

Religion and the transition to low fertility in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Following the Caldwell's (1987) strong assertion that religious beliefs were central determinants of high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa, there has been increasing interest in understanding religions effect on Africa's demographic regime. However, there has so far been no comprehensive attempt to capture its significance for the burgeoning transition to low fertility levels. The ramifications of variation in religiously-related behavior on aggregate fertility patterns can be understood in terms of systematic differences in socio-economic variables or in religions' distinctive norms. Cross-country patterns reveal a lot about which factors may predominantly be at play. To provide a thorough description of the nature of differences in fertility-related indices (TFR, completed fertility, demand for children and modern contraceptive use) between religious groups, I draw on selected census data-sets and Demographic and Health Surveys over the last two decades and examine differences within and across several countries. I find that women who report no affiliation to religious denominations tend to have lower fertility levels than Christians. Muslim fertility levels are not consistently higher than Christians across countries but Muslims consistently show higher demand for children, net of socioeconomic variation in most countries. Much of the fertility differences observed are attributable to compositional differences in socioeconomic characteristics. Few countries (such as Ghana and Rwanda) show religious differences net of socioeconomic variables. Religion is therefore likely to be relevant in Africa's demographic transition to the extent that religious institutions affect the distribution of major intermediate determinants of fertility.