



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on December 20, 2011

Europe No Longer Center of Christian Faith

Christianity was once so localized to Europe that the term “Christendom” largely meant Europe. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the last outpost of Christian rule in the East was lost. The history of Medieval Europe was flecked with Christians holding back Islam. The Battle of Tours in France prevented the overrunning of Western Europe by Muslims. The Reconquista in 1492 ended the remnants of Muslim rule in Iberia. The Battle of Lepanto ended the threat of Muslim naval power in the Mediterranean.



Having captured the Roman world from within (following the [Edict of Milan](#) signed by the emperors Constantine I and Licinius in 313 that proclaimed religious freedom in the Roman Empire), largely because of its enormous sympathy for women, children, and slaves, Christendom gradually spread out of Europe into the other parts of the globe. Indeed, an overt purpose of much early exploration was to bring the Gospel to the peoples outside Europe or the Middle East (where it was familiar).

A seminal part of this was the establishment of colonies in North America, particularly British and French, but also Dutch (New Holland or New York) and Swedish (New Jersey) and even Danish. This shifted the demographic center of Christianity farther west, as did the establishment of Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Latin America. Missionaries also spread Christian love and hope in Africa (Dr. Livingstone) and India (Mother Teresa), and countless other unknown men and women who still continue to work at clinics, teach at schools, and help bring hope to humanity in parts of the world which seem without hope.

Still, a century ago, Europe held 40 percent of all the Christians in the world. According to the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, today only about one-quarter of the world’s Christians are in Europe. What makes this more interesting is that in the nations formerly behind the Iron Curtain, formal state-sponsored atheism is no longer overt. Luis Lugo, [Director of the Pew Forum](#) explains part of the reason:

The geography of where Christians are distributed has changed tremendously in the last hundred years. While the majority of Christians lived in Europe in 1910, by 2010 only about one in four Christians live in Europe.... Today, as a result of these changes, there is no indisputable regional center of Christianity. In terms of population, Europe was clearly at the center of the Christian world in 1910. In 2010, no one region holds a majority of the world’s Christians.

Brian Grim, a senior researcher at the forum, notes that Christianity has withstood persecution in communist regimes:

For those that grew up in the United States during the Cold War period and went to houses of worship it was a frequent prayer that I remember hearing of being thankful of being able to worship in a country where there was freedom of religion. There really was no idea of whether or



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not religion would somehow have a rebound after so many decades of communism in Eastern Europe. In Cuba, where we still see about two-thirds of the population related to primarily Catholicism; Russia, almost two out of three people affiliated with the Orthodox Church; and in China, though the Christian numbers are relatively smaller, we're seeing hundreds of millions of people affiliated with religion.

What accounts for Europe dropping so substantially as a percentage of the world's Christians? Part of the drop is the consequence of rising secularism in Europe. Faith, at least Christian faith, no longer appeals to chic Europeans who have stopped believing in God or attending religious services. In some cases, this superficial faith was always a thin veneer hidden by state religions. As one example, those born in Sweden before 2000 were, by operation of law, Evangelical Christian members of the [Church of Sweden](#). Yet socialist Sweden was among the most irreligious places on the planet. Nations such as Denmark, Norway, Scotland, and England still have "state" religions and the nominal affiliates of those state churches may have no serious religious views at all.

This de-Christianization of Europe has been going on for many decades, and 80 years ago writers were noting that in nations such as France and Germany very few people really believed in Christianity. In 1927, Adolph Keller and George Stewart wrote that only about a quarter of the French were practicing Christians. This concurs with Gustave Combes, who in 1938 wrote that only about one-quarter of the French people were practicing Christians. Sisley Huddleston observed: "Nominally France is a Catholic country, but in reality France has always been in conflict with the Church." One-third of the parishes in France had no priest.

Sidney Dark, in his 1941 book, *The Church Impotent or Triumphant*, writing of France in 1940, the year it fell to Nazis, commented: "France had ceased to be Christian and the Church had ceased to function within France," and, "There is an intimate relationship between the banishing of God from French schools in 1904 and the disaster of 1940, the decay of faith leading to corruption, disagreement and confusion." Thomas Ohm, in his 1948 book *Christianity in Asia*, notes that a Chinese student told him, "I have been in France for five years and have never met a Catholic student."

This de-Christianization started even earlier in Germany. In his 1891 book *The History of the Church in Germany*, S. Baring-Gould wrote: "The spirit of rationalism has gained enormous strides in a church which is without standards of faith. The Apostles Creed is, indeed, found in the liturgy, and is used at baptism; but though found in the liturgy, is hardly ever read, and pastors are willing to baptize without the symbol." Later in the same book, he noted: "The present condition of affairs is deplorable indeed, definite faith is becoming daily more rare in the Evangelical Church." In 1894, Wolfgang Menzel wrote, "This frivolous class of theologians at length entirely reject the Gospels ... and renounce Christianity. ... Abstract philosophy, despising nature and history, mocking Christianity, once more revived and set itself up as the absolute principle of Hegel."

Another important factor has been the drastic, though long-anticipated, demographic decline in Europe. Although this also affects some other modern industrialized nations, such as Japan, most nations in Europe are on a long-term population decline, and the additions to national populations are coming in great part from Muslim immigrants. The largely agnostic Europeans see no reason for large families.

Is it more than coincidence that Europe — which has plunged into two world wars and given us Marxism, National Socialism, and Fascism — is now finding that its governments have incurred obligations so disproportionate to tax resources that bondholders increasingly believe that these sovereign debts simply cannot be honored? A persuasive line of argument is that all these are



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interwoven: that rejecting God and embracing an “eat, drink, and be merry” social philosophy leads to the same bad end.



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