The Making of the Atlas of Global Christianity

Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross

The centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference has proved to be an evocative moment for many who are concerned with Christian mission. Today the limitations and shortcomings of the conference are readily demonstrable, yet still it stands as a highly significant landmark in the history of the Christian faith. Above all, it has proved to be emblematic of the transition, achieved through the missionary movement, by which Christianity became a truly worldwide faith.

Among many features of the 1910 conference that command attention is the atlas it produced that mapped the progress that had been made by Christian missionary effort at that time. Preparation for the conference was undertaken by eight commissions. The first commission, “Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World,” was something of a flagship for the conference. It was this commission, headed by the conference chairman John R. Mott, that engaged James Dennis and his colleagues to produce the atlas.

An important question being asked today by those with Christian mission at heart is, Where are we 100 years after Edinburgh? One way of addressing this question is to create, once more, an atlas mapping the status of Christianity in the world today and tracking the key developments that have occurred in the hundred years since 1910.

Marking the centenary has prompted, among those who cherish the memory of Edinburgh 1910, a note of celebration. Yet this is tempered by a note of repentance, recognizing that much has been learned in the course of 100 years and that different approaches to the missionary task are required today. An atlas inspired by the centenary would have to take account of this perspective. For example, Edinburgh 1910 was guided by an expectation that other world religions would wither and die in the face of the triumphant worldwide spread of Christianity. Today we may rejoice that Christianity has indeed spread worldwide, yet it is clear that other world religions have not only survived but have undergone significant growth and renewal. Any atlas published in 2010 claiming to portray global Christianity must take account of this reality.

Mapping a Demographic Shift

Although some of the leading expectations of Edinburgh 1910 proved to be ill-founded, what stands out to anyone making an objective appraisal of Christianity in the world of the early twenty-first century is the extent to which it has achieved the worldwide geographic spread of which the delegates at Edinburgh dreamed in 1910. A religion that at that time was concentrated in Europe and North America, with isolated outposts in the rest of the world, has undergone an unprecedented demographic shift that has resulted in its strength increasingly being found in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia—often in areas where it was little known a century ago. The task of an atlas for 2010 is to map the extraordinary transformation that has taken place.
Catholic. Through maps, tables, graphs, and charts, supported by fifty-two interpretative essays, the Atlas traces the story of the spread of Christianity in every part of the world in the years since 1910. This involves recognizing extraordinary growth in some regions, as well as decline or stagnation in others.

**Producing the Atlas**

This atlas is descended from a long line of some 200 major surveys, dictionaries, atlases, and encyclopedias dealing with statistics of world Christianity. A number have been denominational or confessional; others have been interdenominational or ecumenical. While the present atlas issues from this broad stream of demographic endeavor, it owes a much more immediate debt to the work of David B. Barrett, editor emeritus of the volume. His preparation of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982; 2d ed., 2001) and dedication to tracking the global demography of the Christian faith over four decades are the foundations on which this atlas has been developed. Another debt of gratitude goes to Patrick Johnstone, author of the widely used prayer guide *Operation World* (issued in several editions between 1974 and 2001), and his successor, Jason Mandryk, for their careful assessment of global Christianity.7

**Building a global team.** An atlas of this size and scope required a remarkable global team assisting the two main editors. These men and women appeared, sometimes seemingly out of nowhere, at just the right time to take the project forward. All of these people worked sacrificially, with only small financial rewards. Our managing editor, Sandra S. K. Lee, a seminary graduate, greatly influenced the initial design of the atlas and managed the project with grace and efficiency. Sandra got married and gave birth to a son all within the confines of the three-year project! Associate editor Darrell R. Dorr, from the U.S. Center for World Mission, brought expertise from editing *Mission Frontiers* and had a special place in his heart for the lay reader. Associate editor Albert W. Hickman burrowed deep into the text, maps, and graphics, locating discrepancies with alarming frequency. Chris Guidry, our desktop publisher, brought previous experience from the

**Methodology.** Over the past twenty-five years, an enormous amount of data on religious demography has been collected and analyzed. New sources of information include government censuses (half the national censuses in the world include a religion question), records kept by religious communities (membership rolls), and published works by individual scholars (such as monographs on new religious movements). These data have been collated, analyzed, and published in a wide variety of ways, highlighting countries, regions, and, more rarely, the entire globe. Given the limitations of censuses (including incomplete and irregular global coverage, potential political bias swaying the findings, and the absence of many religious groups from censuses), any religious demographic analysis must consult multiple sources. The primary mechanism in the methodology behind this atlas is reconciliation of numerous sources, with a special emphasis on membership figures collected by religious groups themselves. Self-identification is thus the central organizing principle, whether the source of the data is polls, censuses, surveys, or membership rolls.

**Databases.** An essential component of the atlas is the collection of data used to generate all maps, charts, tables, and other material. As mentioned earlier, this collection is greatly indebted to David Barrett, our editor emeritus, who pioneered the techniques of collection of data from Christian denominations and analysis of those data. This eventually resulted in the first edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. Perhaps more striking was the fact that Barrett accomplished this at a time when the academy had all but declared the death of religion. Barrett and his colleagues developed their methodology in great detail, which was improved over time. The *World Christian Database* (WCD, published by Brill Academic) was developed by Atlas coeditor Todd Johnson as a continuation of Barrett’s careful documentation of Christian
denominations around the world. The baseline years for data on churches in the two editions of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* were 1975 and 1995. When the *WCD* was launched in October 2003, it presented updated information on churches to the year 2000. In 2007, we updated all church data to 2005. Estimates for all Christian denominations in 2005 were reviewed throughout 2008 to ensure accuracy and later used for the 2010 projections that appear in the atlas. Thus, all Christian figures in the *Atlas of Global Christianity* are documented in the *WCD*. The *World Religion Database (WRD)* (also published by Brill) was launched in 2008. Similar to the *WCD*, the *WRD* reports more specifically on source material related to all world religions, while reconciling different estimates and presenting annotations on the analysis. The *WRD* is the source of all religious demographic figures in the *Atlas* for religions other than Christianity.

**Mapping.** Mapping technology has evolved in recent decades to the point where the editorial team was able to produce the maps to the quality required for publication. Although some of the maps in the atlas depict data by country, the majority depict data at the provincial, ethnolinguistic, and urban level. The provincial-level maps allow the reader to see much more detail within countries, including regional variations related to religion.

**Projections to 2010.** While the atlas was prepared over the years 2005–9, it was clear that the baseline for the data presented would have to be 2010, in order to preserve the 100-year analysis. To generate 2010 data, projections were prepared utilizing data from the years 2000 and 2005. Initially, these projections were purely mathematical, using an average annual growth rate over the five-year period under study and extrapolating for the year 2010. However, all of these projections were reviewed for accuracy, and many were lowered or raised to take into account events or anomalies. For example, the numbers of Christians in Afghanistan and Iraq have been severely impacted by wars initiated between 2000 and 2005, causing in the former case a dramatic increase in the Christian community (primarily expatriates) and in the latter a mass exodus.

*United Nations Classification.** The countries of the world are divided into a bewildering number of classifications, many created specifically for the needs of particular companies or nongovernmental organizations. In constructing a global data set on Christianity and other religions, the editors felt that this analysis should not create yet another classification but should rest upon the most robust and widely accepted system. In surveying the options, it was clear that the most careful work has been done by the United Nations. Thus, the basis for all demographic figures (not related to religion) is the United Nations Demographic Database. We have included a map and a guide to this classification in the inside back cover of the *Atlas*.

**Limitations.** Although the *Atlas of Global Christianity* is oversized (10 × 14 inches) and almost 400 pages long, one of its limitations is its small size and short length. Larger pages (such as those in many major atlases) would have helped the reader to see more detail on the maps—especially provincial boundaries in smaller countries. The smaller size means that even the two-page global spreads lack detail, especially at the provincial level.

The page restriction resulted in a very practical limitation: the atlas contains virtually no country-level maps. Fortunately, these are available on CD in the enclosed electronic *Atlas of Global Christianity Presentation Assistant*. If country maps were included, the atlas would have been over 800 pages long. In addition, each of the essays had to fit within two pages, limiting them to about 3,500 words, far too short to fully cover 100 years of Christian history.

Finally, the limitation of the perspectives of the editors, the editorial team, and the sixty-four essayists still leaves many points of view excluded. The editors, though, were intentional, to the best of their ability, in presenting as many viewpoints as possible: men and women, young and old, Protestant and Catholic, and so on. (It is interesting to note that recent scholarship generally recognizes that there can be no purely objective point of view in the kind of summary essays featured in the *Atlas*."

**The Ecumenical Challenge**

Edinburgh 1910 was a conference organized by the Protestant missionary movement, which was reflected in the composition of its commissions and the makeup of the conference delegations. In a groundbreaking move it did include Anglo-Catholic Anglicans and was memorably addressed by the archbishop of Canterbury. It did not include Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostals, or independents. In the course of the conference, however, a passionate concern for the unity of the whole church surfaced, to such an extent that it has become a commonplace that, as Kenneth Scott Latourette stated, Edinburgh 1910 was “the birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement.”

An atlas inspired by the Edinburgh 1910 centenary and taking account of developments in the century following must attempt to be fully ecumenical. The aim of our project therefore became to address the entire presence of Christianity worldwide in all its various streams and traditions. Accordingly, one major section of the atlas is dedicated to analysis of the demography of six distinct Christian traditions: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Independent, and Marginal (the latter term describing movements substantially informed by Christianity but not holding some of its core doctrines). This section also considers Evangelicals and Pentecostals—major global movements of faith that cut across the historic divisions. Key to the ecumenical approach is not only breadth of coverage but also diversity of authorship. Each of the essays describing the above traditions is written by a scholar who is personally identified with the tradition in question. Their essays were required to be objective, historical, and analytic, but each was written from the perspective of someone within the tradition rather than that of an external commentator.

Furthermore, the ecumenical approach extends to all of the essays throughout the atlas. At every stage the maps and demographic data are complemented by succinct yet comprehensive analysis. It was a key objective of the editors that these essays should be written by a range of authors wide enough to be reasonably representative of world Christianity. This posed the challenge of recruiting authors from as wide a range of traditions...
as possible, while at the same time ensuring that the necessary expertise was available for addressing each topic. No simple quota system could be adopted, but the need for ecumenical balance was always factored into the search for the most appropriate author for each essay. The 52 essays were (co)authored by 64 writers. Any categorization is imprecise, since people can have multiple affiliations, but we can best describe the 64 authors as follows: 2 are Pentecostal, 3 are Eastern Orthodox, 7 are Anglican, 12 are Roman Catholic, and 40 are Protestant. The Protestant category is clearly the largest, covering a wide range from the historic conciliar churches to recent new movements. There are gaps, for no authors were drawn from the Independent or Marginal sectors. Nonetheless, on the whole it represents a breadth of ecumenical endeavor that would have been unimaginable a hundred years ago.

The North-South Challenge

An innovative feature of the Edinburgh 1910 conference was the inclusion of twenty delegates from the non-Western world—though with a total of 1,215 delegates it was still an overwhelmingly Western gathering. The challenge for an atlas created for the centenary was to have an authorship that reflected the marked changes that have taken place in the composition and leadership of Christianity worldwide. An innovative and crucially important feature of this atlas is that the geographic essays are written, almost invariably, by an author who comes from the region being discussed. In this way it seeks to enable each region to tell its own story rather than being subjected to analysis from elsewhere. This posed the challenge of identifying suitably skilled authors from every region of the world. Thankfully, the study of Christianity and of Christian mission is undertaken today in every part of the world. A variety of networks connect scholars engaged in the study of the faith. Through knowledge of the literature and familiarity with the relevant networks, the atlas editors worked to identify potential authors.

The North-South balance in the Atlas is less than perfect but nonetheless represents substantial progress. Of the 64 authors of essays, 3 are from Oceania, 9 from Latin America, 11 from Northern America, 12 from Africa, 12 from Asia, and 17 from Europe. By any standards, this represents a remarkable global spread, perhaps the most widely scattered group of authors to attempt a major work on world Christianity.

Mindful of the importance of gender balance, the editors also exercised a preferential option for women authors. Always such affirmative action had to be balanced with the need to have authors with the required knowledge of the topic in question. As it turned out, eighteen of the essay authors are women. Again, this represents a substantial advance on comparable multiauthor studies.

Assembling the Contributors

Crucial to the success of the atlas was the recruitment of authors who could supply original, authoritative, and comprehensive essays to complement the maps with appropriate interpretation and analysis. An early encouragement to the project was the high level of positive responses that were received when initial contact was made with potential authors. Apart from the prospect of receiving a copy of the atlas, there was no material incentive on offer, yet the potential significance of the project was sufficient to secure the acceptance of the great majority of those who were invited to write an essay. No less impressive is the fact that the vast majority of the authors went on to complete their assignments. Of the sixty-four people who originally accepted the invitation to write, only a handful subsequently withdrew when they found that their circumstances would not allow them to complete their essays.

This is not to say that all the authors found it straightforward to write their assigned essays, and certainly not that all found it possible to complete them on time! In fact, many were surprised at how difficult it was to write an essay on a large topic when strictly limited to 3,500 words. Most were already busy with their institutional and scholarly commitments, so it was not unusual to receive requests for an extension of the deadline because the essay was proving harder to complete than had first been anticipated.

A challenge to the editors was to judge the degree to which diversity of approach could be accommodated in the atlas essays. The authors are drawn from a variety of disciplines and include historians, sociologists, missiologists, ecumenists, religious studies scholars, theologians, and mission practitioners. Approach and method vary, thus casting light from different angles of analysis on the realities presented by global Christianity. Furthermore, some of the authors are seasoned scholars who are able to distill a lifetime’s reflection on their topics, while others are young, emerging writers who bring freshness and vitality to treatment of their themes. Whereas it is a virtue of the maps that they follow a uniform and consistent pattern in the different sections of the atlas, the authors of the essays have exercised freedom in engaging their topics in the most appropriate way, drawing on the particular skills and gifts they brought to the task. At the same time, editorial judgment was constantly required to ensure that the essays complied with the overall tone, ethos, and standards of the atlas.

For the editors, this wide circle of authors, scattered across the face of the earth, became a community of shared endeavor. Everyone was daunted by the scale of the intellectual challenge, yet was inspired by the objective of the project. Not infrequently the shared effort also took on a spiritual character as authors became engaged in prayer for God’s blessing on the common task. A pastoral dimension developed as authors struggled with personal, family, vocational, and institutional issues. Sadly, two authors died in the course of the project—Arturo Piedra and Ogbu Kalu. Many others experienced bereavement within their families or periods of illness or crises in their institutions. Only by overcoming much adversity was the atlas finally completed. Not without sacrificial commitment on the part of its authors would the whole effort have reached the finish line.

An Electronic Product

Early in the project, the editors felt that it would be essential to provide readers with a means of displaying the various graphic elements in the atlas in classrooms and conferences. A CD was
developed for the atlas that allows for a greater degree of interaction with the material presented and provides a method for efficiently and accurately incorporating selected elements into presentation software. The atlas allows for a greater degree of interactivity, thereby increasing its value as a teaching and communication tool. In general, all of the maps, tables, charts, and graphs printed in the atlas are available on the CD, titled Atlas of Global Christianity Presentation Assistant, while the section text and analytic essays are not.

One of the important features of this electronic product is the ability to isolate maps of specific countries. Because of the space limitations of the physical book, the finest level of detail available in maps, charts, and tables is the twenty-one United Nations regions. The electronic product, in contrast, offers access to data on 239 countries, often at the provincial level. Thus, if one is studying religions in Sudan, there are a number of maps showing the religious composition of the provinces of Sudan, whether by majority religions, Islam, ethnoreligions, or Christianity. This feature also allows for easy setup of comparative maps, such as bringing up provincial-level data on Christians in Cameroon and the Philippines.

The other important feature of the Atlas of Global Christianity Presentation Assistant is the ability to relate data from different parts of the atlas to one another. For example, one could locate a “top 10” list of the growth of Christianity in Africa from part 2 and then a similar list of “top ten” African countries by missionary sending from part 5. These could be displayed and compared in table or map form or in both.

Contents of the disc can be accessed in two ways: by exploring a hierarchical file structure based on the printed book’s sections, or by running an interactive application. In the first case, the structure is designed as an electronic file system complementing the atlas itself. One can follow along in the physical copy of the atlas, locating files as needed. The interactive application represents an independent guide to the contents of the atlas, with more flexibility in locating and producing maps and other elements for presentation. In either case, the intent is to give the user quick access to areas of interest or study.

The hierarchical file structure contains static images of the maps, tables, charts, and graphs that can be explored on any computer equipped with a suitable disc drive. The images are stored in folders representing the five main parts and corresponding subsections of the atlas. Each image is suitable for display on a computer screen or for placement in any presentation software.

The interactive application allows the user to select specific maps, tables, charts, and graphs quickly, using a variety of search parameters not possible with the printed atlas. For example, enter a page number from the printed atlas, and a representation of that page appears in the application window; any of the elements on that page may then be selected to isolate it for screen display.

Another option is to access a list of maps contained in a particular atlas section; using the list, switching to similar maps in succession allows for quick comparison of different religion or language maps, for example. Also, one can browse the application’s table of contents, which mirrors that of the printed atlas, to find a particular part or section. Once a map, table, chart, or graph is displayed in the application window, it can be exported easily as a fixed image for inclusion in presentation software.

**Achievement**

In a fundamental sense, what the Atlas has to offer is a visual tour of the remarkable changes in global Christianity over the past 100 years. The story of the Southern shift has been told in many other books and encyclopedias over the past thirty years or so, but it has never been comprehensively mapped in vivid color.

The academic study of world Christianity has rightly focused much of its attention on particular forms of Christianity, especially in the non-Western world. This is a much-needed counterbalance to the false impression that Christianity is a Western religion. But Christianity is more than the sum of vastly different denominational, national, and linguistic manifestations. This atlas puts every Christian, Western and non-Western, black and white, man and woman, German and Papuan, in the same book under the unifying category “global Christianity.”

With the corrosive fragmentation the world experiences every day in conflicts and struggles, it is salutary for Christians to return frequently to the focus of the prayer of Jesus “that they may be one” (John 17:11). The Atlas demonstrates that, notwithstanding the dazzling diversity of its cultural forms, the Christian faith is marked by an irreducible unity and coherence, which demands that consideration be given to global, or world, Christianity.

**Notes**

8. In 2008 Todd Johnson and Brian Grim launched the International Religious Demography project at the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University. The main publication to emerge from this effort is the *World Religion Database* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
Leading Across Cultures
Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church
James E. Plueddemann

Missiologist James E. Plueddemann presents a roadmap for cross-cultural leadership development in the global church. Integrating theology with leadership theory, the author shows how leaders can grow from an egocentric practice of leadership to a globally-minded approach that is grounded in knowledge of diverse cultural underpinnings.

“Must-reading for those who intend to seriously engage in leadership in the globalized mission/church context of the twenty-first century.”
—David Tai-Woong Lee, director, Global Leadership Focus, Korea

Kingdom Without Borders
The Untold Story of Global Christianity
Miriam Adeney

Miriam Adeney has ministered with Christians in the far reaches of the globe and has seen there the unmistakable influence of the Spirit. Through personal and corporate stories from the heart of this movement, her book pulls back the veil on a kingdom that knows no borders.

“A masterpiece of God at work across our planet.”
—Scott Moreau, professor of intercultural studies, Wheaton College, and editor of Evangelical Missions Quarterly