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RELIGION AND DEMOGRAPHY: CAUSALITY OR CORRELATION?

Abstract:

The article is focused on finding out whether religion and demography is causality, correlation, or anything at all, since the last decades we can see enormous regional disparities considering demographic patterns in different parts of the world governed (to a certain extent) by different religions. In the first part is the article oriented towards the relation between religion and demography and what attitudes different religions hold towards matters of sexuality, births, and fertility stimulation as these aspects are essential for issues regarding demography. In the second part of the article, we apply the theoretical approach from the first part to the contemporary religious landscape and prognoses by using quantitative, comparative, and deductive methods.

Keywords:

demography, religion, fertility, Islam, religious landscape

Introduction

In today's world, we can see significantly different demographic patterns throughout the globe, and very often it is associated with religion. Religion is the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about values that shape human behaviour. Most predominantly the last decades there is a trend, that demographic curves of developed countries

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are starting to descend whereas demographic curves in developing countries are strikingly rising. There are apparent connections when it comes to the somewhat conservative way the religious teachings react to practices of birth control and the first impression could be that religion indeed affects demography by its dogmata, however, as we point out later in the article, it is not as simple as it might seem. The goal and purpose of this article in this matter are to find out to which extent is demography influenced by religion and to which extent is it backed by socioeconomic indicators.

Religion and its influence on demographic aspects

We can understand religion as a certain basis for a world-view and from a world-view, naturally, a set of values is derived. From this set of values are practically all opinions and views even further derived and to a certain extent, we could say, that even habits or rather behavioral patterns. In this manner, religion influences demographic processes which form society including aspects such as decisions on establishing marriage, birth rate, and again, demographic influences from the global religious landscape. In this regard the question is, whether between religion and ascending, or descending demographic curve is a correlation, a causality, or anything at all, or there are completely different factors at play, which have little to no connection to religion.

In our effort to find the nexus between religion and fertility for example is a problem, however, residing in the number of apparent associations which could be false. We could state, that Islam has a definite positive influence on a demographic curve because currently, Muslims are the fastest-growing religious group in the world², but the reason behind their high rate of fertility could stem from socioeconomic conditions, not religion.

The same approach was employed by Calvin Goldscheider who studied religious differences in the context of demographic behaviour and stated, that the attempts to explain the influence of religion laid usually on two principles, or rather approaches: the first he called 'characteristic' and there he talked about what we wrote previously: that on its basis the nexus between religion and fertility could be false, which could be found by looking into the variables such as education, income, or place of birth.

² M. Lipka, C. Hackett, *Why Muslims are the world's fastest growing religious group*, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/>> (20.12.2020).

These often show a putative role of religion, because should we start creating groups based on these variables, we often find out, that religious differences are starting to fade out in favor of socioeconomics. However, should the nexus between fertility and religious affiliation remain even after we counted in the socioeconomic backgrounds, in that case, Goldscheider speaks of the second principle, the so-called ‘particularized theology hypothesis’³. The basis of this theory is that the researched demographic behaviour, mostly higher birth rate of a certain religious group, could be accounted for by the teaching of said faith regarding the issues of births⁴. We could imagine it for example as a situation when the higher birth rate of Catholic Christians than atheists is explained by the position of the Catholic Church towards the usage of contraception.

McQuillan states, that it is in no way surprising, that discussions about the influence of religion on demographic behaviour start with a discussion about values. Religions emphasize moral codes, which direct human behaviour even more than any other societal institutions, and a plethora of religious traditions give special attention towards areas such as sexuality, position, and tasks of man, woman, and place of a family in society. Based upon the role which the specific idea represents it is, however, important to differentiate between two categories of values – between relatively specific norms or rules, which aspire to regulate behaviour, which is directly connected to certain determinants of fertility and then wider values and principles whose effect on fertility is indirect.

According to Goldscheider, the first category rests upon the premise of particularized theology hypothesis, in short: certain rules, which are created to directly influence certain determinants of fertility are mostly typical for Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)⁵. Should we look upon the opinion of these religions on the use of contraception or abortion, then all three religions support some kind of restriction on the matter. Roman Catholic Church has a clear mind on this topic – on the official level it forbids all kinds of birth control⁶, while some other Christian denominations gradually moved towards a more relaxed view in the area of contraception, though still rejecting

³ C. Goldscheider, *Population, Modernization and Social Structure*, Boston 1971.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ J. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, Cambridge 1986.

abortions⁷. A similar situation is with Judaism, where only the orthodox groups continue with restrictions on the practice of sterilization or abortions⁸. When it comes to Islamic teachings, the absence of a clear religious hierarchy in this faith resulted in the situation, that there is no universally supported view on a lot of these issues. In general, we could say, that Islam stands rather in opposition to abortions and contraception as well as sterilization, an interesting aspect in this faith however is, that the opinions of Islamic leaders‘ and scholars‘ teachings and Muslim believers significantly differ. An analysis of religious texts and survey of religious leaders⁹ suggest, that even though there often is a general ‘official approval‘ of certain forms of birth control, surveys in numerous Muslim populations has shown, that men and women often give religious reasons to why they do not practice birth control¹⁰.

The view of Abrahamic religions differs from the eastern traditions of Buddhism, or Hinduism. These faiths do not have built up formal hierarchical structures, which are typical for scripture-based religions and do not define clear norms of behavioral conduct, which would play the role of the law for believers. We could say, that the texts of these religions are rather of an advisory character, recommendation, or somewhat an inspiration for the believers, who are – at the end of the day – considered responsible for themselves. Although the lead thinkers of Hindu or Buddhistic traditions expressed certain unease in the context of reproduction, mostly abortions¹¹, it never led to explicit rules restricting these practices nor were they threatening with punishment.

We should not forget, however, that the influence of religion on demographic aspects or fertility is not to be seen only through the prism

⁷ H. L. Smith, *Contraception and natural law*, [in:] *The Anglican Moral Choice*, ed. P. Elmen, Wilton 1983, p. 181-200.

⁸ A. Kasher, *Jewish ethics: An orthodox view*, [in:] *World Religions and Global Ethics*, ed. S. C. Crawford, New York 1989.

⁹ C. Underwood, *Islamic precepts and family planning: The perceptions of Jordanian religious leaders and their constituents*, “International Family Planning Perspectives”, Vol. 26, Issue 3, 2000, pp. 110-117.

¹⁰ B. Caldwell, Barkat-e-Khuda, *The first generation to control family size: A microstudy of the causes of fertility decline in a rural area of Bangladesh*, “Studies in Family Planning” Vol. 31 (3)/2000, pp. 239-251; J. B. Casterline, Z. A. Sathar, M. ul Haque, *Obstacles to contraceptive use in Pakistan: A study in Punjab*, “Studies in Family Planning”, Vol. 32 (2)2001, pp. 95-100.

¹¹ S. C. Crawford, *Hindu ethics for modern life*, [in:] *World Religions and Global Ethics*, ed. S. C. Crawford, New York 1989; J. Simons, *Religions, population: Doctrines of*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Population*, New York 2003.

of relation towards contraception or abortions. Religions developed even other ways, which have the potential to limit or stimulate the birth rate. One of these could be for example the rules on entry to sexual unions. Restrictions of the age of entry to union, number of spouses, entry to other unions after a divorce, or death of a spouse are frequent in numerous traditions, again mostly in those Abrahamic. As relevant for the issue of fertility are even the rules regulating sexual activity outside of officially recognized unions, but even the issues of sexuality inside of those officially recognized. Several religions developed rules dealing with the timing and frequency of sexual relations between spouses, for example, a lot of African religious traditions support long periods of postpartum abstinence¹². Even in the Christian traditions, we can sense these 'justifying' sexual acts ultimately for the sole purpose of conception, although there is an especially interesting concept originating in the medieval Canon law, so-called 'marital/conjugal debt', which speaks about the obligation of spouses to not decline partner sexual satisfaction. Hull considers this one of a few cases when the Catholic theology supports sexual relations and is surprisingly egalitarian since the concept applies equally to men as to women¹³.

Specific norms, which touch determinants of fertility are essential but do not conceive ideological elements of a religious influence on demography in its entirety. Goldscheider states, that it is important in these studies to look at the wider sociocultural references related to religious beliefs and their potential to influence fertility¹⁴. There are two types of potential influences mentioned in the literature. The first one consists of values, which speak about the issues of fertility directly without creating actual specific rules regarding the practice of fertility regulation. We can put as an example the case of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which doesn't have any direct rules regarding contraception, even though its philosophy is pronatalist, which should reflect Mormon theology¹⁵. They believe, that the plan of

¹² R. Schoenmaeckers, I. H. Shah, R. Lesthaeghe, O. Tambashe, *The child-spacing tradition and the postpartum taboo in tropical Africa: Anthropological evidence*, [in:] *Child-spacing in Tropical Africa: Traditions and Change*, ed. H. J. Page, R. Lesthaeghe, London 1981, pp. 25-71.

¹³ I. V., Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700-1815*, Ithaca 1996.

¹⁴ C. Goldscheider, *Population...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ T. B. Heaton, *How does religion influence fertility?: The case of Mormons*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion", Vol. 25, No. 2, 1986, pp. 248-258.

salvation could be achieved only when all worthy souls (which are not yet born) come to the world and Mormons have to help make it happen. That is, at the end of the day, supported even by the teachings of this church regarding the central role of the family in a particular religious community¹⁶. Marital status is suitable for everyone, even the church leaders and big families are a sign of loyalty towards the church's teachings. This aspect was underlined even by the practice of polygamy in the Church, which is not officially practiced nowadays any more as it was repealed by the Church itself in 1904¹⁷. This resulted in the fact, that Mormons typically achieved a higher birth rate than other religious groups in the same society¹⁸ even though rules forbidding contraception were absent. It was simply a perception of the believers. Some sources show, that we can see a similar stance in the case of Muslims. Predominantly in developing countries where Muslims are a minority, the emphasis on the importance of family and a positive image of big families supports higher fertility and leads men and women to the understanding that any practice of family limitation is not following their faith¹⁹.

A similar example could be seen even in some African or Asian religious groups, which are bound to a certain important religious obligation towards their ancestors. In a lot of traditional African religions to give birth to a high number of children is often associated with fulfilling a duty towards their ancestors and serves as a sign, that those who conceive children are especially gifted or blessed, while a shame is cast upon those infertile or sterile, which is considered a punishment of sinners from their ancestors or gods. And since women are usually accused of inability to conceive, mothers with a high number of children have a specific social status²⁰.

The second type of influence consists of values, which address wider issues of social organization with a potential to influence fertility. Goldscheider shows an example of this type in religious teachings about

¹⁶ L. L. Bean, G. P. Mineau, D. L. Anderton, *Fertility Change on the American Frontier*, Berkeley 1990.

¹⁷ *Scriptures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for the Sunday Schools*, Salt Lake City 1968.

¹⁸ T. B. Heaton, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ S. P. Morgan, S. Stash, H. L. Smith, K. Oppenheim-Mason, *Muslim and non-Muslim differences in female autonomy and fertility: Evidence from four Asian countries*, "Population and Development Review", Vol. 28, Issue 3, 2002, pp. 515-537.

²⁰ J. C. Caldwell, P. Caldwell, *The cultural context of high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa*, "Population and Development Review", Vol. 13, No. 3, 1987. pp. 409-437.

applicable roles of men and women. In his analysis of Arabs living in Israel, he states, that a higher birth rate does not reflect specific teaching related to contraception as much as views of Muslims on the nature of family relations and separated roles of women. A lack of access to opportunities to gain income increases the dependence of women on male family members and puts a priority on conformity towards an ideal of woman as a mother. And considering the importance of family and the weight of the size of the family, women are pressured by relatives and the community to birth to children²¹.

The status of women in religious communities is a frequent argument defending the influence of religion on demography. As we have pointed out above, regardless of the fact whether a practice of contraception usage, a stance towards abortion, a role of a family in the value system of believers, or a social status of the mother with numerous offspring is in some way tied up in a formal complex of rules, essential is how the specific religious community perceives it. In this matter, it is advisable to turn attention towards the European conditions where can we see, that Christianity is partially losing its influence in favour of liberalization of values, while Islam is gaining a stronger status in individual European societies and how these facts establish on the ground of religious landscape.

A global religious landscape in an alternance

In recent years the number of children born to Christians was confirming a dominant position of Christianity as the most widely practiced religion in the world, however, that will not apply much longer. According to estimates of Pew Research Center, by the year 2035 should number of children born to Muslims exceed the number of children born to Christians²². The population of Muslims will rise twice as fast as the overall world population between the years 2015 and 2060: while it is estimated that the world population will increase by 32% in the upcoming centuries, the number of Muslims will increase by 70% – from 1,8 billion in 2015 to 3 billion in 2060 – while Muslims made up only 24,1% of the

²¹ C. Goldscheider, W. D. Mosher, *Patterns of Contraceptive Use in the United States: The Importance of Religious Beliefs*, “Studies in Family Planning” Vol. 22, No. 2, 1991, pp. 102-115.

²² Pew Research Center, *Europe’s Growing Muslim Population*, <<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>>, (31.05.2020).

overall population in 2015, in 2060 it is expected that three out of ten people will be Muslims (31,1% of the world population)²³.

The main reasons why specifically Muslims increase their number so rapidly lie in demographic indicators. Muslims tend to have more children than members of other religions. Numbers show, that an average of children which Muslim women have is 2,9 per one, while in the case of Christian women it is 2,6 and an average of all non-Muslims is 2,2 and this applies to all regions of the world, where the Muslim community is numerous – Muslim birth rate exceeds that of non-Muslims everywhere²⁴. Another factor is the median age. Muslims have the lowest median age among all major religious branches – 24 in 2015, while for non-Muslims it is 32, which means that a higher rate of Muslims will be in a point of their life where they will start to have children, what in combination with birth rate enhances the increase of Muslim population again²⁵. As we mentioned in the first part of this article, we shouldn't forget the socioeconomic backgrounds, which could affect fertility (and demographic indicators in general). In this regard stands, that more than one-third of all Muslims is concentrated in Africa or the Middle East, where the highest population growth is estimated regardless of religion.

However, even in these regions grow Muslims as a religious group the fastest. Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa are younger on average and have a higher birth rate than the overall population of said region. They are increasing as a percentage in every region of the world except Latin America and Caribbean, where they are a relatively small number²⁶. Should we look even more closely – Muslims increase faster on a state level as well, for example in India, where their number increases faster than (as of today) dominant Hindu population and the estimates say, that the number of Muslims in India will rise from 14,9% in 2015 to 19,4% (or 333 million) by 2060²⁷.

²³ M. Lipka, C. Hackett, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050: Muslims*, <<https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/muslims/#regional-change>> (31.05.2020).

²⁷ C. Hackett, *By 2050, India to have world's largest populations of Hindus and Muslims*, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/21/by-2050-india-to-have-worlds-largest-populations-of-hindus-and-muslims/>> (31.05.2020).

The same goes for Nigeria, where the number of Christians and Muslims in 2015 was equal, while by 2060 should Muslims get to 60,5% of the population²⁸.

While in plenty of developing regions of the world the population (regardless of religion) is increasing, in developed regions is the demographic curve reversed. A lot of authors are not afraid to mark this phenomenon as ‘The European demographic suicide’ to describe the projected state of this continent by 2050, in which the European Union should lose as much as 49 million people in productive age²⁹. The states try to substitute this natural decrease with immigration and we could assume that a significant part of the main countries of origin will be those, which due to their natality will be harshly overpopulated. Concerning the aforementioned facts in the context of Islam as the fastest-growing religion leads us to how the religious landscape in Europe will gradually change. Naturally, as in the other regions of the world, even in Europe Islam grows faster than other religious groups. Pew Research Center drew up three scenarios that differ regarding projected future levels of migration. The baseline of all scenarios is the Muslim population in Europe (for their research defined as 28 member-states of European Union plus Norway and Switzerland) in the half of 2016, estimated at 25,8 million, which represented 4,9% of the overall population of Europe (and a rise from 19,5 million/3,8% in 2010)³⁰.

We can call the first scenario ‘the scenario of zero migration’, which operates with an assumption, that all migration to Europe descends and stops permanently on zero right away. Considering these conditions, the Muslim population will rise only through the natural increase from 4,9% (on the baseline) to 7,4% by 2050³¹. One of the reasons is what we mentioned above: Muslims have lower median age and higher birth rate than other Europeans.

The second scenario – ‘medium’ – estimates that all refugee flows stop, but the ‘casual’ levels of migration to Europe will continue, be it

²⁸ M. Lipka, C. Hackett, *op. cit.*

²⁹ J. M. Boussemart, M. Godet, *Europe 2050: Demographic Suicide*, <<https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0462-europe-2050-demographic-suicide>> (31.05.2020).

³⁰ Pew Research Center, *The Changing Global Religious Landscape*, <<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/#fn-27661-1>> (31.05.2020).

³¹ *Ibidem.*

due to work-related reasons or others. Under these circumstances, the population of Muslims in Europe should reach 11,2% by 2050³².

The third, highest scenario estimates, that the waves of refugees between 2014 and 2016 will continue even in the future with absolutely the same religious composition (primarily Muslims) besides 'casual' levels of migration. In this scenario should Muslims form 14% of the European population, or almost three times of the baseline position by 2050³³.

Whereas the population of Muslims should increase in all three scenarios, the European non-Muslims should decrease in numbers also in all three scenarios. The overall population of Europe including Muslims and non-Muslims should decrease significantly without migration (from 521 million to an estimated 482 million), while in the medium scenario it stays roughly stable and in the high one, it slightly increases³⁴. In the context of migration, it is necessary to point out, that between 2010 and 2016 was the migration itself the main aspect accelerating the rise of the Muslim population in Europe. Approximately 2,5 million Muslims came to Europe due to reasons different than an asylum application, therefore for example work or education and 1,3 million Muslims gained (or were expected to gain) refugee status, while only 250 000 Muslims left Europe³⁵. The natural increase was only a secondary factor. In the context of European Muslims, there were 2,9 million more births than deaths in this timeframe, and considering conversions, they were regarded only as a small factor in the terms of the whole Muslim population change with less than 160 000 people, who either converted from Islam to another faith (or disregarded faith completely) or from another faith to Islam during the years from 2010 to 2016³⁶.

Conclusion

It is necessary to admit, that looking for causality in the relation between religion and demography is a vain effort. The nexus between these two terms is a very complex one and is leaning to several variables.

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ *Ibidem.*

³⁴ *Ibidem.*

³⁵ C. Hackett, *5 facts about the Muslim population in Europe*, <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/29/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>> (31.05.2020).

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

What creates patterns of behaviour within demographic processes by far cannot be narrowed down to religious affiliation – if anything, it is a religious affiliation in connection with socioeconomic conditions, regional customs, cultural traits outside of religious practices, and plenty of other phenomena. Not restrictions from religious authorities or conventions, as much as alleged perceptions or cultural customs of individual believers (which do not need to necessarily originate in religious traditions) stand behind the stimulation of fertility, negative attitude toward any form of birth control, or issues of marriage and reproduction in itself.

Although, what is incontestable are the numbers that suggest, that certain demographic patterns within certain religious groups are not coincidental. Correlation between religion and demography is undeniable and demographic prognoses show, that by the year 2035 should the highest number of children be born to Muslim parents, and by 2060 should Islam be the dominant world religion. On the contrary, the states of the European Union – in which currently the influence of Christianity descends and gradual liberalization of values dominates – begin to lose population rapidly. Thus, in this regard, we are not talking only about a higher increase of Muslim numbers anymore, but a decrease of non-Muslims, which significantly transforms the European religious environment. Should we not perceive it as but a regional statistic anymore and take into account what effect could a rapid increase of Muslim population in the individual states have, then this reality starts to gain completely new connotations regarding the clash of European liberal values with Islamic dogma.

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