Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Islam will surpass Christianity as the world's largest religion by 2035



Islam is expected to surpass Christianity as the world's largest religion by 2035, according to detailed projections released Wednesday by the Pew Research Center.

Pew, which has been issuing authoritative reports on religious demography for 25 years, said both Islam and Christianity are growing, but Islam is growing much faster.

A key reason, Pew said, is that Muslims tend to have more children than other major religious groups.

"It's the babies," said Pew senior demographer Conrad Hackett, explaining that conversion and other ways of changing religious identity are much smaller factors than fertility rates.

During 2020-2025, the fertility rate for Muslims was 3.1 children per woman, followed by the rate for Christians at 2.5, according to Pew.

The average fertility rate for all other women was 1.6, below the level of 2.1 that's considered necessary for each generation to replace itself.

According to Pew's latest estimates, there were 2.27 billion Christians and 2.02 billion Muslims worldwide in 2020.

Pew's new projections forecast that there will be 2.57 billion Muslims and 2.52 billion Christians by 2035. By 2070, if recent trends continue, there will be more than 3.6 billion Muslims and just under 3 billion Christians worldwide.

The estimates are part of a broader Pew project examining how the size of major religious groups could change between 2020 and 2070.

The projections take into account recent differences between religious groups' age profiles, fertility rates, and patterns of religious switching and migration.

Among the many notable findings: Pew projects that the United States, within 40 years, will no longer have a Christian majority.

Christians now account for 62% of U.S. adults, according to Pew, and will fall below 50% by 2065.

In neighboring Canada, Christians are expected to drop below 50% by 2030, Pew said.

In both countries, a significant reason for the drop is the concurrent increase in the number of people with no religious affiliation.

By 2070, they are projected to account for 41% of the U.S. population and to outnumber Christians in Canada.

Muslims and Christians are expected to keep pace with population growth

The world's population is projected to increase by 29% between 2020 and 2070, Pew said.

Of the religious groups it analyzed, Muslims and Christians are the only ones expected to keep pace, with Christians growing by 30% and Muslims by 80%.

Although Hindus and Jews are growing in absolute numbers, they are projected to decline as a percentage of the global population, Pew said.

It forecasts that Buddhists would shrink both in number and as a portion of the world's population, in part due to expected declines in the overall populations of China, South Korea and Japan.

Over the coming decades, Pew said, most of the world's population growth is expected to occur in Africa, particularly south of the Sahara Desert, where most people are Christians or Muslims.

The region's high fertility and rising life expectancy will boost the global numbers of both faiths, Pew predicted.

By 2070, more than half of the world's Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa

By 2070, Pew said, more than half of the world's Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa, and Congo will surpass the United States as the country with the most Christians, with their ranks increasing more than threefold to 299 million.

The populations of other major regions are expected to grow more modestly, or even decline.

For example, the number of people living in Europe will shrink by 17% by 2070, Pew said, and the number of Christians there will drop by a third, from 505 million to 324 million.

Over the same period, the percentage of Europe's population that is Muslim is expected to increase from 6% to 13%.

In the U.S., Pew projects that the number of Christians will decline from about 217 million in 2020 to about 174 million in 2070.

Several mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S. have faced declining membership over many years.

However, Jeffrey Brodd, a religious studies professor at California State-Sacramento, suggested a rebound was possible following congressional election victories this month by several Democrats active in these moderate-to-liberal denominations.

Fertility rates are a driving factor

By Pew's estimates, Muslim women gave birth to more babies than women in any other religion during 2020-2025.

About 252 million babies were born to Muslim mothers, compared with 208 million born to Christian mothers.

Muslims are the only major religious group expected to have growing numbers of births in the decades ahead.

The other groups are projected either to have steady numbers of births or to experience gradual decline.

If recent trends continue, according to Pew, Pakistan will have the largest Muslim population by 2070, followed by India, Nigeria and Indonesia — which currently has the most Muslims.



Christian-Muslim relations are extremely important in light of the evolving trends

Gina Zurlo, a senior researcher at Harvard Divinity School specializing in religious demographics, said Christian-Muslim relations are "extremely important" in light of the evolving trends.

"The 'clash of civilization' theory still looms large in some religious communities and there is a lot of misunderstanding of both religions from both sides," she said via email. "Many Christians are not happy to see that Islam will be the world's largest religion and it's causing even more angst."

"I hope people seek opportunities for greater interreligious education," she added. "Personal contact is important — when people have personal relationships across religious differences, it 'humanizes' the 'other' in fruitful ways."

Alan Cooperman, Pew's director of religion research, noted that most of the projected proliferation of Muslims and Christians was

occurring in countries where they already are the majority — with conversion playing only a minor role.

“I don’t think this is a situation in which the growth of Muslims is coming at the expense of Christians,” he added. “I do worry about mischief being made with headlines or narratives that take this finding and portray it as sort of a clash where Christians are losing to Muslims.”

The ‘nones’ are growing in some areas

Many countries have seen a steady proliferation of the “nones” — people who are atheist, agnostic or religiously unaffiliated.

Excluding China, which has a high proportion of “nones” but faces a sharp decline in overall population, the ranks of “nones” elsewhere will grow by more than 180 million by 2070, Pew said.

> The “nones” already account for a majority of the population in 10 countries

The “nones” already account for a majority of the population in 10 countries, including the Czech Republic, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Uruguay and Vietnam, according to Pew.

South Korea, France and the United Kingdom are forecast to join this group by 2070.