

## **International religious demography: A new discipline driven by Christian missionary scholarship**

*In our [previous blog](#) we noticed that the religious profile of Indian Subcontinent has changed drastically during the last decade, with the Muslims enhancing their share from less than 20 to nearly 30 percent between 1881 and 2011 and Christians gaining between 2 percentage points by the Census count and by around 5 percentage points by the count of the international Christian organisations. Share of the religions of Indian origin, Indian Religionists as we have called them, has consequently declined from 79 to between 67 percent by the Census counts and is likely to go below 50 percent within the current century. To put these dramatic changes in the religious profile of Indian Subcontinent in perspective, it is instructive to look at the changes that have taken place in the religious composition of the world in this period, which we propose to do in a later note. Before presenting the numbers for the world and its different regions and countries, however, we offer here some background of the sources of data on this subject.*

*Most of the countries of the world do carry out regular censuses, but only about half of them include the question on religion in their counts. It is therefore necessary to go beyond the national censuses to compile data on the religious demography of the world. Presently such data is available mainly from Christian sources. They began collecting data on the numbers of adherents of different religions, faiths and denominations in different countries of the world around the middle of the 1960s. In about half a century, their efforts have led to the evolution of the new academic discipline of “international religious demography”, which is being seriously pursued in some of the major universities of the world. These efforts of Christian scholars and missionaries have also led to publication of major compilations on international religious demography such as the “World Christian Encyclopedia” and the “World’s Religions in Figures”. These are the most easily accessible sources for the data on the religious demography of the world.*

*In this note, we give a brief history of how a pioneering research effort by an Anglican missionary in East Africa to collect data on the adherents of different faiths and denominations has evolved into a major academic discipline, and how this in turn has helped the Church to carry forward its worldwide agenda of evangelisation. The compilation of the changing numbers of the adherents of different faiths in the world helped the Church focus its attention and resources into more fruitful directions, which ensured that Christianity was able to retain its share in the population of the world at a time when the relative population of the core Christian nations was declining and people there were fast losing interest in religion.*

*We tell this story, partly to emphasise the contrast with the situation in India, where a similar, though relatively limited, effort by the Centre for Policy Studies to compile and analyse data on the religious demography of India and its different parts has led to rather tepid institutional response, even though it has been widely noticed in the society and even in the academia. Study of the changing religious demography of India remains largely unrecognised as a legitimate academic pursuit.*

## **Christian origins of international religious demography**

International Christian missionary sources have been collecting systematic and extensive data on the changing religious demography of the world. The *World Christian Encyclopedia*, first published in 1982, is perhaps the most authentic compilation of such data. The second edition of the *Encyclopedia* was published in 2001. It compiles data for all countries of the world from 1900 to 2000. We used this source to tabulate data on the religious demography of the world in our publications, *Religious Demography of India* (Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai 2003 and 2005). The next edition of the *Encyclopedia* is scheduled for 2020. For 2010 data, therefore, we have used a related source, *The World's Religious Demography in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography* (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2013).

In this note, we give the background of both these sources and a brief history of how the efforts of a few Christian scholars engaged in systematic collection of religious demographic data from across the world—mainly in the support of missionary organizations worldwide—have led to the development of a new academic discipline of International Religious Demography.

### **World Evangelization Research Centre at Nairobi**

The story begins with Rev. Dr. David B. Barrett, a British aeronautical engineer, who chose to be an Anglican missionary in Africa and was sent to Nairobi, Kenya in 1957. As part of his missionary work, he conducted a field survey of church affiliations in that country. After 4 years in Kenya, he went to the USA to earn a Ph.D. degree awarded jointly by the Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University; the former is located in the campus of Columbia. He returned to Nairobi to organize and oversee research for the Anglican Church through the World Evangelization Research Centre (WERC), which he founded in 1965. With time, his research interests expanded to encompass all kinds of religious affiliations and across all countries of the world. This led to the compilation of the first edition of *World Christian Encyclopedia* (David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, A.D. 1900-2000*, Oxford University Press, 1982).

There was widespread recognition of the work of Rev. Barrett, both for its utility for the evangelizing missions and for its academic merit. For a long-time, he was one of the major contributors of statistics on global religious adherence to the *Britannica Book of the Year*. Scholars associated with and inspired by him are today considered major authorities on international religious demography.

## **Move to Richmond, Virginia**

In 1985, Rev. Barrett and WERC moved to Richmond, Virginia at the invitation of the Southern Baptist Foreign (now International) Mission Board. The second edition of the *Encyclopedia* was the result of nearly two decades of work at WERC, Richmond. For this much larger edition, Barrett had T. M. Johnson and G. T. Kurian as his co-editors. (David B. Barrett, *et al*, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 2 Volumes, Oxford University Press, 1982).

George Thomas Kurian (1931-2015) was a professional editor. He edited or co-edited more than 60 reference works, which included 27 encyclopedias. In addition to the *World Encyclopedia of Christianity*, he was associated with *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary*, *Encyclopedia of the Third World*, *Encyclopedia of Political Science*, *Encyclopedia of American Studies* and several other compilations on varied subjects.

Todd M. Johnson, who joined Barrett at Richmond in 1989, is a missionary researcher, who rose to become the Director of WERC and its successor institution, the Centre for Research on Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

## **Centre for Research on Global Christianity**

After the publication of the second edition of the *Encyclopedia*, high Christian authorities in the United States decided to place the work of WERC in formal academic stream. For this purpose, they founded the Centre for Research on Global Christianity (CRGC) as a part of the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary at its main campus in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. Dr. Johnson moved from Richmond to South Hamilton in 2003, but Rev. Barrett, always jealous of his independence as a scholar, continued his work at Richmond until his death in 2011.

The CRGC is currently engaged in producing the third edition of the *Encyclopedia* in collaboration with the Edinburgh University Press. The publication of this edition is scheduled for 2020. Meanwhile, CRGC has launched the *World Christian Database*, an online platform to continuously collect and update data on religions and denominations across the world. In 2009, the CRGC also published *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, Edinburgh University Press, 2009), which graphically documents the shift of Christianity from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia and Latin America during the twentieth century.

## **International Religious Demography Project of Boston University**

The CRGC is closely associated with the Boston University. In collaboration with the CRGC, the latter launched its "International Religious Demography Project (IRD)" in 2008. The project is based at the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs (CURA), which is a part of the Pardee School of Global Studies, Boston University. For

this project, the University also collaborates with the Religion and Public Life Project of the Pew Research Centre in Washington, DC. Todd M. Johnson of the CRGC and Brian J. Grim, formerly of the Pew Research Centre, are the main scholars running the IRD project. Both are affiliated scholars of the Institute of Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA) of the Boston University.

Brian J. Grim has interests wider than international religious demography alone. He is also an expert on the state of what are termed as “religious freedoms” in different parts of the world. In that capacity, he is affiliated to the Religious Freedom Project of Georgetown University and has co-authored, with Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied* (Cambridge, 2011). Role of global business in promoting religious freedoms is another of his areas of interest. Currently, he is President of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. Earlier, he was Director of Cross-National Data and Senior Researcher in religion and world affairs at the Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project. He is also a member of the World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith and in this capacity participated in the recent annual meeting of WEF at Davos-Klosters, where he organized and participated in discussions designed to underline the role of faith and of religious freedoms in advancing the global development goals of the WEF.

Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim are co-editors of the *World Religions Database*, an online platform of the International Religions Project of Boston University. This *Database* is intended to complement the *World Christian Database* of CRGC. The two are also the co-authors of *The World’s Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography* (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2013), another publication of the IRD project of Boston University. Since 2014, the IRD project has been also producing a yearly publication, *Yearbook of International Religious Demography*. Todd M. Johnson and Brian G. Grim are also the editors (with others) of the *Yearbook of World Christian Database* and the *Yearbook of International Religious Demography* are both published by Brill, Leiden.

### **The evolution of a new and vigorous academic discipline**

Thus the work of a passionately committed missionary researcher in far off East Africa has led to the evolution of a new and vigorous academic discipline that involves many reputed institutions and publishers around the world. International Religious Demography Project of Boston University asserts that: “The science of counting religionists around the world [...] is a relatively new field of study—the development of the academic discipline of international religious demography has taken place largely in the latter part of the twentieth century. ...”

The Project also claims that part of the reason for the development of this new discipline is the unexpectedly increased prominence that the religion has assumed in the academia: “The increased prominence religion has assumed in academic fields—including history, sociology, international relations, and a host of others—is one of the unexpected

developments of the early twenty-first century. In the latter part of the twentieth century, conventional wisdom held that religion was on the wane and, by implication that the study of religion was of little importance to understanding the world. However, this has not been the reality, ...”

From the history of the International Religious Demography project of Boston University that we have recounted above, it seems that Rev. Dr. Barrett and his determined and rigorous compilation of numbers of adherents of different religions, faiths and denominations across the world has indeed acted as a catalyst in generating this new interest in the study of religions and religious demographics.

#### *Religious demography in support of evangelism*

Rev. Dr. Barrett began his research initially to support the mission work of the Anglican Church in East Africa and continued with it to support the evangelizing missions worldwide with crucial data and information. The Church has used his work to give a new direction to its missionary activities and has also been generous in acknowledging his contribution. On the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of WERC by Rev. Barrett in Nairobi in 1965, its successor institution, the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity, published a booklet outlining the history and impact of his work. It quotes a statement issued by the International Board of the Southern Baptist Convention—Dr. Barrett’s hosts at Richmond—after his death in 2011, acknowledging his role in helping them refocus their resources on the least evangelized people in the world: “When David Barrett came to the Foreign Mission Board as a consultant in 1985, less than 3 percent of our mission force was deployed to this last frontier. Today, as a result of Barrett’s prophetic push, more than 80 percent of the people groups our missionaries serve among are unreached.”

As we shall see in our forthcoming note on the religious demography of the world, the expansion of Christianity into the unreached parts of Africa and into parts of Asia during the later half of the twentieth century has been a great success story of the worldwide missionary activity in the twentieth century. This has helped Christianity keep its share in the population of the world intact at a time when both the demographic share of Europe and the commitment of the European people to Christianity were declining.

#### *Religious demography in support of Religious Freedom*

The work on international religious demography, and the new academic interest in religious studies that it has helped generate, has also offered an academic veneer to the efforts of the international Church to dissuade national governments from regulating conversions in the name of protection of religious freedoms. As we have seen, institutions like the Pew Research Centre and scholars like Brian J. Grim, who have earned academic standing largely through their quantitative work on international religious demography, also actively pursue the cause of international religious freedoms at different forums. The pressure to conform to what the Church calls “religious freedoms”—which for all practical purposes imply unfettered freedom to convert—is now being carried beyond the national governments to private business entities through institutions like the World Economic Forum. It is interesting to note that Brian J. Grim,

one of the scholars leading the International Religious Demography Project of Boston University, is also the leader of these approaches to the business world in his role as the President of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation.

## **Conclusion**

In the course of a few decades, international religious demography has evolved into an important academic field of study in some of the major universities of the world. The effort that began with a passionately committed Anglican missionary, Rev. Dr. David B. Barrett, was encouraged and supported by various evangelizing mission organizations and continues to be led by scholars and institutions closely associated with the Church. The International Demography Project of Boston University, the most significant project in this field, has been conceived and designed by and is being implemented in collaboration with high Church organization in the United States.

This investment into the evolution of a new field of study has paid dividends for the Church. It has helped it focus its resources into more fruitful directions and expand into newer regions of the world. It has also helped the Church to take its concerns and agenda into newer forums, especially into the formal academic settings and generate a new wave of interest in religion and religious studies in the academia.

We have recounted this history as an example of how functioning societies and civilizations can put the research undertaken by isolated and committed individuals to larger uses and create not only new academic disciplines out of it but also new opportunities for taking their mission forward. Perhaps, there is a lesson in this story for the Indian society and civilization.

*Tailpiece:* In a review of the first edition of our book, *Religious Demography of India* (Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai 2001), Ashish Bose, the doyen of demographic studies in India, took us to task for using the word “Religionist”, which he reminded us “is not an English word”. Interestingly, that was the time when the new discipline of international religious demography—which the Boston University defines as “the science of counting *religionists* around the world...”—was being evolved by native English speakers in major institutions of the English-speaking world.