

Christianity's shift from the Global North to the Global South¹

Review and Expositor

2014, Vol. 111(1) 41–47

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DOI: 10.1177/0034637313517428

rae.sagepub.com

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Abstract

The most significant trend within global Christianity over the last century has been its profound demographic shift from the Global North to the Global South. Although the percentage of Christians in the world population has remained fairly constant since 1900, where those Christians are found has changed dramatically. In 1900 more than 80% lived in the Global North, but by 2010 that figure had fallen to less than 40%. Despite Christianity's inherent linguistic and cultural translatability, however, Southern Christianity was formed with and still retains many Northern trappings, so that it often appears foreign to non-Christians (and even, at times, to Southern Christians). In addition, Southern Christians have yet to assume the leadership (in areas as diverse as international Christian organizations and articulating theology) that their global numbers would seem to suggest. Southern Christians also hold a disproportionately small share of global Christian income and wealth, which can inhibit their ability to fund ministry where Christianity is growing most rapidly. Christianity's shift to the South is not without opportunity, however. In many ways, Southern Christians' cultures and ways of thinking resemble those of the biblical era more closely than do Northerners', creating the potential for vibrant new theologies and ways of being the Church. Pentecostal and Charismatic spirituality also energizes many Southern Christians, although this is not without controversy. Finally, Southern Christians tend to live in closer proximity to adherents of other religions than do Northern Christians, opening doors for dialog and mission that the North often resists or avoids.

Keywords

Christianity, demographics, Global North, Global South, shift

1. Material in this article has previously appeared in the following publications: Todd M. Johnson, "The Demographics of World Mission and Christianity, 1910–2010," in *2010 Boston: The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Johnson, Rodney L. Petersen, Gina A. Bellofatto, and Travis L. Myers (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 3–12; and Todd Johnson and Gina A. Bellofatto, "Upon Closer Examination: Status of World Christianity," in *River of God: An Introduction to World Mission*, ed. Douglas D. Priest, Jr., and Stephen E. Burris (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 108–24.

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The phenomenon of the shift

At first glance, the status of Christianity globally over the last 100 or so years can appear static or even stagnant, with Christians constituting roughly one third of the global population during that period. In 1900, Christians of all traditions were 34.5% of the global population.² The figure was roughly the same in 1950 (34.4%), but by 1970 it had dropped to 33.4%. This decline continued through about the year 2000, when the world was 32.5% Christian. Since then the Christian share of the global population has rebounded somewhat, rising to 32.9% in 2010. If current trends continue it is expected to reach 33.8% by 2025. Underlying this relatively flat picture, however, has been the most significant trend within global Christianity over the last century—its profound demographic shift from the Global North to the Global South.³ Although the percentage of Christians in the world population has remained fairly constant since 1900, where those Christians are located has changed dramatically.

Changes in each continent's share of the global Christian population show just how dramatic this shift has been. In 1900 the majority (82%) of Christians worldwide resided in the global North; most of the rest lived in Latin America, with only small representations in Oceania, Africa, and Asia. Europe was home to more than 68% of all Christians. By 2010, however, only 25.6% of the world's Christians were found in Europe, with another 12.3% in Northern America. Conversely, less than 2% of all Christians lived in Africa in 1900; this had skyrocketed to 21.6% by 2010. With 15.4% of the global total, Asia was home to more Christians than Northern America as well.

The shift of Christianity to the Global South can also be illustrated by tracing the path of Christianity's statistical center of gravity over the past two millennia. The statistical center of gravity represents the point on the globe at which the numbers of Christians to the east and west are equal and the numbers to the north and south are equal.⁴ Mapping the center begins in Jerusalem in AD 33 (the birthplace and birth year of Christianity, with Jesus's crucifixion and ascension and the Day of Pentecost). Moving first to the west (via missions to Asia Minor, Europe, and north Africa) and then to the east (with the spread of Christianity through central and even to east Asia), the center of gravity settled on a northwestward track by the seventh century.

This progression in the same general direction continued for some nine centuries, reaching its northernmost point (near Budapest) around the year 1500. The arrival of Europeans in Latin America in the sixteenth century and the subsequent introduction of Christianity there by Roman Catholic missionaries caused a sharp shift in the center of gravity's trajectory, from the northwest to the southwest. The advent of European immigration to North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continued the pull to the southwest. Large-scale European immigration to the Americas during the nineteenth century resulted in the greatest 100-year movement of the center of gravity seen to that time, from the vicinity of La Spezia in Italy in 1800 to near Madrid, Spain, in 1900.

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2. Unless otherwise noted, all data in this article are from Todd M. Johnson, ed., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013).
 3. "Global North" here includes five current United Nations regions comprising 53 countries: Eastern Europe (including Russia), Northern Europe, Southern Europe, Western Europe, and Northern America. "Global South" is defined as the remaining 16 current UN regions (185 countries): Eastern Africa, Middle Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa, Western Africa, Eastern Asia, South-central Asia, South-eastern Asia, Western Asia, Caribbean, Central America (including Mexico), South America, Australia/New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.
 4. For more information on mapping Christianity's center of gravity, see Todd M. Johnson and Sun Young Chung, "Christianity's centre of gravity, AD 33-2100", in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 50–53.

The dawning of the nineteenth century also marked the advent of Protestant and Anglican missions worldwide. Yet despite this, as we have seen, the Global North was still home to more than 80% of all Christians as late as 1900. It was evident, however, that something was happening: between 1900 and 1950, Christianity's center of gravity shifted more to the south than to the west. Even more remarkable was its shift between 1950 and 1970. For the first time since the sixth century, Christianity's center of gravity was moving to the *east* rather than the west! In addition, it had moved south of Jerusalem for the first time in history. This pattern reflects both explosive growth in Africa (and, to a lesser extent, in Asia) as well as decline in Europe (and, to a lesser extent, in Northern America). Meanwhile, Christianity's southeastward trajectory has continued, with the center of gravity located near Tessalit (in northeast Mali) in 2010. This global shift over the twentieth century was thus even more dramatic than its movement over the nineteenth. If current patterns of growth (in the Global South) and decline (in the Global North) persist, it is likely that the center of gravity will continue its movement to the southeast into the twenty-second century.

That Christianity's center of gravity lay north of Jerusalem for most of its history can mask an important truth: Christians in the Global South were in the majority for the first nine centuries of Christian history. This is because the areas in which many of Asia's Christians lived during that period—including Asia Minor, Armenia, and modern Syria and Iraq—are north of Jerusalem. Then, starting around 920, the number of Northern Christians exceeded that of Southern Christians for more than a millennium—a period marked largely by European domination of Christianity. Around 1980, however, Southern Christians regained the majority.

Finally, the Southern shift of Christianity can be seen by comparing the countries that were home to the most Christians over the last 100 years. In 1910, nine of the ten countries with the largest Christian populations were in the Global North (Brazil, the lone exception, ranked ninth). By 2010, Brazil had moved to the second position on the list and was joined by six other countries from the Global South: China, Mexico, the Philippines, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and India. The only Northern countries remaining were the United States (with the largest Christian population in both 1910 and 2010), Russia (ranked third, down from second in 1910), and Germany (tenth, down from third in 1910). It should be noted that the United States is an exceptional case, in that the number of Christians has grown dramatically despite an overall trend of secularization and defection from Christianity in the Global North. In fact, the United States will likely continue to have the largest Christian population of any country well into the twenty-first century, largely owing to the high numbers of Christian immigrants (many from the Global South) who continue to arrive in the country, both legally and illegally.

The challenges and difficulties the shift represents for the Church

Cultural and linguistic translatability have been hallmarks of Christianity from its founding. On the Day of Pentecost, Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem heard the gospel of Jesus miraculously proclaimed in their own languages (Acts 2:5–11). The Book of Acts chronicles the expansion of Christianity outward from its Jewish origins, first to Samaritans (Acts 8:4–8), then to Gentile converts to Judaism (Acts 10), and finally to Gentiles in Asia Minor and then Europe (Acts 13–28). Along the way the new faith began to acquire characteristics that reflected the cultures of those who embraced it. The Jerusalem council described in Acts 15 is significant for its determination that a Gentile need not become culturally Jewish in order to become a Christian. Indeed, cultural and linguistic translatability are some of Christianity's greatest strengths.

Therefore it is somewhat ironic, in light of Christianity's inherent translatability, that its global expansion in the nineteenth (particularly) and twentieth centuries was often wrapped in Northern trappings. Northern missionaries (of necessity, because at the time Christians were found overwhelmingly in the North) took the gospel to the first converts among many peoples of the Global South. Yet, even though the evangelistic reach of these new Southern Christians among their

peoples far exceeded that of the missionaries, the churches that were planted often adopted Northern liturgy, hymnody, architecture, and other trappings.

As Daniel Daesoon Kim, Director of Chiang Mai Theological Seminary in Thailand, has noted, “The biggest issue the Church in Asia is facing is a severe violation of the incarnational principle from both missionaries and local church leaders. Contextualization has been very poor, making Christianity so foreign to local people.”⁵ Moonjang Lee, speaking of the Global South generally, writes, “The subsequent globalisation of the image of Western Christianity poses a problem for non-Western Christianity. Though we talk about a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity, the prevailing forms of Christianity in most parts of the non-Western world are still dominated by Western influences.”⁶ The consequences have been doubly unfortunate: many Southern Christians have been denied, or at least have missed, the opportunity to enjoy an indigenous expression of their faith; and non-Christians often absorbed the message that Christianity, contrary to its translatability, is a Western religion—a distortion that continues to hamper missionary and evangelistic efforts in the Global South to this day.

A second challenge that has plagued the Church is the transition of Christian leadership from North to South. This has been true at all levels, from the local to the national to the international. For example, at the outbreak of World War II many Northern missionaries were forced to return to their home countries. They left the work they had started in the hands of local believers whom they had failed to train adequately—if indeed they had trained them at all—for the new responsibilities that suddenly befell them. All too often the burden of managing the infrastructure left by the missionaries—both physical (buildings, land) and administrative (programs, record-keeping)—demanded time and money that the native Christians lacked.⁷ Yet, even when Southerners were given places at international gatherings and in international movements, they sometimes felt that their voices were not heard by Northerners or, worse, were being ignored.⁸ More recently, Christians from the Global South have begun to take on leadership at the international level (the election of Argentine Roman Catholic Bishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis being especially notable). Yet, Southern Christians still largely play a leadership role that is much less than their numbers suggest.

Another result of Christianity’s shift to the Global South is a widening of the gap, already present to some degree in the North, between academic theology and theology as it is experienced in the context of the congregation.⁹ Especially notable is the growth of “identity theologies” in the academy. Following the development of liberation theology in Latin America during the twentieth century, other identity theologies have emerged, including black theology, womanist theology, and Hispanic/Latino theology. However, although many Southern Christians are members of the identity groups by whom and for whom new identity theologies are developing, these progressive principles do not adequately reflect what is happening theologically in the congregations, where concern for presenting a “consistent witness to the nature of God and of God’s relation with the world” generally outweighs contemplation of the implications of God on a particular identity or

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5. Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, “Daniel Daesoon Kim, Chiang Mai Theological Seminary”, <http://www.wheaton.edu/BGC/Equipping-Corner/One-on-One-with-a-Global-Leader/Daniel%20Daesoon%20Kim> (accessed 26 November 2013).
 6. Moonjang Lee, “Future of global Christianity,” in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 104–5.
 7. Daniel Jeyaraj, “The re-emergence of global Christianity, 1910–2010”, in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 54.
 8. See, for example, Al Tizon’s description of tensions between Northern and Southern evangelicals in the Lausanne Movement in his *Transformation After Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-Local Perspective* (Oxford: Regnum, 2008).
 9. Ian Markham, “Theology,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 208–9.

subject.¹⁰ The demographic shift of Christianity is only positive if it is accompanied by theological reflection from fresh cultural perspectives of more recent members of the global Church. Fortunately, many excellent examples of indigenous Christianity around the world are available to aid in this process.¹¹

A further trend within global Christianity is the appearance of unprecedented renewal occurring within all traditions. The locus of Christian renewal is clearly in the Global South, where the majority of its practitioners live and where it is growing the fastest. Renewal takes many forms, including Evangelical movements, liturgical renewal, Bible study fellowships, and house church movements. These movements are in no way limited to Protestant and Independent churches; one of the largest renewal movements worldwide is the Catholic Charismatics.¹² Indeed, one of the most visible and well-known movements globally is the Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal, described by Julie Ma and Allan Anderson as “one of the most significant forms of Christianity in the twentieth century. ... [I]n less than a century Pentecostal, Charismatic and associated movements have become a major new force in world Christianity.”¹³

Outsiders might well be amazed to discover that this movement, seemingly insignificant 100 years ago, would help shape Christianity into a largely non-Western phenomenon by the end of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Eighteen countries have a majority (over 50%) Pentecostal/Charismatic presence among Christians. The largest populations worldwide in both 1910 and 2010 were in the Global South—South Africa in 1910 and China in 2010 (note that the United States remained in the number three spot in both years). In fact, the United States is the only Northern country on the list of highest percentages of Pentecostals/Charismatics worldwide in 2010, with countries in Africa largely dominating.

Several characteristics of the movement helped catapult it onto the world stage. Pentecostalism’s stress on the spiritual realm very much aligns with the worldviews of the Global South, where spiritual and emotional experiences weigh heavily in daily life. The lively music found in Pentecostal worship sessions mimics Southerners’ exuberance of musical expression. In addition, the movement’s holistic spirituality—belief that not only is personal identity intimately connected to spirituality, but that one experiences a mystical connection to the Earth and cosmos through that spirituality—actively promotes the ideals of Spirit-filled holy life. Yet, the movement is far from universally accepted, as the controversy surrounding John MacArthur’s recent book *Strange Fire* and its associated conference shows.¹⁵

Another notable ongoing reality within global Christianity is the unequal distribution of Christian resources worldwide. Although most (62%) Christians now live in the Global South, the

10. Ibid., 204–5.

11. Examples are often most apparent in art and music. See a wide variety of artistic works published at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (www.omsc.org). For a fine compendium on Christian worship from around the world, see Charles E. Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

12. Latin-rite Catholic Charismatics number more than 133 million. Other large groupings of Pentecostals/Charismatics include Baptist-Pentecostals (77 million), Chinese Charismatics (76 million), African Independent Pentecostals (26 million), and Brazilian/Portuguese Pentecostals (17 million). Among the various major Christian traditions, Pentecostals/Charismatics total almost 23% of Catholics, 3% of Anglicans, 51% of Independents, 1% of Orthodox, and 22% of Protestants. See Johnson and Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 102.

13. Julie Ma and Allan Anderson, “Pentecostals (Renewalists), 1910–2010,” in *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 100–101.

14. Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 100.

15. John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2013).

Global North remains home to the majority of Christian financial resources. Africa, Asia, and Latin America combined hold about 21% of Christian wealth and receive only about 17% of all Christian income annually. The figures for Northern America and Europe are roughly 40% each for the two categories, with Northern American Christians holding slightly more wealth and European Christians having a higher annual total income. Christians are increasingly wrestling with the implications of these disparities for both their personal lifestyles and for ministry. For example, Southern Christians face considerable challenges in funding their ministry activities and staff, both domestic and international; meanwhile, Northern Christians struggle with finding ways to aid their brothers and sisters that do not create dependency. Finding new and creative ways to encourage responsible global stewardship will only increase in urgency as Southern Christianity continues to expand.

The potential and opportunities inherent in the shift

For centuries Northern scholars have written the dominant theologies of Christianity. The shift of Christianity's center to the Global South provides the opportunity for Southern Christians to frame future discussions about what Christianity is and how it is lived out. This process has to some extent already started, with the twentieth century witnessing the rise of liberation theology in Latin America, *minjung* theology in South Korea, and black theology in the United States. As leaders and thinkers in the Global South continue to work out what being a Christian means in their local contexts, as well as what being a Christian means in a wider sense, their scholarship must increasingly join that of Northerners in the preparation of teachers and ministers. With the end of Western Christendom and its dominance of Christianity throughout the world, theological education increasingly will need to equip spiritual leaders with the ability to engage multiple Christian traditions and perspectives. Only by doing this will they be able to work out what being a Christian means both locally and globally, in order to discover what normative Christianity should look like in this new reality.

Whereas the reflections of Northerners were largely shaped by the political and ecclesiastical structures of Christendom, Southern Christians are writing from the context of religious and ecclesiastical diversity. For 100 years the majority of Christian growth has been taking place not in the traditionally Christian countries of the North, but in both non-Christian and newly Christian lands in the South. As a result, Muslims and Christians are now in proximity in countries such as Nigeria, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The same is true of Hindus and Christians in India and of Buddhists and Christians in southeast Asia. Some see inevitable conflict in the future between adherents of different religions, especially with global Christianity. It has been argued that probable conflict lies on two levels: the level of international politics and at the grassroots level.¹⁶ However, too much attention has perhaps been given to the potential for clashing between Christians and other religionists, particularly Muslims.

Many adherents of the world's religions are living together as neighbors, co-workers, and friends as a result of migration and globalization. Migrants can build bridges across cultures rather than serve as instigators of "clashes of civilization." In addition, Christianity's new trajectory is giving Christians both North and South a new opportunity to show hospitality to non-Christian neighbors and to take a genuine interest in their religions and cultures. With Muslims and Christians accounting for 55% of the world's population (and expected to rise dramatically by 2050), it is especially important for members of each tradition to make a concerted effort to build friendships and talk to each other for the sake of restoring relationships and obtaining mutual understanding.

16. Lee, "The Future of Global Christianity," 105.

The shift of Christianity to the Global South has the potential to open up new possibilities for the life and health of Christianity around the world. It has been argued that the way of life in the Global South actually aligns more closely with the circumstances of biblical authors and events.¹⁷ African and Asian societies in particular have much in common with the biblical context, including the newness of the Christian faith and its minority status among religions. Philip Jenkins states, “In Africa particularly, Christians have long been excited by the obvious cultural parallels that exist between their own societies and those of the Hebrew Old Testament, especially the world of the patriarchs.”¹⁸ If the Global South’s worldview is actually closer to the one espoused by Jesus and His followers, what does this mean for the Western-dominated history of Christianity? It is true that Northern Christians have picked up habits and beliefs along the way that are now considered normative in Christianity, but do not necessarily line up with the biblical narrative. One example of this is experiences of healing, which are central to the validity of the apostles’ message and testament to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Western Christianity has by and large pushed miraculous healing and spiritual explanations for everyday events to the periphery of Christian thought, preferring scientific theorizing and other secular values and beliefs. However, healing and spiritual explanations for happenings in daily life are fundamental to the worldviews of many Christians in Asia and Africa.¹⁹

Conclusion

The demographic shift of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South over the past century has inaugurated a new chapter in the story of the Church. Northern dominance—in matters theological, ecclesiastical, cultural, or linguistic—is neither necessary nor desirable for Christian unity. Yet the future of Christianity cannot be written solely from a Southern perspective either. Achieving a truly global Christianity—one that combines the ever-increasing diversity of local Christianity with the call for Christian unity expressed by Jesus in John 17—requires Christians from both North and South to develop new ways of thinking and of being the Church. And even as they wrestle with those internal questions, their outreach to other religionists is also set in the new context of global Christianity, where the gospel can no longer be perceived solely as a Western phenomenon. How they respond to these challenges will determine the shape of the church of the future.

Author biography

Albert (Bert) Hickman is a research associate in Global Christianity at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, and an associate editor of the *Atlas of Global Christianity*. A graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, he also interned at the Center while a student. Before coming to New England he worked in engineering and environmental health in Texas.

17. See, e.g., Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). This includes the Old Testament, which speaks directly to local conditions, especially in Africa (p. 42).

18. *Ibid.*, 45.

19. *Ibid.*, 184–5.



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