

## **The changing religious profile of Asia: Other Religions and the Irreligious**

*In this final note on the religious profile of Asia, we describe the changing share and distribution of Ethnic Religions, some minor religions like Confucianism, Daoism and Shintoism, and of the so-called New Religions. We also describe the rise and decline of Irreligion in parts of Asia in the latter half of the twentieth century.*

*Of 243 million Ethnic Religionists in the world, 147 million are in Asia. Share of Ethnic Religions in the population of Asia has declined only slightly from 5.3 percent in 1900 to 3.5 percent in 2010. In other continents, especially in Africa, the decline of Ethnic Religions has been much more severe as their adherents have been absorbed into Christianity and occasionally into Islam.*

*Within Asia, the share of Ethnic Religionists has declined sharply in Indonesia, from 45.6 percent in 1900 to 2.3 percent in 2010. This is a consequence of the rise of Islam there. In South Korea, Ethnic Religionists have been largely absorbed into Christianity. But their share has increased in many other countries including India, China, Nepal and Laos.*

*Among the minor religions of Asia, Confucianism has a strong presence in South Korea. Confucianists form 11 percent of the population there. There are not many of them in any other country of Asia.*

*Daoists have a strong presence in Taiwan, where they form 12.6 percent of the population. There has been a significant increase in their presence in China also during the last decade.*

*Shintoists form about 2 percent of the population of Japan; they had a share of 15 percent in 1900.*

*The term 'New Religions' refers to religions that arose in several parts of Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in response to the physical and intellectual upheavals caused by the contact with the West. Most of these religions are efforts to syncretise traditional Asian religions with Catholic Christianity and western modernity, but they also have a strong element of cultish practices.*

*New Religionists formed 37.4 percent of the population of Indonesia in 1970 and had a share of 21.8 percent even in 2000. Their share has now declined to 1.7 percent.*

*New Religionists continue to have a share of more than 25 percent in Japan. They also have a presence of 11 percent in Vietnam, 14 percent in South Korea, 13 percent in North Korea and about 7 percent in Taiwan. But spread of New Religions in Asia seems to have been contained now and their share has begun to decline in many countries.*

*Towards the middle of the twentieth century, Irreligion began to spread widely in many countries of Asia that had come under the control of Marxist States. Share of the Irreligious in 1970 reached around 60 percent in China and North Korea and around 12 percent in Vietnam. They also acquired a considerable presence in several countries that became part of the Soviet Block. These included Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, etc., in Central Asia and Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in West Asia.*

*Share of the Irreligious in almost all of these countries began to decline after 1970 and has undergone a very steep decline during the last decade. Irreligion now has become a minor phenomenon in most of these countries except China, North Korea and Vietnam.*

*In China, share of the Irreligious declined from 60 percent in 1970 to around 50 percent in 2000 and has steeply dropped to 40 percent during the last decade. In Vietnam, their share rose from 12 to 20 percent between 1970 and 2000, but seems to have begun declining during the last decade. In North Korea, however, their share continues to grow and has reached near 72 percent now.*

*Thus the spread of Irreligion in those countries that had turned Marxist has now begun to reverse everywhere except in North Korea. The Irreligious of these countries are returning to their older traditional faiths. This has led to a significant increase in the share of Buddhists in China and some increase in that of the Chinese Religionists.*

*The main story of the twentieth century in Asia is that the older religions of the continent, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Religions, have been able to largely maintain their hold, while older native religions of other continents, in Africa, Americas and Oceania, have almost entirely lost out to Christianity and Islam.*

*There is a strong expectation among international Christian circles that contraction of Irreligion in China may lead to a rise of Christianity in the near future. But even if that expectation is fulfilled, it seems unlikely that Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and other Chinese Religions of China would be submerged anytime soon.*

*Asia is a continent of ancient religions and consequently of great religious diversity. The diversity is such that it has taken us several notes to describe its various contours. That diversity has contracted in some parts of the continent, especially in the Indian subcontinent. But it does not yet seem in any danger of being reduced to the uniformity of the two newer religions born in this continent, Islam and Christianity. The experience of the last 110 years of modernity indicates that Asia would remain the land of diverse ancient religions for times to come.*

*In the following note, we have given maps of the distribution of Ethnic Religions and New Religions in different regions and countries of Asia in 1900 and 2010. We have also given maps of the distribution and share of the Irreligious in 1970 and 2010. It would be instructive to look at those maps while reading through the description of the changes given in this note.*

## 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.

### *Followers of Religions other than the major five and the Irreligious*

We have described the changing share and distribution of the five major religions of Asia, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Religions. But Asia being the land of religion has considerable numbers of followers of Ethnic Religions, of several minor religions, some of which we have added together with the five major religions, and of several 'New Religions'. In this note, we describe the share and distribution of these remaining religious communities and also of the Irreligious. As seen in the Table above, the followers of religions other than the major five and the Irreligious together constitute nearly one-fifth of the population of Asia.

### Share and Distribution of Ethnic Religions

Number ('000) of Ethnic Religionists in Asia, 1900-2010					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
<b>World</b>	<b>117,558</b>	<b>160,278</b>	<b>200,035</b>	<b>228,367</b>	<b>242,517</b>
Africa	62,686	67,430	79,520	96,805	89,354
<b>Asia</b>	<b>50,564</b>	<b>90,872</b>	<b>117,696</b>	<b>128,298</b>	<b>146,778</b>
South Asia	7,207	20,406	32,340	37,992	50,703
Southeast Asia	22,640	14,241	21,943	24,817	27,370
East Asia	20,624	56,150	63,283	65,330	68,523
Percentage share of Ethnic Religionists					
Africa	58.16	18.89	12.94	12.34	8.74
Asia	5.29	4.23	3.70	3.48	3.52
South Asia	2.46	2.86	2.89	2.83	3.17
Southeast Asia	28.08	4.97	4.98	4.79	4.61
East Asia	3.87	5.69	4.69	4.40	4.35

### *Ethnic Religions are an amorphous category*

Ethnic or Ethno-Religions are those religious practices that do not have a written text and have some association with the world of spirits. In general, these are indigenous religions that were practiced by the native people of different continents at the time of their contact

with the European or Christian world, and which the latter could not or did not want to place under any one of the known major religions.

*Ethnic Religionists are largely in Asia and Africa*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, nearly all of the Ethnic Religionists of the world were in Asia and Africa. Of 117.6 million placed under this category in 1900, 113.2 million were in these two continents. Of the remaining about 4.5 million, 2.2 million were in Latin America and 1.3 million in Oceania. Of course, there were hardly any such religionists in Europe or North America, because the term ‘ethnic’ is generally applied to non-European people; within Europe, it originally applied to those who were neither Christian nor Jewish and were referred to as heathens and pagans. In 2010 also, nearly all of the Ethnic Religionists of the world are in Africa and Asia.

*Ethnic Religions have been largely absorbed into Christianity*

In the course of the twentieth century a large majority of the Ethnic Religionists have been absorbed into Christianity, and perhaps occasionally into Islam. They formed 58 percent of the population of Africa in 1900, their share is 8.7 percent now, and their presence remains significant only in a few countries of that continent, as we have seen in our note on [Africa](#). In [Oceania](#), Ethnic Religionists had a share of 21 percent in the population, which has now declined to just 1 percent. There also, they retain a significant presence in only a few countries. In Asia, their share was never as large as in Africa and the decline in their share also has not been that precipitous; they continue to have a share of 3.5 percent in the population compared to 5.3 percent in 1900.

*Distribution of Ethnic Religionists in Asia*

Distribution of Ethnic Religionists in the regions and countries of Asia is graphically presented in the Maps in the following note. It would be instructive to look at the Maps while reading the description below.

*Ethnic Religionists in Southeast Asia*

Presence of Ethnic Religionists is the highest in Southeast Asia. They had a share of 28 percent in the population of the region in 1900. Their largest numbers were in Indonesia. Of 22.6 million Ethnic Religionists in the region then, 17.7 million were in Indonesia, where they formed 45.6 percent of the population. There were another 2.2 million Ethnic Religionists in Vietnam with a share of 20 percent in the population. Their share was nearly 39 percent in Laos and their presence was quite high in other countries of the region also. Share of Ethnic Religionists continues to be high in Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos, where they form 10.4, 9.5 and 42.8 percent of the population. Of 27 million Ethnic Religionists in the region in 2010, 9 million are in Vietnam, 4.6 million in Myanmar and 2.6 million in Laos. In other major countries of the region, their share has now declined to less than 5 percent. There are also 5.5 million Ethnic Religionists in

**Ethnic Religionists in Southeast Asia**

	Number '000			Percent Share		
	1900	1970	2010	1900	1970	2010
<b>SE Asia</b>	<b>22,640</b>	<b>14,241</b>	<b>27,370</b>	<b>28.08</b>	<b>4.97</b>	<b>4.61</b>
Indonesia	17,693	6,570	5,521	45.60	5.46	2.30
Vietnam	2,200	1,960	9,104	20.00	4.59	10.36
Myanmar	523	3,000	4,575	5.00	11.07	9.54
Laos	581	917	2,654	38.73	33.81	42.80
Philippines	760	338	2,172	10.00	0.90	2.33
Cambodia	175	250	648	7.00	3.60	4.58
Malaysia	200	553	982	9.52	5.10	3.46
Thailand	180	250	1,559	2.98	0.70	2.26

Indonesia and 2.2 million in Philippines, but their share in these two largest countries of the region is only about 2 percent. In the smaller countries of Timor and Brunei, Ethnic Religionists formed 88 and 25 percent of the population, respectively, in 1900; both countries have 10 percent Ethnic Religionists now.

### *Ethnic Religionists in East Asia*

Of 147 million Ethnic Religionists in Asia, 68 million are in East Asia. Of these 58 million are in China and the remaining 10 million in the two Koreas. Their share is high in both South and North Korea. In 1900, 81 percent of the

	Ethnic Religionists in East Asia					
	Number '000			Percent Share		
	1900	1970	2010	1900	1970	2010
<b>East Asia</b>	<b>20,624</b>	<b>56,150</b>	<b>68,523</b>	<b>3.87</b>	<b>5.69</b>	<b>4.35</b>
China	9,924	40,000	57,890	2.10	4.88	4.29
S. Korea	6,507	12,506	7,062	81.34	39.18	14.66
N. Korea	3,766	3,165	2,990	94.15	22.19	12.28

population of South Korea and 94 percent of North Korea followed Ethnic Religions. It is believed that part of the reason for the rapid spread of Christianity in South Korea during the twentieth century is in the lack of an organised religion in that country at that time. Ethnic Religions retain a significant presence in both Koreas, though their share in the population has declined to 14.7 percent in South Korea and 12.3 percent in North Korea. In China, on the other hand, the share of Ethnic Religionists has increased from 2.1 percent in 1900 to 4.3 percent now. China is one of the few countries in the world, where Ethnic Religions have increased their presence in the course of the twentieth century. Myanmar, as we have seen above, is another.

### *Ethnic Religionists in South Asia*

According to the sources that we are using for our analysis of the international religious demography, there are 50.7 million Ethnic Religionists in South Asia in 2010; of these, 46 million are in India and 4 million in

	Ethnic Religionists in South Asia					
	Number '000			Percent Share		
	1900	1970	2010	1900	1970	2010
<b>S Asia</b>	<b>7,207</b>	<b>20,406</b>	<b>50,703</b>	<b>2.46</b>	<b>2.86</b>	<b>3.17</b>
India	6,670	19,230	45,891	2.90	3.47	3.75
Nepal	90	1,000	3,922	2.03	8.83	13.09

Nepal. That large number for India is at odds with the Census figures. Indian Census of 2011 counts a total of about 8 million persons as adherents of religions other than the five major religions of India. If we go by the data of the sources we are using, India and Nepal form another couple of countries of the world, besides China and Myanmar, where the share of Ethnic Religionists has increased during the last 110 years. Almost everywhere else, there has been a sharp contraction in their presence. The increase is rather large in Nepal, where they had a share of 2 percent in 1900 and have now increased to 13 percent of the population. In India, the rise in their share is from 2.9 to 3.8 percent.

## **Minor Religions of Asia**

Asia being the birthplace of all major religions of the world, it is natural that several minor religions are flourishing in different regions and countries of Asia. Many of these religions are confined entirely to the continent and even specific regions or countries within the continent. Below, we discuss the distribution of Confucianism, Daoism and Shintoism. We are not discussing Sikhism and Jainism here, because we shall describe their share and distribution, in a subsequent note on the Hindu diaspora.

### *Confucianism*

In the analysis so far, we have been adding Confucianists and Daoists to the Chinese Religionists. As seen in the Table below, Confucianists have a significant presence only in South Korea, Myanmar and Thailand. South Korean elite has adhered to a Korean form of Confucianism for long. The international religious demography sources that we have been using count 5.3 million Confucianists in South Korea, out of a total of 6.4 million in the whole of Asia. They form nearly 11 percent of the population of South Korea. Their share was nearer 15 percent in 1970 and it was about 8 percent in 1900.

<b>Number ('000) of Confucianists in Asia and the World, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
World	640	4,759	5,856	6,299	6,448
Asia	640	4,758	5,824	6,264	6,363
S. Korea	640	4,758	4,889	5,219	5,270
Myanmar	-	-	600	676	711
Thailand	-	-	199	222	251
<b>Percentage share of Confucianists in the population</b>					
S. Korea	8.00	14.90	11.40	11.14	10.94
Myanmar	-	-	1.48	1.48	1.48
Thailand	-	-	0.36	0.36	0.36

Until recently, there were no Confucianists in any other country besides South Korea. Since 1990, Myanmar and Thailand have acquired 1.48 and 0.36 percent Confucianists, respectively, in their population. The two together have about a million Confucianists in 2010. There are only a few of them elsewhere in the world. It is interesting to note that despite the recent interest that the Chinese government has been showing in promoting Confucian thought, there are few adherents of Confucianism in China yet.

### *Daoism*

Daoism is confined to China and Taiwan. Of 8.4 million Daoists in Asia, and in the world in 2010, 5.5 million are in China and 2.9 million in Taiwan. Their share in China has risen significantly during the last decade but still remains at only 0.4 percent. They have a much larger share of 12.6 percent in the population of Taiwan. There has been some increase in their share in the last decade, but they had a presence of 9.4 percent in Taiwan even at the beginning of the century. There are a few Daoists in Laos also.

<b>Number ('000) of Daoists in Asia and the World, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
World	375	1,734	2,402	2,655	8,429
Asia	375	1,734	2,392	2,643	8,412
China	75	200	325	360	5,483
Taiwan	300	1,534	2,066	2,282	2,929
<b>Percentage share of Daoists in the population</b>					
China	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.41
Taiwan	9.38	10.45	10.20	10.19	12.62

### *Shintoism*

Shintoism is the traditional religion of Japan. Now only about 2 percent of the population of that country identifies with Shintoism. In 1900, 15 percent of the population was Shintoist. There are 2.7 million Shintoists in Japan in 2010; there were 6.7 million of them in 1900. In 2010, there are about 30 thousand Shintoists in South Korea also, and

there are a few of them in Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore. Outside Asia, there are about 63 thousand Shintoists in the USA and about 8 thousand in Brazil.

<b>Number ('000) of Shintoists in Asia and the World, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>World</b>	6,720	4,175	3,082	2,762	2,761
Asia	6,720	4,173	3,026	2,699	2,691
Japan	6,720	4,173	3,000	2,669	2,660
S Korea			25	28	29
<b>Percentage share of Shintoists in the population</b>					
Japan	14.99	4.00	2.43	2.11	2.10
S Korea			0.06	0.06	0.06

## New Religions

<b>Number ('000) of New Religionists in countries of Asia, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>World</b>	<b>5,910</b>	<b>77,762</b>	<b>92,396</b>	<b>102,356</b>	<b>63,005</b>
<b>Asia</b>	<b>5,910</b>	<b>77,449</b>	<b>91,098</b>	<b>100,639</b>	<b>58,971</b>
Japan	2,000	21,300	31,600	32,828	32,809
Indonesia	3,880	45,000	41,060	46,235	3,993
Vietnam	-	4,500	7,392	9,027	9,705
South Korea	10	3,380	6,450	7,121	6,853
North Korea	20	2,100	2,700	3,095	3,135
Taiwan	-	926	1,358	1,520	1,567

### *Asian syncretism*

The term 'New Religions' refers to religions that have originated in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Most of these evolved in Asia in response to the physical and intellectual upheaval caused by the asymmetric and often forced contact with the West. Many of these religions are efforts at syncretising older religions of Asia with Catholic Christianity and western modernity. All of them also involve some invocation of the spirit, often through intense cultish practices, and most of them include some form of spirit healing.

### *Asia is the home of New Religions*

Of 63 million New Religionists in the world in 2010, 59 million are in Asia. Of the remaining 4 million, about 1.6 million are in the USA and 1.5 million in Brazil. The New Religionists in those two countries are also probably followers of Asian New Religions. Within Asia, New Religions are confined almost entirely to Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, South and North Korea and Taiwan.

### *Distribution of New Religions in Asia*

Distribution of New Religionists within Asia is depicted graphically in the Maps in the following Note. It would be instructive to consult those Maps while reading the description below.

### *New Religions in Japan*

In Asia, Japan is home to several New Religions, which arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries out of efforts to syncretise Shintoism, Buddhism and Christianity.

<b>Percent share of New R in Japan</b>				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
4.46	20.42	25.58	25.91	25.93

Of 59 million New Religionists in Asia in 2010, nearly 33 million are in Japan. More than a quarter of the population of Japan follows New Religions.

### *Soka Gakkai of Japan*

Because of the large numbers of their adherents, some of the New Religion movements of Japan have tended to dabble in politics. Of such movements, Soka Gakkai—with its political wing in New Komeito Party and with an international organisation that has branches all over the world including India—is the largest and the best known. Soka Gakkai was founded in the 1930s, though it relates itself to the thirteenth century tradition of Nichiren Buddhism.

### *New Religions of Indonesia*

Indonesia has also been home to a number of ‘New Religion’ movements largely based in syncretism of Islam with indigenous traditional religious practices, with the Sufi mystic tradition within Islam and even with elements of Hinduism and Buddhism. The largest such movement is Salamullah, which is seen as a deviant interpretation of Islam. But even Brahma Kumaris and Anand Ashram have some following in Indonesia.

### *New Religions in Indonesia have declined*

Number of New Religionists in Indonesia had risen to 46 million in 2000; it has since declined to less than 4 million.

Percent share of New R in Indonesia				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
10.00	37.41	22.46	21.80	1.66

The New Religion movements in Indonesia have always operated on the margins of official legitimacy and are often treated as sects or faiths within the recognized major religions. Their share in the population has been declining continuously since 1970, when more than one third of the population had begun to follow these New Religions. Official census data of Indonesia, however, has always counted most of the New Religionists as Muslims.

### *New Religions in Vietnam*

Nearly 10 million of 59 million New Religionists in Asia are in Vietnam, where they form about 11 percent of the population. One of the most popular and established New Religions of Vietnam is *Cao Dai*, which was founded in the 1920’s by combining elements of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity. Another New Religion with considerable following is *Hoa Hao*, which was founded in the late 1930’s as a new form of Buddhism. New Religions have continued to hold a significant share in the population of Vietnam since the middle of the twentieth century.

Percent share of New R in Vietnam				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
-	10.53	11.08	11.31	11.05

### *New Religions in South Korea*

There are 6.8 million New Religionists in South Korea forming more than 14 percent of the population. Several New Religions, largely based in indigenous religious practices, evolved in Korea in the early twentieth century. Like other New Religions, these involved mystic experiences and invoked visions of a coming new and happier age.

Percent share of New R in S Korea				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
0.13	10.59	15.05	15.20	14.22

### *New Religions in North Korea*

Though North Korea frowns upon all kinds of religious practices, yet nearly 13 percent of the population follows

Percent share of New R in N Korea				
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
0.50	14.72	13.20	12.88	12.88



New Religions. Most of them are probably followers of *Chondoism*, an early twentieth century syncretism based mainly in Confucianism, which seems to be tolerated by the North Korean State.

#### *New Religions in Taiwan*

Many Taiwanese follow several cultish religions that have emerged in the twentieth century including *Yigunadao* and *Maitreya Great Tao*, etc. In 2010, there are 1.6 million New Religionists in Taiwan. New Religions have been having a consistent presence of 6 to 7 percent in the population of Taiwan since the middle of the twentieth century.

Percent share of New R in Taiwan					
1900	1970	1990	2000	2010	
-	6.31	6.70	6.79	6.75	

#### *Baha'ism*

Baha'ism is also a new religion founded in the nineteenth century, though it is often counted separately from other new religions. It originated in Iran, but it is not a particularly Asian religion. It has an international organizational structure and its followers are spread over all continents. Of 7.3 million Baha'is in the world in 2010, 3.4 million are in Asia, 2.1 million in Africa, 0.6 million in North America, 0.9 million in Latin America. They have a presence of about 0.3 percent in Oceania also. Their presence in Europe, however, is limited. In many smaller countries of the world, their presence is surprisingly high, which we have mentioned while analysing the religious profile of different regions and countries.

### **The Irreligious in Asia**

**Number ('000) of the Irreligious in countries of Asia, 1900-2010**

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
<b>World</b>	<b>3,250</b>	<b>697,496</b>	<b>852,837</b>	<b>918,248</b>	<b>813,596</b>
<b>Asia</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>537,963</b>	<b>670,327</b>	<b>730,538</b>	<b>619,610</b>
East Asia	31	506,491	618,086	671,251	572,652
Central Asia	4.5	15,469	15,369	14,645	3,356
Southeast Asia	2	7,100	19,509	24,158	23,533
South Asia	15	2,848	12,003	15,273	16,620
West Asia	1.5	6,055	5,361	5,212	3,448

#### *Spurt in Irreligion and the recent decline*

Asia saw a spurt in irreligion towards the middle of the twentieth century. This was mainly because of the emergence of Marxist States in parts of East and Central Asia. By 1970, Asia came to acquire a vast majority of the Irreligious in the world. Of 697 million of the Irreligious in the world in 1970, 538 million were in Asia. Number of the Irreligious in Asia has begun to decline recently. But, even now in 2010, of 814 million of the Irreligious in the world 620 million are in Asia.

#### *Recent decline in the numbers of the Irreligious*

That phase of irreligion seems to be on the wane now. Number of the Irreligious in Asia has declined by about 111 million in the last decade alone. Of this decline 99 million is

contributed by East Asia, 11 million by Central Asia and 2 million by West Asia. The decline in Southeast Asia has been only marginal.

*The Irreligious in the rest of the world have increased*

While number of the Irreligious in Asia has declined during the last decade, it has increased in the rest of the world from 188 to 194 million. This is because of the rise of irreligion in parts of West and North Europe, [as we have discussed earlier](#). As we noticed there, number of the Irreligious has declined even in those parts of East and South Europe, which are in the neighbourhood of Asia, but has increased substantially elsewhere in Europe.

*Distribution of the Irreligious in Asia*

Maps in the following note depict the distribution and share of the Irreligious in different regions and countries of Asia in 1970 and 2010. These Maps graphically show the change the contraction of Irreligion in the recent decades. In 1900, there were hardly any of the Irreligious in any part of Asia. Therefore, we have not given maps of that period.

*The Irreligious in East Asia*

<b>Number ('000) of the Irreligious in East Asia, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>East Asia</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>506,491</b>	<b>618,086</b>	<b>671,251</b>	<b>572,652</b>
China	31	486,008	585,436	634,806	536,369
Japan	-	11,017	15,800	16,548	16,503
N. Korea	-	8,569	14,487	17,107	17,441
<b>Percentage share of the Irreligious</b>					
<b>East Asia</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>51.33</b>	<b>45.77</b>	<b>45.20</b>	<b>36.38</b>
China	0.01	59.26	51.30	50.28	39.76
Japan	-	10.56	12.79	13.06	13.04
N. Korea	-	60.07	70.80	71.16	71.64

*China, North Korea and Japan*

By 1970, more than half of the population of East Asia had become Irreligious. Their share in China and North Korea had reached around 60 percent. Of 506 million of the Irreligious in 1970, 486 million were in China and another 6 million in North Korea. Of the remaining 14 million, 11 million were in Japan, where they formed around 10.6 percent of the population. Their share in China began to decline slowly after 1970 and has undergone a steep reduction during the last decade from 50 to around 40 percent. In North Korea, the Irreligious continue to grow and they form nearly 72 percent of the population now. In Japan also, there has been some rise in their share since 1970; they form 13 percent of the population now.

*Taiwan and South Korea*

There are also about a million of the Irreligious in Taiwan, where they form 4.4 percent of the population. There are also about 0.8 million of the Irreligious in South Korea, where they form 1.6 percent of the population. Irreligion in both Taiwan and South Korea is a recent phenomenon. In 1970, the Irreligious had a share of only 0.2 and 0.3 percent, respectively, in these two countries.

## *The Irreligious in Southeast Asia*

<b>Number ('000) of the Irreligious in Southeast Asia, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>SE Asia</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7,100</b>	<b>19,509</b>	<b>24,158</b>	<b>23,533</b>
Vietnam	0	5,280	13,600	16,412	16,919
Indonesia	0	1,150	3,500	4,611	3,437
Thailand	-	110	1,080	1,315	1,259
<b>Percentage share of the Irreligious</b>					
<b>SE Asia</b>	-	2.48	4.42	4.66	3.97
Vietnam	-	12.36	20.39	20.56	19.26
Indonesia	-	0.96	1.91	2.17	1.43
Thailand	-	0.31	1.94	2.14	1.82

### *Vietnam*

In Southeast Asia, Irreligion is mainly a phenomenon of Vietnam. Of 23.5 million of the Irreligious in this region in 2010, 16.9 million are in Vietnam. They form 19.3 percent of the population. There has been some decline in their share during the last decade.

### *Indonesia and Thailand*

There are 3.4 million of the Irreligious in Indonesia and 1.3 million in Thailand. In both these countries, their numbers and share have declined during the last decade. Besides these, the Irreligious have a significant presence in Singapore, where they form 4.8 percent of the population. In Laos also, their share had risen to 5.5 percent in 2000; it has since declined to around 1 percent.

## *The Irreligious in Central Asia*

<b>Number ('000) of the Irreligious in Central Asia, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>C Asia</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>15,469</b>	<b>15,369</b>	<b>14,645</b>	<b>3,356</b>
Kazakhstan	1.5	7,118	7,410	6,530	1,040
Uzbekistan	1.0	5,022	4,900	5,265	1,189
<b>Percentage share of the Irreligious</b>					
<b>C Asia</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>20.56</b>	<b>12.63</b>	<b>10.01</b>	<b>2.02</b>
Kazakhstan	0.06	54.29	44.26	40.25	6.49
Uzbekistan	0.04	41.94	23.88	21.65	4.33

In Central Asia, large parts of the population of the countries that came under the Soviet domain had turned irreligious in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1970, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, two of the largest countries of the region, had turned 54 and 42 percent Irreligious, respectively. Smaller countries, like Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan had also acquired a considerable share of the Irreligious in their population. After 1970, that share began to decline everywhere. The decline has been rather rapid during the last decade, when the share of the Irreligious in the population of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has declined to 6.5 and 4.3 percent, respectively.

### *The Irreligious in West Asia*

<b>Number ('000) of the Irreligious in West Asia, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>W Asia</b>	1.5	6,055	5,361	5,212	3,448
Armenia	0.5	1,547	994	467	149
Georgia	0.5	2,483	1,175	895	179
Azerbaijan	0.5	1,750	942	874	328
Turkey	0.0	40	1,167	1,417	807
<b>Percentage share of the Irreligious</b>					
<b>W Asia</b>	0.01	7.04	3.57	2.77	1.49
Armenia	0.09	61.37	28.03	13.28	4.81
Georgia	0.02	52.73	21.53	18.01	4.12
Azerbaijan	0.03	33.83	13.16	11.31	3.57
Turkey	0.00	0.11	2.08	2.13	1.11

#### *Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan*

Like parts of Central Asia, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in West Asia had become part of the Soviet Union. These three countries had turned considerably Irreligious in 1970. That phase began to wane after 1970 and share of the Irreligious began to decline in all these countries. And, there has been a sharp decline during the last decade.

#### *Turkey*

Turkey also acquired a considerable number of the Irreligious in 1990 and their number and share increased further in 2000. That number has declined considerably during the last decade.

#### *Other countries of West Asia*

The Table above shows about 2 million of the Irreligious in countries other than the four we have considered. There were only about 236 thousand such persons in the rest of West Asia in 1970. While number and share of the Irreligious has been declining in the countries that turned Irreligious under the influence of various political ideologies, their number and presence seems to have been rising slowly in other, largely Islamic, countries. This is the result of their increased interaction with other parts of the world, especially with the west.

### *The Irreligious in South Asia*

<b>Number ('000) of the Irreligious in South Asia, 1900-2010</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>South Asia</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>2,848</b>	<b>12,003</b>	<b>15,273</b>	<b>16,620</b>
India	15	2,700	11,400	14,514	16,148
<b>Percentage share of the Irreligious</b>					
<b>South Asia</b>	0.01	0.40	1.07	1.14	1.04
India	0.01	0.49	1.34	1.43	1.32

The international demography sources that we are using estimate 16.6 million of the Irreligious in South Asia, all but some 500 thousand of them in India. Indian Census does have a category of 'Religion Not Stated'. Numbers in this category have substantially increased during the last decade, as we have discussed [in an earlier note](#). Even then the total number counted under this category in the Indian Census of 2011 is just 2.9 million. Irreligion has not yet become fashionable in India or in other countries of the region.

## **Older Asian Religions have survived the twentieth century**

### *The Irreligious in Asia are recovering their faith*

Analysis of the changing numbers of the Irreligious in Asia thus indicates that Irreligion had taken root in those countries of Asia where Marxist States had come to power. Marxist States have now been overthrown in some countries and in others their anti-religious vigour has gotten highly moderated. Consequently, the phase of Irreligion has begun to wane. China still retains a fairly high percentage of the Irreligious in its population. But that share has been declining and the decline has been especially steep during the last decade. The process seems likely to continue.

### *But Asia shall remain religiously diverse*

However, Asia shall continue to retain the great religious diversity that it supports even today. The share of Christians in Asia may rise, if the expectations of international Christianity of a great expansion in China are indeed fulfilled. But so far the irreligious of China seem to have largely reverted to Buddhism and Chinese Religions than to Christianity. Even if Christianity is able to obtain a larger foothold in China, Asia is unlikely to reach the condition of Africa, where nearly the entire population has been claimed by either Islam or Christianity, anytime soon. The older great religions of Asia—including, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese Religions and their varied expressions in several smaller regions—have largely survived the religious upheavals of the twentieth century and are likely to continue to hold their own in the world.

Asia is a continent of ancient religions and consequently of great religious diversity. The diversity is such that it has taken us several notes to describe its various contours. The diversity has contracted in some parts of the continent, especially in the Indian subcontinent. But it does not yet seem in any danger of being reduced to the uniformity of the two newer religions of Islam and Christianity.

## **Summing Up**

1. This note describes the share and distribution of the remaining religions of Asia including Ethnic Religions, some minor religions like Confucianism, Daoism and Shintoism and the so-called New Religions. It also describes the rise and the recent decline of Irreligion in different regions of Asia.

### *Ethnic Religionists*

2. Of 243 million Ethnic Religionists in the world, 147 million are in Asia; of the remaining 89 million are in Africa. There are not many Ethnic Religionists in Europe.

3. Share of Ethnic Religionists has declined only slightly during the last 110 years. They formed 5.29 percent of the population in 1900; their share now is 3.52 percent.

4. Share of Ethnic Religionists in Africa is even now higher than in Asia, but the decline there has been much more precipitous. In 1900, 58 percent of the population of Africa followed Ethnic Religions; their share in 2010 is 8.7 percent. In the course of the last 110 years, a large proportion of the Ethnic Religionists in Africa, as also in rest of the world, have been converted to Christianity and occasionally to Islam.

5. In Asia, the share of Ethnic Religions was particularly high in Southeast Asia. They formed 28 percent of the population of that region in 1900; their share now is 4.6 percent.

6. Indonesia accommodated most of the Ethnic Religionists in Southeast Asia in 1900. They then formed 45.6 percent of the population. Nearly all of them have been converted to Islam and their share in the population is only 2.3 percent in 2010.

7. Laos was another country with high presence of Ethnic Religionists at the beginning of the twentieth century. They had a share of 38.7 percent in 1900. Unlike in much larger Indonesia, their share in Laos has improved to reach 42.8 percent in 2010.

8. In Vietnam, Ethnic Religionists formed 20 percent of the population in 1900. That share declined to 4.6 percent in 1970, but has since risen to 10.4 percent in 2010.

9. In Myanmar also, the share of Ethnic Religionists has increased from 5.0 to 9.5 percent.

10. Besides the above, Philippines had 10 percent Ethnic Religionists in 1900; they are reduced to 2.3 percent now, though that is an improvement from 0.9 percent in 1970.

11. In Malaysia, the share of Ethnic Religionists has declined from 9.5 percent in 1900 to 3.5 percent now.

12. Outsides Southeast Asia, Ethnic Religionists have a significant presence in South and North Korea. In 1900, 94.2 percent of the population of North Korea and 81.3 percent of South Korea followed Ethnic Religions. In 2010, that ratio has declined to 12.3 and 14.7 percent, respectively.

13. Share of Ethnic Religionists in China and India, two of the largest countries of the continent, has improved during this period. Between 1900 and 2010, their share has increased from 2.1 to 4.3 percent in China and 2.9 to 3.8 percent in India.

14. The improvement has been much larger in Nepal with the share of Ethnic Religionists rising from 2.0 percent in 1900 to 13.1 percent in 2010.

15. Unlike in most other parts of the world, where Ethnic Religionists have been absorbed largely into Christianity, they have flourished in many countries of Asia. Their share has improved since the beginning of the twentieth century, or in recent decades, in

several countries including China, Indian, Nepal, Laos, Vietnam, Philippines, Cambodia and Thailand.

### *Confucianism*

16. There are 6.5 million Confucianists in the world. Of them, 5.3 million are in South Korea, where they continue to form about 11 percent of the population. Of the remaining about a million Confucianists, 0.7 million are in Myanmar and 0.25 million in Thailand.

### *Daoism*

17. There are 8.4 million Daoists in the world. Of them, 5.5 million are in China and 2.9 million in Taiwan. In Taiwan, they form 12.6 percent of the population; they had a share of 9.4 percent in 1900 also. In China, there were few Daoists until recently.

### *Shintoism*

18. There are 2.8 million Shintoists in the world. Of them 2.7 million are in Japan and about 29 thousand in South Korea. In Japan, their share has declined from about 15 percent in 1900 to 2.1 percent now.

### *New Religions*

19. Asia is home to several 'New Religions' that evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth century in several regions of Asia as a response to the physical and intellectual upheaval caused by the asymmetric and forced contact with the West. Most of these religions are attempts at syncretising the older religions of Asia with Catholic Christianity and western modernity and almost all of them involve some cultish practices.

20. Number of New Religionists in Asia had risen to more than 100 million in 2000; it has declined to 59 million during the last decade.

21. Of 100 million New Religionists in Asia in 2000, 46 million were in Indonesia. Their number there has declined to around 4 million.

22. Japan continues to have a considerable presence of New Religionists. There are about 33 million New Religionists in Japan in 2010 and they form more than a quarter of the population.

23. North Korea and South Korea also continue to have a significant presence of New Religionists. They form 13 percent of the population of the former and 14 percent of the latter.

24. There are also about 6.8 percent New Religionists in Taiwan.

25. The spread of New Religions in Asia seems to have been contained now and it has begun to reverse in many countries.

### *The Irreligious*

26. Asia acquired a large number of the Irreligious towards the middle of the twentieth century with the establishment of Marxist States in China and its neighbourhood and in many countries of Central Asia. That phenomenon has begun to reverse now.

27. China had become nearly 60 percent Irreligious in 1970; that ratio has now declined to less than 40 percent. A large part of this decline has occurred during the last decade, when the number of the Irreligious came down sharply from 635 to 536 million.

28. In North Korea, however, share of the Irreligious continues to grow. They formed 60 percent of the population in 1970; their share now is near 72 percent.

29. The Irreligious also have a considerable presence in Vietnam, where their share grew from 12.4 percent in 1970 to 20.6 percent in 2000. It has since declined slightly to 19.3 percent.

30. The Irreligious had come to form considerable share of the population of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and some of the neighbouring countries during the Soviet phase. Their presence in all these countries has now declined to fairly low levels. Much of the decline has happened during the last decade.

31. The Irreligious had also acquired a considerable presence in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in West Asia. That presence has also now waned. But there has been some increase in Irreligion in other highly Islamic parts of West Asia under the influence of modernity.

### *Asia retains its religious diversity*

32. The spread of Irreligion that parts of Asia had witnessed in the middle of the twentieth century has begun to reverse. The people of these countries are retuning largely to their native religions. This has led to considerable rise in the share of Buddhists in China and also some rise in that of the Chinese Religionists, as we have seen in our previous notes.

33. The main story of the twentieth century is that the older religions of Asia, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Religion, have been largely able to maintain their presence amid the great religious upheavals that other continents have witnessed during the last 110 years of modernity. Unlike in Africa, Islam and Christianity have not been able to reduce the older religions of Asia to insignificance.

34. There is an expectation among the international Christian circles that the reversal of Irreligion in China may lead to a significant rise in Christianity there. Even if that



expectation is fulfilled, it seems unlikely that Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Chinese Religions there would be submerged anytime soon.

35. Asia is a continent of ancient religions and consequently of great religious diversity. The diversity is such that it has taken us several notes to describe its changing contours during the last 110 years. That diversity has contracted in places, especially in the Indian subcontinent. But it does not yet seem to be in any danger of being reduced to the uniformity of Islam and Christianity, as has happened, for example, in Africa.