

Age of world's worshipers could shape global issues

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The relative portion of older adherents to the world's religions will shift in the coming decades, according to a study by a researcher at the the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center, Mailman School of Public Health. In 2010, Jews had the largest portion of seniors with 20 percent age 60 and older; on the low end, only 7 percent of Muslims represented this age group. By 2050, the study projects that Buddhists and the religiously unaffiliated will be tied for the greatest portion of oldest members, both at 32 percent; Muslims will remain the youngest religious group with only 16 percent. The global population of Christians will age relatively slowly, from 14 percent in 2010 to 21 percent in 2050.

The study is the first to account for aging, mortality, and fertility rates between [religious groups](#), and religious conversion and secularization trends covering almost all countries. Results appear in the *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*.

More than 2,500 data sources, including censuses, demographic surveys, and other population surveys from 198 countries—accounting for more than 99 percent of the world population—were studied. The researchers identified and synthesized the data building up a global dataset over half a decade.

"Changes in religious groups' age distributions could potentially have wide-ranging societal implications," said the study's lead author, Vegard Skirbekk, PhD, of the Columbia Aging Center and professor of Population and Family Health at the Mailman School. "Age variation in

religious distributions can affect the risk of conflict and the degree of cooperation. For instance, conflict is more common between religious groups whose members are younger and less frequent among groups with larger number of older people."

Another example is public spending. Other research has suggested that willingness to pay for public social welfare programs can decrease when those who contribute differ from those who are beneficiaries in terms of their ethno-cultural characteristics. When religious groups show contrasting age patterns, this could potentially affect the level of support for and the sustainability of social welfare programs, he says.

The age of religious adherents can also shape how a religion is practiced. According to Skirbekk, older age groups tend to emphasize religion in terms of its relevance for intergenerational relationships and support, traditions and norms, as meaning, relief and solace in the face of life challenges and disease, coping strategies in the event of health challenges, as well as rituals relating to end-of-life practices. By contrast, younger individuals may seek religion to a greater extent as guidance for behavior, for choice of lifestyles, education, family formation, and work.

To the extent that religion shapes lifestyle choices—such as through rules on diet and alcohol consumption—the demographic changes could also shape the health of older adults. The role of religion can change over the life course in the context of fewer remaining years of life and increasing prevalence of disease. Many seek religious answers when trying to cope with illness at later stages of life.

Finally, the demographic shifts could also affect how various religions are seen—particularly for those without a religious affiliation. "On a global scale, the religiously unaffiliated will age rapidly, potentially making them transform from a group representing the future to one

increasingly representing the past," says Skirbekk.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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