	North Korea	13,126,000	United Kingdom	14,845,000	United Kingdom	20,480,000
6	Japan	12,478,000	North Korea	14,768,000	France	17,000,000
7	India	12,117,000	Japan	12,880,000	North Korea	16,384,000
8	United Kingdom	10,576,000	France	12,800,000	Japan	13,200,000
9	Viet Nam	10,175,000	Viet Nam	12,077,000	Canada	13,000,000
10	France	10,163,000	Canada	8,656,000	Viet Nam	12,000,000

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

Population 2050	Agnostics 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	A gr % 2020–50
762,432,000	43,154,000	5.7	0.51	2.18
47,394,000	3,504,000	7.4	0.28	0.74
223,567,000	10,556,000	4.7	0.73	2.68
491,472,000	29,095,000	5.9	0.44	2.23
425,200,000	91,007,000	21.4	0.47	1.17
57,376,000	13,303,000	23.2	0.99	1.59
38,422,000	13,085,000	34.1	0.79	1.59
17,469,000	178,000	1.0	1.52	2.02
674,000	12,700	1.9	0.69	1.90
811,000	27,400	3.4	0.57	1.87
9,735,034,000	707,144,000	7.3	0.74	–0.21

TABLE 12 Atheists (a) by United Nations continents and regions, 2020–50

Region	Population 2020	Atheists 2020	% 2020
Africa	1,340,598,000	739,000	0.1
Eastern Africa	445,406,000	150,000	0.0
Middle Africa	179,595,000	160,000	0.1
Northern Africa	246,233,000	178,000	0.1
Southern Africa	67,504,000	165,000	0.2
Western Africa	401,861,000	85,600	0.0
Asia	4,641,055,000	118,157,000	2.5
Central Asia	74,339,000	554,000	0.7
Eastern Asia	1,678,090,000	108,048,000	6.4
South Asia	1,940,370,000	2,250,000	0.1
South-eastern Asia	668,620,000	6,921,000	1.0
Western Asia	279,637,000	384,000	0.1
Europe	747,636,000	15,106,000	2.0
Eastern Europe	293,013,000	3,612,000	1.2
Northern Europe	106,261,000	2,479,000	2.3
Southern Europe	152,215,000	3,209,000	2.1
Western Europe	196,146,000	5,805,000	3.0
Latin America	653,962,000	3,202,000	0.5
Caribbean	43,532,000	570,000	1.3
Central America	179,670,000	280,000	0.2
South America	430,760,000	2,352,000	0.5
Northern America	368,870,000	10,587,000	2.9
Oceania	42,678,000	1,732,000	4.1
Australia/New Zealand	30,322,000	1,724,000	5.7
Melanesia	11,123,000	6,400	0.1
Micronesia	549,000	220	0.0
Polynesia	684,000	1,600	0.2
Global total	7,794,799,000	149,523,000	1.9

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

Population 2050	Atheists 2050	% 2050	Pop gr % 2020–50	a gr % 2020–50
2,489,275,000	1,244,000	0.0	2.08	1.75
851,218,000	308,000	0.0	2.18	2.42
382,640,000	265,000	0.1	2.55	1.69
371,545,000	276,000	0.1	1.38	1.48
87,379,000	223,000	0.3	0.86	1.01
796,494,000	172,000	0.0	2.31	2.35
5,290,263,000	94,972,000	1.8	0.44	–0.73
100,250,000	202,000	0.2	1.00	–3.31
1,617,342,000	83,145,000	5.1	–0.12	–0.87
2,396,167,000	3,408,000	0.1	0.71	1.39
794,002,000	7,700,000	1.0	0.57	0.36
382,502,000	517,000	0.1	1.05	0.99
710,486,000	17,489,000	2.5	–0.17	0.49
261,977,000	2,192,000	0.8	–0.37	–1.65
114,960,000	3,341,000	2.9	0.26	1.00
136,648,000	4,091,000	3.0	–0.36	0.81
196,902,000	7,866,000	4.0	0.01	1.02
762,432,000	4,459,000	0.6	0.51	1.11
47,394,000	490,000	1.0	0.28	–0.50
223,567,000	561,000	0.3	0.73	2.34
491,472,000	3,408,000	0.7	0.44	1.24
425,200,000	21,351,000	5.0	0.47	2.37
57,376,000	3,365,000	5.9	0.99	2.24
38,422,000	3,350,000	8.7	0.79	2.24
17,469,000	11,300	0.1	1.52	1.91
674,000	560	0.1	0.69	3.10
811,000	2,700	0.3	0.57	1.70
9,735,034,000	142,879,000	1.5	0.74	–0.15

TABLE 13 Top 10 countries with the most atheists, 2000–50

	Country	Atheists 2000	Country	Atheists 2020	Country	Atheists 2050
1	China	97,953,000	China	100,084,000	China	75,000,000
2	Viet Nam	5,445,000	United States	9,622,000	United States	20,000,000
3	United States	4,582,000	Viet Nam	6,233,000	Viet Nam	6,400,000
4	Japan	3,736,000	North Korea	4,016,000	France	4,000,000
5	Russia	3,675,000	Japan	3,581,000	North Korea	4,000,000
6	North Korea	3,572,000	France	2,737,000	Japan	3,700,000
7	France	2,343,000	India	2,186,000	India	3,300,000
8	Ukraine	2,050,000	Italy	2,137,000	Australia	3,250,000
9	Italy	2,032,000	Germany	2,061,000	Italy	2,750,000
10	Germany	1,833,000	Australia	1,660,000	Germany	2,250,000

SOURCE: TODD M. JOHNSON AND BRIAN J. GRIM, EDS., *WORLD RELIGION DATABASE* (LEIDEN/BOSTON: BRILL, ACCESSED JULY 2021).

The expected decline (in global percentage) of agnostics and atheists by 2050 provides evidence for the quantitative resiliency of religion over the next 30 years. Purely demographic changes do not show a precipitous decline in religious adherence. Religionists generally have higher birth rates than the nonreligious, while death rates for both are similar. The author’s current understanding of the impact of secularization does not seem to indicate widespread conversions from the world’s religions in the years to come. The burden of proof, then, falls to observers who state that massive conversions from religious adherence are expected or likely. At present, the best quantitative tools for projecting the religious future of humankind forecast the perseverance and even flourishing of religion.²¹ By these estimates, religionists would make up 91.2% of the world’s population in 2050, up from 80.8% in 1970 (when the percentage of nonreligious peaked worldwide in the twentieth century). While early gains after 1970 in the percentage of religionists were the result of the

21 Todd M. Johnson and David B. Barrett, “Quantifying Alternate Futures of Religion and Religions,” *Futures* 36 (2004): 960.

collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union, future gains are likely to come from the resurgence of religion in China. However, these numbers, mask the fact that secularization will likely continue to deepen in Western countries such as Sweden, where over 37% of the population is expected to be either agnostic or atheist by 2050.²²

3 Research on the Future of Religion

Based on the advances made in both data collection and analytical techniques, there are several pressing topics related to research on the future of religion. First, how will the global trend toward overall lower fertility affect the religious composition of nations and communities? For instance, as birth rates have plummeted in Western Europe, the demand for laborers has been filled in part by the immigration of large numbers of Muslims. Though fertility levels are dropping in most countries with Muslim majorities, the effects of past high fertility have created “youth bulges” that potentially will result in Muslim youth continuing to look outside their home countries for employment. Will the fertility levels of these new, younger Muslim immigrants correspond to the generally lower fertility levels of their newfound homelands (the usual scenario), or will the newcomers persist in having family sizes resembling those in their countries of origin? More generally, will new Muslim immigrants successfully integrate with largely non-Muslim societies? And if so, how will that affect the religious outlook of the new arrivals, existing Muslim communities, and non-Muslims?

Second, will the religious future of the world be determined by Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where, combined, seven in ten people live today? This is important for assessing the strength of agnostic and atheist communities (China) and Christianity (Sub-Saharan Africa). Also noteworthy is that not only Muslims immigrate to Western Europe—Hindus, Christians, and others of all faiths do so as well. How might emigrants to the more secularized lands of Europe from countries with high degrees of religiosity change the religious character of Europe?

Third, how can more accurate religious demographic measures be developed for religious populations? As noted earlier, the highest quality projections for religious communities are built on cohort-component projections, but detailed data on cohorts is not available for most religious communities around the world. One obvious way to improve projections is to obtain more complete data for cohort-component projections. It is also particularly

22 Johnson and Grim, *World Religion Database*.

difficult to estimate the size of subgroups in other world religions; most figures for even basic religious identities such as Sunnis and Shias within Islam are tied not to census or survey data but primarily to ethnographic and historical analyses.²³ One way to obtain more accurate data on religious subgroups would be to develop better and more layered religious affiliation questions for future surveys. Interdisciplinary work is crucial for this process because, for instance, simply estimating how many people are associated with the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence would require the cooperation of specialists in Islam, historians, anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociologists. (Obtaining detailed data via censuses or other methods would require collaboration among even more groups—including governments—some of whom are likely to see cooperation as a threat to their vested interests.) Along these lines, tracking conversion rates is a pressing and underdeveloped demographic issue. Future work should aim to develop better estimations of how many people exit religious communities, convert to different religions, and revert to previous religious affiliations at later stages of life.

Fourth, does increasing religious diversity lead to less social solidarity and more conflict (the “clash of civilizations” theory)?²⁴ To answer this, religious demographers need to present data on religious diversity in ways that can be related to statistics on conflicts so that such a proposition can be tested. Some initial empirical tests have been done,²⁵ but much more work remains before the full picture of how religious plurality, and different configurations of religious plurality, relate to social solidarity and conflict.

Going forward, it is important to consider that the limits of demographic projection methodologies are real. For instance, traditional demographic analysis focusing on fertility, age structure, and life expectancy to project the religious composition of Africa over the twentieth century, had it been done around 1900, would never have predicted the dramatic growth of Christianity from less than 10% in 1900 to approximately 50% in 2020, because most of the growth was a result of conversion. Likewise, today’s global migration patterns would have been difficult to predict during the time of the Cold War (1950s–80s). Given such limits, in what ways can future projections construct various scenarios that account for religion-specific processes of the future—that truly consider economic and environmental impacts?

23 See Pew Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*.

24 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

25 Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, “Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Economies?” *American Sociological Review* 72:4 (2007): 633–58.

The most important challenge for international religious demography remains the development of more accurate systems for measuring and analyzing both the present and the past, which form the basis of any future projections. These improved systems will allow future researchers to answer, or at least answer more accurately, many of the hotly-debated issues of the current generation of social scientists, such as the role of modernization in the level of secularization. Perhaps futurist Warren Wagar phrased it best: “As futurists, we are really out of our depth in trying to chart the far future of religion.”²⁶

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26 Warren Wagar, *The Next Three Futures: Paradigms of Things to Come* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1991), 40.