

Will the looming fertility bust destroy religion?

As the global population ages, it's unclear what will bind people to faith.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



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The New York Times recently published a major article addressing one of the most significant developments in the modern world. The story, by Damien Cave, Emma Bubola, and Choe Sang-hun, was headlined “Long Slide Looms for World Population, with Sweeping Ramifications” (May 22). It took a well-known phenomenon of the past half century—the dramatic collapse of birth rates in Europe and other highly developed nations—and showed how that trend has now spread to large parts of the globe, with notable impacts already in Latin America and South and East Asia. Brazil, for instance, now has a fertility rate comparable to Denmark.

As the Times authors note, this is “a dizzying reversal unmatched in recorded history,” and it portends a sharply aging population, in which children become scarce. The prospects for 2050 are hair-raising for all aspects of life—for commerce, government, politics, and social services. “It may also require a reconceptualization

of family and nation,” they write. “Imagine entire regions where everyone is 70 or older.” And then ask a still more frightening question: Will this decline ever reverse? What is the final outcome?

I have a vested interest in the study of this phenomenon, as last year I published a book that tried to assess the implications of fertility decline for religious life and practice and to extrapolate it to midcentury. The book is *Fertility and Faith: The Demographic Revolution and the Transformation of World Religions*, and I stand by that subtitle.

Fertility rates correlate closely to the strength of organized and institutional religion. Initially, Europe pioneered the pattern of nations that were both low fertility and low faith, and observers assumed that this was something to do with peculiarly European conditions. It wasn't. As that demographic slide has occurred worldwide, it has been marked by sudden contractions in organized religion, however we measure it, and the rapid spread of ideas and policies bitterly opposed by many among those faiths, especially in matters of sexuality and gender. If Christianity is faltering in Europe, so is Buddhism across much of Asia. And if indeed the fertility rate is such a bellwether of religious decline, and of the sharp growth of religious nones, then that is a powerful augury for the United States, which has now fallen to Scandinavian rates of reproduction.

So will a fertility bust destroy religion? No, or not exactly, for two reasons. The first is that the fall of religious institutions does not necessarily destroy faith as such, or eliminate spiritual hunger. Witness the upsurge of pilgrimage across supposedly secular Europe. The question that then arises is how long private and individual faith can endure without institutions, and we simply do not have the historical records to answer that question.

Also, presently at least, the fertility decline is patchy. There are large areas of the globe it has not yet affected—above all, Africa. For a generation at least, that continent's two great faiths, Islam and Christianity, will be flourishing in that setting, if not elsewhere. After 2050, the crystal ball becomes distinctly cloudy, but it is highly likely that even Africa will eventually move to the low-faith and low-fertility model.

The Times study demands that we think beyond simple secularization and through the linkage between the size and structure of families—and about what churches

actually do. Only when we take children out of the picture do we realize just how much of what churches have always done has focused on the young. Besides Sunday school, this means bringing them through the rites of passage, from baptism, confirmation, and first communion to summer camp and vacation Bible school. Such activities are what binds people to religious communities. If you want to see churches where the young are largely absent, then look to Europe, and worry. In the words of the prophet Joni Mitchell, you don't know what you've got till it's gone.

So what can churches do to respond to this alarming new child-free order? Many mainline churches are used to having congregations that are mostly elderly people, but that is likely to become the norm, and across denominations. Moreover, the meaning of "elderly" will change as the proportion of people in their 80s and 90s grows steadily. That prospect holds huge pastoral opportunities, as does an emphasis on outreach to the solitary of all ages, in a society where family life is so constrained. Churches will have to take over many of the support functions presently carried out by families. "Older" churches must also think hard about collaborating with newer and younger immigrant congregations, with their very different interests and needs.

But whatever practical steps churches take, none of those communities can afford to ignore that fertility slide and the consequent Great Aging.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The Great Aging."