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Study compares Catholicism to Christianity across the globe

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All Things Catholic



I happen to groove on population statistics, but I realize that for

most people they rival watching paint dry, or the heartbreak of psoriasis, as a good time. Faced with a new report from the Pew Forum on the global Christian population, therefore, let's start with a few deliberately bold assertions to get the blood moving.

Based on the study, here are three rules of thumb about Christian growth and decline -- extrapolations which go well beyond the contents of the Pew report, but which can be supported by the data it contains:

- If you want Christianity to shrink, give it wealth and privilege and back it up with the power of the state.
- If you want Christianity to show surprising resilience, suppress its structures and persecute its people.
- If you want Christianity to thrive, drop it into a free market environment and force it to hustle.

One might call these conclusions ?Laws of Christian Thermodynamics?, meaning generalizations about

how Christian systems change when they interact with their environment. Pondering the massive Pew report released Monday, titled "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," it's tough not to find them persuasive.

Here's why.

Europe, the erstwhile capital of Christendom, has lost its pride of place. A century ago, two-thirds of all Christians lived in Europe; today, only a quarter of the world's 2.18 billion Christians are on the old continent. In ultra-secular Western Europe, majorities still identify as Christian, but the percentage share of the population is down sharply.

Despite decades of state-imposed atheism, Christianity is doing remarkably well in Communist lands (either former or current.) Two in three Russians still identify as Orthodox, and some analysts believe there's a renaissance afoot in Russian Orthodoxy. China is experiencing a spiritual boom, and today China is the third-largest Protestant nation in the world, trailing only the United States and Nigeria.

Christianity's greatest growth is in Africa, a wide-open spiritual marketplace marked by stiff competition among religious alternatives. During the past century, Christianity in Africa grew by an astonishing 6,000 percent, from 8.5 million to 516 million. Christians were nine percent of the African population in 1910; by 2010, they were 63 percent. Over the same span, sub-Saharan Africa went from 1.4 percent of the global Christian total to 24 percent.

Put all that together, and the Laws of Christian Thermodynamics look pretty solid. In any event, it's food for thought during the holiday season.

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Based on the Pew Forum report, Christianity in the early 21st century comes off as a decidedly "multi-polar" faith. Nigeria today has more than twice as many Protestants as Germany, the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation; Brazil has more than twice as many Catholics as Italy, the headquarters of Roman Catholicism Inc.

Today, no single continent contains a majority of the world's Christian population, which suggests that no one regional expression of Christianity can claim to be normative anymore.

The United States is the largest Christian nation in the world, according to the Pew data, with a total of 247 million Christians. Rounding out the top ten are Brazil, Mexico, Russia, the Philippines, Nigeria, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany, and Ethiopia. Note that only one nation from Western Europe, and just two from the West generally, make the list.

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Similar trajectories run through Catholicism, with the important difference that the United States is not in pole position. Here are the ten largest Catholic countries in the world as of 2010, according to the Pew data:

- Brazil: 133 million
- Mexico: 96 million
- Philippines: 76 million

- United States: 74 million
- Italy: 50 million
- Colombia: 38 million
- France: 37 million
- Poland: 35 million
- Spain: 34 million
- DR Congo: 31 million

In my 2009 book *The Future Church*, I ran projections for the Catholic population in 2050. By mid-century, DR Congo will rise to fifth place on the "Top Ten" list of Catholic nations, just behind the United States. Spain and Poland will drop off altogether, replaced by Nigeria and Uganda.

None of this, of course, should come as a surprise to anyone who's been paying attention. That said, there are two further reflections worth developing based on the "Global Christianity" report.

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Most Christians, according to the Pew data, have never experienced life as a religious minority. While Christians comprise just one-third of the world's population, they represent a statistical majority in 158 countries, two-thirds of all the nations on earth. Only about ten percent of the world's Christians live in societies where they are a minority.

This data may help explain a fact of Christian life that otherwise seems inexplicable, which is the decidedly tepid response to anti-Christian violence around the world. Perhaps Christians have a hard time getting worked up about religious persecution because, frankly, most of them have never experienced it.

Those who have, however, are taking it on the chin.

According to the International Society for Human Rights, a secular NGO based in Germany, fully 80 percent of all acts of religious intolerance in the world are directed at Christians. A recent symposium organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe asserted that 200 million Christians are currently the victims of violence, oppression or harassment.

Just in the last few days:

- A well-known Christian catechist was killed in the Indian state of Orissa, site of a ferocious anti-Christian pogrom in 2008 that left roughly a hundred dead, hundreds more wounded, and thousands homeless.
- A Sister of Charity of Jesus and Mary was killed in the Indian state of Jharkhand, allegedly by mining interests threatened by her activism among poor tribals.
- Catholics in Kirkuk, Iraq, erected a monument to 36 Christian martyrs since 2003, a reminder of the decimation of Iraq's once-sizeable Christian community.
- In Pakistan, a 38-year-old Christian mother of two is facing a death sentence under the country's blasphemy law, allegedly for challenging the treatment of women in Islam during a 2010 discussion about religion in her village.

If this were happening to any other religious community, the outcry almost certainly would be deafening. Airwaves would be filled with spiritual leaders and pundits demanding action, while the grassroots would be organizing solidarity campaigns. In the Christian world, especially in the West, the basic response instead seems to be silence.

Analysts of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict have often speculated that one difficulty with Israeli policy is that Jews have a hard time thinking of themselves as a majority. Perhaps the equal-and-opposite problem on the Christian side is that we're incapable of seeing ourselves as a minority, even when we are.

In a world in which 200 million Christians are under assault, that's one bit of cultural psychology Christians might do well to overcome.

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An interesting term of comparison in the Pew data lies between Catholicism and Protestantism. In a nutshell, there's reason to believe that although both traditions have suffered declines in Europe, Catholicism has weathered the storm of secularism more successfully than Protestantism — at least, so far.

The demographic transition from north to south is the Christian mega-story of our time, but it's even more pronounced on the Protestant side of the street.

Europe today accounts for one-quarter of the world's Catholic population, but just 13 percent of the Protestant total. There are now more Protestants in Nigeria and China alone than in all of Europe.

The "Global Christianity" report includes a close-up look at Germany which is especially revealing. Today, there are 29 million Protestants in Germany and 28 million Catholics, each representing a third of the national population. A century ago, however, Catholics were also a third of the German population, but Protestants were a robust sixty percent.

The report draws the obvious conclusion: "The Protestant proportion of the population has declined significantly, whereas the Catholic proportion has remained roughly the same."

The Pew report also spotlights the United Kingdom, where the Church of England is the dominant Christian body. Data from the U.K.'s Annual Population Survey indicate that the proportion of the population which identifies as Christian fell from 78 percent in 2004-2005 to 72 percent in 2008 — a drop-off of six percentage points in just four years.

During a telephone conference call with the Pew researchers on Monday, I asked if the data suggest Catholic losses in Europe have been less severe than in Protestantism. They were hesitant to press too hard on that conclusion, especially because confessional totals from a century ago are often imprecise, but demographer Conrad Hackett leaned in that direction.

"My impression is that Catholic identity tends to "stick" in a way that may not be true for other traditions in countries experiencing a lot of religious change," Hackett said.

None of this means Catholicism is flourishing in Europe, because it's not. It does suggest, however, that Catholicism may possess a few anti-bodies against secularism that some other Christian traditions lack.

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