

# Global Catholicism

*Profiles & Polarities*

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## Introduction

Of the 2.5 billion Christians in the world as of 2018, Catholics number more than 50 percent, over 1.2 billion. According to current estimates, Protestants represent about 37 percent, with another 12 percent belonging to the various Orthodox churches. Other less mainstream communities identifying as Christian (Christian Scientists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses) represent about 1 percent. Also remarkable is the growth of Pentecostal, charismatic, or renewalist churches today, with over 682 million members.<sup>1</sup> Catholics and Pentecostal/charismatics together constitute three quarters of global Christianity.

Yet demographic shifts are changing the face of world Christianity. The mainline churches of Europe and North America continue to lose members, while Christianity is exploding in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, usually referred to as the Global South. According to the Pew Forum, more than 1.3 billion Christians (61 percent) live in the Global South, compared with about 860 million in Europe and North America (39 percent).<sup>2</sup>

There are more Christians in the United States than in any other country in the world, some 173 million according to a 2015 Pew Research Center study, meaning that roughly seven in ten Americans identify with some Christian tradition. However, that population continues to decline, especially among Catholics and mainline Protestants, with the drop greatest among mainline Protestants. In 2007, there were an estimated 41 million mainline Protestant adults in the United States. As of 2014, there were roughly 36 million, a decline of 5 million. Evangelicals have also suffered some losses.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Todd M. Johnson, et al., "Christianity 2018: More African Christians and Counting Martyrs," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42, no. 1 (2018): 23–24.

<sup>2</sup>Pew Research Center, "Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and distribution of the World's Christian Population, December 19, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015.

According to the latest Pew study (2018–19), 65 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christian, down 12 percentage points from a decade ago, while the number describing themselves as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” is now at 26 percent of the population, up from 17 percent a decade ago. Some 43 percent of adults identify as Protestants, down from 51 percent in 2009, while Catholics went from 23 percent to 20 percent during the same period. Only 47 percent of Hispanics identify as Catholics, down from 57 percent ten years ago.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Catholic Church has the largest net loss, it is also the largest Christian community in the United States. According to a 2008 CARA study, its numbers would be even worse if it were losing members at the rate of the mainline Protestant churches.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, the latest numbers from the Pew Research Center are not good news. They show Catholics losing 12.9 percent of adults raised Catholics, compared to losses of 10.4 percent for mainline Protestants and 8.4 for evangelicals. Nearly 13 percent of all Americans are former Catholics.<sup>6</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, has suffered the largest drop in membership in more than a century. According to surveys conducted between 2015 and 2018, “just over half of those raised Southern Baptist were still with the SBC. In other words, nearly half of Southern Baptists kids leave and never come back.”<sup>7</sup>

However, if Christianity is in trouble in Europe and North America, it is exploding in the Global South. The growth of Christianity in Africa has been extraordinary, from 9 million in 1900 to an estimated 380 million today. The number of African Christians has already surpassed that of Christians in Latin America. According to Todd Johnson and his associates, “By 2050 there will likely be more Christians in Africa (1.25 billion) than in Latin America (705 million) and Europe (490 million) combined.”<sup>8</sup> This means that Europe will not dominate global Christianity as it did in the past.

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<sup>4</sup>Pew Research Center, “In US, Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” October 17, 2019.

<sup>5</sup>Mark M. Gray, “The Impact of Religious Switching and Secularization on the Estimated size of the US Adult Catholic Population,” Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Georgetown University, 2008.

<sup>6</sup>Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Chapter 2: Switching and Inter-marriage,” May 12, 2015.

<sup>7</sup>Ryan P. Burge, “Only Half of Kids Raised Southern Baptist Stay Southern Baptist,” *Christianity Today*, May 24, 2019.

<sup>8</sup>Johnson, et al., “Christianity 2018,” 21.

In Asia, Christianity continues to grow, driven by mushrooming evangelical and Pentecostal churches. In 1970, there were 17 million Asian evangelicals and Pentecostals; today, the number is over 200 million. The largest congregations are in South Korea and the Philippines, with megachurches in the tens of thousands of members. Christianity is growing also in Indonesia and Malaysia among Buddhists and Confucians. The City Harvest Church in Singapore has a weekly attendance of just under sixteen thousand. The service involves music from a rock group, prayer in tongues, and witness. Many of these megachurches preach the “prosperity gospel.” In Singapore, the Christian population, most of it evangelical or Pentecostal, has increased from 2 percent in 1970 to 8 percent in 2015.

Christianity in China continues to grow despite the efforts of the Chinese government to limit its growth. Estimates put the Catholic population at between 10 and 12 million, while those of evangelical and Pentecostal Christians range from 40 to 60 million, with some suggesting numbers as high as 100 million.

The Catholic Church today, with its enormous numbers and worldwide presence, is truly a global church, at once the world’s oldest institution and a transnational actor. My intention in this book is to survey global Catholicism in an effort to give a brief profile of the church’s dimensions, state of health, polarities both internal and external, and emerging trends by looking at Catholic churches around the world. These churches exist in very different cultures and face different challenges. Some with long histories are showing their age with a loss of vitality. Others are new churches, moving beyond their missionary or colonial past; they struggle with questions of inculturation, developing their own spiritualities, finding their own voices, or learning how best to proclaim the gospel in the pluralistic and sometimes hostile cultures in which they are rooted.

The Second Vatican Council was an effort to renew the church, trying to move beyond its long battle with modernity and bring it into the twentieth century. But we are now in the twenty-first century, and the challenges facing the church are considerable. An increasing number of people are leaving the church, not just in Europe and the United States but in other parts of the world as well. A pluralism of nontraditional spiritual practices presents options for some, while a considerable pluralism of theologies, liturgical tastes, spiritual practices, and social commitments exists within the church itself. Many Catholics experience a disconnection between their lives and official teachings, especially in the areas of marriage and sexuality, but they remain active in pastoral or educational

ministries and do not consider themselves any less Catholic. Apart from India and Islamic countries, secularism prevails. In some countries religious liberty is at risk and Christians are persecuted.

So how does the church find new ways to make its message heard? How can it continue to mediate an experience of the Holy? How does it renew itself for the sake of its mission? Cultural individualism finds expression even within the church, as many of those still practicing do so on their own terms. Authority, institutions, and traditional metanarratives are suspect. Without cultural supports for religious practice, the few devotional practices that remain, at least in the West, are generally not valued. What is respected is experience.

A global Catholic Church will no longer be served by a highly centralized, institutional authority, and a Eurocentric theology will not suffice. Nor will patriarchal structures. The structures of the church need reform; they need to be less focused on Rome, open to greater diversity and the participation of previously excluded voices. In Africa and Asia inculturation becomes increasingly important. Many of those still in the church want models and inspirational figures, not teachers. Others are “seekers,” not churchgoers but still not free of a cultural or residual Christianity. They long for some spiritual key to unlock the conflicting values and ideas mediated by digital media, for some illuminating vision.

Vatican II is an important reference point, but not the final word; it is better understood as the point of departure for a renewed church.<sup>9</sup> Or as Johanna Rahner says, “The comfortable identity of the ‘stronghold of eternal truths,’ which the Catholic Church displayed in the 19th century by using the image of a hierarchical ordered *societas perfecta*, is being replaced by the uncomfortable and unsettling situation of a continuous journey.”<sup>10</sup> But it is a journey into a future yet unknown; it means reading the signs of the times to discern what the Spirit might be saying.

Pope Francis, the first non-European pontiff, is seeking to carry through that renewal and reform in the twenty-first century. His ecclesial vision sees the church as a church of and for the poor, a welcoming church no longer centered in Europe, but one that goes to the peripheries without losing its gospel identity. His influence will be seen in the pages that

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<sup>9</sup> See Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers, eds., *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Johanna Rahner, “A Less Eurocentric Theology: Advantages, Tasks, and Challenges,” in Hellemans and Jonkers, *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church*, 164.

follow. In the final chapter I suggest what this survey might mean for the church's future.

Naturally, with more than 1.2 billion Catholics, such a survey can be little more than an overview; not every church or country can be included. I apologize for those I have omitted. Nevertheless, what emerges is a sketch of a global church, often struggling, sometimes polarized or persecuted, but rich in its diversity, its peoples, and its lives of faith.