

Who's counting China? Phenomenal growth in the number of Christians: Phenomenal growth in the number of Christians

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

I was perilously close to becoming an agnostic—at least about certain statistics. Specifically, I really didn't know the data on Christians in China, and for a while I was not sure if anyone did. Only now, perhaps, do we have the glimmerings of an answer to one of the most pressing questions in global religion: just how many Chinese Christians are there?

This question matters enormously because of China's vast population—now over 1.3 billion—and its emerging role as a global superpower. If Christians make up even a sizable minority within that country, that could be a political fact of huge significance.

Some years ago, veteran journalist David Aikman suggested that China's Christian population was reaching critical mass and that Christianity would achieve cultural and political hegemony by 2030 or so. Writing in *First Things* last year, Catholic China-watcher Francesco Sisci agreed that “we are near a Constantinian moment for the Chinese Empire.” If we could say confidently that China today had, say, 100 or 150 million Christian believers, that would also make the country one of the largest centers of the faith worldwide, with the potential of a still greater role in years to come.

But what can we actually say with confidence when honest and reliable authorities differ so widely on the basic numbers? Estimates of Christian numbers vary enormously, from 25 million or so to an incredible 200 million. If current estimates are so contested, then so are growth projections.

One of the most authoritative sources on religious statistics is the World Christian Database, which offers invaluable reference materials on all parts of the world. On China, though, WCD figures are startlingly high (which does not necessarily make them wrong). According to this source, the country's Christians exploded from under a million in 1970 to around 120 million today (over 9 percent of the whole country), and that number will grow to 220 million by 2050. If correct, that would make the story of Chinese Christianity probably the most dramatic success story in modern religious history.

Other sources, however, place the Christian share of the population significantly lower. The minimum realistic figure is that of the Chinese government itself, which to say the least has no vested interest in exaggerating the tally of religious believers. The government publicly admits to the figure of 20 million for Catholics and Protestants combined—1.5 percent of all Chinese. Beyond those, of course, there are the unregistered Christian communities, the famous house churches, and their numbers are a total mystery. The WCD suggests that there are 70 million house-church believers, others say 50 million, still others far less. Putting the various estimates together, the Pew Forum gives a Christian population of 4 or 5 percent; the CIA's World Factbook puts it at 3 or 4 percent. The differences may sound tiny, but we are dealing with a colossus—in China, just 1 percent of the population means an impressive 13 million souls.

The best evidence we now have comes from extensive opinion surveys undertaken over the past decade, material that is now being made available through a Templeton Foundation-supported project at Baylor University, led by Rodney Stark, Carson Mencken and other scholars. At first sight, this evidence portrays Chinese Christianity as much more modest than in some recent accounts, with a mere 35 or 40 million adherents. However, the researchers stress that these numbers identify only those who are prepared to admit openly to Christian faith. Depending on the attitudes of zealous local officials, such an overt admission might be suicidally rash. Pew survey evidence also finds many additional Chinese who might not describe themselves overtly as Christian, but who are prepared to consider the existence of "God/Jesus"; perhaps these are converts en route to full belief.

Putting the Templeton and Pew materials together, we can reasonably place the number of Chinese Christians at around 65 to 70 million, or a little less than 5 percent of the population. That falls a good deal short of any vision of "converting China." Christians constitute just a small minority within that country, roughly

comparable to the percentage of Muslims in Western European nations.

Even viewed in these somewhat reduced terms, though, the Chinese number still inspires awe. Those 65 or 70 million Christians outnumber the total population of major nations like France, Britain or Italy. Put another way, China has almost as many Christians as it does members of the Communist Party. Moreover, the Christian figure represents a phenomenal growth from the 5 or so million who witnessed the communist takeover in 1949 and from the subsequent decades of massacre and persecution. If not quite a miracle, this is a profoundly impressive story.