

CHITTAGONG, BANGLADESH AND THE MUSLIM BENGALI PEOPLE



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY
of Global
Christianity

GORDON  CONWELL
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



Chittagong, Bangladesh and the Muslim Bengali People

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Cover Photo: Men gathering plants. Termukh Bridge, Narayanganj District, Bangladesh.

Unsplash: Hasib Matiur

Unless otherwise noted, data is sourced from the *World Christian Database* and the following citation should be used: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed December 2019).

ABOUT THE CSGC

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity is an academic research center that monitors worldwide demographic trends in Christianity, including outreach and mission. We provide a comprehensive collection of information on the past, present, and future of Christianity in every country of the world. Our data and publications help churches, mission agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to be more strategic, thoughtful, and sensitive to local contexts. Please visit our website at www.globalchristianity.org.

DATA AND TERMS

This dossier includes many technical terms related to the presentation of statistics. A complete methodology document is found here: <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/dossiers>. We use a social scientific method for measuring religion around the world; namely, self-identification. If a person calls herself a Christian, then she is a Christian. We measure Christians primarily by denominational affiliation in every country of the world and these data are housed in the World Christian Database. Ethnolinguistic people groups are distinct homogeneous ethnic or racial groups within a single country, speaking its own language (one single mother tongue). These dossiers measure gospel access (also known as “evangelization”) by a number of variables, including but not limited to, evangelistic crusades, church planting, personal witnessing, sharing on social media, etc. These dossiers also utilize data from the United Nations related to socio-economic, development, and gender-justice related issues.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Dhaka, Bangladesh.

in Rangamati, Khagrachhari, Bandarban districts, and in the eastern part of Chittagong division, collectively known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Christians in Bangladesh form a very small minority and consist mostly of former low-caste Hindu peasants and members of certain tribes, including the the Khasi, Garo, Oraon Sadri, Santal, Kurukh, Chakma, Mahili, and Bawm. The tribes have been far more receptive to Christianity than the Bengalis, upon whom it has had little influence.

Bangladesh has the fourth largest population of Muslims in the world, who constitute 89% of the country's total population. Bangladesh has experienced Islamic terrorist attacks in recent years. On balance, it is a combination of the premature and preemptive secularization attempts in the formation of Bangladesh as an independent nation with the abundance of Western NGOs working in the country in the subsequent decades that helped to incite politico-religious violence. Following a general religious trend, forms of Islam that are regarded from within to be syncretistic are typically associated with rural Bangladesh and are based in its origin there among agriculturalist Sufis. The more politicized, doctrinally, and juristically conservative expressions of Islam are more common in urban areas.

Cross-cultural workers seek to bring about holistic transformation of Muslim communities in Chittagong, but in doing so ultimately alter the experience of women in the district. Some scholars have demonstrated how village women are able to indeed negotiate between the secular NGO and Islamist agendas to leverage them to procure more rights for themselves, pointing to a general trend toward increased autonomy. Despite assumptions regarding the malleability of rural populations and their susceptibility to ideological manipulation, whether for a secular or Islamist agenda, Bangladesh's women are finding ways to resist these stereotypes and wield burgeoning, grassroots

Bangladesh borders India and Myanmar to the east, west, and north, and is bordered by the Bay of Bengal to the south. The term "Chittagong" refers simultaneously to the division, district, and capital city of the district. The Chittagong Division has an area of nearly 34,000 km² bounded by Dhaka and Sylhet divisions on the north, the Bay of Bengal, and Arakan (Myanmar) on the south, Mizoram, Tripura states of India and Chin state of Myanmar on the east, Dhaka and Barisal divisions on the west. There are many lofty hills

BANGLADESH QUICK FACTS

POPULATION (2020): 169,775,000
CHRISTIANS: 903,000 (0.5%)
RELIGION: 89% MUSLIM, 9% HINDU
GOSPEL ACCESS: MEDIUM
PEOPLES: 68 LEAST-ACCESS: 37
DEVELOPMENT: 61 (GLOBAL AVG. 70)
GDP PER CAPITA: \$3,500 (AVG. \$15,300)
GENDER INEQUALITY: 54 (AVG. 37)

PROVINCE QUICK FACTS

CHITTAGONG
POPULATION: 33,887,000
CHRISTIANS: 136,000 (0.4%)
GOSPEL ACCESS: MEDIUM

democracy to attain more rights that conform neither wholesale to secular nor Islamist principles. Regardless, Christian workers should be mindful of their objectives in engaging Muslim women, and, it seems, the safest approach to communicating their message holistically is to show how Christianity circumvents the competing agendas of both the politically vehement Islamist movements and the liberal, anti-Muslim, anti-indigenous associations with the West

Myanmar's brutal military crackdown in 2017 caused more than 700,000 Rohingya people to flee Rakhine State for Bangladesh. The governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar quickly agreed to a rapid repatriation process shortly after. Their agreement came up against international opposition by the Rohingya currently in refugee camps. In the meantime, Cox's Bazar has become a semi-permanent home of more than one million refugees. With the presence of one of the largest refugee camps in world on their doorstep, and the ensuing pressures therefore exerted on the local population in Chittagong, managing local sentiments toward the camps is vitally important. The creation of security posts in Ukhia and Taknaf areas designed to monitor the Rohingya who move out of the camps has meant that local residents now have to regularly carry and show their photo identity for security personnel.

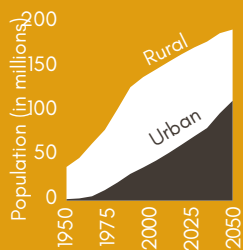
One major obstacle to Christianity in the region is its association with colonialism. In addition, some scholars and government officials see Christianity as preying on the poor, converting people with lower socio-economic backgrounds because only the "poor" among Bangladesh's people could possibly be persuaded by Christianity. Christian workers among the village peoples of Chittagong (whether in the Hill Tracts or elsewhere) have an immense opportunity to undermine the dehumanizing elements of these "tribal history" campaigns by honoring and celebrating the diverse peoples of this region as living cultures and not relics of the past in need of preservation. It seems one of the major differences between the effects of Islam on these peoples and the potential effect of Christianity is in its goal not merely to preserve cultures but to celebrate them and invite them into the family of God as their people, and not as part of an amalgamation of religious, political, and national values.



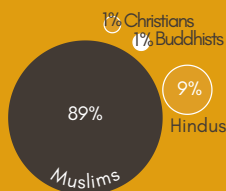
Lumber mill on a river in Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH IN CONTEXT

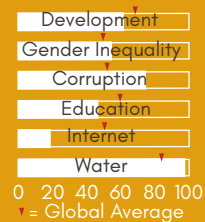
COUNTRY



population

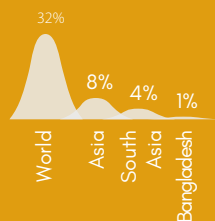


religion

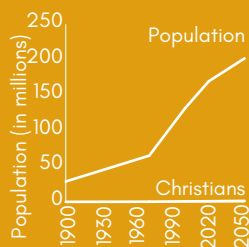


human need

CHRISTIANITY



region

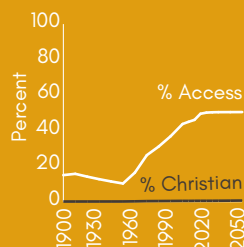


history

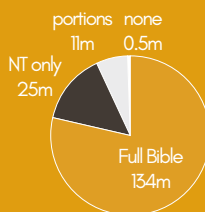


tradition

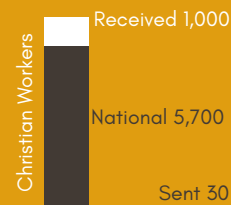
MISSION



evangelism



bible translation



personnel

OVERVIEW

Bangladesh borders India and Myanmar to the east, west, and north, and is bordered by the Bay of Bengal to the south. It has a land area of 147,570 km². The term “Chittagong” refers simultaneously to the division, district, and capital city of the district. In April 2018, the government changed the official anglicization of these Chittagongs to “Chattogram” for consistency with contemporary scholarship on this region. Nevertheless, this dossier will maintain the former spelling convention. The Chittagong Division has an area of nearly 34,000 km² bounded by Dhaka and Sylhet divisions on the north, the Bay of Bengal and Arakan (Myanmar) on the south, Mizoram, Tripura states of India and Chin state of Myanmar on the east, Dhaka and Barisal divisions on the west. There are many lofty hills in Rangamati, Khagrachhari, Bandarban districts, and in the eastern part of Chittagong division, collectively known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Christians in Bangladesh form a very small minority and consist mostly of former low-caste Hindu peasants and members of certain tribes, including the Khasi, Garo, Oraon Sadri, Santal, Kurukh, Chakma, Mahili, and Bawm. The tribes have been far more receptive to Christianity than the Bengalis, upon whom it has had little influence. Chittagong in particular has a rich Catholic history, followed by robust Protestant missions. Despite the pre-existence of Islam in this region, Christian workers should recognize and emphasize the early work of these Jesuit, Dominican, Augustinian, and Protestants in delivering and then translating Christianity into the language and land of Bangladesh. Their early efforts were marked by the destruction of churches and the sacrifice of their laypeople and clergy, but with the result that Christianity remained a significant albeit small religious minority in Chittagong that has continued into the present.

HISTORY AND PEOPLE GROUPS

PORTUGUESE-CATHOLIC BEGINNINGS

Christianity was introduced to Bengal through Portuguese: Dom Francisco Almida (1505-1509) and Alfonso de Albuquerque attempted to spread Christianity in Bengal. In 1517-1518 during the regime of Sultan Alauddin Hussein Shah, two Portuguese traders Coelho and Silveira came to

CHRISTIANITY IN BANGLADESH BY PROVINCE



Christians comprise less than 1% of the population of Bangladesh, though there are slight differences in the concentrations of Christians by province.

Christians in Bangladesh form a very small minority and consist mostly of former low-caste Hindu peasants and members of certain tribes.

BANGLADESH TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS



1947: British colonial rule over India ends. East and West Pakistan is established.	
1971: Awami League proclaims independence of the province as Bangladesh.	
1988: Islam becomes state religion. Floods leave tens of millions homeless.	
2002: Acid attacks punishable by death amid anger over escalating violence against women.	1998: Two-thirds of the country devastated by the worst floods ever.
2015: Islamist militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team banned for killing and assaulting pro-secular public figures.	2013: Factory building collapses, killing more than 1,100 people. European retailers promise to sign safety accord.
2018: Awami League wins victory in parliamentary election, but the campaign was marred by reports of violence, intimidation, and vote-rigging.	2017: The number of Rohingya Muslims who fled military action in Myanmar's Rakhine state and sought refuge in Bangladesh is estimated at one million.

Source: BBC

Chittagong and Arakan, respectively. In 1557 two Catholic dioceses, Cochin and Malacca, were formed from Goa and Bengal was included in Cochin diocese. The Bishop of Cochin sent out two Jesuits, Father Antony Vaz and Father Pedro Peter Dias, to Bengal in 1576. In 1577, Portuguese Captain Podro Tavares went to the Mughal Emperor Jala-uddin Muhammad Akbar (1555-1605) in Fatehpur Sikri palace with a request to build up a permanent port in Hooghly for which he gave written permission. At the same time, missionaries also received permission to preach Christianity and set up their settlements, churches, and educational institutions in Bengal.

Formal missionizing efforts began in East Bengal with two Jesuits in 1598: Francesco Fernandez and Father De Souza. Together, they founded the first church in Bangladesh, The Church of the Holy Name of Jesus, which was officially inaugurated on January 1, 1600. Shortly after, the Jesuits were joined by Dominican missionaries who, along with Arakanese support, helped them found the second church in Bangladesh, specifically in Chittagong: St. John the Baptist Church. The Arakanese attacked the region within months, destroying the churches in Chittagong and capturing some Portuguese children along with Fr. Fernandez, who died in an Arakanese prison on November 14, 1602. He is widely regarded as the first Christian martyr in Bengal.

In 1606, Pope Paul V sent Augustinian missionaries to Dhaka, Narikul, Katrabu, and Andarkilla of Chittagong from Shripur where they successfully established churches and schools from 1612 to 1621. These too were destroyed when the Mughal Emperor declared war against the Portuguese in 1932. Estimates vary, but some sources suggest that as many as 1,000 Christians died as a result of this conflict, including four Augustine missionaries, three Jesuit missionaries, and seven priests.

As Britain began to extend its colonial reach into Bengal, Protestant Christianity began to enter the region via chaplains appointed to oversee servant-laborers in primarily Indian factories in 1658. Contemporaneously, the Augustinian missionaries established thirteen "missions" in Dhaka, Narikul, Hooghly, Chittagong, Chandipur, Jessore, Banchara, Piply, Tejgaon, and Khijli.

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Portuguese missionaries adopted Bengali language and

began formal Bible translation efforts. The Jesuit preceptors played the pioneering role in publishing books and journals for the evangelization of the indigenous peoples of Bengal. In particular, between 1712 and 1714, Fr. Antonio Claudius learned Bengali and compiled some small Bengali booklets about Christian theology; Fr. Manuel da Assumpsao published a Bengali book from Lisbon named *Kripa Shastrer Orthobhed* (The Meaning of the Scriptures) in 1735.

Following the trend of Catholic missions in other regions of the world during this period, Catholic missionaries contributed to the development of the written literature of Bengali beyond that of the Scriptures and theological tracts by formalizing study and composition in Bengali.

BRITISH COLONIALISM AND PROTESTANT BENGAL MISSIONS

The first Protestant missionary was Rev. John Zachariah Kiernander who arrived in Bengal in early 1740 from the Royal Danish Mission. The British via the East India Company obtained control of Bengal in 1757. Following the formation of the British Baptist Missionary Society in the 1790s, William Carey accompanied by Joshua Marshman and William Ward established Serampore College and published many religious books in Bengali language. William Carey's work resulted in the first printed Bengali Bible and a dictionary called *A Dictionary of the Bengali Language*. Following

Chittagong in particular has a rich Catholic history, followed by robust Protestant missions.



Village school supervised by Church Missionary Society missionaries with the Church of Bangladesh, 1962.

Christian workers
should recognize and emphasize the early work of these Jesuit, Dominican, Augustinian, and Protestants in delivering and then translating Christianity into the language and land of Bangladesh.

Carey's initiative, missionaries published many newspapers with the aim of spreading Christianity in Bengal. These newspapers played a pioneering role in preaching and spreading Christianity.

In the sub-region of Chittagong known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in historiographic and ethnographic literature there are a number of people groups with a history of conversion to Christianity in the period of British colonization. The CHT is a large region in respect of physical area and lies at the extreme southeast border of Bangladesh. The region is comprised of three districts in the Chittagong division, Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachari, respectively. Because of its relative geographic isolation and, conversely, its contiguousness with India and former east Pakistan, the region has experienced notably low numbers of Bengali people, and Bengalis outside of CHT knew very little about the region and its peoples until the twentieth century. The British occupied CHT in 1860 when it received its current title. With the dissolution of British Bengal, CHT became part of East Pakistan until Bangladeshi independence was achieved in 1971. The indigenous peoples of this region have been subject to a variety of attempts to formulate a unified political identity for them in waves of shifting political ownership, nevertheless, the peoples remain distinct, particularly in their response to Christianity.

CHRISTIAN MINORITIES OF THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

Bawm Chin speaking people (one of 54 languages in the Kuki-Chin family) mostly reside in the Bandarban district of the CHT. They have a close cultural and linguistic affinity with the Lushais and Pangkhuas. Bawm means "unity" in their language. They maintain group differences with the Pangkhua by tying up their hair knots at the center of the head whereas the Pangkhuas tie them at the back of the head. The present-day Bawms are predominantly Christians along with some who practice animistic rituals related to slash and burn agriculture.

Among the ethnic communities living in Bangladesh and those who belong to the Kuki-Chin linguistic group, the Lushais are said to be the most important for their combatant relationship with the colonial state. Presumably, they migrated to the CHT from the Lushai Hills of India, following British conquest of the Lushai Hills in 1892. The colonial his-

tory records them as the fiercest tribe in the region due to their warrior nature reflected both in inter-group feuds and resistance to the invading state. Previously the Lushais were animist; Pathian is their chief god. They have a language of their own, Mizo. During the colonial era, the majority of Lushais converted to Christianity. In Bangladesh a smaller number of Lushai people live in north-western parts of the CHT, around the Sajek area.

The Mrus call themselves Murusa. They primarily speak the Mru language, another language of Tibeto-Burman origin. In the last decade, a new religious belief named Krama has spread among the Mru. The belief was preached by a prophetic character named Manle Mro. The revivalism within this new religion seems to be crafted to some extent in opposition to their entrance into the modern world.

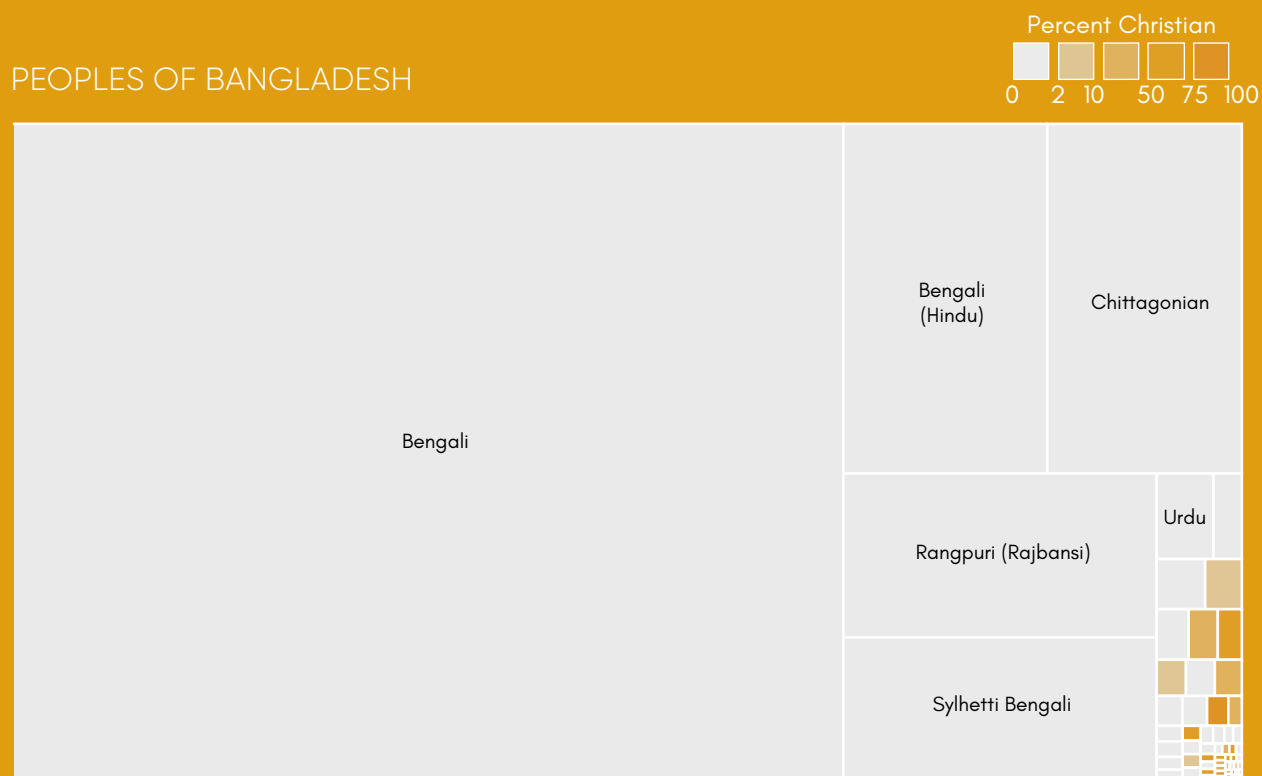
The third largest ethnic community in the CHT are the Tripuras. Sometimes they are also referred as Tipra or Tipperah. The Tripura also live in Sylhet, Comilla, and on the Sitakunda hill. The Tripura people mainly speak various dialects known as Kokborok, the standard dialect of the Debbarma



Local travel on a river in Bangladesh.

PEOPLE GROUPS IN BANGLADESH

The Bengali are one of the largest ethnic groups in the world. They are also found in India, Pakistan and in diaspora all around the world. The Bengali language, an Indo-Aryan language, is the number one mother tongue of Muslims worldwide. It is the second largest mother tongue of Hindus in the world. Three other peoples/languages are significantly large in Bangladesh. These include Chittagonian, found mainly in the southeast of the country; Rangpuri (also known as Kamatapuri or Rajbangshi), is a Bengali-Assamese language found mainly in the west; and Sylhetti, also a Bengali-Assamese language, is found in the Sylhet Division, in the north of the country. All of these peoples are less than 0.2% Christian.



The treemap above depicts all 68 people groups in Bangladesh. The rectangles are proportional to the population of each people group, while the color intensity reflects the percent Christian within the people group. The table below provides corresponding information on the largest of these people groups.

People	Population	% Christian	People	Population	% Christian
1 Bengali	114,873,000	0.2%	11 Santal (Satar)	308,000	22.0%
2 Bengali (Hindu)	14,940,000	0.2%	12 Khasi (Khuchia, Khasa, Ky)	255,000	60.0%
3 Chittagonian	14,261,000	0.1%	13 Arakanese (Maghi, Mogh)	222,000	3.0%
4 Rangpuri (Rajbansi)	10,764,000	0.0%	14 Rohingya (Chittagonian)	219,000	0.0%
5 Sylhetti Bengali	9,440,000	0.1%	15 Oraon Sadri	205,000	48.0%
6 Urdu	1,019,000	0.0%	16 Marma (Mogh)	161,000	1.0%
7 Burmese	509,000	0.2%	17 Tipperah (Tippera-Bengali)	155,000	1.0%
8 Hindi	509,000	0.5%	18 Garo (Garrow, Mandi)	133,000	85.0%
9 Chakma	386,000	3.0%	19 Eurasian (Anglo-Indian)	84,900	40.0%
10 Bihari	340,000	0.0%	20 Gujarati	84,900	1.0%

The National
Holiday Shahid
Dibash/Ekushey
(Language
Martyrs' Day)
on February 21st
gives citizens of
Bangladesh the
opportunity to
reflect on the
sacrifices made
by many in an
effort to pro-
tect Bangla as
a national lan-
guage during a
period in 1952
that came to be
known as the
Bengali
Language
Movement.

tribe spoken around Agartala is the official language of the Indian State of Tripura. Around 89% of the Tripura people are ardent followers of the Vaishnava Hinduism that is heavily influenced by their neighboring Bengali people. The rest are Muslims and Christians, mostly Baptists.

The Pangkhuas, constitute one of the ethnic communities of the south-eastern CHT. The Pangkhuas and the Lushais have much in common with each other in the aspects of language, social organizations, and culture. Both ethnic communities have descended from the Lushai Mountain and Mizoram and moved to the CHT hills. The Pangkhuas believe that in the past they used to live in a place called Pangkhua on the Lushai hill. The Pangkhuas can understand some of the Lushai tongue. Their culture also has some similarities with the Bawm culture. Presently, most of the Pangkhua people are Christians having converted to Christianity during the colonial period. In the Pangkhua society, males act as the head of the household. They have a clan-based social system. People are usually expected not to marry within the clan, so they build marital relationships with other ethnic groups of the CHT like the Bawm, Chakma, Tanchangya, Marma, Shendu, Mru, Tippera, and Lushai. Giving bride price to the bride's family is a common social practice among the Pangkhuas. It reflects the recognition of women as valuable workers and hence, bride price is given as a form of compensation to the family going to lose the labor.

HOLIDAYS

Holidays in Chittagong are important reminders of how religion and culture interact. First in the yearly calendar is Shahid Dibash/Ekushey (Language Martyrs' Day) February 21st. This national holiday gives citizens of Bangladesh the opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices made by many in an effort to protect Bangla as a national language during a period in 1952 that came to be known as the Bengali Language Movement. The events at that time prompted UNESCO to observe 21 February as International Mother Language Day, a decision supported by Bangladesh and 28 other countries. Next, is Shadhinota Dibôsh (Independence Day) March 26th, a national holiday in Bangladesh to commemorate the declaration of independence, and the beginning of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The day includes parades, with activities centered on the Jatiyo Sriti Soudho

(National Martyrs' Memorial) near Dhaka. Following this is Pôhela Boishakh (Bangla New Year's Day) April 14th. Activities on the Bangla New Years' Day include visiting relatives, neighbors, and friends, with special foods being prepared and shared. New Year fairs are held in various locations around Bangladesh, featuring entertainment, traditional performances, and market stalls selling handicrafts, toys, food, and agricultural products.

Besides national holidays, religious holidays play an important role in the lives of residents of Chittagong. For the majority Muslim community, Eid ul-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan, a month-long period of fasting and worship. Eid ul-Fitr includes expressions of thanks to Allah for strengthening them through Ramadan, with special services and processions taking place. Eid ul-Adha is a reminder of Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael in obedience to God's command. The occasion serves as a reminder to all Muslims that they should submit to God and be prepared to sacrifice anything that God wishes.

For Hindus, Krishna Janmashtami marks the birth of Krishna, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. Celebrations include dramatic productions based on the life of Krishna, dancing, singing, and chanting holy mantras. Durga Puja (Vijaya Dasami), stretches over five days, with the last day being a national holiday, this Hindu celebration commemorates Lord Rama's victory over the evil demon Ravana. In Bangladesh, celebrations are held throughout the country, with Mymensingh being a popular gathering place for the festival.

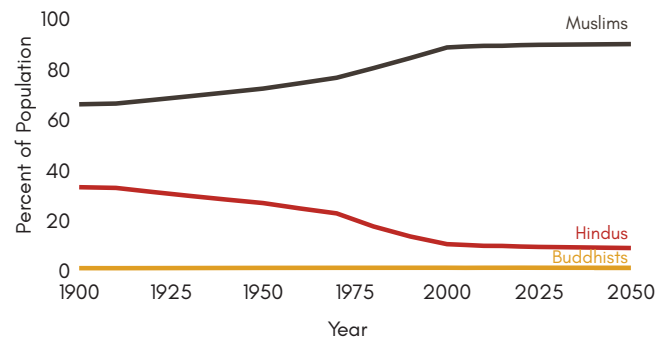
RELIGION

Islam is the primary religion of Bangladesh, introduced to the region by Turkic invaders at the beginning of the 13th century. Muslims are mostly Sunni, with a small Shia minority concentrated in urban areas. Historians are divided as to what best explains how a former British Indian colony with a massive Hindu population become one of the most Muslim countries in the world, though most acknowledge the influence of Sufism. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in Bangladesh's Mughal and pre-Mughal period, Sufis taught largely disjointed villages how to utilize their land resources, simultaneously linking them to Muslim rulers. These Sufi agriculturalists were venerated as pioneers of

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Bangladesh has the fourth largest population of Muslims in the world, who constitute 89% of the country's total population.

RELIGIONS IN BANGLADESH, 1900–2050



Jordan has remained majority Muslim since 1900. The Christian percentage declined slowly after the arrival of Islam, and is about 1% today.

the faith in Bangladesh and their teachings became central. Next, these Sufi pirs began to be worshipped interchangeably with Vaishnavite saints alongside Hindus. This form of Islam, however, was and remains strongest among more rural populations of Chittagong.

Bangladesh has the fourth largest population of Muslims in the world, who constitute 89% of the country's total population. In 2005, Bangladesh made international headlines when bombs exploded in 63 out of 64 districts in the country. Just over a decade later, in what appeared to be an attack targeting expatriates, bombs exploded in Dhaka. Rather than conforming these facts to a reductive narrative presupposing rampant Islamic extremism, Muslim scholars prefer to interpret the religious violence in Bangladesh as a product of the contentious political climate endemic in the region. According to this view, since Bangladeshi independence was achieved initially by constructing a nationalist identity, Islamic values were threatened at the outset of Bangladesh's nationhood. Unfortunately, this does not comport well with the reality of an Islamist hegemony in Bangladesh: secularism was removed from the constitution in 1975 and in 1988 Islam was recognized as the state religion. The dichotomy in Bangladesh, however, is not between Islam and secularism, but rather Islam and nationalism. In recent years there has been some success in identifying nationalism with Western secularism and subsequently atheism.

In the wake of Bangladesh's still relatively recent independence, its ostensible vacillation between secular and Islamist values is, perhaps, explained by two contrasting

narratives promulgated within the country. One suggests that it is Islamic identity that finally allowed the country to shake off its British colonialism, the other, however, clear in the secular position of the government at its declaration of independence suggests that it was the separation of the burgeoning Bangladeshi state from foreign powers (i.e. Pakistan-West Bengal) who had previously manipulated and militarized the Islamic majority to maintain their grip that ultimately liberated its people. Though for the time being it appears that the former narrative has prevailed over the latter (i.e., Islam as the catalyst to the post-colonial present of Bangladesh) and while it certainly remains an issue with more than two competing ideologies undergirding it, recognizing the ways in which more aggressive and politicized Islamism operates is only possible by acknowledging that Islamic identity for many Bangladeshi people is linked to views regarding the source of their independence as a country.

Since most of Bangladesh's Sunni majority are of the Hanafi school, with a number of Wahhabi reform movement centers and some syncretistic sects local to Chittagong, it is helpful to outline these major sub-categories of Islam that one may encounter when working in this region, since each is likely to present disparate epistemological frameworks as well as diverse levels of devoutness and politicization in their religious affiliation.

Hanafism

Roughly 85% of Bangladesh's population are Sunni Muslims governed by the Hanafi school of Islamic Law. Hanafi Islam is a subset of Sunni Islam that traces its interpretive tradition of Muhammad's sunnah (holistic teaching: actions and words) to the transmission of the hadiths by Abu Hanifah in the mid-late eighth century. As such, it constitutes one of the four major textual and interpretive traditions of the Qur'an, hadiths, and the laws contained therein. From its advent, the interpreters of Islamic law in this tradition were both idealists and facilitators. Early in the Hanafi tradition, for example, with regards to the death penalty for charges of fornication, the rules of evidence and procedure were often carefully written by practitioners of scholarly interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence so as to prevent the penalty from taking place. The tradition has the longest history of practical experience and close alliance with govern-

Recognizing the ways in which more aggressive and politicized Islamism operates is only possible by acknowledging that Islamic identity for many Bangladeshi people is linked to views regarding the source of their independence as a country.



Children playing in a river.

ment. In modern Islamic states such as that of Bangladesh, these early interpretive traditions form the underpinnings of the conceptual legal framework of the society.

Wahhabism (Wahhabiyah)

Wahhabism is a revivalist and reformist movement in Islam that began in the eighteenth century following the interpretive framework set out in the writings of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhab. His teaching emphasized the centrality of absolute monotheism (tawid) and stressed the importance of punishing and correcting deviations from strict adherence to this abiding doctrine. Historically, Wahhabis distinguished between two types of violations of this absolute monotheism: that which was unintentional and engendered by ignorance, and that which was the result of blatant rejection of core teachings—the former was regarded as a member of the community while the latter was regarded as excommunicado and subjectable to jihad. Some modern Wahhabis have collapsed these two categories in favor of declaring holy war against any Islamic practice regarded as syncretistic. The exact number of Chittagong Muslims who subscribe to this movement is unclear, though it appears to have a substantial influence within the region.

Maijbhandarism

Maijbhandarism is a Sufi movement that is based in the village of Maijbhandar, 40 km to the northeast of Chittagong city, nestled between the Sitakunda mountains and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It is often claimed to be the

only indigenous tariqa in Bangladesh. It is centered around a shrine complex with more than 20 mausoleums built in close proximity to each other. Maijbhandar means the “middle storehouse,” perhaps a reference that the village stored food and arms early in its history. But the movement most likely originated in the early nineteenth century in this agricultural village, which is now the destination of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year. The movement has produced a string of charismatic spiritual leaders over the past century. In addition, textual output has been impressive with hagiographies and theological treatises. But composition of 10,000 songs has been its most profound contribution to Islam in Bangladesh and Maijbhandari is now considered its own musical tradition.

The above three “sects” of Islam may not necessarily represent bounded sets of Bangladeshi Muslims but rather three important frameworks of law and practice, of syncretism, and reform. Modern extremist movements, according to Muslim scholars, ignore entire corpuses of juristic interpretation in order to assert that shariah in its canonical Qur’anic expression represents God’s will for people. Following a general religious trend, forms of Islam that are regarded from within to be syncretistic are more typically associated with rural Bangladesh and are based in its origin there among agriculturalist Sufis, and the more politicized, doctrinally and juristically conservative expressions of Islam are more common in urban areas of Chittagong.

GENDER

Discourse surrounding the abundant NGOs in Bangladesh illustrate a preoccupation with linking women’s development with women’s attire, in particular, to their shedding of the burka, reflecting what is often a colonial-era perspective of female covering in Muslim cultures. While the Bangladeshi state and many NGOs regard a woman’s “shedding” of her head-covering as a positive development, for Islamists, this transformation may pose a threat to their idea of indigenous culture.

Western NGOs and their approaches toward gender-related issues in Islam have been repeatedly called out for what is regarded by Muslim leaders as egregious re-colonizing efforts disguised as magnanimity. Christian workers in this region will do well to contextualize themselves to the point that their efforts are not regarded as being complicit with

Western NGOs and their approaches toward gender-related issues in Islam have been repeatedly called out for what is regarded by Muslim leaders as egregious re-colonizing efforts disguised as magnanimity.

the mistakes of these organizations of the past, while opposing unjust structures of oppression in which Islam and its religio-political identity operate against the rights of women within the country. This is not to say that the work of NGOs in Bangladesh has not had positive impacts, but their pervasive presence had a precedent for being regarded as a form of colonization and a means of infiltrating western modes of dress and (assumed) sexual norms that the people of Bangladesh may not be prepared for immediately, even as they are being ministered to by cross-cultural workers who seek to bring about holistic transformation of Muslim communities in Chittagong, transformation that ultimately alters the experience of women in Bangladesh. Some scholars have demonstrated how village women are able to negotiate between the secular NGO and Islamist agendas to leverage them to procure more rights for themselves. Christian workers should be mindful of their objectives in engaging Muslim women, and, it seems, the safest approach to communicating their message holistically is to show how Christianity circumvents the competing agendas of both the politically vehement Islamist movements and the putatively liberal, anti-Muslim, anti-indigenous associations with the West.

A glimmer of gender equality may be found in the two women who have served as prime minister over the last two decades. Unfortunately, this too is fraught with corruption and the extent to which their leadership has improved the lives of women in Bangladesh in general is inconclusive.

GENDER IN BANGLADESH

	% FEMALE	GENDER GAP	GENDER INEQUALITY
BANGLADESH	50	12	54
SOUTH ASIA	49	17	52
ASIA	49	10	36
WORLD	50	8	37

The table above compares key measures of gender equality against global, continental and regional averages.



Woman and child in Bangladesh.

COUNTRY RANK	LIFE EXPECTANCY	PHYSICIANS PER 1K	INFANT MORTALITY	MALARIA PER 1K	HIV PER 1K	GDP PC	NET WORTH PC	INTERNET USERS %	RELIGIOUS LIBERTY	GENDER INEQUALITY
BANGLADESH	74	5	22	1	1	\$3,500	\$6,400	18%	3	54
REGION (OF 9)	4	7	5	5	3	7	8	7	4	2
ASIA (OF 51)	29	44	14	12	22	46	45	47	39	4
WORLD (OF 234)	143	160	68	73	122	190	183	197	217	35

The table above depicts the value of specific UN indicators for Bangladesh as well as Bangladesh's ranking globally, continentally and regionally against other countries. For example, Bangladesh ranks 29th out of 51 countries in Asia for life expectancy.

REFUGEES

Myanmar's brutal military crackdown in 2017 caused more than 700,000 Rohingya people to flee Rakhine State for Bangladesh. Shortly after, the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar quickly agreed a rapid repatriation process. Their agreement came up against international opposition and resistance by the Rohingya currently in refugee camps. In the meantime, Cox's Bazar has become a semi-permanent home of more than one million refugees.

With the presence of one of the largest refugee camps in world on their doorstep, and the ensuing pressures therefore exerted on the local population in Chittagong, managing local sentiments towards the camps is vitally important. The creation of security posts in Ukhia and Taknaf areas designed to monitor the Rohingya who move out of the camps however has meant that local residents now have to carry their photo-identity and regularly produce it for security personnel, which many locals consider humiliating. The price of daily essentials has also risen due to the increase of foreign aid personnel in the area.

When the Rohingya people first fled the violence of the Burmese military to Bangladesh, sympathy for them from the local population was extremely strong. However, this support is at risk of drastically transforming over the coming year. While tensions between the local population and those in the camps is not yet hostile, there remains a significant risk of social unrest. As the international community continues to put pressure on the Myanmar military and government to improve conditions in Rakhine, allowing the safe and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya to Myan-

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mar, Bengali citizens in Cox's Bazar are unlikely to support the presence of a permanent refugee camp, especially not in its current state.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

According to the constitution, "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions." The constitution also stipulates the state shall uphold secularism by not granting political status in favor of any religion and by prohibiting the abuse of religion for political purposes and discrimination or persecution against persons practicing any religion. It also provides for the right to profess, practice or propagate all religions, "subject to law, public order, and morality," and states religious communities or denominations have the right to establish, maintain and manage their religious institutions. Family law concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption has separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians.



Woman at work on the streets of Phulbari Upazila, Bangladesh.

TRADITIONS & DENOMINATIONS

INDEPENDENTS

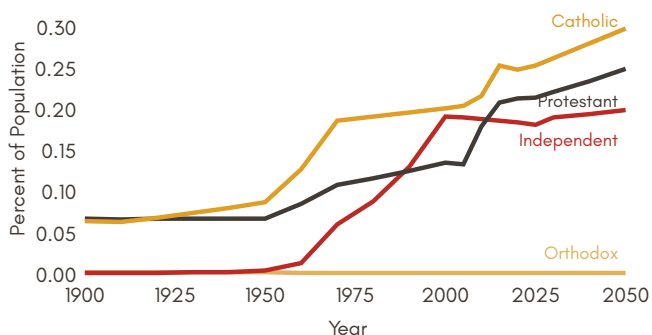
Bangladesh is home to the world's largest movement of messianic mosques (Christian mosques). Isai imandars, "those faithful to Jesus," are from Muslim backgrounds and gather in private homes for worship. The large and fast-growing Jamaat movement retains most cultural elements of Islamic worship and practice around a core of Christian theology, faith, and commitment; many of these congregations are also Charismatic in nature. Their style of worship tends to follow the patriarchal religious culture in Bangladesh, but unlike with the highly ritualized mosque prayers, the imandars do not follow a particular ritual. At the same time, imandars remain within Islam, Muslim society and family and have little to do with the regular churches. Some self-identify as Muslims, and others do not. Thousands of Isai imandars meet for worship on Fridays. This movement is controversial, as some other Christians do not recognize Isai imandars as practicing authentic Christianity.

Bangladesh is home to the world's largest movement of messianic mosques (Christian mosques).

CATHOLICS

Today there are two archdioceses and seven dioceses in Bangladesh. The Archdiocese of Dhaka comprises the dioceses of Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Rajshahi and Sylhet, while the Archdiocese of Chittagong comprises the dioceses of Barisal and Khulna. The Bangladeshi Catholic population is about 420,000, there are 107 parish churches, 220 diocesan priests, 178 religious priests, 123 religious brothers, 1,451 religious sisters, 5 consecrated virgins, 1,130 catechists and many educational, healthcare and welfare institutions

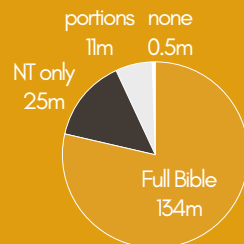
CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IN BANGLADESH, 1900-2050



Catholics, Protestants and Independents have experienced similar growth over the past century in Bangladesh, however less than 1% of the population is Christian today.

BIBLE TRANSLATION AND ACCESS IN BANGLADESH

TRANSLATION AVAILABILITY



Availability of translation in mother tongue

Bangladesh has relatively few languages, and the largest, the national language, Bengali in 1809 was the first to receive a full Bible (William Carey's first translation). Chittagonian was considered to be a dialect of Bengali, and Rohingya a dialect of Chittagonian, so both were considered to also have the Bible. Translation work continues on each, but together with a handful of other languages, 99.7% of the population of Bangladesh have scriptures in their mother tongue.

TRANSLATION NEED

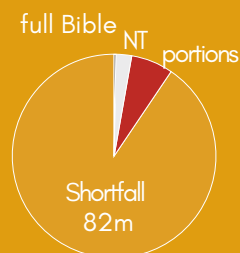
Of those languages with no scriptures published to date, many have more speakers in other countries than in Bangladesh (including Rohingya). The Bible Society of Bangladesh lists only Marma (the largest local language) as being a current project, and at least some of the other languages may yet be deemed not to need a translation. Still, with so relatively few possible projects, every language that needs it should soon have at least portions of scripture.

Mother tongue speakers (mts) with no bible translation by mts size



BIBLE DISTRIBUTION AND ACCESS

Progress towards distribution goals in Bangladesh



Adult Literacy: 73% Internet Users: 18%

Assuming that every literate adult should have access to at least one book of scripture, 90 million books would be required to be in place in Bangladesh. Over the last 20 years (the assumed life of a hard copy Bible), 8.7 million Bibles, New Testaments and individual books of the Bible were actually distributed. This is more than enough for the less than a million Christians, but most non-Christians are without. How much the shortfall of 82 million can be made up will depend on demand and both on online availability as well as vastly additional printed materials for the 82% without internet access.

At the core of contemporary religious and political conflicts in Bangladesh is an abiding desire for the people of the country to be allowed to have an identity of their own.

and organizations. Vocations to priesthood and religious life are on the increase. There are more than 50 formation houses in the country. There are also 52 Catholic secondary schools, about 1,000 primary schools and 60 healthcare centers run by the missionaries. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh, founded in 1971, is the general body of the ordinaries of Bangladesh. Pope John Paul II visited Dhaka in November 1986. The papal ambassador heads the Apostolic Nunciature to Bangladesh. Since his appointment by Pope Francis on July 6, 2013, Archbishop George Kochery has been the Apostolic Nuncio to Bangladesh. Archbishop Patrick D'Rosario became the first Bangladeshi cardinal in 2016.



Child in Bangladesh.

ANALYSIS

At the core of contemporary religious and political conflicts in Bangladesh is a desire for the people to be allowed to have an identity of their own. The country's history in the 20th century was characterized by the end of two different periods of colonization, first Britain and then Pakistan represented shifts in partisan power. Christianity in the country remains concentrated in the isolated and underprivileged minorities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The peoples of Bangladesh, particularly those dwelling in rural areas like the Chittagong Hill Tracts, are victims of a governmental campaign underway to “preserve” the cultural and heritage of these diverse peoples. Superficially, this endeavor seems noble, however, anthropologists and ethnographers suggest that this campaign is a part of a larger dehumanizing and Islamizing campaign that regards the ethnic and cultural identities of these smaller groups to be inferior, thus grouping them together under “tribal identities” that are regarded as a way of asserting that these groups will soon become history. This is not to say that they are universally victims of ethnic cleansing but simply that the language employed by the Bangladeshi government seeks to impose a uniformity upon these groups that grooms them for Islamization and undermines their cultural and linguistic distinctives in favor of integrating them into the “superior” Islamic national identity of Bangladesh.

One major obstacle to Christianity in the region is its association with colonialism. In addition, some scholars and government officials see Christianity as preying on the poor, converting people with lower socio-economic backgrounds because only the “poor” among Bangladesh's peo-

MISSION RANK	% CHRISTIAN	CHRISTIAN GAIN P.A.	CHRISTIAN GROWTH %	GOSPEL ACCESS	BAPTISMS PER ANNUM	MISSIONARIES RECEIVED	CHRISTIAN BROADCAST %	PERSONAL EV (ALL)	PRIORITY PEOPLES
BANGLADESH	0.53%	24K	2.90%	50%	18,323	1,000	0.80%	14.7M	3
REGION (OF 9)	7	6	6	3	5	4	8	3	7
ASIA (OF 51)	47	28	26	28	22	13	47	5	27
WORLD (OF 234)	197	124	72	194	117	75	227	13	55

The table above depicts the value of indicators of mission and Christian presence for Bangladesh and ranks them globally, continentally and regionally against other countries. For example, Bangladesh ranks 47th out of 51 countries in Asia for percentage Christian.

ple could possibly be persuaded by Christianity. Christian workers among the village peoples of Chittagong (whether in the Hill Tracts or elsewhere) have an immense opportunity to undermine the dehumanizing elements of these “tribal history” campaigns, by honoring and celebrating the diverse peoples of this region as living cultures and not relics of the past in need of preservation. It seems one of the major differences between the effects of Islam on these peoples and the potential effect of Christianity is precisely in its intrinsic imperative not merely to preserve cultures but to celebrate them and invite them into the family of God as their people, and not as part of a homogeneous amalgamation of religious, political, and national values.

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Lumber mill on a river in Bangladesh | Unsplash: Md Efthakhar Ul Alam

Village school | WCE 1st edition

Local travel on a river in Bangladesh. Unsplash: Md Efthakhar Ul Alam

Children playing in a river. Unsplash: Ashraful Haque Akash

Woman and child in Bangladesh. Unsplash: Adrian Taylor

Woman at work on the streets of Phulbari Upazila, Bangladesh. Unsplash: Shiahb Hossain

Child in Bangladesh. Unsplash: Ahmed Hasan

APPENDIX

RELIGIONS OF BANGLADESH

	1900		1970		2000		2020		Avg. Annual Growth Rate 2000-2020	2050	
Religion	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%		Population	%
Religious	28,673,000	100.0	65,018,000	100.0	131,478,000	99.9	169,632,000	99.9	1.28	201,652,000	99.9
Muslims	18,807,000	65.6	49,521,000	76.1	115,988,000	88.1	151,215,000	89.1	1.33	180,707,000	89.5
Hindus	9,371,000	32.7	14,500,000	22.3	13,261,000	10.1	15,500,000	9.1	0.78	17,250,000	8.5
Buddhists	157,000	0.5	450,000	0.7	944,000	0.7	1,240,000	0.7	1.37	1,400,000	0.7
Christians	37,200	0.1	237,000	0.4	651,000	0.5	903,000	0.5	1.65	1,363,000	0.7
Catholics	18,000	0.1	120,000	0.2	264,000	0.2	420,000	0.2	2.36	600,000	0.3
Protestants	18,900	0.1	69,400	0.1	177,000	0.1	360,000	0.2	3.62	500,000	0.2
Independents	50	0.0	38,400	0.1	250,000	0.2	310,000	0.2	1.08	400,000	0.2
Orthodox	200	0.0	200	0.0	150	0.0	150	0.0	0.00	200	0.0
doubly-affiliated	0	0.0	0	0.0	-42,100	0.0	-190,000	-0.1	7.82	-140,000	-0.1
unaffiliated Christians	0	0.0	8,600	0.0	2,600	0.0	3,000	0.0	0.68	3,000	0.0
*Pentecostals/Charismatics	0	0.0	6,700	0.0	232,000	0.2	325,000	0.2	1.71	450,000	0.2
*Evangelicals	10,000	0.0	42,200	0.1	114,000	0.1	300,000	0.2	4.97	600,000	0.3
Ethnic religionists	300,000	1.0	300,000	0.5	600,000	0.5	730,000	0.4	0.98	860,000	0.4
Sikhs	1,000	0.0	6,000	0.0	21,700	0.0	27,300	0.0	1.15	43,000	0.0
Baha'is	0	0.0	3,200	0.0	8,500	0.0	12,000	0.0	1.74	20,000	0.0
Chinese folk-religionists	0	0.0	0	0.0	2,800	0.0	4,000	0.0	1.77	8,000	0.0
Zoroastrians	0	0.0	200	0.0	300	0.0	360	0.0	0.87	400	0.0
Jews	0	0.0	0	0.0	160	0.0	200	0.0	1.19	200	0.0
Nonreligious	0	0.0	30,000	0.0	104,000	0.1	143,000	0.1	1.63	275,000	0.1
Agnostics	0	0.0	20,000	0.0	93,400	0.1	130,000	0.1	1.66	250,000	0.1
Atheists	0	0.0	10,000	0.0	10,100	0.0	13,100	0.0	1.31	25,000	0.0
Total population	28,673,000	100.0	65,048,000	100.0	131,581,000	100.0	169,775,000	100.0	1.28	201,927,000	100.0

Source: World Christian Database

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