

35 Million Move In and Out of the Christian faith in 2008?

Written by Sherry

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Some fascinating realities to contemplate on the verge of a New Year:

First of all, religious identity is remarkably fluid: for good or ill. This is contrary to what most Catholics have assumed and has helped fuel our "don't ask, don't tell" culture. As I wrote in part 10 of my series "[The Challenge of Independent Christianity](#)"

"We tend to regard the three basic "types" of Christianity - Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy - as essentially stable and fixed. Given the long histories and long memories of these faiths, it is only natural to think of religious affiliation as a deeply-rooted identity that changes only with difficulty and very slowly. We don't expect to wake up tomorrow and find that Protestants have decided en masse that the Reformation was not a good idea or that the Orthodox have jettisoned their icons in favor of store-front missions. Our ecumenical dialogue is founded upon this presumed stability.

David Barrett, however, has a fascinating sidebar in his World Christian Encyclopedia indicating that a surprising amount of religious change is, in fact, the norm. As Barrett puts it, "Every year, millions of people are changing their religious profession or their Christian affiliation. Mass defections are occurring from stagnant majority religions to newer religions" (World Christian Encyclopedia, p. 5). It is imperative for us to understand that a significant part of this change is the result of personal choices, and not just natural birth and death. Evangelicals have a saying: "God has no grandchildren".

(You can read the whole 10,000 word article on Independent Christianity beginning [here](#))

This has been especially so in times and places where certain factors converge :ready access to new religious ideas (sometimes through evangelizers who come to you and sometimes through locals who are exposed to new ideas elsewhere and bring them home like the lay scholars who brought Christianity to Korea from China in the last 18th century) and circumstances that have prepared local people to be open.

We live in one of those times. The advent of the internet and globalization combined with the world-wide spread of new, intensely evangelizing forms of Christianity and post-modern ideas and assumptions has rendered clear, this-not-that, "steady state" religious identity a thing of the past-especially in the west but increasingly in large parts of the developing world as well. There has been some discussion around St. Blog's in the past year about the idea that a first generation, personally "chosen" faith is not as culturally rich as an inherited, historic faith that one simply absorbs from one's serenely homogenous, practicing family and community.

No doubt but that isn't the choice before us. Not in 2008.

Every serious Anglo Catholic (on the left or right) that I've ever met in this country has a sense of going against the flow of the culture - and often against the feelings of significant parts of his/her family and friends as well. The situation is not as grave among recent immigrants from strongly Catholic backgrounds but it will be for their children.

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Our situation both demands and is tailor-made for the New Evangelization. Spend a few minutes at this year's end contemplating the following global statistics in light of our Lord's call to make disciples of all nations and the recent CDF Note on evangelization:

19 million people convert to Christianity every year around the world. (Conversions to all other faiths combined: about 2.5 million/year)

122,000 new Christians are baptized every 24 hours around the world.

37,000 new Catholics are added to the Church every 24 hours around the world.

This fluidity of belief and practice cuts both ways:

16.5 million Christians leave the faith every year.

In the historically Christian west, we naturally been acutely aware of those leaving.

Christianity has experienced massive losses in the Western world over the last 60 years...every year, some 2,765,100 church attenders in Europe and North America cease to be practicing Christians within the 12-month period, an average loss of 7,500 every day.

But the global result is still a gain:

David Barrett, in his World Christian Encyclopedia, estimates a yearly global "net gain" of 2.5 million Christians or 69,000 new Christians per day.

If (as is most unlikely) 19 million non-Christians became Christian and a entirely different 16.5 million Christians left the faith in the new year, it would mean that over 35 million people moved in and out of the Christian faith in 2008 (more than the entire population of Canada!) Whatever the actual numbers are, this is clearly anything but "steady state", if-it-was-good-enough-for-mama, it's-good-enough-for-me faith.

At the beginning of the 21st century and at the end of 2007, huge numbers of people on this planet are searching, are open to something new, are spiritually hungry. Not a few exceptional souls but tens of millions.

And a few of them are living or working or hanging out around you and me.

In 2008, how can we reach out and present Christ in the midst of his Church to those who are seeking him - perhaps without knowing it, without the words to articulate what they are seeking - around us?