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The future of world religions: Muslims to outnumber Christians by 2035, Pew Research report

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Exam relevance: General Studies I (Indian society, demography), Mains; Prelims: world religions, population trends, international reports



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What the report says

According to the Pew Research Center's new report, if current demographic trends continue, Muslims will outnumber Christians by 2035 and Islam will become the world's largest religion. Christianity has been the world's largest religion for centuries; that order could change in the next decade.

Key findings

Total numbers and growth rates

- The world's total population is projected to grow by 29 per cent between 2020 and 2070.

- Only two religious groups will keep pace with overall population growth in this period, Christians (+30 per cent) and Muslims (+80 per cent).
- By 2070 there will be more than 3.6 billion Muslims and just under 3 billion Christians worldwide.
- The Muslim share of world population will rise from 26 per cent in 2020 to 36 per cent in 2070, while the Christian share will stay roughly steady at about 29 per cent.

Fertility rates and age structure

- During 2020-2025, the total fertility rate (TFR) of Muslims was 3.1 children per woman, compared with 2.0 for non-Muslims.
- The three Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, are the only groups with fertility rates above the replacement level (2.1 children per woman): Christians stood at 2.5 and Jews at 2.3 (matching the global average); women in the "other religions" group collectively had about 2.1 children per woman. The remaining groups have fertility rates too low to sustain their populations in the long term.
- In 2020 the median age of Muslims was 24, nearly a decade below the median age of non-Muslims (33). A younger age structure is the main driver of faster population growth.

Regional shifts

- By 2070, more than half of the world's Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa.
- The Democratic Republic of Congo will overtake the United States in Christian population.
- North America will no longer be Christian-majority, the Christian share will fall from 63 per cent to 46 per cent. The religiously unaffiliated share in the US will rise to about 41 per cent.
- Jews (the third-largest religious group in the US in 2020) will fall behind both Muslims and Hindus in the US by 2070.
- In Europe, the unaffiliated share will rise from a quarter to about a third, and the Muslim share from 6 per cent to about 13 per cent.
- In the Asia-Pacific region, Muslims will overtake the unaffiliated as the largest group, and Hindus will be the second-largest.

The country picture

- By 2070, Pakistan will have the largest Muslim population in the world, followed by India, Nigeria and Indonesia (Indonesia has the largest today).
- The number of Muslim-majority countries will grow by just one, Ivory Coast, to 54 in 2070.
- The number of countries with unaffiliated majorities will rise, from 10 at present to 13 in 2070, adding South Korea, France and the United Kingdom.
- By 2070, 62 per cent of the world's Jews will live in Israel (46 per cent in 2020).
- The total populations of China, Japan and South Korea will shrink, and their Buddhist populations will fall by more than half. Buddhists overall will decline in both number and share.

The India picture (projections in the Pew report chart in its Hindu-population chapter)

- The Hindu share of India's population is projected to fall from 79.4 per cent in 2020 to 75.8 per cent in 2070; the Muslim share is projected to rise from 15.2 per cent to 19.6 per cent; the Christian share is projected to stay at 2.2 per cent; "other religions" are projected to fall from 2.5 per cent to 1.8 per cent, and Buddhists from 0.7 per cent to 0.6 per cent.
- In absolute terms, India's Hindus will grow by about 176 million between 2020 and 2070, the largest Hindu increase in any country; Pakistan (about 5 million) and the United States (about 4 million) follow.
- Worldwide, the number of Hindus will grow by about 199 million to roughly 1.4 billion, but their share of world population will slip from 15 per cent to 14 per cent.
- By 2070, the United States will have the world's fifth-largest Hindu population; only India and Nepal will remain Hindu-majority countries in 2070.

The religiously unaffiliated ("nones")

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- The unaffiliated will grow in most countries, but because of China's shrinking population (where the largest number of "nones" live), their global share will fall from 24 per cent in 2020 to 17 per cent in 2070.

Methodology

The report studies seven religious groups (Christians, Muslims, the unaffiliated, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and other religions). The projections hold recent levels of age structure, fertility, religious switching and migration constant; the same mortality rate is applied to every group within a country. These are demographic projections, not predictions, switching or policy changes can alter the actual figures.

Related reading: Census 2027: The Tangled Question of the Religion Column and the Start of Self-Enumeration

Why it matters for the exam

- For Prelims: the year 2035 (Muslims overtaking Christians), the 3.6 billion/3 billion figures, fertility rates (Muslims 3.1, Christians 2.5, Jews 2.3), the Pakistan-India-Nigeria-Indonesia order, and India's composition (79.4 to 75.8 per cent).
- For Mains: demographic trends and their socio-political implications; usable as an example in questions on India's population policy.

Prelims Practice Questions

Question 1. With reference to the Pew Research Center report "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2020-2070", consider the following statements:

Statement 1: If current trends continue, Muslims will outnumber Christians by 2035.

Statement 2: Between 2020 and 2070, the Muslim population is projected to grow by about 80 per cent and the Christian population by about 30 per cent.

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Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) Both 1 and 2

(d) Neither 1 nor 2

▼ **Answer and Explanation**

Correct answer: (c)

According to the report, Muslims will overtake Christians by 2035. World population will grow 29 per cent between 2020 and 2070; only Christians (30 per cent) and Muslims (80 per cent) will keep pace.

Question 2. According to the report, which country is projected to have the world's largest Muslim population by 2070?

(a) Indonesia

(b) India

(c) Pakistan

(d) Nigeria

▼ **Answer and Explanation**

Correct answer: (c)

By 2070, Pakistan will have the largest Muslim population, followed by India, Nigeria and Indonesia. At present, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

According to the report, women of which religious group gave birth to the most children during 2020-2025?

Muslim women, about 252 million babies were born to Muslim mothers in this period, compared with about 208 million born to Christian mothers. Muslims are the only major group projected to see growing numbers of births in the decades ahead.

How much does religious switching affect these projections?

For most groups the net effect of switching is modest, but between 2020 and 2070 about 117 million more people are projected to become religiously unaffiliated than to take up a religion, most of them former Christians. For Christians, losses from switching partly offset natural increase (births minus deaths).

Is this the Pew Research Center's first report on religion and population?

No. The Center published a similar report, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050", in April 2015; the new report takes 2020 as the base year and projects to 2070.

Sources

- www.pewresearch.org
- www.pewresearch.org
- www.thehindu.com