Religions, 1910–2010

The map to the right depicts the world in 1910 by the religion with the most adherents in each of the world’s 5,000 major civil divisions (note that in some cases this is a plurality rather than an actual majority). Although the story of religions over the past 100 years is one of increasing pluralization in many countries, this map shows the geographic reality of the world’s major religions. Christianity, Islam, Hindus, Buddhism and even agnosticism are mainly concentrated by province. These huge blocs represent some extent cultural realities (for example, Arabs as Muslims, South Asians as Hindus), but each of these religions also has enormous cultural diversity (for example, most Muslims are not Arab).

Another feature of this map is that the relative strength of each majority religion is depicted. For example, the Muslim world can be seen to be stronger at its core (higher percentage majority Muslim) than on the periphery (lower percentage majority Muslim).

Interestingly, Chinese folk-religions are an absolute majority in no country or province, although they make up over 6% of the global population, most live in China (where agnostics is the dominate). Conversely, Sikhs and Judaism – although less than 0.3% of the global total each – have local majorities in the Indian state of Punjab and in Israel, respectively. India is also notable for having the most different provincial majority religions (five) in a single country.

One can see two profound changes when comparing the strengths of religions in 1910 with those of 2010. First, sub-Saharan Africa was predominantly ethnoreligious in 1910, by 2010 ethnotheism or fiercely intermarried ethnic religions have been displaced as a major bloc, as Christianity expanded from the south and Islam from the north now form the majority in almost all provinces. Second, China has gone from a majority of Chinese folk-religions to a majority of agnostics and atheists. Third, the growth of agnostics and atheists is shown both on the world map (for example, China) and in the continental rectangles, where tan squares appear in every continent in 2010.

The graphs on those two pages show the relative strengths of religions in 1910 and 2010, for both the whole world (below) and by continent (on the facing page). One can immediately see the diversification of religions by continent: in every case the situation in 2010 is less monothetic than it was in 1910. The table on the facing page is a quick reference for comparing the global strength of each religion as a percentage of the world’s population in 1910 and 2010 as well as a way to compare a religion’s growth rate with that of other religions and with the world’s population as a whole. In addition, one can compare growth over the century (1910–2010) or over the past ten years (2000–10).

A related concept is religious diversity, presented on pages 32–3. Instead of the relative strength of a single religion, the presence (or absence) of more than one religion is examined.

Religions by continent, 1910 and 2010

Religions by global adherents, 1910 and 2010

Religious growth rates*, 100-year and 10-year

- *Mean annual growth rate per cent per year, between dates specified

- **Religious growth rates: 100-year and 10-year