



CENTER FOR THE STUDY  
OF **Global Christianity**

AT GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project released a report on April 2, 2015, on the future of world religions (<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>), consisting of population projections between 2010 and 2050. A major finding of the report is that by 2050, Christian and Muslim populations will be nearly the same size, 2.9 billion and 2.7 billion, respectively, with no change in the percentage of the world that is Christian (31.4%).

In January 2015, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, USA) released a statistical table

(<http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/documents/2IBMR2015.pdf>) on the status of global Christianity from 1900–2050.<sup>1</sup> While our analysis is similar to Pew's in many ways, there are some important differences. We anticipate a much wider divergence between the Christian and Muslim populations in 2050: 3.4 billion Christians (compared to Pew's 2.9 billion) and 2.7 billion Muslims (similar to Pew).

Pew and the Center use similar methods to track religious adherence worldwide (tracking births, deaths, conversions to religions, conversions from religions, emigration, immigration). Pew does utilize more detailed age/set data by religion where it is available from censuses and surveys. Both reports use census and survey data to arrive at best estimates, but the Center also considers data from religious communities themselves, such as denominational statistics.

There are several reasons for the discrepancy between Pew's and the Center's numbers of Christians in 2050 (2.9 billion vs. 3.4 billion). The Center taps into knowledge from contacts in every country of the world who inform us on what is happening in non-traditional forms of Christianity, such as house churches and insider movements (where individuals convert to Christianity in secret and/or remain identified with their past religion). Some of the most significant growth of Christianity in the world today,

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<sup>1</sup> The Center has been publishing 2050 projections for all religions since 1990, updating them every 2 years according to the latest UN Population Projections reports.



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and into the future, is indeed non-traditional and does not easily get picked up in traditional demographic measures such as censuses, surveys, and polls. This is particularly the case in China and India. Pew does not model religious switching in either China (p.20) or India (p.100), citing a lack of reliable data. It is true that official censuses in many countries measure current religion but do not ask about childhood religion and that it is not possible to measure the switching patterns of individuals using census data (p.41). However, in the absence of “official” sources, the Center employs “non-official” sources. On-the-ground contacts in China and India consistently report that Christianity is growing due to conversions, and many of these Christians are organized in “underground” or secret communities.

In addition, respondents to census-takers or other officials in countries with high governmental and/or social restrictions on religion (such as China and India) often do not report their true religious affiliation in order to avoid persecution. As a result, the Center’s percentages of Christians in China and India in 2050 (15.8% and 6.9%, respectively) are higher than those of Pew (5.4% and 2.2%). The Center projects Christians in China and India to number a combined 330 million in 2050, compared to Pew’s figure of 108 million.

Pew and the Center use different base population figures (the 2010 and 2012 revisions, respectively, of the United Nations World Population Prospects). Using the 2012 figures rather than those for 2010 adds almost 81 million Christians to Pew’s global total. In addition, the Center consistently finds more switching to Christianity in many African and Asian countries, also accounting for the overall difference in estimates for Christians in 2050.

The Center can be reached for inquiries and further explanation at [info@globalchristianity.org](mailto:info@globalchristianity.org). All of the Center’s figures can be found in the *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill), <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org>.