

[PCS 8 (2023–2024) 74–84]

HOME AWAY FROM HOME:
AN OUTSIDERS' REFLECTION ON THE 2021 CANADIAN CENSUS

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The last century has seen seismic shifts in global Christianity. Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania are Christianity's current home. Lamin Sanneh, Andrew F. Walls, Philip Jenkins, Patrick Johnstone, Joel A. Carpenter, Kwame Bediako, Jehu J. Hanciles, and many others have written extensively on this phenomenal shift of the Christian faith.

In the last century, there has been notable population growth in these regions accompanied by rapid accession to Christian faith, resulting in an increase in the Christian population. Jenkins provides an example from Kenya:

[I]n the lands that would become Kenya, the population in 1900 was a mere one million, but that figure has now [in 2014] swollen to around 40 million, in little over a century. By 2050, Kenya could have 80 million people or more. In 1900, there were three Europeans for every African; by 2050, there should be three Africans for every European. In consequence, the absolute number of African believers soared, from just 10 million in 1900 to 500 million by 2015 or so, and (if projections are correct) to an astonishing billion by 2050. Put another way, the number of African Christians in 2050 will be almost twice as large as the total figure for all Christians alive anywhere in the globe back in 1900.¹

1. Jenkins, "Changes and Trends," 17, 18.

The growth of Christianity in the Global South is not tied to a close connection between Christianity and secular powers. That form of Christianity, usually referred to as *Christendom*, is a cultural and “territorial expression of Christianity”² or “the territorial Empire of Christ,”³ in which Christian identity—though not necessarily Christian faith—is adopted, or rather assumed, “essentially in terms of law and custom.”⁴ This “*corpus Christianum*” was conceived as “a single society in which the whole of public and private life was to be controlled by the Christian revelation”⁵—and with its laws and customs supported by the secular state. But when the secular state provides backing to Christianity, it does so in the presence of skeptical observers and outspoken critics who view such support with suspicion because of their apprehensions regarding the convergence of secular authority and religious objectives. Frequently, Christianity flourished in regions where it constituted a minority religion, thriving amidst challenges, such as opposition, poverty, and frequent persecution. Interestingly, and contrary to general expectations, “it was precisely as Western colonialism ended that Christianity began a period of explosive growth that still continues unchecked.”⁶

The kind of Christianity that took root bears a different flavor from the one bequeathed to local communities by Western missionaries. Gone are the days when it can be assumed that “the American” (or Canadian or British or other European) “way of life [is the] supreme expression of Christianity.”⁷ In Africa, the Christian faith is authentic, charismatic, practical, and real. It is a faith that offers tangible solutions to real-time challenges facing people. Andrew Walls memorably noted that “the urge to make Chris-

2. Walls, “The Eighteenth-Century Protestant Missionary Awakening,” 41.

3. Walls, “The Translation Principle in Christian History,” 37.

4. Walls, *The Missionary Movement from the West*, 8. Sierra Leonean theologian Jehu Hanciles similarly defines Christendom as “the experience and understanding of Christianity as a territorial and tribal faith.” Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 3.

5. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 101.

6. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 70.

7. Hastings, “The Clash of Nationalism and Universalism,” 32.

tianity a place to feel at home, rooted in a people's culture, life and language, is of the heart of the gospel because it is a fundamental of the gospel that God takes us as we are, simply on grounds of what Christ has done."⁸ Christianity has experienced phenomenal growth in the Global South precisely where and when the local people have found, or made, Christianity to be *a place to feel at home*. This contrasts with the current reality in Canada, where there is a real "decline in the practice of religious activities, both collectively and individually, and in the importance of religious and spiritual convictions in how people live their lives"⁹ and "surveys consistently report that people believe that religion does more harm than good."¹⁰ Prior to the mid-1940s, acceptance "of the basic tenets of Christianity was assumed to be part of the worldview of any educated Canadian" whereas today there is "a kind of chasm . . . between religion and society" in Canada.¹¹ But in contemporary Africa, faith still profoundly influences the way individuals lead their lives, with religion and daily existence intricately connected and inseparable. As John Mbiti observes, Africans carry their religion to the fields, to educational institutions, to the marketplace, and even to the parliament; the African person is "notoriously religious."¹²

The profile of global Christianity has evolved, with a Christian individual more likely to be a Black woman in Eldoret, Kenya, or a Hispanic woman in São Paulo, Brazil, rather than a White man or woman in Toronto, Canada. This demographic portrait of Christianity is anticipated to remain unchanged in the near future. As the Canadian Survey shows, there is still a massive growth of "racialized groups in Canada," representing 16.1 percent of Canada's population.¹³ Jenkins avers that by 2050 "even our

8. Walls, "Africa and Christian Identity," 11; Walls is alluding to the titular theme of Welbourn and Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home*.

9. Statistics Canada, *The Canadian Census*, 13.

10. Zurlo, *Global Christianity*, 79.

11. Bramadat, "Beyond Christian Canada," 3–4.

12. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1.

13. "The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country's Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity," *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 2. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

‘Euro-American’ Christians will include Congolese believers living in Paris, Chinese in Vancouver, Korean in Los Angeles, and Nigerians almost anywhere.”¹⁴ Given that “immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians,”¹⁵ it is crucial to investigate the impact of immigration on the decline or growth of Christianity in Canada.

In Canada, as in Europe, the United States, and Australia, Christianity has experienced a swift decrease, as the Census indicates. The figures reveal a diminishing trend, with 77.1 percent of the population identifying with the Christian religion in 2001, 67.3 percent in 2011, and further dropping to 53.3 percent in 2021. Interestingly, around 12.6 million people, constituting one-third of the population, reported having no religious affiliation,¹⁶ an increase from 19 percent in 2004.¹⁷ The Census also pointed out the possible decrease in religious beliefs among individuals who move to Canada and among children born in Canada.¹⁸ Other demographers found that Canada “was 98% Christian in 1990 and 63% in 2020,” with a drop to 53 percent expected all too soon.¹⁹ It is crucial to investigate the underlying reasons for this phenomenon. That said, immigration offers hope for the Christian faith in Canada and beyond.

In an article titled “New Canadians Promise Renewal for Christian Churches,” published in the *Edmonton Journal* on 7 April 2012, the author stated that “immigrants from the Southern Hemisphere are already altering Canada’s religious landscape, by-

14. Jenkins, “Changes and Trends,” 18.

15. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 14. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

16. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 2, 12, 13. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

17. Reimer, “A Demographic Look at Evangelical Congregations,” 1.

18. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 13. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

19. Zurlo, *Global Christianity*, 78.

passing the shrinking mainline Protestant churches while infusing Catholic and Pentecostal congregations with devout newcomers.”²⁰ The Census agrees on this trend:

Catholics are the largest Christian denomination in Canada, with 10.9 million people (29.9%) in 2021. The United Church (3.3%) and the Anglican Church (3.1%), two other Christian denominations, each had more than 1 million people in Canada. Orthodox Christians (1.7%), Baptists (1.2%), and Pentecostals and other Charismatics (1.1%) were the other Christian denominations most often reported.²¹

From the Census, it is clear that global migration is a contemporary expression of missions. Despite certain indications of the adverse effects of migration on Christianity (e.g., “Immigration is one of the key drivers of non-Christian religions”²²), “migrants have literally been prime movers of Christian expansion; every Christian migrant is a potential missionary!”²³

The January/February 2024 issue of *Faith Today*, Canada’s premier evangelical magazine, featured a discussion on modern missions. In one of the articles, the writer quotes Joel Gordon, who serves with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), reflecting on some lessons learned from a trip to Türkiye for the World Evangelical Alliance’s *Future of the Gospel* forum: “We have many Christians coming from Nigeria where there’s 10,000 to 50,000 people in a church . . . they are coming with ideas, and gifts, and energy, and vibrancy, and music and other ways of living out the gospel that need to be embedded in the Canadian context in order for us to be more effective in reaching all people.”²⁴ As a result of this disconnect, “African churches in diaspora largely remain the locus of identity, community and security pri-

20. Wittmeier, “New Canadians Promise Renewal.”

21. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 12. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

22. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 14. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

23. Hanciles, *Migration*, 1; emphasis original. He later repeats “all migrants are potential missionaries,” 29.

24. Fitz-Gerald, “Rethinking Global Mission,” 31.

marily for African immigrants.”²⁵ David Guretzki, also from EFC, contends that Canadian Christians have not fully connected with certain ethnic groups present in Canada because they are isolated or separated from them. Hence, they miss the contributions of such to the growth of the Church in Canada: “The Nigerians, Ghanaians and Chinese, for example, may have a whole lot more to say about evangelizing Canada.”²⁶

In *Word Made Global: Stories of African Christianity in New York City*, Mark Gornik notes that when he began writing his book, he could not locate “a single article or book on the subject of African churches in North America.”²⁷ This assertion speaks to the scholarly neglect of the contributions of immigration to North American Christianity. There is a lack of efforts to engage with immigrants and understand their perspectives in order to enhance Christianity in North America. Lee Beach asks some critical questions connected to this concern: “Will the emergence of a robust church in South America, China, and Africa have an impact on the church in Canada?” “Can missionaries from South America, China, or Africa help the church in Canada to reach Canadians?”²⁸ The answer is yes.

The presence of multitudes of “African immigrant Christians . . . in the West is [definitely] proving to be of great missionary significance.”²⁹ If existing local Canadian church congregations are to directly benefit from this, rather than only new congregations serving only immigrants, Rich Janzen et al. contend that Canadian congregations must develop a vision to be intentional about “immigrant integration,” emphasizing that “immigrants and Canadian born” Christians are necessarily “mutual resources for each other.”³⁰ But is the Canadian church (and the Western church generally) a welcoming church? Is it open to really listen and learn from the rest? How should the church in the West reorient itself

25. Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*, 80

26. Fitz-Gerald, “Rethinking Global Mission,” 31.

27. Gornik, *Word Made Global*, 15.

28. Beach, “New Models of Ministry,” 49.

29. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth*, 16.

30. Janzen, et al., “Integrating Immigrants into the Life of Canadian Urban Christian Congregations,” 444.

to benefit from the church in the Global South? Is the non-Christian West really ready for the Christian rest? How might Western Christians benefit from the Christian immigrants who have moved there? And how should the church in the Global South position itself to be of more significant influence globally?

I (David) was also present at the WEA *Future of the Gospel* forum mentioned above. I observed that despite the presence of a few Africans, such as myself, there was no tangible intention to include African voices in the discussions. At one time, one of the participants insisted that Africans should not just be at the table where discussions happen; they must be in the kitchen where the “meal” is prepared. Otherwise, they are on the menu. It seems little has changed since 1976, when John Mbiti chastised Western theologians for ignoring African voices. He wrote,

We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has been all one-sided; it has all been, in a sense, your theology . . . We know you theologically. The question is, “Do you know us theologically?” . . . You have become a major subconscious part of our theologizing, and we are privileged to be so involved in you through the fellowship we share in Christ. When will you make us part of your subconscious process of theologizing?³¹

The words of John Mbiti find greater meaning in today’s multi-ethnic Canada. The rest of the world has come to Canada. The “cultural diversity” which had been “built into the church early in the apostolic period” has now returned to the universal Church and today “Africa and Asia and Latin America are part of North America, and they will never go away.”³² The unreached people groups are no longer in the remote jungles of Africa but within the bustling cities of Canada. Canadian churches, individual Christians, Christian organizations, and others need to make space for the other, to carefully listen and learn, and to re-envision the church, theological education, and life to serve the millions of Canadians who have found a home far away from home. And perhaps just as African Christian Theology has arisen from the effort

31. Mbiti, “Theological Impotence,” 16–17.

32. Walls, *The Missionary Movement from the West*, 224, 246.

to “interpret Christ to the African in such a way that he feels at home in his faith,”³³ the churches of Canada can develop a Canadian Christian Theology that can allow today’s post-Christendom Canadians to also feel at home in Christian faith.

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33. Sawyerr, “What Is African Theology?,” 26.

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