

# East Asia spiritually vibrant despite religious disaffiliation

June 18, 2024

WASHINGTON (RNS)—In East Asia, people are leaving their religion at rates among the highest in the world, according to a survey released June 17 by Pew Research Center.

But while many East Asians do not identify as members of an organized religion, they continue to hold spiritual beliefs associated with the region's faiths.

Pew studied more than 10,000 adult participants over four months in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and neighboring Vietnam and found significant numbers of adults across the region say they have "no religion," ranging from 27 percent in Taiwan to 61 percent in Hong Kong.

Among these religiously unaffiliated people, however, at least 4 in 10 believe in God or unseen beings, with a quarter or more saying mountains, rivers or trees have spirits. And half or more leave offerings for deceased ancestors.

"When we measure religion in these societies by what people believe and do, rather than whether they say they have a religion, the region is more religiously vibrant than it might initially seem," the report said.

The survey also pointed to a remarkable level of mobility in East Asian's religious identification.

Many people say they have switched from the religious identity they were raised in, either to another religion or to no religion. In Hong Kong and South Korea, 53 percent of adults have changed their religious identity

since childhood.

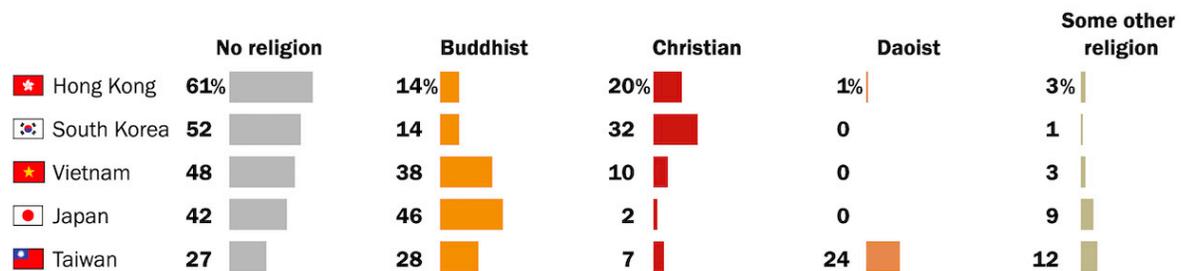
## Dominant trend of disaffiliation

The dominant trend is disaffiliation, rather than switching faiths. The percentages of adults in Hong Kong (37 percent) and South Korea (35 percent) who say they were raised in a religion but no longer identify with one are the highest in the world, overshadowing several Western European countries such as Norway (30 percent), the Netherlands (29 percent) and Belgium (28 percent).

“There’s been a lot of study and talk about how Western Europe is secularized,” said Jonathan Evans, senior researcher at Pew and lead author of the report. “But it doesn’t seem that there’s been as much discussion about religious change in people’s lifetimes coming from East Asia.”

### The most common religion in Hong Kong, South Korea and Vietnam is ‘no religion’

*% of adults in each place who currently identify as ...*



Note: “Some other religion” also includes those who selected “Muslim,” “Confucian,” “Local religions/Indigenous religions,” “Combination of religions,” and in Japan, “Shinto.” Don’t know/Refused responses are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted June 2-Sept. 17, 2023, among adults in five Asian publics. Read the Methodology for details.

“Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies”

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“The most common religion in Hong Kong, South Korea and Vietnam is ‘no religion’” (Graphic courtesy of Pew Research Center via RNS)

He added, “It’s been really fascinating to see how East Asia and religious identity fit into a more global understanding.”

While the levels of disaffiliation are high, public attitudes toward proselytizing vary widely. Most adults in Japan (83 percent) and South Korea (77 percent) say it is unacceptable for a person to try to persuade others to join his or her religion.

People in Taiwan and Vietnam are more divided regarding conversion efforts, while the majority of respondents in Hong Kong (67 percent) say it is acceptable to proselytize.

In Hong Kong, 30 percent of adults report being raised without a religion, while 61 percent currently report being religiously unaffiliated, a gain of 31 percentage points.

**People in the region are more likely to engage with the spiritual world than to say religion is very important in their lives**

*% of adults in each place who say they ...*

	Think karma exists	Have been visited by the spirit of an ancestor in a dream or some other form	Ever practice meditation	Pray daily	Consider religion very important in their lives
Hong Kong	76%	16%	22%	13%	11%
Japan	16	36	30	19	6
South Korea	48	40	59	21	16
Taiwan	87	36	34	16	11
Vietnam	75	42	16	20	26

Note: Darker shades represent higher values. Respondents were asked separately if they have ever felt that the spirit of an ancestor has come to visit them in a dream, or to be with them in any other form.

Source: Survey conducted June 2-Sept. 17, 2023, among adults in five Asian publics. Read the Methodology for details.

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“People in the region are more likely to engage with the spiritual world than to say religion is very important in their lives” (Graphic courtesy of Pew Research Center via RNS)

On the flip side, 29 percent of Buddhists in South Korea say they were

raised Buddhist, but 14 percent identify as currently Buddhist—a 15-point decline.

The Pew team faced cultural and linguistic challenges in collecting data in East Asia. The concept of religion is relatively new in the region, having been imported by scholars only about a century ago.

## **Asking the right questions**

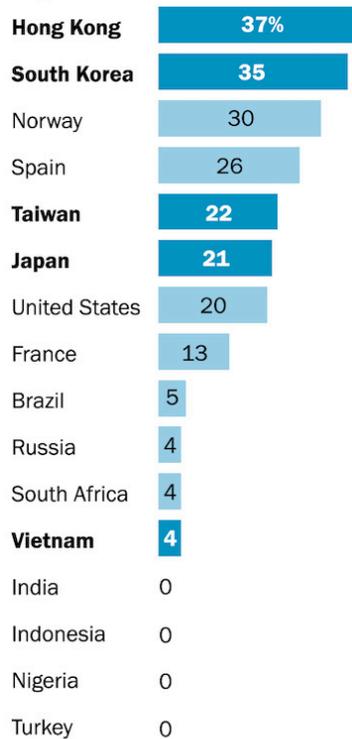
According to the report, frequently used translations of “religion” typically are understood as referring to “organized, hierarchical forms of religion, such as Christianity or new religious movements,” producing results “based on a Judeo-Christian, Eurocentric mindset,” Evans said.

For the new survey, Pew designed questions that would measure beliefs and practices common in Asian societies, which revealed highly active spiritual lives among East Asians.

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## Religious disaffiliation in East Asia and Vietnam compared with select countries

*% of adults in each place who say they have left their childhood religion and no longer identify with any religion*



Note: Selected from 102 places surveyed by Pew Research Center since 2008. Those from past surveys are generally representative of regional patterns. For data and analysis of all 102 places, read “Religious switching in East Asia compared with the rest of the world” later in this report.

Source: Surveys conducted between 2008 and 2023. “Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies”

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“Religious disaffiliation in East Asia and Vietnam compared with select countries” (Graphic courtesy of Pew Research Center via RNS)

In Taiwan, only 11 percent of adults say religion is very important to them, while 87 percent believe in karma, 34 percent say they ever practice meditation and 36 percent say they have ever been visited by the spirit of an ancestor.

In another striking example, 92 percent of religiously unaffiliated Vietnamese adults say they have made an offering to ancestors in the past year. Most adults surveyed in all five countries say they believe in God or unseen beings, such as deities or spirits.

Evans explained that while people may identify with a specific religious tradition such as Christianity or Buddhism, the boundaries of ritual and practice often are blurred.

“Someone might classify this as a Buddhist practice, but do we see Christians doing it? Do we see religiously unaffiliated people doing it?” he asked.

“While people might place a label on themselves, that does not necessarily reflect what beliefs and practices they have.”