

The Spread of Islam and Christianity through the World

In our [previous blog](#) we gave a background of the sources of international religious demography. In this note, based on data from those sources, we give an overview of the changes that have taken place in the religious demography of the world and its different regions in the course of the twentieth century.

Between 1900 and 2010, the world has witnessed a great expansion of its two great proselytizing religions, Christianity and Islam. The share of Islam in the population of the world has increased by 10 percentage points, from 12.3 percent in 1900 to 22.5 percent in 2010. The share of Christianity in the total population of the world has not changed, but it has expanded deep into Africa and parts of Asia.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Christianity was confined to the continents of Europe and Americas. Of 558 million Christians in the world in 1900, only 32 million, forming less than 6 percent of the total, were in Asia and Africa. In 2010, of 2,260 million Christians in the world 836 million, forming 37 percent of the total, are in Africa and Asia. The number of Christians in Africa and Asia together is now about the same as their number in Europe and North America.

Nearly half of the population of Africa is now Christian. This Christianisation of the African continent during the twentieth century is among the great success stories of the Church and it has given the Church the confidence and resolve to attempt a similar penetration of Christianity into Asia in the course of the twenty-first century.

Muslims have increased in numbers, but they have not spread into newer parts of the world. The distribution of Muslims across the world remains nearly the same as at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But the growth of Muslims has been faster than other communities in nearly every part of the world. Consequently, their share in the population of the world as a whole and in different regions and countries of the world has increased substantially during the twentieth century, giving rise to severe tensions in several parts of the world. We shall give data on the increased share of Christians and Muslims in the population of different regions and countries of the world in further detail in our forthcoming note.

While both Christianity and Islam have grown in their different ways, all other religions of the world have remained largely confined to their homelands and, for many, their share in the world has sharply shrunk. There has been some increase in their diaspora, but this represents only movement of people and not religions. We shall give detailed numbers for the diaspora of different religions in a later note.

Religious profile of the World

Table 1: RELIGIOUS PROFILE OF THE WORLD, 1900-2010

	1900	1970	2010	1900	1970	2010
Total	1,619,626	3,696,158	6,895,889	100.00	100.00	100.00
Christians	558,132	1,236,374	2,260,436	34.46	33.45	32.78
Muslims	199,941	553,528	1,553,775	12.34	14.98	22.53
Jews	12,292	14,763	14,762	0.76	0.40	0.21
Hindus	203,003	462,598	948,575	12.53	12.52	13.76
Sikhs	2,962	10,618	23,927	0.18	0.29	0.35
Jains	1,323	2,618	5,316	0.08	0.07	0.08
Buddhists	127,077	233,424	494,880	7.85	6.32	7.18
Chinese R.	380,006	231,865	436,257	23.46	6.27	6.33
Ethnic R.	117,558	160,278	242,517	7.26	4.34	3.52
New R.	5,910	77,762	63,005	0.36	2.10	0.91
Non-Religious	3,024	532,096	676,943	0.19	14.40	9.82
Atheists	226	165,400	136,653	0.01	4.47	1.98

Sources: D. B. Barrett, G. T. Kurian and T. M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, New York 2001, for 1900 and 1970; and, T. M. Johnson and B. J. Grim, *The World's Religions in Figures*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2013, for 2010. *Note:* Sum of individual religions may not add up to the total population because several relatively less numerous religions have not been included in the Table. Populations are in thousands.

Islam sharply increases its share in the world

The twentieth century, especially its latter half, has been the century of Islam, at least in terms of demographic growth. Share of Muslims in the population of the world has increased from 12.34 percent in 1900 to 22.53 percent in 2010, and a major part of this increase of 10 percentage points has accrued in the last four decades. This has made Muslims the second largest religious community of the world after the Christians, and ahead of both the Chinese Religionists and Hindus, who both outnumbered the Muslims at the beginning of the century.

Christianity spreads into newer continents

Christians have retained their share intact at around one-third of the world population, though the share of the Christian continent of Europe in the population of the world has sharply declined and a large number of European people have abandoned their faith in the course of the twentieth century. This has been compensated by a vast expansion of Christianity into the previously non-Christian parts of the world. This makes the twentieth century as much a century of the expansion of Christianity as of Islam.

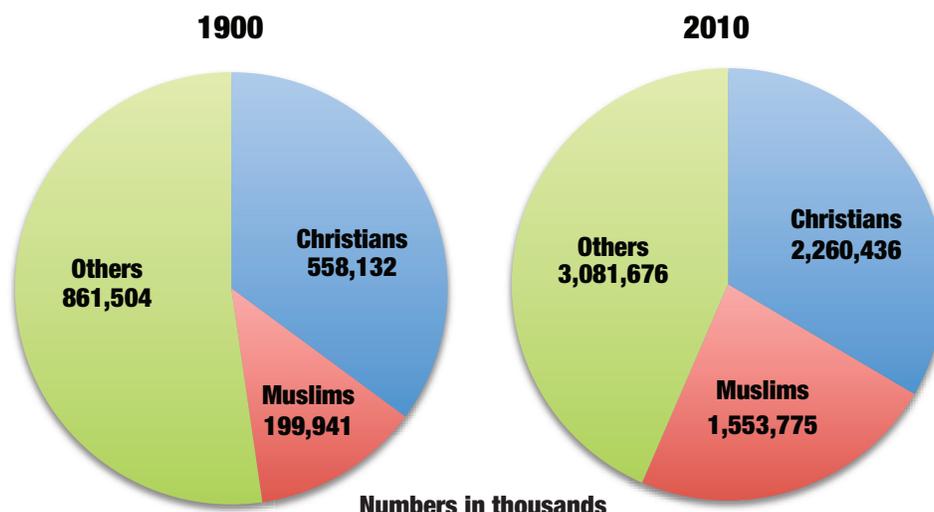
Islam and Christianity now form 55 percent of the world

As a consequence, the adherents of the Abrahamic religions, Muslims and Christians together, have now come to form a majority of the population of the world. They had a share of less than 47 percent in 1900; their share now is above 55 percent. In addition, the non-Religious and Atheists have acquired a share of about 12 percent.

Native religions of China and Africa loose heavily

The loss has been of the native religions of China, whose share in the population of the world has declined steeply from 23.46 to 6.33 percent in this period, and of native ethnic religionists of mainly Africa, who have declined from 7.26 to 3.52 percent. The more systematized religions like Hinduism and Buddhism have largely kept their shares intact.

Christians Muslims and Others in the World, 1900-2010



Conversions and differential growth of populations drive these changes

These changes in the religious profile of the world have been driven by two factors: *one*, faster growth of populations in Asia, Africa and Latin America as compared to Europe; and *two*, conversion of large populations to both Christianity and Islam in Africa and in parts of Asia. In the following, we describe this shifting of the demographic balance of the world away from Europe and of its religious balance towards Islam and Christianity.

Shifting of the demographic balance

Table 2: Population (in thousands) of different Continents of the World

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010	MF
Total	1,619,627	3,696,158	5,266,440	6,055,044	6,895,889	4.26
Asia	956,196	2,147,030	3,180,594	3,682,550	4,164,252	4.36
Africa	107,808	357,039	614,770	784,445	1,022,236	9.48
Europe	402,608	656,444	722,206	728,887	738,197	1.83
North America	81,626	231,540	281,988	309,631	344,529	4.22
Latin America	65,142	284,796	440,470	519,138	590,082	9.06
Oceania	6,246	19,310	26,412	30,393	36,593	5.86
Percent Share of different Continents in the population of the World						
Asia	59.04	58.09	60.39	60.82	60.39	1.02
Africa	6.66	9.66	11.67	12.96	14.82	2.23
Europe	24.86	17.76	13.71	12.04	10.70	0.43
North America	5.04	6.26	5.35	5.11	5.00	0.99
Latin America	4.02	7.71	8.36	8.57	8.56	2.13
Oceania	0.39	0.52	0.50	0.50	0.53	1.38

Europe lags in population growth

During the twentieth century, the population of the world has multiplied by 4.26 times, rising from 1.62 billion in 1900 and 6.90 billion in 2010. Asia, the most populous continent of the world, has grown at nearly the same rate as the world as a whole. Population of Europe, however, has grown far more slowly, multiplying by less than 2

times, from 403 to only 738 million. Populations of Africa and Latin America, on the other hand, have multiplied by more than 9 times.

Share of Europe in the world halves while that of Africa and Latin America doubles

Consequently, the share of Europe in the total population of the world has declined from nearly 25 percent in 1990 to less than 11 percent in 2010. The share of Africa has meanwhile more than doubled from 6.7 to 14.8 percent and that of Latin America has similarly risen from 4.0 to 8.6 percent. The share of North America rose slightly from 5.0 to 6.3 percent between 1900 and 1970, but has declined to the level of 1900 in the four decades since then. The share of Oceania has also risen a little, but it remains small at about half a percent of the world.

Asia retains its share of 60 percent, but East Asia lags behind other regions

Table 3: Changing share of different regions of Asia

	Population in '000			%Share in Asia			
	1900	1970	2010	1900	1970	2010	MF
ASIA	956,196	2,147,030	4,164,252	100.00	100.00	100.00	4.36
East Asia	532,545	986,644	1,573,970	55.69	45.95	37.80	2.96
South Asia	292,409	712,308	1,598,760	30.58	33.18	38.39	5.47
Southeast Asia	80,629	286,708	593,414	8.43	13.35	14.25	7.36
Central Asia	20,921	75,229	166,112	2.19	3.50	3.99	7.94
West Asia	29,641	85,988	231,996	3.10	4.00	5.57	7.83

Asia has continued to form around 60 percent of the population of the world throughout this period. However, the growth rates have been very different for different regions of the continent. In particular, the population of East Asia has multiplied by less than 3 times, while that of South Asia, the other highly populous region of the continent, has multiplied by nearly 5.5 times. This difference is mainly because of the relatively lower growth of China compared to India. Other regions of Asia have multiplied by 7 to 8 times. Consequently, the share of East Asia in Asia has declined from 55.7 to 37.8 percent and that of South Asia has risen from 30.6 to 38.4 percent. The share of the rest of Asia has also increased from 13.7 to 23.8 percent.

Expansion of Christianity beyond Europe

Table 4: Number of Christian in different Continents of the World (in thousands)

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	558,132	1,236,374	1,747,462	1,999,564	2,260,436
Asia	21,898	101,395	248,728	312,849	342,011
Africa	9,939	143,818	276,498	360,232	494,052
Europe	380,643	492,695	550,419	559,643	580,114
North America	78,812	211,420	240,458	260,624	271,554
Latin America	62,003	269,201	409,346	481,102	544,687
Oceania	4,838	17,845	22,010	25,110	28,019
Percent share of different Continents in the Christians of the World					
Asia	3.92	8.20	14.23	15.65	15.13
Africa	1.78	11.63	15.82	18.02	21.86
Europe	68.20	39.85	31.50	27.99	25.66
North America	14.12	17.10	13.76	13.03	12.01
Latin America	11.11	21.77	23.43	24.06	24.10
Oceania	0.87	1.44	1.26	1.26	1.24

Asia and Africa had few Christians at the beginning of the twentieth century

Of 558 million Christians in the world in 1900, 381 million were in Europe and they formed more than two-thirds of all Christians. Another 14 percent of the Christians were in North America and 11 percent in Latin America. There were only 21.9 million Christians in Asia and less than 10 million in Africa. Asia and Africa together accounted for just 5.7 percent of the Christians in the world.

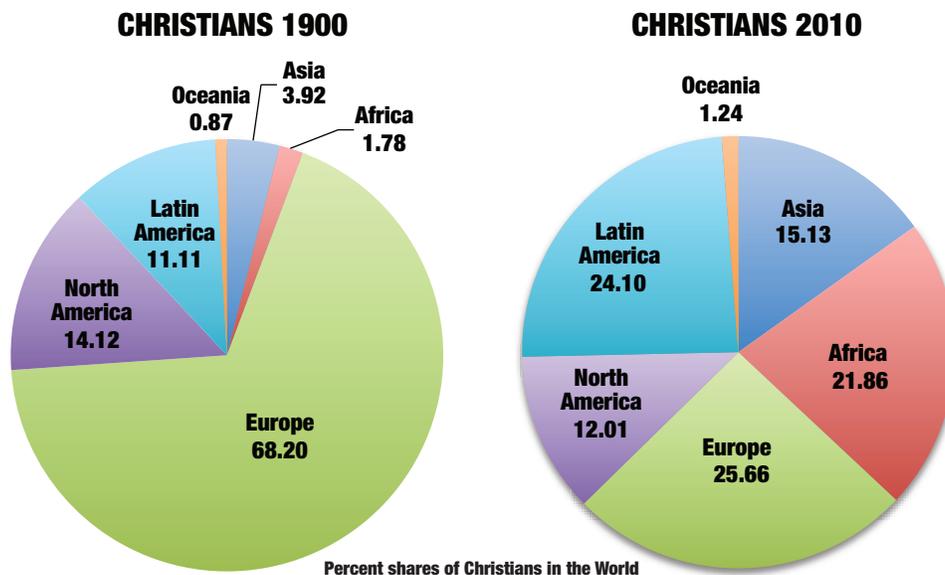
Now only 38 percent of the Christians in the world are in Europe and North America

In 2010, the total number of Christians has multiplied nearly 4 times to reach 2.26 billion, but only a quarter of them are now in Europe. The share of Europe in the Christian population of the world has been declining continuously during this period. The share of Christians in North America had increased from 14 percent in 1900 to 17 percent in 1970, but has since declined to 12 percent.

And 37 percent of Christians are in Africa and Asia

While the shares of Europe and North America in the Christian population of the world have declined that of Africa has risen from less than 2 to nearly 22 percent. Asia also now accommodates 15 percent of the Christians. Africa and Asia together thus have nearly the same number of Christians as Europe and North America; there are 836 million Christians in the former and 862 million in the latter. In 1900, there were only 32 million Christians in Asia and Africa compared to 459 million in Europe and North America. Share of Latin America in the Christian population of the world has also more than doubled from 11 to 24 percent. As seen in the pie chart below, the distribution of Christians through different continents of the world has been entirely transformed in the course of the twentieth century. This process of penetration of Christianity beyond Europe and North America has not subsided yet.

Spread of Christianity into Africa and Asia, 1900-2010



Rise in the share of Latin America is because of higher population growth

The increased share of Latin America in the Christian population of the world is mainly due to the relatively higher growth of the total population of that continent as we have seen in Table 2 above. The share of Christians in the population of the continent, however, has not changed significantly during the twentieth century. Latin America has been converted long ago. Christians already had a share of 95 percent in the population there in 1900. That share has declined slightly to 92 percent in 2010. Even so, the share of Latin America in the total Christian population of the world has increased from 11 percent in 1900 to 24 percent in 2011.

Table 5: Share of Christians in the populations of the world and different continents

	1900	1970	1990	2010
World	34.46	33.45	33.18	32.78
Asia	2.29	4.72	7.82	8.21
Africa	9.22	40.28	44.98	48.33
Europe	94.54	75.06	76.21	78.59
North America	96.55	91.31	85.27	78.82
Latin America	95.18	94.35	92.73	92.31
Oceania	77.46	92.41	83.34	76.57

Rise in the share of Asia is because of both conversion and higher growth of population

The increased share of Asia in the total population of Christians in the world is partly due to relatively higher growth of population and partly due to conversion to Christianity. The share of Christians in the population of Asia has registered a significant increase from 2.3 percent in 1900 to 8.2 percent in 2010 as seen in Table 5 above.

Africa has become another Christian continent

The really significant expansion of Christianity during the century, however, has been into Africa. Nearly half of the population of Africa has been converted to Christianity in the course of the century. Christians formed only 9 percent of the population of the continent in 1900; their share is 48 percent in 2010. The expansion was rapid between 1900 and 1970, but it has continued robustly during the last four decades. (See, Table 5).

Decline of the share of Europe and North America in the Christians of the world is because of both lower growth of population and widespread loss of faith

Decline of the share of Europe in the Christian population of the world has been driven by both a relatively slower growth of the population of Europe and a decline in the share of Christians in the total population of the continent. Europe was a Christian continent in 1900 with nearly 95 percent of its population adhering to the faith. By 1970, the share of European population professing the Christian faith had declined to 75 percent; since then, there has been a slight improvement in their share. (See, Table 5 for this and the following paragraphs).

In 1900, North American continent was also nearly entirely Christian; 97 percent of the population of the continent followed Christianity then. That proportion has declined to 79 percent in 2010, which is almost the same as in Europe now. Unlike in Europe, the decline in North America has been largely after 1970 and seems to be still continuing.

In Europe and North America, the main cause of decline in the share of Christians is the loss of faith by a large section of the population. In both continents, nearly 15 percent of the population in 2010 is either Non-Religious or Atheist. There also has been some increase in the share of other religions, especially of Islam in Europe. But the shrinking

share of Christianity in Europe and North America is driven by not the rise of religious diversity but contraction of religious faith. Those who are thus lost to the Christian faith are in no way lost to the Christian civilization of the West and are potentially recoverable, as witnessed by the recent resurgence of faith in several countries of Europe, and as seen in the tentative rise in the share of Christians in the population of Europe after 1970.

Penetration of Christianity into Africa is the big story of the twentieth century; Asia is the target for the twenty-first

The big story of the twentieth century, as far as the Church is concerned, is the expansion of Christianity deep into Africa, and its tentative spread into parts of Asia. This expansion has been carefully planned and nurtured by the international Church. As we saw in our previous note, the discipline of international religious demography has emerged from the extensive surveys and intense research undertaken in East Africa in aid of missionary work there. The Church is mightily proud of its expansion into Africa during the twentieth century and it seems to have given the Church the confidence to make a similar push into Asia in the twenty-first century. The pride and the determination are evident in the following exhortation of Pope John Paul II in his homily before a large Diwali-day congregation at Delhi on November 7, 1999:

“Just as the first millennium saw the Cross firmly planted in the soil of Europe and the second in that of America and Africa, so may the Third Christian Millennium witness a great *harvest of faith* on this vast and vital continent...

“...May the Church in Asia heed this message so that ‘all may have life and have it abundantly’. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

The first part of this exhortation also appears in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, which the Pope released during his visit to India. In that document, the fragment is referenced to his earlier Address to the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference at Manila in January 1995. It seems, the thought that Africa has already become a Christian continent by the end of the second millennium and the energies of the Church at the beginning of the next millennium have to be focused on Asia had been with the Pope and the Church for long before its public expression in the homily before the Diwali-day congregation at Delhi.

Distribution and Expansion of Muslims in the World

The number of Muslims in the world has grown much more than that of the Christians, as we have seen earlier. But unlike the Christians, Muslims have not expanded to newer continents of the world during the twentieth century. Distribution of Christians across the world has been completely transformed, but distribution of Muslims has remained largely unchanged.

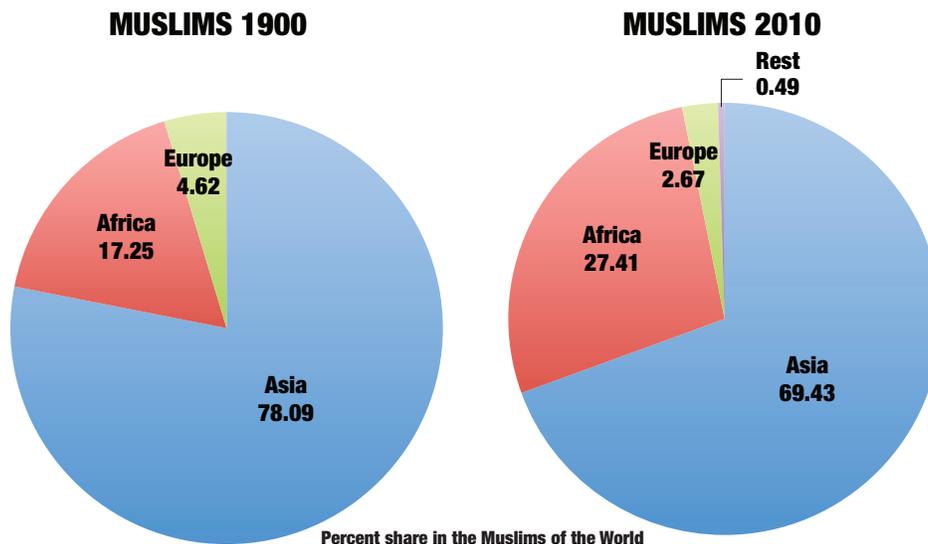
In 1900, of about 200 million Muslims in the world, 156 million were in Asia and nearly 35 million in Africa. The remaining about 9 million were in Europe, most of them in the parts adjoining Asia. That distribution remains largely unchanged. In 2010, of 1.55 billion Muslims in the world, 1.08 billion are in Asia and another 426 million in Africa. There are only about 49 million Muslims outside Asia and Africa; of them 41.5 million are in Europe.

Table 6: Number of Muslims in different Continents of the World (in thousands)

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	199,941	553,528	962,357	1,188,243	1,553,775
Asia	156,140	391,407	676,678	832,879	1,078,855
Africa	34,485	143,096	251,067	317,374	425,863
Europe	9,235	17,623	29,206	31,566	41,490
North America	10	842	3,810	4,450	5,492
Latin America	58	489	1,373	1,672	1,526
Oceania	13	71	223	301	549
Percent share of different Continents in the Muslims of the World					
Asia	78.09	70.71	70.31	70.09	69.43
Africa	17.25	25.85	26.09	26.71	27.41
Europe	4.62	3.18	3.03	2.66	2.67
North America	0.01	0.15	0.40	0.37	0.35
Latin America	0.03	0.09	0.14	0.14	0.10
Oceania	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.04

Looking at the distribution of Muslims in percentage share rather than absolute numbers, we find that in 1900, about 95 percent of the Muslims of the world were in Asia and Africa; and, in 2010, more than 97 percent of the Muslims are in these two continents. There has been some change in the relative balance of Muslims in Asia and Africa. In 1900, 78 percent of the Muslims were in Asia and 17 percent in Africa; in 2010, the share of Asia in the Muslims of the world has declined to around 69.4 percent, while that of Africa has risen to 27.4 percent. This is largely because of the higher growth of the population of Africa. As we have seen in Table 2, between 1900 and 2010, the population of Asia has multiplied 4.4 times while that of Africa has grown 9.5 times.

Share of different continents in the Muslims of the World



Muslims have grown faster than others

The changes in the distribution of Muslims across the world thus seem to be largely determined by the higher growth of populations of the regions where they have a high presence. But within those regions, as well as in other parts of the world, their share in the population has also indeed gone up. In the world as a whole, the share of Muslims has risen by around 10 percentage points, from 12.3 percent in 1900 to 22.5 percent in 2010. They have gained by about the same 10 percentage points in both Asia and Africa. This gain is mainly because within these regions of high demographic growth, Muslims have grown even faster than others. In parts of Africa, especially in West Africa, there indeed have been some conversions from native African religions to Islam. The growth in their share in Europe from 2.3 percent in 1900 to 5.6 percent in 2010 seems to have been caused by both migration and relative higher natural growth. There has also been some rise in their share in North America, Latin America and Oceania, mainly because of migration. But there are not many Muslims in these continents; their total number in the three together is only about 7.5 million.

Table 7: Share of Muslims in the populations of the world and different continents

	1900	1970	1990	2010
World	12.34	14.98	18.27	22.53
Asia	16.33	18.23	21.28	25.91
Africa	31.99	40.08	40.84	41.66
Europe	2.29	2.68	4.04	5.62
North America	0.01	0.36	1.35	1.59
Latin America	0.09	0.17	0.31	0.26
Oceania	0.21	0.37	0.85	1.50

Thus, though the Muslims have grown in numbers, they have not enhanced their footprint across the world as spectacularly as the Christians have done in the twentieth century. Even so, there are certain parts of the world, especially in Asia and Europe, where the presence of Muslims has increased substantially, with its concomitant consequences. We shall discuss these issues in the following note in which we look upon the changing religious profile of different parts of the world in detail.

Other Religions of the World

Unlike Christianity and Islam, the other major religions of the world—of which Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese Religions and the native ‘Ethno-religions’ of different regions have the largest populations—are not proselytizing religions. They do not go around the world converting others to their faith. Therefore, they are confined almost entirely to their homelands. In 2010, of 949 million Hindus in the world, 933 million are in South Asia; of 495 million Buddhists, 458 million are in East and Southeast Asia and another 28 million in South Asia; and, of 436 million Chinese Religionists, 423 millions are in East Asia and another 11 million in Southeast Asia.

In the context of these religions, it is not proper to talk about their spread or distribution through the world. These religions have not expanded into other parts, it is only that some of the followers of these religions have gone and settled elsewhere. The size and distribution of their diasporas may have important consequences for their native and perhaps also in some of the host countries. But their impact is not comparable to the impact of the spread of Christianity or Islam through the world. We shall give details of the diasporas of the major religions of the world in a separate note.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The religious profile of the world has changed fairly drastically in the course the twentieth century.
2. The share of Muslims in the population of the world has increased by 10 percentage points, from 12.34 percent in 1900 to 22.53 percent in 2010.
3. The share of Christians, during this period, has remained unchanged at around one-third of the population of the world.
4. This static share of Christians in the world hides a massive penetration of Christianity into Africa and parts of Asia. It is this expansion of Christianity into newer continents that has allowed Christianity to retain its share in the world in an age when the population of the Christian continent of Europe was growing much slower than the rest of the world and the European people, both within the continent and in North America, were undergoing a widespread loss of faith and turning Atheists and Non-Religious.
5. With the sharp increase in the share of Islam and little decline in that of Christianity, these two proselytizing religions have come to form a majority of the population. Their share has increased from 46.8 percent in 1900 to 55.3 percent in 2010.
6. Corresponding to this rise, there has been a sharp decline in the share of Chinese Religionists and native so-called ethno-Religionists everywhere, but especially in Africa.
7. The share of Chinese Religionists in the population of the world has declined from 23.5 to 6.3 percent and that of native religions of Africa from 7.3 to 3.5 percent.
8. The more systematized religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, however, have retained their share intact. In 2010, the former have a share of 13.8 percent and the latter 7.2 percent in the population of the world. In 1900, these shares were 12.5 and 7.8 percent, respectively.
9. These changes in the religious profile of the world have been driven by both differential growth of populations in different part of the world and large-scale conversions to Christianity and Islam.
10. Between 1900 and 2010, the population of the world has multiplied 4.26 times from about 1.62 to 6.90 billion. But the population of the Christian continent of Europe has multiplied by only 1.83, while that of Africa has multiplied by 9.5. The population of Latin America has also multiplied by 9.1 times. Asia and North America have multiplied by nearly the same factor as the average of the world.
11. This shifting of the demographic balance of the world away from Europe would have normally led to a drastic decline in the share of Christianity in the population of the world. But along with the decline of Europe in the population of the world, there has been a rise in the share of Christianity in Africa and Asia.
12. Because of this expansion, the distribution of Christians in the world has undergone a transformation. In 1900, more than 82 percent of the Christians in the world were in Europe and North America and only about 6 percent in Africa and Asia put together. In 2010, only 38 percent of the Christians are in Europe and North America; and, Africa and Asia together also accommodate 37 percent of the Christians in the world.

13. Thus at the beginning of the twentieth century, Christianity was the religion of mainly the European people inhabiting the continents of Europe and North America. At the beginning of the twenty-first, it has also become the religion of nearly half of the people of Africa and a significant part of the people of Asia.

14. This deep penetration of Christianity into Africa has been a matter of pride for the Church, allowing Pope John Paul II to declare at the eve of the twenty-first century that the Church had ‘planted the Cross firmly’ in the soil of Europe in the first millennium and in that of America and Africa in the second. The Pope then went on to pray that the third millennium might see a similar *harvest of faith* in the Asian continent.

15. The number of Muslims in the world has increased even more than that of the Christians. But, their growth has been largely in Asia and Africa and, within those continents, in the regions where they had a considerable presence already at the beginning of the twentieth century.

16. The Muslims have thus increased in numbers but, unlike the Christians, they have not been able to convert newer continents and regions in this period.

17. The distribution of Muslims across different continents remains largely as it was in 1900, except that there is some increase in the share of Africa in the total number of Muslims in the world and there is some decline in the share of Europe and the rest of the world.

18. But in all those regions where Muslims have a presence, their growth in this period has been faster than others. Consequently, the share of Muslims in the populations of nearly all regions of the world has seen a considerable rise as we shall see in a following note. This rise has often led to severe communal tensions in many parts of the world.

19. Unlike the Christians and Muslims, all other major religions of the world have remained largely confined to their homelands. Because of the increased movement of people across the world, some of the adherents of these religions have indeed moved to other parts of the world. But this represents movement of people, not expansion of religions. We shall look at the quantum and distribution of the diaspora of religions other than Christianity and Islam in a later note.