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The two global religious divides – geographic and generational

Ipsos Global Advisor survey reveals changes in beliefs and attitudes toward religion among both high-income and emerging countries and across age groups

May 11, 2023 – A new Ipsos Global Advisor survey shows wide variations across countries and generations in the prevalence of religious affiliation and practice, beliefs, the role of religion, and the extent to which it defines personal identity and morality. Most geographic differences tend to follow a similar pattern, opposing a highly religious Global South to a mostly secular Global North. However, major generational shifts are emerging in many of the 26 countries surveyed where younger people are less likely than older adults to identify as Christian, especially Catholic, and more likely to identify as Muslim or of some other faith.

Generational shifts in religious affiliation

Across the 26 countries surveyed by Ipsos, the proportion of respondents who say they have a religion ranges from nearly 100% in India and Thailand to less than half in Japan, South Korea, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. The survey brings to light major generational shifts when it comes to religious affiliation.

In each of the 16 most Catholic countries surveyed, the percentage of Gen Zers (those born in or after 1997) who identify as Catholic is lower than the percentage of baby boomers (those born in or before 1964) who do so – by an average of 16 points. Gaps in Belgium, Italy, Peru, Poland, France, and Chile exceed 20 percentage points.

A similar pattern is seen in eleven of the 12 countries where at least 15% of those surveyed identify as Protestant, Evangelical or just “Christian”: Gen Zers are less likely than boomers to identify as such, by an average of 11 points. Gaps in Sweden and Australia exceed 20 points.

Conversely, in every one of the 14 countries where at least 2% of all adults surveyed identify as Muslim, Gen Zers are more likely than boomers to do so – by an average of seven points. Differences of 10 points or more are seen in Great Britain, Sweden, and Belgium.

Generational differences vary when it comes to not having a religion, i.e., identifying oneself as either atheist, agnostic or just “spiritual.” Three countries show Gen Zers less likely than boomers to say they have no religion by at least 10 points (including Sweden and Germany by more than 15 points), but nine countries show the reverse pattern (including South Korea and Italy by more than 20 points).

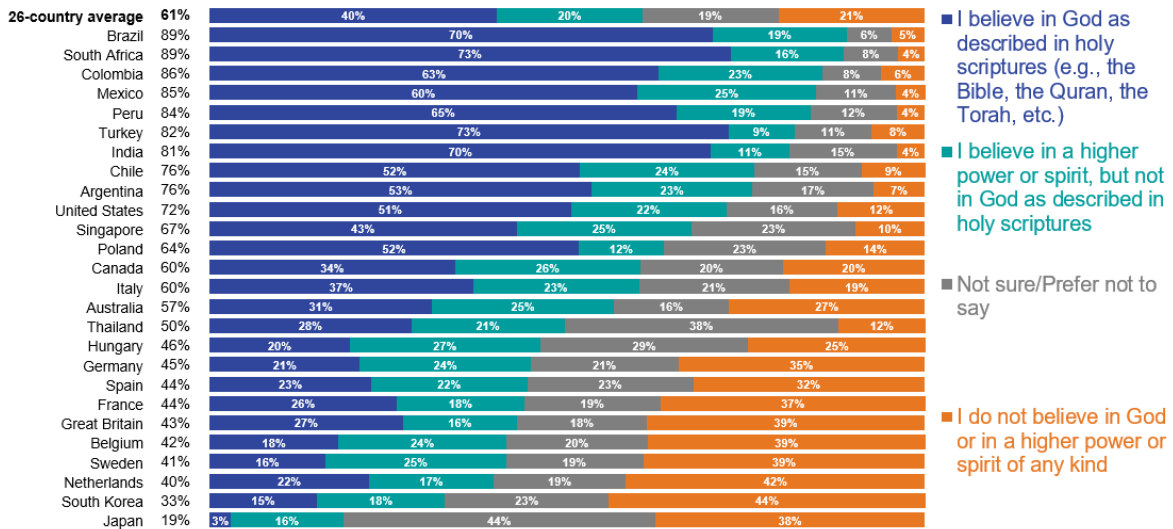
Belief in God or a higher power

On average, 40% say they believe in God “as described in holy scriptures,” 20% believe in “a higher spirit but not as described in holy scriptures,” another 21% believe in neither God nor any higher spirit, and 19% are not sure or will not say. While majorities in 11 countries believe in God as described in holy scriptures – most notably Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and India – those who say they do not believe in God or any higher power or spirit make up a plurality in Japan, South Korea, and seven of the 10 European countries surveyed.



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Q. Which of these statements is closest to your beliefs?



In all but one of the 14 countries where at least one-third of all adults believe in God as described in holy scriptures, Gen Zers are less likely than boomers to hold such beliefs – by an average of 10 points (and as much as 20 points in Mexico). However, the trend is reversed in less religious countries. Across the 12 countries where fewer than one in three adults believe in God as described in holy scriptures, the proportion of Gen Zers who do so is on average five points higher than it is among boomers. The widest difference is seen in Sweden (28 points).

Related and other beliefs

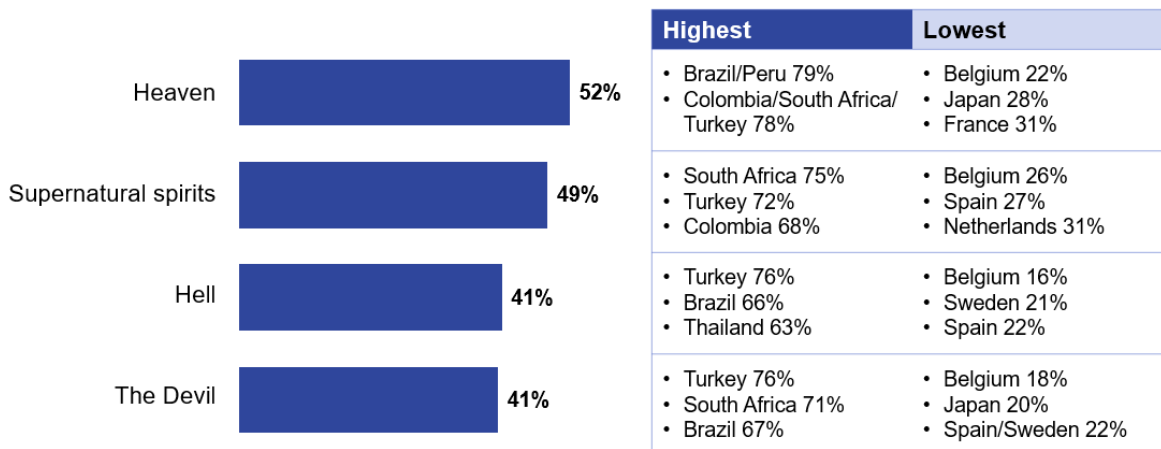
Belief in heaven averages at 52% and belief in supernatural spirits (e.g., angels, demons, fairies, and ghosts) averages at 49%. Belief in hell and in the devil both average about 10 points lower than belief in heaven.

The percentages of believers in each of heaven, spirits, hell, and the devil are lowest in Belgium and are about 50-60 points higher in Turkey, Brazil, and South Africa.



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Q. Do you believe each of the following exist(s)?



The younger people are, the more likely they are to believe in heaven, hell, the Devil, and supernatural spirits – particularly in countries where belief among all adults is low. In many of these countries, especially those in Northern and Western Europe, the prevalence of these beliefs is higher among Gen Zers than among boomers by more than 20 percentage points.

Religious practice

Unsurprisingly, both regularly attending a place of worship and praying at home are most common in countries where majorities believe in God or a higher spirit.

More than seven in 10 in India and about half in South Africa, Thailand, Brazil, and Turkey say they attend a place of worship (e.g., a church, temple, or mosque) at least once a month, compared to only one in 20 in Japan, about one in 10 in Belgium and Hungary, and fewer than one in five in France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, and Canada.

On average, the proportion of those who pray outside a place of worship at least once a month is 15 percentage points higher than the proportion of those who attend a place of worship at least once a month. It is more than 25 points higher in Colombia, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, Peru, South Africa, and the United States.

In countries where religious practice is high, older adults tend to engage in it more than young adults, while in countries where religious practice is low, young people tend to have higher engagement.

In all but one of the 15 countries where at least one-third of all adults pray outside a place of worship at least once a month, Gen Zers are less likely than boomers to do so, by an average of 15 points (and as much as 23 points in Brazil, 27 points in Colombia and 40 points in Chile). In contrast, across the 11 countries where less than one-third of all adults pray outside a place of worship at least once a month, Gen Zers are more likely to do so, by an average of seven points (including 23 points in Sweden and 28 points in Germany).



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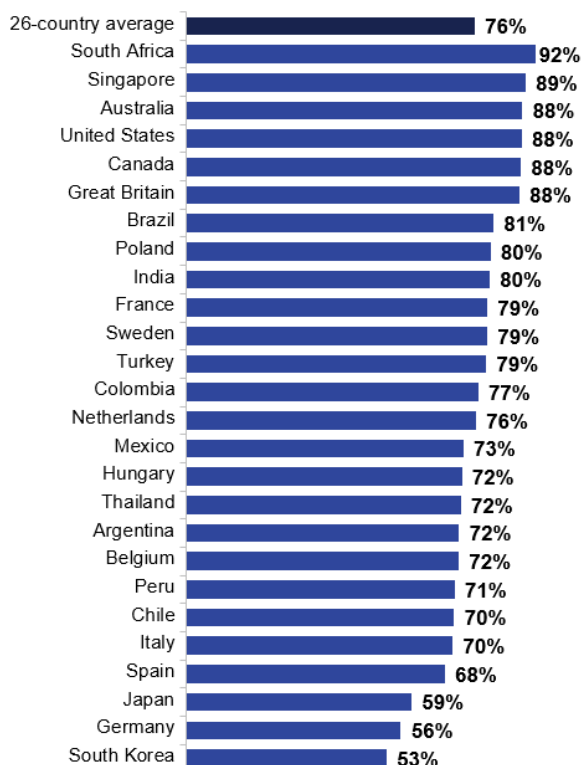
Similarly, across the 11 countries where at least one-quarter of all adults attend a place of worship at least once a month, Gen Zers are less likely than boomers to do so, by an average of two points (and as much as 15 points in Colombia). However, across the 15 countries with lower overall attendance, Gen Zers are more likely to report it by an average of 11 points (including 28 points in Germany and 34 points in Sweden).

Religious tolerance

The proportion of adults surveyed who say they feel comfortable around people with different religious beliefs averages 76% across 26 countries. Reported comfort with those who have different religious views ranges from about nine in 10 in South Africa, Singapore, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the U.S. to just half in South Korea.

“I am completely comfortable being around people who have different religious beliefs than me”

% Agree



Comparing this year’s results with those of an Ipsos Global Advisor survey conducted in 2017 shows that religious tolerance has increased significantly in Sweden, Brazil, Belgium, Mexico, and Poland, while declining in South Korea and Germany.

On average, nearly half (47%) say religion does more harm than good in the world. After India, this view is most common in Western Europe and in Japan; it is least common in Latin America, South Africa, Turkey, and Southeast Asia. In much of Western Europe (with the notable exception of Italy), it is also less prevalent among younger adults than it is among older ones.



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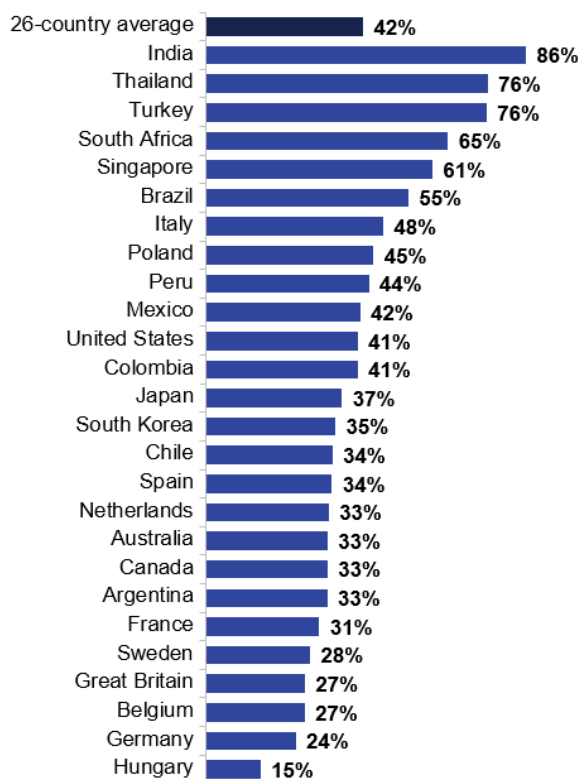
Japan and Sweden are the only two countries surveyed in 2017 where negative views of religion have gained significantly. By contrast, they have declined significantly in Argentina, Hungary, Germany, Australia, Spain, Poland, and Peru.

Religion and identity

On average, 42% say their religion defines them as a person. All three countries where more than three in four agree are predominantly non-Christian, and all six countries where less than one in three agree are in Europe.

“My religion defines me as a person”

% Agree



Since 2017, there have been significant increases in agreement in Japan, Sweden, Mexico, France, Australia, Spain, and Brazil, and significant decreases in Hungary, Poland, and the U.S.

In several European countries, young people are much more likely than older adults to view religion as a market of identity. Differences exceed 15 points in Sweden, Great Britain, Germany, and France, where young people are also more likely to say they are Muslim. However, other countries – Italy, Poland, Chile, Colombia, Singapore, and South Korea – show an opposite pattern.



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Religion and morality

On average, 54% agree that religious practices are an important factor in the moral life of citizens, 37% agree that people with religious faith are better citizens, and 20% say they lose respect for people when they find out they are not religious.

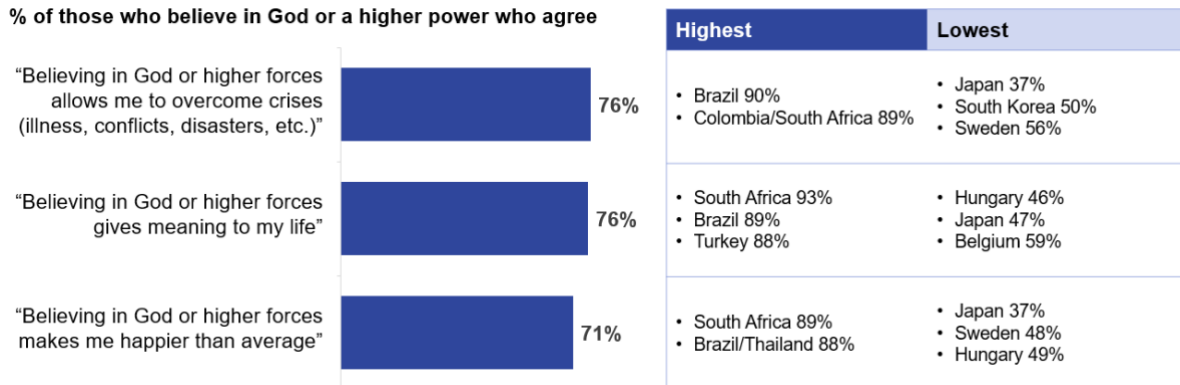
In all three cases, the percentages vary by as much as 50 or 60 points between countries with high and low levels of religiosity.

Young people are more likely than their elders to associate religion with morality in countries where young people are also significantly more likely than older adults to identify as Muslim.

Role of God or a higher power

About three out of four people who believe in God or a higher power or spirit say it helps them to overcome crises, gives meaning to their life, and makes them happier than average. The higher the proportion of believers in a country, the more likely believers are to feel they benefit from their faith.

% of those who believe in God or a higher power who agree



In most countries, the percentage of all adults surveyed who say that people with religious faith are happier tends to mirror the percentage who say they attend a place of worship regularly.



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About the Study

These are the results of a 26-country survey conducted by Ipsos on its Global Advisor online survey platform and, in India, on its IndiaBus platform, between January 20 and February 3, 2023. For this survey, Ipsos interviewed a total of 19,731 adults aged 18 and older in India, 18-74 in Canada, South Africa, Turkey, and the United States, 20-74 in Thailand, 21-74 in Singapore, and 16-74 in all other countries,

The sample consists of approximately 1,000 individuals each in Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Spain, and the U.S., and 500+ individuals in each of Argentina, Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Hungary, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Thailand, and Turkey. The sample in India consists of approximately 2,200 individuals of whom 1,800 were interviewed face-to-face and 400 were interviewed online.

Samples in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, and the U.S. can be considered to be representative of their general adult populations under the age of 75. Samples in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, and Turkey are more urban, more educated, and/or more affluent than the general population. The survey results for these countries should be viewed as reflecting the views of the more “connected” segment of their population. India’s sample represents a large subset of its urban population — social economic classes A, B and C in metros and tier 1-3 town classes across all four zones.

The data is weighted so that the composition of each country’s sample best reflects the demographic profile of the adult population according to the most recent census data.

The “26-country average” reflects the average result for all the countries where the survey was conducted. It has not been adjusted to the population size of each country or market and is not intended to suggest a total result.

Where results do not sum to 100 or the ‘difference’ appears to be +/-1 percentage point more/less than the actual result, this may be due to rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of “don’t know/not sure” or not stated responses.

The precision of Ipsos online polls is calculated using a credibility interval with a poll of 1,000 accurate to +/- 3.5 percentage points and of 500 accurate to +/- 5.0 percentage points. For more information on Ipsos’s use of credibility intervals, please visit the Ipsos website.

The publication of these findings abides by local rules and regulations.



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About Ipsos

Ipsos is one of the largest market research and polling companies globally, operating in 90 markets and employing nearly 20,000 people.

Our passionately curious research professionals, analysts and scientists have built unique multi-specialist capabilities that provide true understanding and powerful insights into the actions, opinions and motivations of citizens, consumers, patients, customers or employees. Our 75 business solutions are based on primary data from our surveys, social media monitoring, and qualitative or observational techniques.

“Game Changers” – our tagline – summarizes our ambition to help our 5,000 clients navigate with confidence our rapidly changing world.

Founded in France in 1975, Ipsos is listed on the Euronext Paris since July 1st, 1999. The company is part of the SBF 120 and the Mid-60 index and is eligible for the Deferred Settlement Service (SRD).

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