



# Religions and Low Fertility Today

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## ABSTRACT

Our understanding of whether, to what extent, and under which conditions religions nowadays influence birth levels depends on research. It is important to seek answers to two fundamental questions. The first question is about the role of religiosity and religious affiliation in the deterministic cause of low fertility and family planning in recent times. The second question deals with the influence of religious institutions on birth levels and the exercise of reproductive rights at the global level and within certain population groups over recent decades. To that end, the paper provides an overview of theoretical examinations of the connection between religions and fertility, empirical studies addressing low completed fertility, birth control, or sexual behaviour in relation to religiosity or religious affiliation of individuals, as well as the influence of religious institutions on fertility transition and the respect of human rights in this field. A review of the recent studies of various populations characterised by low

birth levels shows that religiosity, especially practising religion, encourages people to uphold traditional values, attitudes, and behaviours that are directly or indirectly related to the concepts of marriage and childbearing. Moreover, it sheds light on some examples of religious institutions' concrete opposition to progress in this area, while also highlighting contradictory cases of religions supporting profound contemporary changes in reproductive behaviour.

## KEY WORDS

religions | fertility | family planning | reproductive rights | demography

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Pronatalism has long been a central principle in most, if not all religions. Accordingly, present-day religions also insist on strengthening the traditional family, maintaining male superiority, encouraging people to have children, teaching women that parenting is their only role in life, and prohibiting the use of effective birth control and voluntary abortion (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 23). It is not uncommon for recommendations regarding women's status, adolescents' health, or the choice of birth control to be softened in the latest international documents, or for their implementation to be hindered under the pressure of religious groups. This is also the case with the Programme of Action of the Fifth International Conference on Population and Development, which is the key relevant international policy document in the field of population research (Rašević and Petrović 1996: 151).

### **THE PHENOMENON OF SUB-REPLACEMENT FERTILITY**

Childbearing as a positive natural component directly influences population growth and its age profile. However, it performs these two significant demographic functions only if at least enough children are born to meet the needs of population replacement. Therefore, any birth level that is too low to sustain these two functions is known as sub-replacement fertility, which sooner or later results in population decline and excessive population ageing. The significance of sub-replacement fertility is even more

critical considering that it is a deep-seated and, consequently, long-standing phenomenon that takes both time and effort to change. In conditions of low population mortality, it is the principal natural dynamic factor of demographic changes.

The phenomenon of sub-replacement fertility is a deep-seated one that no developed society has been able to escape. However, sub-replacement fertility doesn't only affect developed countries, nor is it exclusive to Western civilisation. According to an assessment by the United Nations, this phenomenon today affects 83 countries in the world, or 46% of the global population, including the whole European continent, as well as some of the most populous countries: China, USA, Brazil, Russia, Japan, Vietnam, Germany, Iran, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. It is expected that, by the middle of this century, 69% of the world's population will live in countries where women give birth to fewer than 2.1 children on average, which represents the theoretical level required for population replacement (United Nations 2017: 6).

Reproductive behaviour is considered from the perspective of various scientific disciplines, such as economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, ethnology, geography, biology, sexology, and demography. In this process, as Hobcraft and Kiernan argued, economists want to answer the question of what limits the choices connected to childbearing, sociologists wonder why those choices

are limited, psychologists analyse the influence of preferences, emotions, and attitudes on the choices, anthropologists study how the culture enables or, more likely, limits those choices, historians tell us how those choices have changed over time, while ethnologists dedicate the most attention to the spatial dimension of the choices. Then we have biologists, whose principal considerations are focused on procreative capacity and sterility, while sexologists study the influence of the frequency of sexual intercourse as a direct fertility factor. Demographers analyse the scale of the sub-replacement fertility problem and its macro-level consequences (Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995: 2).

Prevalent studying of this phenomenon from the point of view of a single scientific discipline is one of the reasons why we still do not have one comprehensive theory of sub-replacement fertility despite the series of complex considerations – supported by statistics, research findings, and high applicability – regarding low population fertility. As a result, we believe the research process focused on the comprehensive theoretical dissection of the reasons for having one or two children will continue in the years to come. Nevertheless, many important determinants of the sub-replacement fertility phenomenon have already been identified. A special place among them is taken by what is known as civilisation's factors.

The core of contemporary reproductive behaviour is affected by some of the important factors that are intrinsic to the present level of each civilisa-

tion's development, whether they be related to its positive achievements or to its most serious weaknesses. On one hand there is, *inter alia*, the nuclear family and the altered roles of women and children within it, different relationships between partners, strengthened individualism, aspirations of self-actualisation, insistence on the quality of one's own life and the life of children, liberal laws on abortion, and the availability of efficient birth control. On the other hand, there is the materialistic mindset coupled with the consumer mentality, the desire for free time, and a personal life that is more scattered than ever before. In the new system of values, parenthood has remained high on the list. However, its essence has changed. Children are born primarily to satisfy the psychological and emotional needs of the parents. This is typically achieved with one or two children at most (Rašević 1999).

These factors and a series of other unaddressed structural, cultural, and technological changes are rooted in the second global revolution, known as modernisation. The industrial revolution, extensive urbanisation, radical changes in agriculture, science, and technology, the revolution of the education system, medicine, and the political system, including secularisation, are the most significant changes within the entire process. The demographic revolution is, however, a consequence of said changes. Country-to-country variations of the demographic revolution indicator values are related to the time factor or, alternatively, to the socioeconomic context and/or the

cultural identity of the population, which, to a greater or lesser extent, influence individual choices regarding parenthood.

Where analyses of the causes of low fertility rates mention the influence of religions, this is principally done in a way that stresses that childbearing has become a seemingly free choice of individuals in the conditions of weakening moral pressures of various kinds. As the disparities between the birth rates of individuals of different levels of religiosity or wealth has decreased in developed countries, so have demographers become less interested in studying the influence of religions on reproductive behaviour. Could the interest in this old issue be awakening again in theoretical considerations and empirical studies? Our understanding of whether, to what extent, and under which conditions religions nowadays influence birth levels depends on the inclusion of this topic in research efforts.

## **INFLUENCE OF RELIGIONS ON FERTILITY LEVELS**

### **Aim of the paper**

The paper seeks answers to two questions. The first question is about the role of religiosity and religious affiliation in the deterministic cause of low fertility and family planning in recent times. To that end, the paper provides an overview of theoretical examinations of the influence of religions on birth levels and the findings of the most relevant empirical studies conducted in recent years, addressing low

completed fertility, birth control, or sexual behaviour in relation to the religiosity or religious affiliation of individuals. It also addresses the influence of religious institutions on birth levels and the exercise of reproductive rights within certain population groups over recent decades.

### **Methodology**

The review of studies relevant to this paper focused principally on articles published between 2004 and 2018 in a large number of journals in the field of demography. It also included a search of the titles and key words of articles in journal databases available through the National Library of Serbia and the KoBSON programme, published in Serbian, English, or any other language with a summary in English.

Furthermore, the author of this paper took into account the findings of other papers presented at the last two major population conferences, which are accessible online. These were the 28th International Population Conference, held in Cape Town, South Africa, from 29 October to 3 November 2017 (IUSSP 2017) and the European Population Conference, organised in Brussels, Belgium, from 6–9 June 2018 (EAPS 2018). By far the least popular topic at the global population forum – with four papers in total – was the theme of culture, religion, language, and demographic behaviours (IUSSP 2018: 3).

The selected methodology has several limitations. The paper's most important limitation is the fact that it considers only demography journals, although the article about the connec-

tion between religiosity and fertility could have been published in journals associated primarily with other scientific disciplines. We are confident that this limitation has been mitigated by the openness of demography to the findings of research conducted in related scientific disciplines. On the other hand, this study did not take into account books or submissions for proceedings that deal with the same topic we are exploring.

## Findings

Using the method described above, we came across a pertinent theoretical reflection in the article by Kevin McQuillan entitled, "When Does Religion Influence Fertility?" In response to the central question of this article, the author emphasises three elements. First, the religion in question must articulate behavioural norms that have links to fertility outcomes. Second, a religious group must possess the means to communicate its teachings to its members and to enforce compliance. Finally, religious groups are more likely to influence the demographic choices of their followers when members feel a strong sense of attachment to the religious community (McQuillan 2004: 49-50). This reflection could have been used as a theoretical framework, or quoted in discussions on the findings of most of the empirical studies that we will present.

Conversely to theoretical examinations, there have recently been several empirical studies focusing on the influence of religions on reproductive behaviour. We have placed special emphasis on the results of the follow-

ing analyses, which were based on various data sources and related to various population groups.

1. As a rule, population censuses are the primary source of information about the religious affiliation (or lack thereof) of individuals in former socialist countries. The research whose findings we are presenting looked for a connection between the number of children a woman had and her religious affiliation (or lack thereof) based on the results of the 2011 Population Census in the Czech Republic.

The findings of the descriptive analysis showed that the largest average number of live births, at the generation-replacement level, was found among women past their fertile years who declared themselves as Catholics, members of other Christian denominations, or of non-Christian religions. One in three women aged 45 or older in these three religious cohorts had given birth to three, four, or five children, compared to only one in five atheist women (Růžičková and Hamplová 2016: 217).

The findings of the regression analysis, conducted in the second phase of the research to assess the average number of children per woman when taking into account age, civil status, education, and place of residence, showed that these disparities in fertility levels related to women's religiosity disappeared when the respondents' civil status was considered (Růžičková and Hamplová 2016: 221).

At the same time, it was identified that there were minor differences in the average number of live births among highly educated women of

various religious affiliations who were past their fertile years (Růžičková and Hamplová 2016: 222).

2. Many European countries conduct longitudinal representative surveys that include questions about respondents' childbearing history, the history of partner relationships, socioeconomic variables, as well as about their religious affiliation and how frequently they attend religious services. Examples of surveys of this type include the Generations and Gender Survey, coordinated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and the British Household Panel Survey. These two data sources were used in analysing the completed fertility of women of various age cohorts born between 1930 and 1979 in three highly secular Western European countries: the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands. Specifically, the results of the 2005 Generations and Gender Survey were used for France and the Netherlands, while those of the 2010 British Household Panel Survey were used for Great Britain.

The cumulative fertility rates of women who identified as Catholics, Protestants, or atheists were analysed. The study either confirmed or partially confirmed the initial hypotheses, finding that:

- religious women who regularly attend church (at least once a month) on average have more children than religious women who attend church less often or not at all;
- nominally religious women have more children on average than atheist women;
- identified religiosity-related differences in fertility rates are increasing among younger age cohorts in France and the Netherlands;
- religious women have children more often than atheists, and this difference is increasing among younger age cohorts;
- religious women less often give birth to children outside of marriage than atheist women, and this difference is increasing among younger age cohorts (Peri-Rotem 2016: 257).

3. The results of the Generations and Gender Survey, conducted in France in 2005 in order to identify the connection between religious practice and the reproductive behaviour of various age cohorts, were also analysed in a slightly different way. Namely, comparisons of behaviour were made among four population subgroups, selected based on their level of participation in religious practice, in each of the cohorts. According to the results, the more frequent attenders, who reported a religious affiliation and whose attendance of religious services was at or above the median frequency of their cohort, remained more strongly attached to marriage and less often experienced several successive unions. They also had more children: among women who were born in 1960 and had ever been married, more frequent attenders had 0.6 children more than the others. Women practising a religion other

than Catholicism, notably Muslim women, were not responsible for the whole of this difference, since the more frequently practising Catholics had 0.5 more children than the others (Régnier-Lolier and Prioux 2008: 4).

4. The European Social Survey is an important source of information for exploring individual attitudes, beliefs, and models of behaviour throughout Europe. The study we are presenting used data from the third wave of the European Social Survey, conducted in 2006 on a sample of more than 43,000 respondents living in 226 regions of 25 European countries, searching for the connection between being a Christian and one's attitudes towards divorce, cohabitation, and having children outside of marriage. The results support the conclusion that it is the level of an individual's religiosity (rather than the specific Christian denomination – Catholicism, Protestantism, or Eastern Orthodoxy) and the level of religiosity of the environment in which an individual lives that are important for maintaining individual traditional views about marriage (Rijken and Liefbroer 2018).

5. Drawing on the data from three surveys on sexuality conducted in France in 1970, 1992, and 2006, an analysis of the sexual behaviour of Catholics and Muslims was undertaken. The analysis shows that the difference between the practicing Catholics and the non-religious subpopulation in terms of several aspects of sexual behaviour, including masturbation, use of birth control, and interest in pornography, is nowadays decreasing (Maudet 2017: 709). However, wom-

en who practice these two religions engage in early sexual intercourse less often than atheist women. Namely, according to the survey conducted in 2006, 25% of Catholic and 14% of Muslim women aged 18–29 years had had their first sexual intercourse before turning 18, compared to 40% of atheist women of the same age (Maudet 2017: 713). Moreover, compared to non-religious people, Catholics and Muslims are much more likely to consider homosexual relationships to be a manifestation of abnormal sexuality, i.e. a psychological problem (Maudet 2017: 715).

6. The analysis of birth rates, mortality rates, population growth rates, and population sizes in five Serbian municipalities of various religious profiles in the period from 1961 to 2001 indicated clear demographic development disparities between the total Muslim and Christian cultural and religious cohorts, resulting primarily from the dichotomous reproduction model characterised at the same time by both sub-replacement fertility (Christians) and high fertility (Muslims). However, the finding that populations of different municipalities within the Muslim cohort were characterised by distinct disparities in terms of reproductive behaviour between Albanians and Bosnian Muslims from the early 1970s led the author to enquire whether the influence of religion might have been used to steer the population development of a part of that cohort. Namely, birth rates in the considered period remained at a high level among the Albanian population, while

they declined among Bosnian Muslims (Radovanović 2004: 111).

Many authors have emphasised the role of religious institutions in the deceleration or acceleration of fertility transition. They have stressed, for instance, that the socioeconomic development in the latter part of the 20th century did not incite the expected quicker decline of birth levels in Kosovo & Metohija as a result of the preserved traditional views about the position and role of women in the family, under the authoritative pressure of local public opinion (Рашевич 2010: 108). On the other hand, they highlighted the significance of support from religious institutions and leaders in efficiently implementing family planning programmes in Islamic countries such as Tunisia, Indonesia (Rašević 1996: 12, 16), and Iran (Devedžić 2006: 19). It is important to underscore that, even today, religious institutions are trying to restrict sexual and reproductive rights globally and at the level of individual populations. An example of this is one of the most restrictive laws on abortion in Europe, which was adopted under the powerful influence of the Catholic Church in Poland (Heinen and Portet 2010).

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A review of the recent studies of various populations characterised by low birth levels shows that religiosity, especially the practising of religion, encourages people to uphold traditional values, attitudes, and behaviours that are directly or indirectly related to the concepts of marriage and

childbearing. Despite the ongoing process of internal secularisation, people who practice a religion clearly have more children on average. Reproductive behaviour differences between religious and non-religious individuals are increasing in younger cohorts. At the same time, the influence of religious institutions on the exercising of sexual and reproductive rights of individuals should not be neglected at the global level, nor at the level of individual countries. There are examples of religious institutions counteracting civilisation's trends, as well as contrary examples of support provided to the inevitable changes in this sphere.

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## Religije i nizak fertilitet danas

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### REZIME

Fenomen nedovoljnog rađanja dece je duboko uslovljen proces sa kojim se danas suočava gotovo polovina svetske populacije. U osnovi savremenog reproduktivnog ponašanja nalaze se neki od bitnih faktora koji su imanentni sadašnjem nivou razvoja civilizacije, bilo da predstavljaju njena pozitivna dostignuća ili njene izrazite slabosti. Ako se u razmatranjima o uzrocima niskog fertiliteta i pominje uticaj religija, to se čini pre svega naglašavajući da je rađanje dece postalo naizgled slobodan izbor pojedinca u uslovima slabljenja moralnih pritisaka različite prirode.

Sa smanjenjem razlika između nivoa rađanja prema stepenu religioznosti pojedinca ili partnera u razvijenim zemljama, slabio je interes demografa za izučavanjem uticaja religija na reproduktivno ponašanje. Da li se obnavlja interesovanje za ovo staro pitanje u teorijskim razmatranjima i empirijskim istraživanjima? Uvid da li, koliko i pod kojim uslovima religije utiču na fertilitet u današnje vreme zavisi od otvaranja ove teme među istraživačima. Otuda je važno sagledati odgovore na dva osnovna pitanja. Prvo pitanje se odnosi na ulogu religioznosti i konfesionalnosti u determinističkoj osnovi niskog fertiliteta i planiranja porodice u novije doba. Drugo pitanje se tiče uticaja religioznih institucija na nivo rađanja i ostvarivanje reproduktivnih prava na globalnom nivou i u okviru pojedinih populacija poslednjih decenija.

U tom smislu, u radu je dat pregled teorijskih preispitivanja veze religija i fertiliteta, empirijskih istraživanja sa fokusom na nizak završeni fertilitet, kontrolu rađanja ili seksualno ponašanje prema religioznosti i konfesionalnosti pojedinca, kao i uticaj religijskih institucija na tranziciju fertiliteta i poštovanje ljudskih prava u ovoj sferi.

Pregled istraživanja relevantnih za cilj rada je prevashodno urađen na osnovu članaka objavljenih od 2004. do 2018. godine u većem broju časopisa iz oblasti nauke o stanovništvu. Pored toga, konsultovani su on-line dostupni radovi saopšteni na dve poslednje velike populacione konferencije. To su XXVIII svetska populaciona konferencija održana 2017. i Evropska populaciona konferencija održana 2018. godine.

Izabrana metodologija ima više ograničenja. Najvažnije ograničenje rada odnosi se na razmatranje samo demografskih časopisa. Verujemo da je ovo ograničenje ublaženo otvorenošću demografije za nalaze istraživanja iz srodnih naučnih disciplina. Takođe, nisu uzeti u obzir knjige ili prilozi u zbornicima radova koji se tiču ove teme. Pregled istraživanja, sprovedenih poslednjih godina u različitim populacijama koje karakteriše nizak nivo rađanja, pokazuje da religioznost, pogotovo praktikovanje religije, utiče na održavanje individualnih tradicionalnih vrednosti, stavova i ponašanja koja su direktno ili indirektno povezana sa brakom i rađanjem.

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I pored odvijanja procesa unutrašnje sekularizacije, osobe koje praktikuju neku od religija, u proseku imaju jasno veći broj dece. Razlike u reproduktivnom ponašanju između religioznih i nereligioznih osoba povećavaju se u mlađim starosnim kohortama. Istovremeno uticaj religijskih institucija na ostvarivanje seksualnih i reproduktivnih prava pojedinaca nije zanemarljiv ni na globalnom nivou, ni na

nivou pojedinih država. Postoje primeri kada religijske institucije koče civilizacijske tokove, ali ima i suprotnih primera vezanih za podršku neminovnim promenama u ovoj sferi.

#### **KLJUČNE REČI**

religije | fertilitet | planiranje porodice | reproduktivna prava | demografija