

Religious affiliation at the end of life is changing globally

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The worldwide pattern of religious affiliation at the time of death is expected to change over the next 50 years, with distinct regional trends, according to researchers from the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. The findings are published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*.

This is the first study to analyze the demographics of religious [affiliation](#) at the time of [death](#) on a global scale and to make projections until 2060. Despite the importance of religious affiliation for health- and death-related behavior, there have been few global predictions of this kind.

These changes have implications for end-of-life healthcare, as well as for burial practices.

"Religious affiliation affects which end-of-life practices are preferred, whether specific life-extending procedures are acceptable, and whether specific post-mortem practices, such as cremation, will be carried out," said lead author Vegard Skirbekk, PhD, of the Columbia Aging Center and professor of Population and Family Health at the Mailman School of Public Health.

The researchers compiled data from more than 2,500 surveys, registries, and censuses around the world to create the first global database of [religious views](#) and demographic characteristics. They projected the number of deaths by age, sex, and religion for 198 nations for the years 2010-2060. The projections cover eight major religious groups:

Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, folk religions, other religions, and the unaffiliated.

The authors expect Christianity to be the stated religion of 31 percent of people who will die in 2060, compared to 37 percent in 2010, although Christianity will continue to be the most common [religion](#). The share identifying as Muslim will increase from 21 percent to 25 percent over the same time period. The category of religiously unaffiliated will remain stable.

There are regional differences as well. Europe is projected to continue its trend of secularization, with the religiously unaffiliated increasing from 14 percent to 21 percent of deaths. In Nigeria, Muslims will become the most prevalent religious group. In South Korea, the share that is Christian will be larger than the share that is Buddhist.

In North America, the share of individuals identifying as Christian will fall at the time of death from 85 percent in 2010-2015 to 74 percent in 2055-2060. Individuals identifying as Muslim will increase by 2060 to 1.6 percent from 0.4 percent presently. Those with no [religious affiliation](#) will double from now until 2060, rising from 10 percent to 20 percent of all deaths.

"Religious affiliation represents a rare source of recorded religious views at the time of death. Our study is based on worldwide data that allow us to investigate this for the first time globally," noted Skirbekk.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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