

## **The changing religious profile of Asia: Christians and Muslims**

*We finally return to our home continent of Asia, the most populous continent of the world and the continent that has given birth to all major religions of the world.*

*As in [Africa](#), Islam and Christianity have made deep inroads into Asia in the course of the last 110 years. Share of Muslims in the population of the continent has increased by more than 9 percentage points, from 16.3 percent in 1900 to 25.9 percent in 2010. And, Christians have gained by 6 percentage points, with their share rising from 2.3 to 8.2 percent. The two together have thus claimed another 15 percent of the population in this period of high modernity.*

*Unlike in Africa, however, older religions of the continent—Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Chinese Religions (including Daoism and Confucianism)—have not been submerged under the deluge of Islam and Christianity. The two great proselytising religions of the world have been able to lay claim on only one third of the population of Asia, even after the steep rise in their share during the last 110 years.*

*Hindus (including Sikhs and Jains) have more or less held on to their share of the population. Share of the Chinese Religionists has declined from nearly 40 percent in 1900 to around 11 percent now. But that is because of the rise of Irreligion in China. That rise has begun to reverse. The Irreligious now form about 15 percent of the population of Asia, compared to 20 percent in 2000 and 25 percent in 1970.*

*In South Asia, the share of Muslims has increased by 9 percentage points according to [the Census counts](#) and by 5 percentage points according to the international religious demography sources that we have used in this note. Share of Christians has also increased by nearly 6 percentage points according to the latter sources. South Asia now has the largest Muslim population of all regions of Asia and India has the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia.*

*In Southeast Asia, the share of Muslims has increased by 15 percentage points from less than 22 percent in 1900 to nearly 37 percent in 2010. The share of Christians has also increased by about 12 percentage points from 10.4 to 22 percent. The largest increase in the Muslim share has been in Indonesia and Malaysia; they have increased their share in several other countries also in recent decades. Christians have increased their share in Philippines, which already had a high Christian presence in 1900, and in several other countries where they did not have much of a presence earlier.*

*In East Asia, share of Christians has increased by nearly 8 percentage points from 0.4 percent in 1900 to 8.1 percent now. But this number is controversial; different sources estimate the Christian population in China anywhere from 1.5 to 8 percent. Christians have established a larger presence in South Korea, where their share had reached 41 percent in 2000; it has since declined to 33 percent. Christian presence is not very significant in other countries of East Asia including Japan.*

*Muslims in East Asia have suffered a decline. Their absolute numbers as well as share in the population have contracted in this period. They had a presence of nearly 6 percent in China in 1900; their share now is nearer 1.5 percent. This is the only country in the world where Islam has retreated in this manner.*

*Central Asia is dominated by the Muslims. They have a share of more than 94 percent in the population. Their share was 98 percent in 1900, but it had declined considerably in the intervening decades because many countries of this region had become part of the Soviet Union and turned largely irreligious. That phase has passed. Share of Muslims has increased by 21 percentage points since 1970.*

*Share of Christians in Central Asia has also improved from 1.3 to 3.3 percent since 1900. But Christians in this region are confined largely to Kazakhstan, where they form 26 percent of the population, and to the neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, Christian share has grown to this level from 5 percent in 1900.*

*West Asia is the homeland of Islam. Share of Muslims in this region has increased from 76 percent in 1900 to 89 percent now. This is mainly because of a steep decline of Christianity in Turkey. Christians formed 22 percent of the population of Turkey in 1900; that share fell to less than 1 percent in 1970 and is about a quarter percent now. Share of Christianity has declined considerably in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel also.*

*Christians still form about 6 percent of the population of West Asia. Most of them are concentrated in the Christian majority countries of Georgia and Armenia. Christians have also acquired significant expatriate presence in the Arabian countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and UAE. These countries also have significant expatriate Hindu presence. Except for these expatriate communities in peninsular Arabia, Christian countries of Georgia and Armenia, and the contested region of Palestine, West Asia remains largely Islamic. It remains an Islamic stronghold, but the largest numbers of Muslims are elsewhere in South Asia.*

*In this note, we have described the changing share and distribution of Christians and Muslims in different parts of Asia. [In the following post](#) we give maps of the distribution and share of Christians and Muslims in different regions and countries of Asia. It would be instructive to look at those [maps](#) while reading this note. We shall give similar description of other major religions of the continent in our further notes.*

## Religious profile of Asia

Population (in thousands) of different religions in Asia					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	956,145	2,146,877	3,180,422	3,682,366	4,164,252
Christians	21,897	101,384	248,713	312,833	342,011
Muslims	156,089	391,274	676,523	832,712	1,078,855
Hindus*	206,827	473,463	703,283	831,685	969,267
Buddhists	126,620	232,239	318,862	354,650	487,037
Chinese R**	380,930	238,082	354,637	392,315	449,385
Ethnic R	50,564	90,872	117,696	128,298	146,779
New Religionists	5,910	77,449	91,098	100,639	58,971
Non R/Atheists	54	537,963	670,327	730,538	619,610
Percent share of different religions in the population of Asia					
Christians	2.29	4.72	7.82	8.50	8.21
Muslims	16.32	18.23	21.27	22.61	25.91
Hindus*	21.63	22.05	22.11	22.59	23.28
Buddhists	13.24	10.82	10.03	9.63	11.70
Chinese R**	39.84	11.09	11.15	10.65	10.79
Ethnic R	5.29	4.23	3.70	3.48	3.52
New Religionists	0.62	3.61	2.86	2.73	1.42
Non R/Atheists	0.01	25.06	21.08	19.84	14.88

\*Includes Jains and Sikhs. \*\*Includes Daoists and Confucians.

### *Asia is the most populous continent of the world*

Asia is the most populous continent of the world. As much as 60 percent of the population of the world lives in Asia and this ratio has not changed significantly in the course of the twentieth century. Asia is also the most densely populated; it accommodates 60 percent of the world population on 30 percent of the land area.

### *Asia is the cradle of religion*

Asia is the cradle of religion. It is the home of Sanatana Dharma, the timeless religion of India, and of its varied expressions in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, and in the numerous practices of the tribal communities. It is also the home of the ancient Chinese Religion and its several expressions in Daoism, Confucianism, etc., and even in Buddhism. The two much newer and actively proselytizing religions of the world—Christianity and Islam—also have their origins in the Asian continent.

### *Therefore, Asia is religiously diverse*

It is, therefore, not surprising that the religious profile of Asia is much more diverse than that of Africa, where Islam and Christianity have claimed nearly the whole population, and of Europe and the newer continents, which are dominated by Christianity alone. As seen in the Table above, though both Christianity and Islam have grown considerably during the twentieth century, yet the two together claim only about one-third of the population of Asia. Hindus, including Sikhs and Jains, form about a quarter, and Buddhists and Chinese Religionists together form another about a quarter. The remaining about 15 percent of the population is largely Non-Religious or Atheist and is found mainly in the Marxist countries of China and North Korea.

### *Both Muslims and Christians have improved their share*

In the course of the twentieth century, share of Muslims in the population of Asia has increased by 9.6 percentage points from 16.3 percent in 1900 to 25.9 percent in 2010 and that of Christians by nearly 6 percentage points from 2.3 to 8.2 percent. Much of the rise

in the share of Muslims and Christians in the world is contributed by Asia and [Africa](#), as we have remarked in our earlier notes on the religious demography of the [world](#).

*Share of Hindus has increased marginally*

Share of Hindus in Asia has increased marginally from 21.6 to 23.3 percent between 1900 and 2010. This is because of the higher growth of the population of India in the period following Independence.

*Share of Buddhists and Chinese Religionists has declined*

Share of Buddhists has declined slightly from 13.2 to 11.7 percent in this period, while that of Chinese Religionists has declined precipitously from 39.8 to 10.8 percent. This is partly because of the much lower growth of the population of China, and also Japan, as compared to the Asian average and partly because of a great rise in the number of the Non-Religious and Atheists in China in the latter half of the twentieth century. We shall describe these changes in detail later.

*Hindus have escaped similar decline*

At this stage we should probably pause to consider how small the share of Hindus could have been in the population of Asia and of the world if our population control measures had been as drastic and as successful as those of China or if our educated secularists had succeeded in discrediting religious faith enough to make a considerable number of Hindus turn Atheists or Non-Religious.

*Regions of Asia*

Asia is divided into five geographical and geo-political regions. These include: South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. Muslims and Christians are spread across all five regions, though their share in the population varies from region to region. Hindus (including Sikhs and Jains) are confined almost entirely to South Asia. Buddhists are spread across Southeast and East Asia and Chinese Religionists are confined largely to East Asia. In the Tables below and Maps at the end, we give the distribution and share of major religions in different regions and countries of Asia. As you read through this note, it would be instructive to look at the appropriate Maps given [in the following note](#).

**Distribution of Christians across Asia**

<b>Number ('000) of Christians in different region of Asia, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Asia</b>	<b>21,897</b>	<b>101,384</b>	<b>248,713</b>	<b>312,833</b>	<b>342,011</b>
South Asia	4,325	25,857	53,624	69,476	64,545
Southeast Asia	8,386	53,697	90,243	111,034	130,270
East Asia	2,166	11,592	88,070	114,659	127,573
Central Asia	278	4,153	5,252	4,202	5,446
West Asia	6,742	6,086	11,525	13,462	14,177
<b>Percent share of Christians in different regions of Asia</b>					
<b>Asia</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>4.72</b>	<b>7.82</b>	<b>8.50</b>	<b>8.21</b>
South Asia	1.48	3.63	4.80	5.17	4.04
Southeast Asia	10.40	18.73	20.46	21.41	21.95
East Asia	0.41	1.17	6.52	7.72	8.11
Central Asia	1.33	5.52	4.32	2.87	3.28
West Asia	22.74	7.08	7.67	7.17	6.11

## South Asia

*Share of Christians has increased everywhere except in Sri Lanka*

Of 342 million Christians in Asia, 64.5 million are in this region. Of them, 57.3 million are in India, 3.8 million in Pakistan, 1.8 million in Sri Lanka, about 0.9 million in Nepal and 0.7 million in Bangladesh. These numbers for India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are much higher [than their respective Censuses](#) and perhaps indicate the presence of large numbers of hidden Christians in these countries.

In 1900, there were only about 4 million Christians in South Asia. Their share in the population was less than 1.5 percent. Christians then had a significant presence only in Sri Lanka, where they formed nearly 10 percent of the population. Sri Lanka is the only country where the share of Christians has undergone a decline since 1900; their share now is 8.8 percent, it was even lower at around 7.8 percent in the earlier decades. In all other countries of South Asia, Christians have registered a slow but steady growth. Their growth has been particularly remarkable in Nepal in the recent decades. Consequently, share of Christians in South Asia as a whole has grown to above 4 percent in 2010.

*Crypto-Christians have non been counted in 2010*

Decline in the share of Christians between 2000 and 2010 seen in the Table above is because, throughout this analysis, we have added crypto-Christians to the Christians for decades up to 2000. But, the sources we are using have stopped counting crypto-Christians from 2010 onwards.

## Southeast Asia

*Southeast Asia had significant Christian presence in 1900*

Southeast Asia already had 10.4 percent Christians in its population in 1900; that share has more than doubled to nearly 22 percent in 2010. Number of Christians in the region has gone up from 8.4 million to 130 million.

*Philippines had been already Christianised then*

Of 8.4 million Christians in the region in 1900, 6.6 million were in Philippines where they formed 86 percent of the population. Their share increased to 94 percent in 1970 and has since declined to around 91 percent.

*Christianity had a foothold in Vietnam, Singapore and Timor also*

None of the other countries of Southeast Asia had a similar concentration of Christians. However, Vietnam, Singapore and Timor did have a significant Christian presence of 8.2, 4.0 and 12.2 percent, respectively, in 1900. In 2010, Timor is nearly 86 percent Christian. Their share in Singapore has reached 19 percent, but remains nearly unchanged at 8.5 percent in Vietnam.

*It has now expanded to Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia and Brunei*

In the course of these 110 years, Christians have acquired a fairly high share in many other countries of the region. In 2010, they have a share of 11.8 percent in Indonesia, 8.9

percent in Malaysia, 7.9 percent in Myanmar and 13.7 percent in the tiny country of Brunei. Of 130 million Christians in Southeast Asia in 2010, about 85 million are in Philippines, 28 million in Indonesia, 7.4 million in Vietnam, 3.8 million in Myanmar and 2.5 million in Malaysia.

## **East Asia**

*Christianity has shown significant expansion in East Asia*

According to the Christian compilations of [international religious demography](#) that we have been using for this analysis, presence of Christians in East Asia has grown rapidly in recent decades. Number of Christians in the region increased from around 2 million in 1900 to 11 million in 1970 and has since ballooned to nearly 128 million in 2010. Share of Christian in the population of the region has correspondingly grown from 0.4 percent in 1900 to 1.2 percent in 1970 and 8.1 percent now.

*But our data sources overestimate Christians in China*

This growth is supposed to have happened mainly in China, where the number of Christians according to this data has increased from less than 2 million in 1900 and somewhat less than that in 1970 to 107 million in 2010. This would imply that nearly 8 percent of the population has turned Christian in 2010. This is probably an overestimate. [The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#) estimates the number of Christians in 2010 to be around 67 million and various surveys place the share of Christians between 1.5 and 3 percent, much lower than the value of 8 percent in the Table above.

*South Korea has a high but declining Christian presence*

South Korea is another country of East Asia with a considerable presence of Christians. Of 20.5 million Christians outside China in 2010, 16 million are in South Korea. Christianity took root in South Korea in the second half of the twentieth century; in 1970, 18.3 percent of the population had turned Christian compared to about 0.5 percent in 1900. Share of Christians rose further to about 40.8 percent in 2000, but has declined sharply to 33.4 percent in the last decade. Absolute number of Christians in this decade has also declined from 19.1 to 16.1 million.

*Christian presence is significant also in Hong Kong and Macau*

Presence of Christians is significant also in Taiwan at about 6 percent and in Hong Kong and Macau, where they form 13.6 and 7.2 percent of the population, respectively.

## **Central Asia**

*There are not many Christians in Central Asia*

Christian penetration is the lowest in Central Asia. There are only 5.4 million Christians in the region forming 3.3 percent of the population in 2010. Their share in 1900 was 1.3 percent.

### *Most of the Christians are in Kazakhstan*

Kazakhstan accommodates 4.2 million of the total 5.4 million Christians in the region in 2010. They form 26.3 percent of the population there. In 1900, their share was less than 5 percent. Christians have a share of 7.7 percent in the neighbouring Kyrgyzstan also. Christian presence is below 2 percent in all other countries of Central Asia.

## **West Asia**

### *Christian share in West Asia has declined drastically*

Christianity in West Asia suffered a drastic decline in the first half of the twentieth century. Christians formed 22.7 percent of the population of the region in 1900; that share fell to 7.1 percent in 1970 and is 6.1 percent now in 2010.

### *Christian presence was high in Georgia, Armenia, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey*

Christians in West Asia have two distinct pockets of influence: One, Georgia and Armenia between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea; and Syria and Lebanon on the Mediterranean. In 1900, the latter pocket also included Turkey. Of 6.7 million Christians in West Asia at the beginning of the Century, 2 million were in Georgia another 3.1 million in Turkey. They had a share of 92 percent in the population of Georgia, 89 percent in Armenia, 77 percent in Lebanon, 22 percent in Turkey and 16 percent in Syria.

### *Georgia and Armenia remain Christian*

In Georgia and Armenia, Christians continue to have a high share of 85 and 93.5 percent, respectively, though there was a decline during the Soviet Marxist phase. Their share in the neighbouring Azerbaijan, however, has declined from nearly 10 percent in 1900 to 3.3 percent in 2010.

### *Christianity has steeply declined in Turkey, Syria and Lebanon*

In Turkey, the presence of Christians declined sharply between 1900 and 1970 with their numbers declining from 3.1 million to about 300 thousand and their share from 22 to less than 1 percent. In Syria also their share has declined sharply from around 16 percent in 1900 to 5 percent now. In Lebanon, they continue to retain a significant presence, but their share has declined from 77 to less than 36 percent.

### *Their presence has declined in Palestine and Israel also*

In 1900, Christians also had a presence of nearly 8 percent in Israel and 12 percent in Palestine. That share has come down to less around 2.4 percent in the former and 1.9 percent in the latter.

### *New Christian communities in UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia*

In recent decades, Christians have acquired some presence in several countries of the Arabian Peninsula where there were hardly any Christians earlier. They have a share of nearly 13 percent in UAE, 9 percent in Kuwait and more than 4 percent in Saudi Arabia. These are largely expatriate communities.

## Distribution of Muslims across Asia

Number ('000) of Muslims in different region of Asia, 1900-2010					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
<b>Asia</b>	<b>156,089</b>	<b>391,274</b>	<b>676,523</b>	<b>832,712</b>	<b>1,078,855</b>
South Asia	71,634	182,501	311,641	386,711	475,770
Southeast Asia	17,435	61,194	118,476	138,429	218,912
East Asia	24,011	21,085	18,597	19,632	21,601
Central Asia	20,495	54,950	98,553	124,357	156,564
West Asia	22,514	71,545	129,256	163,585	206,009
Percent share of Muslims in different regions of Asia					
<b>Asia</b>	16.32	18.23	21.27	22.61	25.91
South Asia	24.50	25.62	27.90	28.76	29.76
Southeast Asia	21.62	21.34	26.87	26.70	36.89
East Asia	4.51	2.14	1.38	1.32	1.37
Central Asia	97.96	73.04	80.99	85.00	94.25
West Asia	75.95	83.20	86.07	87.09	88.80

### South Asia

*Rise in Muslim share is larger than indicated here*

According to the data in Table above, share of Muslims in South Asia has risen from 24.5 to 29.8 percent between 1900 and 2010. [We have looked at this region earlier](#) on the basis of the Census data of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the three countries that form nearly 97 percent of the population of South Asia. Comparing the two sets of data, it seems that the sources used here have over-estimated the share of Muslims in 1900 and somewhat under-estimated it in 2011. Therefore, rise in the share of Muslims in South Asia between 1900 and 2010 is of about 9 and not 5 percentage points.

*India has the largest number of Muslims*

Of 476 million Muslims in South Asia in 2010, 173 million are in India, 167 million in Pakistan and 132 million in Bangladesh. These numbers more or less agree with the current Census figures. India thus has the second largest population of Muslims in the world after Indonesia, which has a population of around 190 million. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh together, however, form the region of largest Muslim concentration in the world. There are a total of 472 million Muslims in this Indian region; they form more than 30 percent of the global Muslim population of 1.55 billion.

*Sri Lanka*

Of the remaining 4 million Muslims in South Asia, 1.8 million are in Sri Lanka, where they form 8.6 percent of the population; their share in 1900 was 6.9 percent.

*Nepal*

Another about a million Muslims are in Nepal. Share of Muslim in Nepal has increased from less than 1 percent in 1900 to 4.2 percent now.

*Maldives*

Muslims form 98.4 percent of the population in this tiny island nation with a population of about 300 thousand in 2010. In 1900, the population was entirely Muslim.

## Southeast Asia

### *Southeast Asia has seen the largest increase in Muslim presence*

Share of Muslims in the population of Southeast Asia has increased by 15 percentage points, from around 22 percent in 1900 to 37 percent in 2010. Number of Muslims in this period has multiplied more than 12 times, rising from around 17 million to 219 million. Total population of the region meanwhile has grown only 7 times from 80 to 593 million. Almost the entire rise in the share of Muslims has occurred after 1970.

### *Indonesia*

The greatest change has taken place in Indonesia, the most populous country of the region. In 1900, Muslims formed only 40 percent of the population of about 39 million, while nearly 46 percent followed their traditional Ethnic religions. In 2010, more than

Muslims in Indonesia, 1900-2010					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	38.8	120.3	182.8	212.1	239.9
%M	40.00	42.25	54.71	54.74	79.43
%N	10.00	37.41	22.46	21.80	1.66
%E	45.60	5.46	2.84	2.51	2.30

Total in millions. N: New, E: Ethnic Religions.

79 percent of the much larger population of 240 million has turned Muslim. In 1900, the country had about 46 percent adherents of traditional Ethnic Religions. Nearly all of them were converted to Islam by 1970. However, the [international religious demography sources](#) we are using indicate that at that stage a large part of the population had begun following 'New Religions'. After 1970, most of the New Religionists have reverted back to Islam. Official Census figures of Indonesia do not take note of the New Religionists and count the country to have been 87 to 88 percent Muslim since the 1970s.

### *Malaysia*

Of the remaining 28 million Muslims in Southeast Asia in 2010, 16 million are in Malaysia. They form about 57 percent of the population; their share in 1900 was around 49 percent and remained near that figure up to 2000. The data indicates a rise of about 7 percentage points in the share of Muslims between 2000 and 2010, and a decline in the share of Chinese Religionists from 24 to 18 percent. Malaysia also has about 6 percent Hindus; their share in 1900 was 10 percent.

### *Singapore and Brunei*

Muslims have a share of 15 percent in Singapore now. Their share was around 22 percent in 1900. They also have a share of 57 percent in the tiny country of Brunei.

### *Philippines and Thailand*

Muslims have a share of 5.3 percent in Philippines and 5.9 percent in Thailand. Muslim presence in 1900 was 3.5 and 1.5 percent, respectively.

### *Myanmar and Cambodia*

Muslims have a share of 3.8 percent in Myanmar, 2 percent in Cambodia and 3.6 percent in Timor in 2010. Changes in their share in Myanmar and Cambodia are not too significant; in Timor there were few Muslims in 1900 or in 1970.

Muslim presence in other countries of Southeast Asia is insignificant.

## **East Asia**

### *Absolute number of Muslims has declined in East Asia*

East Asia is perhaps the only major region in the world, where the absolute number of Muslims has declined in the course of the twentieth century. Their number was 24 million in 1900; it declined to 18.6 million in 1990 and has since risen to 21.6 million now. But this rise of the last two decades has been more or less in line with the rise in the total population. Share of Muslims in the population, therefore, declined from 4.5 percent in 1900 to 1.4 percent in 1990 and has remained around that figure in 2010.

### *Nearly all of the Muslims are in China*

Nearly all of the Muslims of East Asia are in China. Of 24 million in 1900, only 11 thousand were outside China; of them, 6 thousand were in Taiwan and 5 thousand in Mongolia. Of 21.6 million Muslims in 2010, 21.1 million are in China. Of the rest, 137 thousand are in Mongolia, where their share in the population has increased from around 1 percent in 1900 to nearly 5 percent now. In Taiwan, their number has increased to 90 thousand. There are also 94 thousand Muslims in Hong Kong, where they form 1.3 percent of the population. Their share in other countries of the region remains low, but they now also have some presence in several countries that had no Muslims in 1900.

## **Central Asia**

### *Central Asia is a Muslim region*

In the total population of 166 million in Central Asia in 2010, 156 million are Muslims. Of the remaining about 10 million, 5.4 million are Christians; most of the Christians are in Kazakhstan, as we have mentioned above. Muslims form somewhat more than 94 percent of the population of Central Asia in 2010; their share was 98 percent in 1900. That share had declined to 73 percent in 1970, because of the spread of irreligion in the countries that became part of the Soviet Union. But most of the irreligious have returned to Islam in recent decades.

### *Most of the countries of the region are pre-dominantly Muslim*

Of the countries in the region, Iran and Afghanistan are 99 percent Muslim and have remained so throughout the period. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had become part of the Soviet Union and a large proportion of their population had turned irreligious. But that phase has passed. Muslims now form 95 percent of the population of Turkmenistan, 94 percent of Uzbekistan and 96 percent of Tajikistan.

### *Only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have some Christian presence*

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the north have some Christian presence, as we have noted earlier. These two had also turned largely irreligious in the Soviet phase. Now in 2010, 67 percent of the population of Kazakhstan and more than 81 percent of Kyrgyzstan is Muslim. Christians form about 26 percent in the former and 7 percent in the latter. About 6 percent of the population of Kazakhstan and 10 percent of Kyrgyzstan continues to be irreligious.

## West Asia

### *West Asia is less Muslim than Central Asia*

Of more than a billion Muslims in Asia in 2010 only 206 million are in this original home of Islam. Muslims form about 89 percent of the population of the region, compared to their share of more than 94 percent in Central Asia. Besides Muslims, the region has 6 percent Christians and 2.5 percent Jews. In 1900, there were 23 percent Christians and 1.1 percent Jews in West Asia; Muslim share was consequently lower at 76 percent.

### *Only Yemen, Turkey and Iraq are exclusively Muslim*

Of the countries in Central Asia, only Yemen and Turkey are exclusively Muslim in 2010. Muslims form 99 percent of the population of Yemen. In 1900, their share was slightly lower because of the presence of 1.3 percent Jews there. Turkey is now 98 percent Muslim. Muslim share was much lower in 1900; more than 22 percent of the population was Christian then, as we have seen in the previous section. Iraq is also 97.5 percent Muslim now. In 1900, share of Muslims there was only 89.5 percent and there were 6 percent Christians and 4 percent Jews in the country. Jews were all gone by 1970 and share of Christians has slowly declined to around 1.5 percent now.

### *Arabia is no more exclusively Muslim*

The peninsular region known as Arabia is no more exclusively Muslim. Oman is 88 percent Muslim, with 4.4 percent Christians and 6.2 percent Hindus (including Sikhs and Jains) in its population; in 1900, Muslims formed nearly 100 percent of the population. Saudi Arabia, where Islam and its Prophet were born, is 93 percent Muslim, with 4.3 percent Christians in its population. Christian presence in Saudi Arabia is of recent origin; in 1900, nearly 100 percent of the population was Muslim and their share was 99 percent even in 1970. The UAE, which has developed as a kind of Arab entrepôt, has only 77 percent Muslims in its population. Besides them, there are 12.5 percent Christians, 7 percent Hindus (including Sikhs) and 2 percent of even Buddhists. Kuwait, which is a liberal enclave within Arabia, Muslims form 86 percent of the population; besides them, there are about 9 percent Christians and 4 percent Hindu. These non-Muslim communities in Arabia comprise mainly immigrants. Populations of many countries of the region now have a large expatriate immigrant component, though a predominant majority of the immigrants are also Muslim.

### *Muslim presence is higher in Syria and Jordan*

Muslims now form nearly 93 percent of the population of Syria and 94 percent of Jordan. In Jordan, their share was about the same in 1900. The remaining 6 percent then were Christian; in 2010, the remaining 6 percent are divided between Christians and the Irreligious. Muslim presence in Syria was much lower in 1900 because of the presence of nearly 16 percent Christians and also 1.3 percent Jews. By 1970, the Jews were all gone, as in Iraq, and the Christian presence has slowly declined to 5.2 percent now.

### *The contested lands: Palestine, Lebanon and Israel*

Muslim presence is relatively low in this most contested part of West Asia. Muslims form a minority of less than 20 percent in Israel; the remaining population comprises 72.5 percent Jews, 2.4 percent Christians and about 5 percent of the Irreligious. In 1900, 83 percent of the population of what now forms Israel was Muslim; Jews and Christians formed about 9 and 8 percent of the population. Muslim share had declined to around 11 percent in 1970 and has slowly risen to the current level of about 19 percent.

*Palestine* is about 81 percent Muslim; their share was about the same in 1900, though it has varied widely in the course of the last 110 years. The remaining population of Palestine comprises about 12 percent Jews and 2 percent Christians. In 1900, there were 9 percent Jews and 12 percent Christians in the region that now forms the state of Palestine.

*Lebanon* is about 58 percent Muslim now. Of the rest, there are about 36 percent Christians, 2 percent Chinese Religionists and 4 percent of the Irreligious. In 1900, Muslims formed about 21 percent of the population and there were 77 percent Christians and 2 percent Jews then. Share of Muslims in Lebanon has been consistently rising and that of Christians declining during the last 110 years.

## **CONCLUSION**

### *Asia*

1. Asia is the most populous continent of the world. Almost 60 percent of the global population lives in this continent, which occupies only 30 percent of the land area of the world.
2. Asia is also the cradle of religion. All major religions of the world have their origin in this continent.
3. Therefore, Asia is religiously much more diverse than other major parts of the world.
4. Though Christianity and Islam have grown substantially during the last 110 years yet, unlike in [Africa](#), they have not been able to overwhelm the older religions of the continent and have been able to claim only one-third of the population so far.
5. Christianity and Islam together have a share of 34.1 percent in the population in 2010 compared to only 18.6 percent in 1900.
6. In this period of 110 years, Muslims have registered an accretion of 10 percentage points with their share rising from 16 percent in 1900 to 26 percent in 2010.
7. Christians have gained about 6 percentage points with their share rising from 2.3 percent in 1900 to 8.2 percent in 2010.

## **Christians**

### *Christians in South Asia*

8. In South Asia, the share of Christians has grown modestly from 1.4 to 4.0 percent. But actual growth may be more because of hidden Christians. In 2000, when the sources gave separate data for Christians and Crypto-Christians, share of the two together was higher at 5.2 percent.

9. In this period, Christians have improved their share in every country of South Asia, except Sri Lanka where they had a high share of 10.6 percent in 1900. It has declined to 8.8 percent in 2010.

#### *Christians in Southeast Asia*

10. Southeast Asia had a fairly high presence of Christians at 10.4 percent of the population in 1900.

11. Their share has doubled to 22 percent in 2010. The region has thus registered the highest rise in Christian share in this period.

12. Nearly two-thirds of the Christians in Southeast Asia are in Philippines, where they form 91 percent of the population. The country was 86 percent Christian in 1900.

13. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Christians had a foothold in Vietnam, Singapore and Timor also. Their share has improved in all three, and it has reached up to 86 percent in Timor.

14. Christians have acquired a significant presence in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Myanmar also, where they did not have much presence in 1900.

#### *Christians in East Asia*

15. Share of Christians is said to have increased to about 8 percent in 2010 from 0.4 percent in 1900.

16. Their share in China is also said to have reached near 8 percent. This figure is, however, controversial and various sources estimate the share to be anywhere from 1.5 to 8 percent.

17. In this region, Christianity has been the most successful in South Korea, where they acquired a share of 18 percent in 1970. It rose further to nearly 41 percent in 2000 before declining to 33.4 percent in 2010.

18. Christians have also acquired a significant presence in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau in this period.

19. In other countries of East Asia, including Japan, the presence of Christians is not very significant, though it has improved in most of those countries.

#### *Christians in Central Asia*

20. Christian presence remains low in Central Asia, though it has increased from 1.3 percent in 1900 to 3.3 percent in 2010.

21. Most of the Christians in Central Asia are in Kazakhstan, where they now form 26.3 percent of the population; their share in 1900 was less than 5 percent. They have a share of 7.7 percent in the neighbouring Kyrgyzstan also. Elsewhere their presence is low.

#### *Christians in West Asia*

22. West Asia is the only region where Christian presence has declined in the twentieth century. This is mainly because of their share in Turkey coming down from 22 percent in 1900 to around 1 percent in 1970.

23. Christian share has also declined from 16 to 5 percent in Syria, from 77 to 36 percent in Lebanon, from 8 to 2.4 percent in Israel and from 12 to 1.9 percent in Palestine.

24. Christians continue to have a pocket of high concentration in Georgia and Armenia, where they comprise 85 and 93.5 percent of the population, respectively.

25. Countries of the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and UAE, have acquired significant expatriate Christian communities since 1970.

## **Muslims**

### *Muslims in South Asia*

26. Of all the regions of Asia, South Asia has the largest Muslim population. And, of all the countries of Asia, India has the second largest Muslim population after Indonesia.

27. Share of Muslims in South Asia has increased from 24.5 to 29.8 percent between 1900 and 2010 according to the sources we have used for analysing international religious demography. According to the Census data of Indian, Pakistan and Bangladesh, however, accretion in the Muslim share is of about 9 percentage points.

### *Muslims in Southeast Asia*

28. Muslims form 37 percent of the population of Southeast Asia. They have gained 15 percentage points in their share since 1900, when they formed only 22 percent of the population. All of this change has happened after 1970.

29. Rise in the Muslim share has been the most marked in Indonesia, where the share of Muslims has gone up from 40 percent in 1900 to 79 percent now.

30. Indonesia now has 190 million Muslims, making it the largest Muslim population in the world.

31. Share of Muslims has also increased significantly in Malaysia from 49 to 57 percent. Much of this change has occurred in recent decades. In Brunei also Muslims form 57 percent of the population.

32. In Singapore, the share of Muslims has declined from 22 percent in 1900 to 15 percent now.

33. Muslims do not have a significant share in other countries, though their share has increased considerably in Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar.

### *Muslims in East Asia*

34. East Asia is perhaps the only part of the world where the absolute number and share of Muslims have declined in this period. Number of Muslims in this region has declined from 24 million in 1900 to 21.6 million now and their share from 4.5 to 1.4 percent.

35. This decline in East Asia is because of the decline in their numbers and share in China, which accommodates nearly all of the Muslims in the region.

### *Muslims in Central Asia*

36. Of all the regions of Asia, Central Asia has the highest share of Muslims. They form 94 percent of the population here. Their share was 97 percent in 1900.

37. Muslim share is below 94 percent in only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which have significant populations of Christians, as we have seen earlier. These countries, and also Uzbekistan, have relatively larger share of the Irreligious.

38. Some of the Central Asian countries had become largely irreligious during the Soviet phase. That phase has now passed and those countries have largely reverted to Islam.

*Muslims in West Asia*

39. Share of Muslims in this region where Islam and its Prophet were born is relatively low at 89 percent of the population.

40. Their share was even lower at 76 percent in 1900. The improvement has been largely because of the drastic reduction in the number and share of Christians in Turkey.

41. There are many older pockets of Christianity in this region. And many of the countries that were 100 percent Muslim in 1900 have acquired significant expatriate populations of the adherents of Christianity and Hinduism, etc. The region, therefore, does not seem as exclusively Muslim as Central Asia.

*Graphic representation of the rise of Islam and Christianity in Asia*

42. Muslims thus have a fairly high and growing presence in every region of Asia, except East Asia, where there has been a decline in both their number and share in the population. The substantial rise in the share of Muslims in Asia, and also Africa, is one of the two largest changes that have occurred in the religious demography of the World during the last 110 years. The other is the spread of Christianity into [Africa](#) and its tentative rise in almost all parts of Asia, as we have discussed here and in [an earlier note](#). Rise of both Islam and Christianity in Asia can be graphically seen in the [Maps in the following note](#).