

New country, new faith

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue



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Over the past five years, migrants and refugees have flowed into Europe in unprecedented numbers, arousing deep concerns about their impact on host countries. What is not clear, though, is how much impact the new arrivals will have on Europe's religious alignments.

The main effect will be to swell the Muslim population. But alongside the Muslim influx are Christians of various kinds. Their actual numbers are open to much debate. A limited number of the new arrivals come from ancient churches in Syria and Iraq, but far more common are the African Christians who are not fleeing any particular conflict, but who are migrating in search of a better life.

Their presence has found an evocative material symbol in the makeshift tent church erected in the camp at Calais, in France, among the many thousands of desperate migrants struggling to reach Britain. Many of the church's attenders are Ethiopians and Eritreans, from Christian communities that were already well established when France itself was still pagan soil.

Another intriguing category of believers has attracted a great deal of media coverage in recent months: there is a remarkable number of new converts to

Christianity, to the point that some urban churches are reporting mass baptisms. The standard picture of a convert is of a young Iranian or Afghan who might have had very limited exposure to Christianity in his own country—barely even hearing the name—but who now publicly avows his faith. (Given the overwhelmingly male character of recent arrivals, I consciously say “his.”) Such decisions often arise from gratitude for the pastoral care extended by churches: not just the feeding and clothing of newcomers, but more generally the intense efforts by Christian groups to make migrants and refugees feel welcome. Kindness pays dividends, all the more so when deliberate proselytizing forms no part of the picture.

For Americans especially, such conversions are wonderful news, fulfilling as they do the hope that Muslims are indeed open to evangelization, provided that they are free to hear the gospel. And might those new Christians open the way to successful missions in their old homelands? Might Europe’s Muslim migrants provide the foundation for a whole new Christian explosion across the Middle East and North Africa?

Maybe, but certainly not yet. Those new converts undoubtedly exist, but the phenomenon needs to be treated cautiously. The reported numbers are actually not that large when set alongside the total picture of the migration. So far, the number of Muslim converts to Christianity does not approach the traffic in the other direction—that of formerly Christian Europeans accepting Islam.

Also rarely asked in news reports is what the converts are converting from. Western media and government often speak of “Muslim nations” in monolithic terms, as if every one of their citizens was a devout and knowledgeable member of that faith. In fact, many of those people are Muslim only in the notional and cultural sense in which millions of nonparticipating members of Western national churches might describe themselves as Christians. They are thus quite open to accepting new creeds in new countries, all the more so if they had some family connection with one of the ancient churches. Significantly, many of the reported converts are Iranian, from a country long deeply disenchanted with official Islamic rule and clerical power.

One thing we can be certain of is that any Christian expansion will take place without the slightest assistance from European governments, which are more likely to react with bureaucratic hostility. For decades, Middle Eastern Christians have been fleeing to Western countries in search of sanctuary from persecution in their home countries, the bitter reality of which seems too obvious to be worth spelling

out. Repeatedly though, European (and some North American) immigration authorities have demanded that asylum seekers prove their Christian credentials by a series of absurd tests. In Britain, notoriously, these have included being asked to recite the Ten Commandments or to state how many books there are in the Bible (presumably all non-Protestants fail that one outright). “What is Pentecost?” is another favorite.

Such an approach is ludicrous enough when applied to members of established Christian communities, who might have some dim recollections of Sunday school. It is absolutely inappropriate for new believers who grasped shreds of doctrine and scripture while they were living in deeply hostile societies and who hope for a new life in historically Christian Europe.

With all these caveats and concerns, these emerging Christian communities will repay watching, and especially the new converts. If those emerging churches endure and grow, they could mark an important new departure for the continent’s religious story.