

Appendix E: Description of Groups

This study attempts to project the future number of people who will self-identify as Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Jews, as well as people associated with three other religious categories: the religiously unaffiliated, folk or traditional religions and “other” religions, which are consolidated into a single group.

Buddhists

The three major branches of Buddhism in the modern world are Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism and Vajrayana (sometimes described as Tibetan) Buddhism. While affiliation with particular branches of Buddhism is not measured in most censuses and surveys, Mahayana Buddhism is widely believed to be the largest, because it is prevalent in several countries with very large Buddhist populations, particularly China, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. Theravada Buddhism, the second-largest branch, is concentrated in such countries as Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia. Vajrayana Buddhism, the smallest of the three major branches, is concentrated in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia.¹⁰⁷ The Buddhist population figures in this study also include members of other groups that identify as Buddhist, such as Soka Gakkai and Hoa Hao.

Christians

This analysis looks at Christians as a single religious group and does not project changes among Christian subgroups. About half of all Christians were Catholic as of 2010. An estimated 37% of Christians belonged to the Protestant faith, broadly defined to include Anglicans as well as members of independent and nondenominational churches. The Orthodox Communion, including the Greek and Russian Orthodox, made up 12% of Christians. Other Christian groups, which made up the remaining 1%, include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Christian Scientists and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Estimates are based on self-identification. The intent is sociological rather than theological, and no set of beliefs (such as adherence to a particular creed) or practices (such as regular church attendance) is used to define who is a Christian.

¹⁰⁷ Alternatively, some scholars consider there to be two main Buddhist branches – Mahayana and Theravada – and classify Vajrayana as part of the Mahayana branch. Other schools within the Mahayana tradition include Zen, Nichiren and Pure Land. See, for example, Williams, Paul. 2008. “Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations.” Routledge.

Folk or Traditional Religions

Folk religions are closely tied to a particular people, ethnicity or tribe. In some cases, elements of other world religions are blended with local beliefs and customs. These faiths often have no formal creeds or sacred texts. Examples of folk religions include African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian aboriginal religions.

Hindus

Major traditions within Hinduism include Vaishnavism, which is devoted to worship of the god Vishnu, and Shaivism, organized around worship of the god Shiva. Because of a lack of census or survey data on subgroups of Hindus in most countries, however, reliable estimates of the global size of various Hindu traditions are not available.

Jews

The projections in this report are based on estimates of people who self-identify as Jewish when asked about their religion on national censuses and large-scale surveys. The figures do not include “cultural” or “ethnic” Jews – people who have Jewish ancestry and may consider themselves at least partially Jewish but who do not describe their current religion as Jewish. The worldwide figures in this report could be larger if a broader definition (such as having a Jewish grandparent) or smaller if a tighter definition (such as an unbroken line of matrilineal Jewish descent) were imposed.¹⁰⁸

Muslims

There are two major branches of Islam – Sunni and Shia. As of 2010, it was estimated that the overwhelming majority (87-90%) of Muslims were Sunnis; about 10-13% were Shia Muslims. However, with little data on population differences among Muslim subgroups around the world, this report does not project the future size of Sunni and Shia populations.

¹⁰⁸ For more information on varying definitions of Jewishness and resulting population estimates, see DellaPergola, Sergio. 2011. “Jewish Demographic Policies: Population Trends and Options in Israel and the Diaspora.” The Jewish People Policy Institute, pages 21-25.

Other Religions

“Other religions” is a residual category composed of groups not classified elsewhere. This very diverse category includes followers of religions that often are not measured separately in censuses and surveys: the Baha’i faith, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Taoism, Tenrikyo, Wicca, Zoroastrianism and many other religions. Because of a lack of data on these faiths in many countries, the individual religions within this category are not projected separately. Rather, they are combined and treated as a whole. This means the growth trajectories of specific religions in this category could vary greatly.

The Religiously Unaffiliated

The religiously unaffiliated population includes atheists, agnostics and people who do not identify with any particular religion. However, many of the religiously unaffiliated do hold some religious or spiritual beliefs. For example, surveys have found that belief in God or a higher power is shared by 7% of unaffiliated Chinese adults, 30% of unaffiliated French adults and 68% of unaffiliated U.S. adults.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Beliefs and practices of unaffiliated adults in the United States are documented in the Pew Research Center’s October 2012 report “‘Nones’ on the Rise.” The Pew Research belief-in-God question measures belief in God or a universal spirit. French results are based on a Pew research analysis of 2008 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data; the ISSP survey measures belief in God or a “higher power of some kind.” Chinese results are based on a Pew Research analysis of the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents survey, conducted by the Chinese polling firm Horizon. In China, the belief-in-God statistic includes belief in God, gods, spirits, ghosts or Buddha.