

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Global Religious Landscape and the Growing Secularization of the World

The Pew Research Center periodically issues valuable studies on religious movements, trends and often speculates on what present tendencies tell us about the future. The Pew Center recently published its *Global Religious Futures*, which gives focus to eight major global religious groups and speculates on what present tendencies tell us about these groups through 2050. What follows is a summary of the Center's salient findings:

1. Muslims are the fastest growing religious group, largely because they have the highest fertility rate and the youngest population. Therefore, Islam will grow from the present-day 1.6 billion people to 2.76 billion by 2050.
2. The share of the world's population that is Christian is expected to remain steady (at about 31%) but the regional distribution will change. Nearly 4 in 10 Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, while the decline in European Christians will continue to roughly 16% by 2050. The center of biblical Christianity is shifting from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere.
3. The number of religiously unaffiliated people (aka "nones") is increasing in the United States and Europe (see below).
4. In the US, Christians will decline from more than 3/4th of the population (2010) to 2/3rd (2050). In the US, the "nones," Muslims and Hindus will all rise.
5. Buddhism as a share of the world's population will decline from 7% to 5% by 2050.
6. By 2050, India will be the nation with the largest Muslim population.
7. By 2050, Christianity will comprise 31.4% of the world's population (2.9 billion) while Islam will comprise 29.7% of the population (2.7 billion).

According to Phil Zuckerman, Sociology and Secular Studies Professor at Pitzer College in California, there were over 1.1 billion non-religious people in the world in 2010, and that number is expected to increase to over 1.2 billion by the year 2020. "Churches are closing across the world, faith is fading, and those men and women who live their lives according to secular values and humanist principles are on the rise." In some ways, the world's newest religion is: "No Religion."

Consider these facts:

- For the first time in Norwegian history, there are more atheists and agnostics than believers in God.
- For the first time in British history, there are now more atheists and agnostics than believers in God. And church attendance rates in the UK are at an all-time low, with less than 2% of British men and women attending church on any given Sunday.
- A recent survey found that 0% of Icelanders believe that God created the Earth. And whereas 20 years ago, 90% of Icelanders claimed to be religious, today less than 50% claim to be.
- Nearly 70% of the Dutch are not affiliated with any religion, and approximately 700 Protestant churches and over 1,000 Catholic churches are expected to close within the next few years throughout the Netherlands, due to low attendance.
- According to a recent Eurobarometer Poll, 19% of Spaniards, 24% of Danes, 26% of Slovenians, 27% of Germans and Belgians, 34% of Swedes, and 40% of the French, claim to not believe in “any sort of spirit, God, or life-force.”
- In the United States, somewhere between 23% and 28% of American adults have no religious affiliation, and these so-called “nones” are not only growing in number, but they are becoming increasingly secular in their behaviors and beliefs.
- Among Millennials—Americans in their 20s—over 35% are non-religious, constituting the largest cohort of secular men and women in the nation’s history.
- In Canada, back in 1991, 12% of adults stated “none,” when asked their religion—today that is up to 24%.
- In Australia, 15% of the population said they had no religion in 2001, and it is up to at least 22% today.
- In New Zealand, 30% of the population claimed no religion in 2001, but it had risen to 42% in 2013.
- In South America, 7% of men and women in Mexico, 8% in Brazil, 11% in Argentina, 12% in El Salvador, 16% in Chile, 18% in the Dominican Republic, and 37% in Uruguay are non-religious—the highest such rates of Latin American secularity ever recorded.
- In Japan, about 70% of adults claimed to hold personal religious beliefs sixty years ago, but today, that figure is down to only about 20%; in 1970 there were 96,000 Buddhist temples throughout Japan, but in 2007, there were 75,866 - and around 20,000 of those were un-staffed, with no resident priest. In the 1950s, over 75% of Japanese households had a kamidana (Shinto altar), but by 2006 this was down to 44% nationwide, and only 26% in major cities.
- While 11% of South Koreans were atheists in 2005, that has increased to at least 15% as of late, and the percentage of South Koreans who described themselves as religious has dropped from 58% to 52% over the past decade.
- Over 50% of Chinese adults are secular (although in Communist dictatorships where religion is officially oppressed, valid information on people’s religiosity is always hard to come by).

- In Africa, while religiosity remains high, there are nonetheless growing pockets of irreligion: over 5% of the those in Ghana claim to have no religion, and 9% of people in Madagascar and Tanzania, and 11% of people in Gabon and Swaziland are now non-religious. Approximately 20% of Botswanans now claim to have no religion.
- Over 20% of Jamaicans are now non-religious.

What does all of this mean for those of us who believe in the Great Commission and who believe that genuine biblical Christianity is the answer to the human condition? Permit me to suggest two key strategies that each Christian should adopt:

1. Pray strategically. Take the data summary above and make it into a prayer list. Pray that God will open the eyes of Muslims to see that Jesus is indeed God's Son sent to offer salvation through His cross and resurrection. Pray for the "nones": that they will see that Jesus is indeed the answer to their questions and can resolve all of their doubts.
2. Develop a strategy for your giving. Giving to your local church is your priority. But might I suggest that you also give to educational institutions that prepare leaders for the church and for the world. The southern hemisphere, where Christianity is exploding, needs well-prepared leaders. Who will provide these? Strategize your giving to reach those areas where Christianity is exploding but also where it is almost nonexistent (e.g., Western Europe). These developments are not beyond our God, but they mandate that His passion to reach the world becomes our passion as well.

Let's both pray and give to reach this desperately needy world for Christ.

See Phil Zuckerman in the *Huffington Post* (12 May 2016) and "7 Key Changes in the Global Religious Landscape" www.pewresearch.org (18 May 2016).