
Christians in South Africa: The statistical picture

J J Kritzingen
Universiteit van Pretoria

Abstract

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Government censuses since 1960 indicate that the religious picture was already largely fixed by the 1950s. Already at that stage some 3 out of 4 South Africans identified themselves as 'Christians'. Since then this percentage grew steadily, mainly because of ongoing growth in the christianising of the black population. The high percentage of people who didn't supply any religious information during the 1991 census makes recent analysis difficult. However, two trends seem clear: (a) the movement towards African Independent Churches (AICs) is continuing, and (b) a significant number joins the newer Apostolic/Charismatic churches. Another reality is the presence of Christian nominality, which is not reflected in the census figures, but can be as high as 75%.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the September 1993 number of the *MARC Newsletter*¹, a publication with a worldwide distribution, I read the following news item:

Church affiliation in South Africa has been in radical decline since 1970 with the percentage of the population that regard themselves as Christian dropping from 54 percent in 1970 to 38 percent in 1990.

(MARC Newsletter 1993:2)

I couldn't believe my eyes, because that is totally at odds with my reading of the official census results since 1970.

As they gave as their source the *South African Christian Handbook 1993/4* of Marjorie Froise² it was easy to check the correctness of the quote. On page ix I found the following paragraph:

When the statistics for the Protestant denominations are added together, the data indicates that 54% of the total population regarded themselves as Christian in 1970 (AIC excluded). By 1980, this figure had dropped to 47,5% and in 1990, to 38%. Although the 1990 figure³ is possibly not correct, it is the editor's conviction that the downward trend is continuing.

(South African Christian Handbook 1993/4 1994:ix)

It is clear that whoever wrote the news item for the *MARC Newsletter* was using this paragraph incorrectly. It is explicitly mentioned that these figures apply to the *Protestant denominations*. However, the said author could plead extenuating circumstances, because Marjorie Froise's formulation is not clear. But the fact is that, even though the (mainline) Protestant membership may be on a relative decline, it is not true of the total number of 'Christians'⁴.

Apart from the above problems I have with the information given by *MARC* and Marjorie Froise, I want to take her up on another issue. Why, in the above quoted paragraph, did she exclude (a) the (Roman) Catholic Church and (b) the AICs, the group of Churches variously called the African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated Churches? Was it Froise's intention to count only the 'Protestants' as Christians? If so, I beg to disagree.

I count (for statistical purposes) all those who state an affiliation to a Christian Church, quite independent of what I may think of that Church. Who am I to exclude the members of certain Churches from this number, just because I have queries about (some of) their doctrinal formulations, or have no inclination towards (some of) their rituals? The fact (which I will substantiate later on) is that the AICs are growing strongly in numbers and in stature within the Christian camp. At the same time the Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian Church worldwide, and in South Africa maybe the only 'mainline' Church that (until recently) seemed to be growing as fast as the general population. It is unacceptable to simply exclude these Churches.

I do agree that not all those who are counted as 'Christians' in the government census can be regarded as *Christians*. I use this wonderful title in a qualitatively sense, and reserve it for those who are conscious followers of Jesus Christ, made a faith commitment, and seriously strive to live as his disciples. As a matter of fact, I find four levels of Christian statistics:

- * The most superficial level is the government census. This often merely indicates that the person (or family) is not attached to any alternative religious body, or that a member of the family sometimes attends church services.
- * The next statistical level is the official figures of the Churches. This is usually a much lower figure - maybe 2 out of every 3 of the above.
- * Not all of the people on the Church lists regularly attend church services or take part in church activities. This third level can be fewer than 1/2.
- * The last level (and smallest number) indicate those who I defined above as the 'committed Christians'⁵. This number is very difficult to come by.

If we take these committed Christians to be about 2 out of every 3 church attenders, then they are not more than about a quarter of the number counted in the government census⁶. This means that the government census' 80% nominally Christian population would translate to 20% 'committed Christians'.

I think that these four levels are present in every single Church. There is no absolutely purified Church, as there is no (Christian) Church without a single committed Christian. My approach is therefore not to discount any denomination, but to be realistic about the quality of Christian commitment. The very optimistic official figures can be taken as (reasonably) correct counts (quantitatively), but that doesn't mean that they should be accepted uncritically as giving qualitative truth. If these official figures (I will deal with them in a moment) would represent quality Christians, then the South African scene⁷ deals a heavy blow to any thoughts of moral superiority that Christianity may entertain!

2. WHAT ARE THE STATISTICAL FACTS?

To see something of the trends I pick up the story in 1960⁸. As can readily be seen in the statistical tables, the religious make-up of South Africa⁹ was already largely stabilised by the sixties. Over the past three decades, however, two main trends seem to develop: (a) the christianising of the (black) population seems to be progressing steadily, and (b) the newer Christian movements are growing relatively faster than the traditional mainline denominations.

Before giving the tables, which will reflect the figures for the 1960, 1970, 1980 and 1991 government censuses, it is necessary to make a few remarks about the most recent (1991) census. The 1991 census forms stated explicitly that the furnishing of information on religious affiliation was voluntary. (No other information was classified as such.) On my enquiries the office stated that this confidentiality was according to longstanding regulations. These regulations may have been in force at the time of the previous censuses, but the voluntary nature of the survey was never stated so clearly, with the result that only 3% of the people didn't provide this information in 1980. Not so this time. A large number of people (almost 30% of the total) in 1991 decided not to furnish any information on their religious affiliation. There may be many reasons why they reacted as they did. Some could have done it for political reasons – because the census did become a political football. Others opted out because of frustration with the form. Still others may indeed have regarded religion as a personal matter. The fact is that we don't know anything about these people's affiliation. To accept – as some do – that these people are all non-Christians is just as mistaken as the supposition that they are all Christians. I am sure that many of them (the majority) should actually be counted with the 25 million 'Christians', but I cannot say how many¹⁰.

Table 1: Adherents of the different religions in South Africa, 1960 to 1991 (in thousands and percentages).

Religious affiliation	1960 No.	%	1970 No.	%	1980 No.	%	1991 No.	%
Christians	11 727	73,3	16 427	75,4	22 603	77,0	25 065	66,4
Hindus	328	2,1	430	2,0	512	1,8	477	1,3
Muslims	191	1,2	260	1,2	319	1,1	412	1,1
Judaist	115	0,7	118	0,5	119	0,4	81	0,2
Other	9	0,1	29	0,1	48	0,1	31	0,1
No religion					625	2,1	454	1,2
Uncertain ¹¹	3 616	22,6	4 530	20,8	4 229	14,4	-	-
Nothing/object ¹²					910	3,1	11 213	29,7
TOTAL	15 988	100,0	21 794	100,0	29 365	100,0	37 738	100,0

- The first trend spoken of can clearly be seen in the above table. Not only were practically 3 out of every 4 South Africans already by 1960 affiliated to one or other Christian church, but the proportion seems still to be growing. I think this can also be said of the period since 1980, because many of the 11 million who declined to answer the religious question were in fact 'Christians'. (It is interesting to note that not less than 94% of those who did answer the question indicated themselves as Christians.)
- But what are the dynamics within the Christian grouping? In the following table 2 we look at the Christian community in order to detect possible shifts.

Table 2: The relative strength of Christian groupings in South Africa, 1960 to 1991 (in thousands and percentages).

Denomination	1960 No.	%	1970 No.	%	1980 No.	%	1991 No.	%
African Initiated	2 313	19,7	2 716	16,5	5 857	25,9	8 383	33,4
Dutch Reformed	2 289	19,5	3 006	18,3	3 676	16,3	3 913	15,6
Roman Catholic	1 076	9,2	1 898	11,6	2 701	11,9	2 854	11,4

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Methodist	1 707	14,6	2 307	14,0	2 978	13,2	2 208	8,8
Apost/Pentecostal	497	4,2	931	5,7	323	1,4	1 450	5,8
Anglican	1 403	12,0	1 716	10,4	2 040	9,0	1 431	5,7
Lutheran	651	5,6	949	5,8	1 045	4,6	943	3,8
Presbyterian	321	2,7	578	3,5	646	2,9	542	2,2
Congregational	291	2,5	395	2,4	467	2,1	468	1,9
Baptist	152	1,3	247	1,5			303	1,2
Other	1 025	8,7	1 685	10,3	2 870	12,7	2 255	9,0
Total Christian	11 727	100,0	16 427	100,0	22 603	100,0	25 065	100,0

Four remarks may be made:

- *The African Initiated Churches (AICs)* as a group has grown very strongly during the last decades. At least 1 out of 3 Christians nowadays hold membership in one of the great number of these churches. One of them, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), has grown to the fourth largest Church overall, after the Dutch Reformed Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist Church.
- *The Roman Catholic Church* has (until recently) grown steadily at a faster rate than the population. It seems to be the only traditional denomination to hold its own against the AICs.
- All the *other mainline churches* are losing out in terms of their share of the (Christian) population. The NG Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) is still the largest of these and this family of churches (still technically not one, but four Churches) comprises the largest block next to the AICs.
- An amorphous group which may be called the *Apostolic/Pentecostal Churches* seems to be growing at a faster rate than the others, be it from a very low base.

3. WHAT RACE ARE THESE CHRISTIANS?

There are still people around who associate Christianity with the West and white faces. Is this true of South African Christianity? As the 1991 census may have been the last one based on the racial classification of Blacks, Whites, Coloureds and Asians, we may (for the last time) use the race-based statistics to make the point clear that this is not true.

Table 3: The racial breakdown of the main Christian groupings in the Republic of South Africa, 1991 (in thousands and percentages)¹³

Group	Blacks No.	%	Whites No.	%	Coloureds No.	%	Asians No.	%	Total No.	%
Other AICs	5 310	98,9	7	0,1	45	0,8	5	0,1	5 367	100
DRCs	1 050	32,7	1 598	49,7	564	17,6	1	0,0	3 213	100
Roman Ca.	1 780	75,9	315	13,4	235	10,0	14	0,6	2 344	100
Methodist	1 382	76,2	334	18,4	95	5,2	2	0,1	1 813	100
ZCC	1 511	99,6	1	0,1	5	0,3	0	0,0	1 517	100
Anglicans	646	54,9	292	24,8	233	19,8	5	0,4	1 176	100
Lutherans	663	85,4	28	3,6	82	10,6	2	0,3	776	100
Presbyt.	306	76,1	90	22,4	5	1,2	1	0,2	402	100
AFM	112	27,9	225	56,0	63	15,7	2	0,5	402	100
Congreg.	232	60,4	19	4,9	129	33,6	4	1,0	384	100
Baptist	154	61,8	73	29,3	19	7,6	3	1,2	249	100
Full Gosp.	89	44,7	67	33,7	21	10,6	22	11,1	199	100
TOTAL	21 646	69,9	5 068	16,4	3 286	10,6	987	3,2	30 987	100

The overwhelming majority of the Christians of South Africa are Black. The Christian community nowadays reflect the racial composition of the total population. Some Churches are to a large extent based in the White community (e.g. the DRC), but others (e.g. the ZCC) are almost totally Black, but those that are mono-racial in principle are very few and insignificant.

4. WHERE ARE THE CHRISTIANS?

It may be interesting to note differences in the religious situation of the regions of the country. In my 1986 publication interesting facts came to light regarding the relative unevangelised areas. Without being able to do it with the same level of detail, I will now analyse the published 1991 tables in terms of regional differences¹⁴.

Table 4: The Christians and non-Christians of the different regions of the Republic of South Africa 1991 (Thousands and percentages).

Region	Christians No.	%	Non- Christians No.	%	Non- specified No.	%	Total	%
A:W Cape	2 404	67,9	169	4,8	970	27,4	3 543	100
B:N Cape	553	77,5	3	0,4	158	22,1	714	100
C:OFS	2 045	83,6	3	0,1	397	16,2	2 446	100
D:E Cape	1 304	69,9	15	0,8	546	29,3	1 865	100
E:KwaNatal	4 880	61,3	445	5,6	2 630	33,1	7 955	100
F:E Tvl	1 318	63,4	11	0,5	751	36,1	2 080	100
G:N Tvl	2 134	51,5	6	0,1	2 010	48,5	4 142	100
H:PWV	5 218	72,3	161	2,2	1 835	25,4	7 214	100
J:W Tvl	724	70,7	5	0,5	295	28,8	1 024	100
TOTAL	20 583	66,4	824	2,7	9 580	30,9	30 987	100

Only three regions have significant adherents of other religions, namely Region A: the Western Cape, with its Malay Muslim population; Region E: Natal/KwaZulu, with its many Hindu and Muslim Indians; and Region H: the PWV area, with a sizeable, though almost insignificant (2,2%) number of Muslims and Jews. There does not seem to be many followers of other religions. The absence of the Traditionalist alternative is clearly a great mistake, because there are certainly many more non-Christians. The (black) people with traditionalist leanings either regarded themselves as 'Christian traditionalists', or refrained from providing any information. Although the regions do differ the general pattern remains the same:

- * a vast majority of the people regard themselves as belonging to the Christian camp; and
- * an unsatisfactory number gave no information.

This last group makes it difficult to substantiate trends. The final question remains unanswered: what can be known about the religious affiliation of this 30%?

ENDNOTES

1. *MARC* is the acronym for *Mission Advanced Research and Communication Center*, a ministry of *World Vision International* of Monrovia, California. It maintains a high standard of research and promotes a holistic view and practice of mission.
2. This is an extremely informative publication, already in its third edition. In it Marjorie Froise brings together and systematizes data on the hundreds of Christian organizations and churches operating in South Africa. These lists is preceded by a statistical and descriptive character on 'The church in South Africa'.
3. I do not know where she obtained the 1990 figures, because the government census, which she seems to be using, was only done in 1991.
4. The reason why I put the term 'Christians' in inverted commas will become clear in the course of the next argument.
5. I am aware that the creation of a category of 'committed Christians' will probably be controversial. However, I am trying to deal with the factual situation of nominality, without discrediting the statistical returns.
6. These proportions are not much more than rough observations. They are, however, based on indications gleaned from case studies.
7. What is meant is the unbelievable levels of hate, intolerance and violence that are daily in the news.
8. I use my own published tables for 1960, 1970 and 1980 (Kritzinge 1986), and the published report of the 1991 census of the RSA (03-01-22 (1991)) for the compilation of the tables. For the last column I added the (unofficial) population of the TBVC states in the same religious breakdown as was found in South Africa.
9. It is quite difficult to compose a statistical picture of 'South Africa'. After 1970 the four 'homelands', Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei, became independent as the so-called TBVC states. Since 1980 they conducted their own censuses. I tried to include information for the whole of the historic South Africa in tables 1 and 2.
10. This is why I still tend to view the 1980 results as more authoritative. My feeling is that the 1980 breakdown, extrapolated to the present population figures, still provides our best picture.

11. The official censuses (even in 1991) did not include among the different possibilities a category for 'African Traditional Religions' (or any other term for it). This should be rectified in future. At this stage I can do nothing other than assume that most traditionalists were (at least up to 1980) counted under the category 'Uncertain'. There were also the categories 'Object to state' and 'No religion, no church', but they were never large.
12. Note the large number of abstainings and objections in 1991. In the previous censuses these were so few that I classified them with the uncertain category.
13. The source for this table is the Central Statistical Services' publication *Population Census 1991: Social characteristics of the population. No 03-01-22 (1991)*.
14. I will not be able to say anything about the TBVC states, as I am not aware whether they had a religious census in 1991.

Works consulted

- Central Statistical Services 1992. *Population Census 1991: Social characteristics of the population. No 03-01-22 (1991)*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
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- Kritzinger, J J 1986. South Africa's religious mosaic. *Africa Insight* 16, 93-108.