

New Times, Old Beliefs: Projecting the Future Size of Religions in Austria, Canada and Switzerland

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Introduction/Background

Projecting the religious composition of the population is relevant for several reasons. It is a key characteristic influencing several aspects of individual behaviour, including marriage and child bearing patterns. The religious composition is also a driver of social cohesion and consequently increased religious diversity may lead to a more fragmented society. In this context, Austria, Canada and Switzerland find themselves in a period of transition where population proportions adhering to the largest religions (Roman Catholic in Austria, and both Roman Catholic and Protestant in Canada and Switzerland) have shrunk during the last few decades (although those were periods of positive population growth). In 1970, about 87% of the Austrian population was Roman Catholics. Thirty years later, in 2001, the share had fallen to 74%. In Canada from 1971 to 2001, census enumeration shows that the Roman Catholic population share decreased from 46% to 43%, while the Protestant proportion decreased from 44% to 29 %. The Roman Catholic Church had an increase of members due to immigration however their share in the total population fell. In Switzerland, there has been also a strong decline in the proportion of the population reporting affiliation with the Catholic and Protestant denomination: from above 96 % in the seventies to 75% in 2000.

Reasons for the loss of influence of the Catholics/Protestants Churches are the same in all countries: secularization and immigration. In the three countries, the population share reporting “no religious beliefs” has grown rapidly to levels above 10% at the beginning of the 21st century: 12% in Austria (from 4% in 1970), 16% in Canada (from 7% in 1971), and 11% in Switzerland (from 1 % in 1970).

At the same time, the countries witness an increase in diversity due to migration. However, the process is quite different among the three countries. In Austria and Switzerland, the influence of migration on the diversification of the religious landscape has been quite low in the last thirty years. The share of population with other religion has increased from 2% in 1971 to 8% in 2001 in Austria, and from 3% in 1970 to 10% in 2000 in Switzerland. In both countries, the Muslim community represents around 50% of that group. In Canada, the share of immigrants with a Roman Catholic denomination has always been the largest within each new wave of immigrants since 1960, which explains why the share of the Roman Catholics in the total population has not been declining as substantially as that of the Protestants. However, immigrants to Canada come more and more from regions outside Europe, in particular Asia and the Middle East, and noticeably from Muslim countries.

Purpose

In this study we project the future of the religious composition in Austria, Canada and Switzerland. We base our analysis on a set of scenarios where differential age-specific fertility, migration and secularization rates, as well as the probability of transmission from parents to children are taken into account. We base our estimates on large and rich datasets, originating from census collected every 10-year between 1970-71 and 2000-01, where data from the entire population for the three countries allow us to estimate conversion rates as well as religion-specific migration and fertility.

Methodology

The projections of the population by religion status from 2000 to 2050 will be created using the PDE Population Projection software, a simplified multi-state projection software for states interacting with one another. The inputs required for the projections are the following:

- Base year parameters: population by age, sex, and religious status, age and religion specific fertility rates, sex (and religion – no considered in this study) specific mortality rates, age-, sex- and religion-specific net migration numbers and transition rates between religious groups
- Scenario for the projections of the different components above mentioned. Based on the analysis carried out for Austria, we envisage the following assumptions.

1. Fertility:

1.a. Constant fertility within each religious category at the level observed in the starting year. This scenario is coherent with the hypothesis that dependants (mainly wives) of new migrants may rely on child benefits rather than on employment, and will therefore keep the fertility of the groups with higher fertility (e.g. Muslim population) at a somehow higher level than the rest of the population (in Austria 2.3 for Muslim women compared with 1.3 for Roman Catholics).

1.b. Converging fertility of all religious affiliations to the same level. This implies that the different generations of migrants will rapidly adopt the low fertility pattern existing in the countries of study.

2. Mortality

One single trend, following the central/medium variant of the statistical offices. There are no data on mortality differentials by religion and it will hence not be considered in the analysis

3. Migration

3.a. The net number of migrants follows the central/medium variant for population projections of the statistical offices. The age and sex patterns of migrants follow those observed around 2000 as well as the religions affiliation of migrants is kept at levels observed in 2000 (based on information about country of origin).

3.b. Same as in before, except that the net number of migrants follows the high variant for migration stated in the population projections of the statistical offices.

4. Transition/Secularization:

4.a. Constant transition rates at levels observed in 2000 for transitions from Catholics to ‘without religion’ and from Protestants to ‘without religion’. This scenario mainly shows the depletion of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches due to present trends in secularization.

4.b. Transition rates double between 2000 and 2030. This shows a worsening of the present trend of people leaving the Protestant and Catholic Churches.

4.c. Transitions are approaching zero by 2030 so that by 2030, everybody stays in the religious groups he/she was born into. This scenario describes a reversal of the present trend over a rather long period of 25 years.

4.d. Other transition scenarios based on particular country settings

First results

The projections have already been carried out for Austria. In our calculations we find that the Roman Catholics are likely to become a minority, meaning that they could fall below the 50% mark by 2051. Some scenarios even show a decline below the 40% line. However, in all cases they will still be the largest religious community in Austria for the first half of this century. The share of the Protestants will be relatively stable over the years, around 4-5%. The highest uncertainty is about the share of the population without religion: it could be as low as 10% and as high as 33%. The Muslim population that has experienced a sharp increase, from 1% in 1981 to 4% in 2001, and by 2051 will represent 14% to 26% of the population. Other religion categories will increase their weight in Austria, to be around 7-12% by 2051. The rapid changes will also provoke imbalances as regards as to the religious composition of the different age categories. It will be interesting to compare those results with those resulting from the projections for Switzerland and Canada.

Caveats

The data regarding the population by religion is based on censuses asking the questions of religious affiliation of the population. It does not include any questions as to the religiosity and/or to the practice of religions by the individuals. Therefore, the analysis can be seen as more quantitative than qualitative.

References

Goujon, A., V. Skirbekk, K. Fliegenschnee, P. Strzelecki. 2006 New Times, old beliefs: Projecting the future size of religions in Austria. VID Working Paper 01/2006. Vienna: Vienna Institute of Demography.