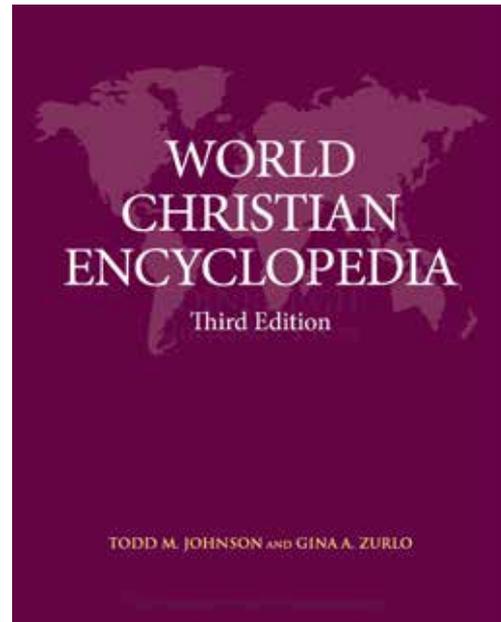


The Future of Frontier missions and the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd edition



BY TODD M. JOHNSON

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The year 2020 marks 10 years since a series of meetings in Tokyo, Edinburgh, Cape Town, and Boston commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference. This year also marks the publication of a seminal reference work in mission and World Christianity: the 3rd edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, produced by Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo (Edinburgh University Press). Furthermore, 2020 marks a decade since the publication of an earlier major reference work, the *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910–2010* (Edinburgh University Press), produced by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and copiously referenced in anticipation of and during these global gatherings. One of the Atlas's purposes was to map the presence of Christianity around the world and to assess Christian mission and evangelization. In doing so, it brought attention to peoples and places around the world where Christianity had not yet reached.

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The Tokyo meeting in May 2010 focused primarily on peoples unreached by the gospel. Echoing the “watchword” from Edinburgh 1910, the Tokyo Declaration states, “We set forth this declaration in obedience to Christ’s final command, as a means of calling Christ-followers everywhere to whole-heartedly embrace and earnestly engage in ‘making disciples of every people in our generation’.... We will seek to know where people are unreached, overlooked, ignored, or forgotten.” Delegates in Tokyo looked for clarity on the status of the world’s peoples in relationship to Christian mission, as well as sought to develop strategies that might assist in reaching all peoples. In doing so, the meeting had a decidedly frontier missions focus.

Before this time, Christians from various traditions largely considered other Christians as their “frontier” in mission, seemingly unaware of how to push the boundaries of mission beyond established Christianity. Frontier mission—defined as mission outside of Christianity mainly among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Christians—was a significant focus for Barrett and other church-based researchers starting in the 1970s. The 2nd edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* was published in 2001 and added a comprehensive list of the world’s peoples and languages with their status in

relation to the presence of Christianity, various forms of evangelization and Bible translation. This text presented another way of measuring frontier mission, by analyzing the quantity and quality of Christian resources among a people group. The fewer the resources, the further they were from the gospel message. This method has been continually updated and maintained in the online *World Christian Database* (Brill).

The 3rd edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* uncovered some notable findings that relate to frontier missions in 2020. Although 10 years is too short of a time period to highlight significant change, these findings offer some initial reflections since 2010. Many of these findings continue from where the *Atlas of Global Christianity* concluded.

The most important finding related to frontier missions is that **87% of all Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists (3 billion people in total) do not personally know a Christian.** Within a country, or even within a city, adherents of different religions can be isolated from each other, in many ways, including geographically, ethnically, socially and economically. The WCE3's concept of "personal contact" measures the number of non-Christians who personally know a Christian by applying a formula to each ethnolinguistic people group. Values for each country, region, and continent produce a global total. Although this number is an estimate, it offers a preliminary assessment of a critical shortfall in Christian mission.

Another finding is that **in 2000, 30% of the world (1.84 billion people) had not been evangelized. In 2020, this has improved slightly to 28.2% or 2.2 billion.** Our projection for 2050 is 28.0% or 2.7 billion unevangelized. Evangelization is measured by assessing whether individuals have had an adequate opportunity to hear the Christian message and to respond to it, whether they respond positively or negatively. This is estimated by analyzing evangelistic ministries at work in countries and peoples. Asia is the least evangelized continent in 2020 at 60% evangelized. Our estimates show that the rate of evangelization has slowed to the point where it is barely keeping up with population growth.

Further findings relate to the overall growth of religious affiliation. **In 1970, 81% of the world's population belonged to a religion. In 2020 it is 89% and by 2050, the world will likely be 91% religious.** This trend is counterintuitive for Christians in the North, where it is perceived that religion is dying, but the world is indeed

becoming more religious because religion is growing in China and India, the world's two largest countries. The issue here is that Christians in the Global North, where most of the resources are, experience secularization, and then improperly project their experience to the rest of the world. The problem for frontier missions is that Christians in the Global North generally are not adept at interacting with people of other religions, yet, with their resource base, they continue to drive the global frontier mission enterprise. One recent study in Singapore found that nine out of 10 Singaporeans are comfortable living and working with people of different ethnicities or religions. In the Global North, similar polls show results closer to one in 10. But it is Christians in the Global North who write most of the books on how people in other religions can get along! Xenophobia is also much stronger in North America and Europe. It's clear that Christians in Asia, who are used to living in multi-religious contexts, should be leading the way in how to love and interact with people of other religions.

At the center of this Christian interaction with people in other religions is the relationship between Christianity and Islam. **In 1800, 33% of the world was either Christian or Muslim. In 2020, it is 57% and by 2050 a likely 64% of the world will be Christian or Muslim.** Despite the prevalence of these two traditions, the relationship between the two is still predicated on the fact that Christians represent the "Western World" and Muslims the "Arab World." Neither of these are true. Christianity is a majority Global South faith and the countries with the most Muslims are Indonesia, India, and Pakistan. The relationship between Christians and Muslims requires a fresh global approach to interfaith dialogue.

One important finding of the WCE is the continued shift of Christianity to the Global South. **In 1900, 18% of all Christians lived in the Global South. In 2020, 67% of Christians live in the global South.** Although in mission communities the shift is largely a well-known fact, it has not yet transformed frontier mission strategy. In recent years, the standard approach is for Western agencies to recruit non-Westerners for their work force. The movement of non-Westerners into the leadership of these agencies has been slow but is crucial to make the most impact in frontier mission. Nonetheless, Christians of the Global South are making and implementing their own plans for evangelization efforts, both within their countries and as cross-cultural missionaries.

The single greatest change in the shift to the global South has been the remarkable and rapid growth of Christianity in Africa. **From only 1.7% in 1900, by 2050, 39% of all Christians worldwide will live in Africa.** For Protestants this figure is even higher. **Today, 44% of all Protestants are Africans and by 2050 it will likely be 55%.** At the same time, Africans are underrepresented at nearly all global Christian events. A group of about 100 Protestant leaders from around the world gathered at a celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in Wittenberg, Germany in 2017. Only six Africans were in attendance. A white participant stated in front of the crowd, “Africans are welcome at the table.” One of the Africans responded, “In my country we have a proverb. ‘It is good for you to invite me to the table, but it is better if you invite me in the kitchen.’” In frontier missions, Africans should be in the kitchen but they are normally invited to the table where the menu has already been determined by Western Christians, who, due to their history and context, are the least adept at interacting with people in other religions, the core of the frontier missions task.

Fragmentation is another challenge for frontier mission, both by Christians from the Global North and Global South. **There are 45,000 Christian denominations and rites in the world.** Why so many denominations? Christians so often want to distinguish themselves from each other and choose to emphasize certain characteristics of their faith above others. The 16th-century Protestant Reformation was highly generative in the fragmentation of Christianity. Its emphasis on individual reading and interpretation of Scripture, combined with renewed religious freedom, resulted in the development of new Christian groups, each an attempt to capture a “purer” Christianity. As the Reformation expanded throughout Europe, the beginning of what is known today as denominationalism began. From the earliest days of Christianity, prophetic writers have called the church around the world to spiritual unity, yet our history is one of deep and frequent division. While there are important theological differences, many of our problems can be attributed to cultural and social differences. For frontier missions, disunity among Christians sows confusion. Which form of Christianity are new converts supposed to follow? Christians have the opportunity to come together in unity while maintaining distinctives, partly for their own sakes, and partly for the sakes of others and for the sake of witness to Christ around the world.

The third edition of the WCE is different from the first two editions in its efforts to highlight pressing social issues of today’s world, ranging from conflict and violence, persecution, Christians in politics, theological education, medical ministries, etc. All of these have significant impacts on pioneer mission, which often occurs in places with low rankings on socio-economic-development measures. While awareness is increasing of the growth of Christianity in, for example, sub-Saharan Africa, many overlook the critical realities that Christians face there—they are simply more vulnerable and less healthy than Christians in the West. One question posed by the findings of the WCE in relationship to frontier mission is the contributions of women. Women play a tremendous role in churches around the world, ranging from ordained pastoral leadership to healthcare and education. While no hard data exist, it is widely believed that most foreign missionaries in the world today (425,000 total) are women. Frontier mission strategy should think clearly about the unique contributions and gifts of women and encourage them to rise up into leadership positions.

Each of these findings will have a continuing impact on the frontier mission enterprise in the years ahead. The good news is that Christianity is growing beyond its base in the Western world where xenophobia is strong and Christians report negative feelings about people of other religions. The shift to the Global South is the future of frontier mission but bad habits from the West have already infected some churches in the Global South. For example, one of the fastest growing missionary movements is based in South Korea where Christianity is both fragmented and deeply xenophobic. Further questions arise about contextualization efforts of newer missionary-sending churches; for example, are Korean churches exporting Korean Christianity, or are they learning from the mistakes of the West? Christians from all over the world are taking up the call to go to peoples where the gospel is not known. Authentic, global partnerships in mission is the key to successful frontier mission strategy today and in the future. 