Chapter 6

The Size and Demographic Structure of Religions in Europe

Marcin Stonawski, Vegard Skirbekk, Conrad Hackett, Michaela Potančaková, and Brian Grim

Religion can be a defining criterion of societies in terms of identity and community orientation. Religious orientation might influence outcomes as different as trade patterns, female employment levels, legal and economic systems, and societal structures (Castells 2010; Modood 2010; Flora, Szilagyi, and Roudometof 2005). Religion has been found to relate to important life outcomes, ranging from people’s willingness to pay taxes to their health-related behavior, as well as marriage and fertility choices (Alm and Torgler 2006; Schmid and Kohls 2009; Berghammer 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2011). The importance of religion is sometimes downplayed in the academic literature, with arguments that control for individual characteristics such as schooling, neighborhood, employment, or personality could reduce its estimated effects. However, religion can affect several of these variables and controlling for them could create a downward bias in the estimated effect of religion (Westoff and Jones 1979). Several studies find that religion can have important and significant effects on behavior, also net of confounding factors (McQuillan 2004; Philipov and Berghammer 2007; Skirbekk et al. 2012).

Studying religious affiliation in terms of demographic distribution could be particularly important for Europe. Europe has, to a significant extent, been a forerunner in terms of demographic change with the early historical onset of mortality and fertility decline (sustained mortality decline first took place in Europe, driving population growth in the intermediate term). It is the first world region that experienced sustained below-replacement fertility (the majority of European countries for which there are data experienced below-replacement fertility already by the 1970s). Further, Europe continues to exhibit some of the world’s longest life spans and high levels of net immigration (European countries have been among the world’s most important destinations for migrants for several decades (Özden et al. 2011)). Europe has historically had a large Christian population along with significant numbers of Jews and Muslims. During recent decades, there has been growth in the unaffiliated population along with a growth in non-Christian religions following immigration.

Although there is considerable interest in understanding European religion, there has been a lack of rigorous estimates of the size and composition of religious groups in

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Europe. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* (WCE) and the *World Religion Database* (WRD) have estimates based on data reported by religious institutions as well as by surveys and censuses, but they do not provide age or sex data (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001; Johnson and Grim 2008). While the WCE and WRD estimates are largely in line with other sources, one study found that relying on church-provided statistics sometimes led to higher estimates of Christian populations (Hsu et al. 2008). The WRD also houses data from the collaboration between the Age and Cohort Change Project at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Austria and the Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project in Washington, DC, and makes them available to scholars (Grim, Johnson, Skirbekk, Zurlo 2014; Johnson and Grim 2013; Johnson and Grim 2010; and Johnson and Grim 2008). Our ongoing work, a collaboration between the Age and Cohort Change Project at IIASA and the Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, has produced the first global estimates of religious distributions that also take into account age and sex distributions in addition to size of major religious groups (Hackett et al. 2012).

Two of the most closely watched patterns of religious-demographic change in Europe are religious switching (in particular, movement away from religious affiliation) and the growth of religions other than Christianity (in particular, Islam). Following several decades of high levels of religious disaffiliation in a number of European countries, there has been curiosity about the current unaffiliated share, and how this share differs by age. Further, it has been unclear what the effect of the large net immigration and relatively high fertility of several religious minorities in recent decades has been on religious composition. This study also provides answers about the sex differences in religious affiliation, a product of differential patterns of religious switching by sex and the disproportionally male migrant stock. Fertility differentials also influence the religious landscape. Several studies have documented that religious commitment is associated with relatively high fertility in an assortment of European countries (Goujon, Skirbekk, and Fliegenschnee 2007; Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001; Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2011; Hackett et al., 2011).

**Data and Methods**

To estimate the proportion of religious groups in European countries, we collected the best available and most up-to-date data from censuses, surveys, and administrative population registers for all European countries.\(^2\) In this study, we favored sources that measured religious identity directly in a one-step question (see Hackett 2013 for a discussion of one-step versus two-step measures of religious identity). In this study we do not

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\(^2\) For a description of how religion is assessed and potential problems associated with, for instance, religious self-identification, see the methodological appendix in *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population* (Hackett et al. 2011).