

Survey finds Africa is most religious part of world

May 6, 2010

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Researchers say they've found the most religious place on Earth—between the southern border of the Sahara Desert and the tip of South Africa.

Religion is “very important” to more than three-quarters of the population in 17 of 19 sub-Saharan nations, according to a new survey.

In contrast, in the United States, the world’s most religious industrialized nation, 57 percent of people say religion is very important.

A Talibe boy in Senegal shows off the writing tablet on which he practices writing Arabic passages from the Quran, Islam’s holy book, even though he can’t understand them. The boys, who chant the verses over and over, are turned over to Muslim teachers as small children to learn the Quran and beg alms on the streets. (IMB PHOTO)

“On a continent-wide basis, sub-Saharan Africa comes out as the most religious place on Earth,” said Luis Lugo, director of the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#).

According to the survey, 98 percent of respondents in Senegal say religion is very important, following by 93 percent in Mali. The lowest percentage was reported in Botswana, 69 percent, which still is a healthy majority.

“That begins to paint a picture of how religious sub-Saharan Africans are,”

Lugo said.

The study is part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project. More than 25,000 sub-Saharan Africans responded in face-to-face interviews in more than 60 languages.

While the study confirms that Africans are, indeed, morally conservative and religiously pious, researchers explored a variety of topics, including religious tolerance, polygamy, the role of women in society, and political and economic satisfaction.

Islam and Christianity dominate as the most popular religions in the region—a stark reversal from a century ago when Muslims and Christians were outnumbered by followers of traditional indigenous religions.

The study reports the number of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa grew faster than the number of Muslims, from 7 million in 1900 to 470 million in 2010. One in five of the world's Christians lives in sub-Saharan Africa.

While a majority of African Muslims are from the northern region of the continent, nearly 234 million live below the Sahara Desert.

Indigenous African beliefs have not disappeared, but they often are incorporated into Islam and Christianity, the report found. A number of sub-Saharan Africans believe in witchcraft, evil spirits, reincarnation and other elements of African spirituality. More than half of the people surveyed in Tanzania, Mali, Senegal and South Africa believe sacrifices to ancestors or spirits can protect them from harm.

According to the Pew survey, most sub-Saharan African Muslims are Sunni. Within Christianity, Catholicism dominates in Guinea Bissau, Rwanda and Cameroon, while Liberia, South Africa, Zambia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Botswana are predominantly Protestant.

Pentecostalism is spreading rapidly and is deeply influential across the region, and also across Christian denominations.

"Casting out of the devil or evil spirits, high degree of apocalyptic expectations, the health-and-wealth 'prosperity gospel' is the new Christian phenomenon of the Pentecostalism in sub-Saharan Africa," Lugo said.

The 19 countries represented in the survey comprise 75 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa. The countries are Botswana, Cameroon, Chad, Djibouti, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.