

## Book Review

**Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia, Third Edition***

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Few global Christianity publications offer in one place information that is as helpful and broad based as the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. A continuing project on the social scientific study of religion pioneered by David Barrett, this third edition assembles a large amount of unique material about religious belonging from around the globe. It benefits from extensive experience and a comprehensive information database built over the years by Gordon-Conwell's Centre for the Study of Global Christianity. This is the first edition without Barrett as one of its editors. Its launch comes at a time when World Christianity has grown to be an important field of study in many universities around the world.

### **The Thesis of the Project**

The *World Christian Encyclopedia, Third Edition* (WCE3) presents the membership of Christianity around the world within its social, environmental, and political contexts. WCE3's substantial analysis and thoughtful presentations serve well the publication's implicit thesis that it is possible to present the state of global Christianity in one, albeit large, tome. Attention to visual presentation of data and the carefully written narratives allow readers to gain a clear understanding of adherents of the Christian faith around the world. This edition is more comprehensive than the previous two, providing much more data communicated efficiently through graphics. This edition is the first to pay particular attention to the crucial but poorly documented role of women in the growth of Christianity around the world. While admitting that this emphasis is just a beginning, this edition's welcome engagement with the contribution of women in World Christianity goes much further than many other accounts do.

The nature of church affiliations has changed dramatically since the first edition was published in 1982. Both the structure and nature of denominations around the world make this kind of demographic research all the more difficult. This offering attempts to come to terms with these complex patterns of church membership that are found in the world. The *Encyclopedia* admits these difficulties and where possible tries to account for them. Such a task faces the dual challenges of communication and credible research data from places like Africa and Oceania. In all, the document succeeds in demonstrating through statistical data the demographic shift over the last 50 years of the centre of Christianity to the Global South.

### **The Team**

WCE3 brings together the insights of about 700 collaborators and contributors who together provide the data for 234 countries of the world. Some of these come from the countries themselves, and many are in-country experts. The enormity of this editorial feat is evident in the breadth and depth of the resulting publication. The editors are well suited for the task. Todd M.

Johnson brings to bear his decades of experience in demographic studies of religion around the world. In addition to his involvement with the second edition and the highly acclaimed PEW forum projects on religious demography, Johnson has published encyclopedias, atlases, monographs, and numerous articles. He leads the *World Christian Database* project at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He also leads the *World Religion Database* project at Boston University's Institute for Culture, Religion and World affairs. Johnson was a co-editor in the WCE second edition, published in 2001. Gina Zurlo, also from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, is the new co-editor for the work. A renowned researcher in the field, she has been involved in major projects about counting religious adherents, such as *The World's Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography*. Her work can be found in numerous articles on religious demography. If the earlier editions are anything to go by, this edition of the *Encyclopedia* will likely cement the place of these researchers as the shapers of Christian religious demography for years, possibly decades to come.

### **A Summary of the Contents**

Two distinctive features that immediately stand out to the reader are the size of this volume and its heavily illustrated presentation. The 1000-page tome makes for a lively reading experience with over 2000 illustrations, 1500 tables, 234 maps, and over 64 pages of colour drawings. The graphics offer creative, space-efficient ways of delivering copious amounts of useful data. The first illustration, for instance, is entitled "The World As 100 Christians" (3) and depicts 18 pieces of comparative information as percentages all on the same diagram. Together with the illustrations and tables, readers will also see photos of Christians from the countries to give a sense of what their lived Christianity looks like. One cannot fail to see from the descriptions and supporting data the gradual growth in strength of Christianity in the Global South over a period of 120 years.

WCE3 begins by giving a fairly concise summary of the state of Christianity in the world. In the opening pages the editors cover important, wide-ranging themes in the lives of Christians, such as infant mortality, malaria prevalence, access to doctors, and availability of internet. Here the editors establish the definitions of the Global South and Global North. The segment issues a helpful corrective about the prevailing narrative of Christianity, demonstrating that Christians in Africa and Asia were, for most of the first millennium, greater in number than in what we now call the Global North. WCE3 defines and makes use of "Christian Families," a new categorization of Christianity that is likely to be increasingly useful in describing the diverse Christianities around the world. WCE3 defines these Christian Families as "groupings of autonomous churches or denominations that are linked by similar ecclesiastical tradition, history and name" (7). The overview does not abandon the more well-known groupings of Christians by tradition. The Christian traditions explored in the overview are Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Independents. Evangelicals and Pentecostals/Charismatics are variously addressed within the country narratives. The opening summary also paints in broad strokes Christianity on the continents of the world, treated alphabetically: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Northern America, and Oceania. Various themes featured include women, mission, ethnic groupings, and the religions of the world. What follows is the substance of the publication - a country by country treatment of Christian demographic data.

This extensive section forms the bulk of the content through which this book, similar to the previous editions, more than adequately delivers its promise as a reference work. Each country section is a complete unit supplying in an easily comparable format all the data relevant to the development of Christianity. The country data contains geographical information on a map, standard population statistics, as well as economic, health, and gender data. Tables show the change of religious demographics from 1900 to 2050 and the rate of growth for various religions from 1900 to 2020. This data is supported by supplementary notes which address context-specific issues for each country.

Two elements stand out in these country synopses. The first of these bears David Barrett's distinctive trademark first seen in his 1973 compendium, the *Kenya Churches Handbook*. Like in Barrett's handbook, each country section in WCE3 contains a list of churches and denominations. Through this list, the reader can quickly obtain a reasonably accurate grasp of the Christian communities and their relative strength within the demographic context of the country. In keeping true to its mission-focussed roots, WCE3 accompanies this list of denominations with information about missionaries and indigenous (national) workers.

The other important element is the "main narrative" of each country section. This is a story of the development of Christianity within the country, outlining the key features of Christian growth. After a short introduction, each narrative typically reflects on the development of Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Independents, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals/Charismatics, as appropriate for each country. Issues such as outreach, media, mission, women, megachurches, and ecumenism are also covered within this section. At the end of the narrative comes a helpful bibliography which interested readers can visit to find in order to augment their knowledge.

A small call-out box on "Religious freedom" provides information about the ways in which the state interacts with religion. This is an important piece which enhances the readers' understanding of the context within which Christianity (or the lack thereof) operates. The country narratives also include colour and black-and-white pictures which convey to the reader a visual representation of lived-out Christianity in these contexts.

At the end of WCE3 is an article on methodology that provides the conceptual framework around which the book is built. This section pays attention to the sources of data and the development of databases. The essay points readers to the *World Christian Database*, which built upon Barrett's meticulous collections of data on the Christian denominations of the world. WCE3 relies on the 2015 edition of this data. The data is interpreted primarily on the principle of self-identification. Whether the data is from government statistics, local membership information, or surveys, the researchers paid attention to what the religious groups said about their own numbers. While this perspective may have its own difficulties, it has the important distinction of putting the Christian communities' narratives at the centre of the global story of Christianity. We will return to this topic shortly.

### **Strengths and Observations**

If an encyclopedia is meant to gather in one place essential information about different aspects of a subject, then WCE3 has succeeded in its purpose, as far as World Christianity is concerned. The all-encompassing data delivered creatively, simply, and efficiently is a primary strength of this publication. Furthermore, while the previous edition spread the data over two volumes amounting to 1700 pages, this one volume format is appealing because of the convenience of

thumbing through one 1000-page book to search or compare different pieces of data. One other strength worth noting is the methodological decision to employ self-identification as the organizing principle. Having come from a majority world context where local data has historically been subject to foreign researcher biases, I find the privileging of local narratives a welcome perspective that will in time lead to more accurate and better nuanced information, especially on the Global South. Self-identification is not without its challenges, but the benefits of a correctly nuanced, indigenously originated picture, in my view, outweigh these potential problems.

WCE3 acknowledges the challenge of obtaining reliable data from some places, especially in the Global South. For these areas the editors relied on available data, researchers, and mostly foreign, in-country experts. According to the list given (vii-viii), WCE3 does not feature indigenous collaborators for some countries in the Global South. The emergence of native missiologists and World Christianity scholars and researchers since the late 1990s affords the possibility of more representation of the Global South on the list of collaborators and contributors. This will be worth taking into account going forward.

The information contained in this volume makes it an essential document for personal libraries and, very importantly, reference sections of any university serving students of religion. For a project this comprehensive, the book is reasonably priced at around US\$238 for a hard-cover edition. That said, from my knowledge of the context, I would venture to say that this price is beyond reach for many potential individual and library users in the Global South. One could argue that institutions, for instance, could subscribe to the world databases on religion or Christianity. However, these databases sit behind a price wall which stands in the way of knowledge distribution, further exacerbating the well-known global inequalities. Aspects of these inequalities are well illustrated within the publication's own data. Distribution of such knowledge to the Global South is thus a discussion which the project leaders, publisher, and others can explore to come up with viable mechanisms to address the issue in the future.

## **Conclusion**

The editors have, in putting together this data, assembled a document that will likely be the benchmark for reference books on Christian religious demography for the foreseeable future. This formidable effort negotiated substantial difficulties of communication, data collection, and researcher availability to present a sound, credible reference work. The highly skilled editorial team's success in obtaining, collating, and creatively presenting highly complex data eloquently articulates the story of one of the most remarkable centuries in the growth of Christianity. I commend this book to scholars and missionaries alike, who will find this an indispensable asset for their work.