

Title

O’Byrne, Ryan Joseph. (2020).

South Sudan. *Brill Encyclopaedia of Global Pentecostalism*. Michael Wilkinson, Connie Au, Jörg Haustein, Todd Johnson, and Erica Ramirez, eds.

The Great Unknown

Out of South Sudan’s population of 12+ million there are an estimated 7,462,064 Christians, 728,178 of whom are adherents to Pentecostal/Charismatic (P/C) churches (Johnson REFERENCE NEEDED). However, as even the best statistics about South Sudan are approximations from very limited data, attempts at the P/C population have limited usefulness: even before the death and displacement from the present war (2013 onward), not only is there a dearth of literature on P/C in South Sudan, but there is no reliable estimate for South Sudan’s population more generally.

Nonetheless, Christianity can certainly claim between 70-95% of the South Sudanese population, of whom Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Charismatic (PEC) churches are the fastest growing. Such growth is not uniform, however, and the explosion of P/Cs in the capital of Juba is not necessarily replicated in rural areas. Moreover, knowledge of contemporary South Sudanese religious life results from an uneven spread of scholarly attention, with more being known about religious life among the politically and numerically dominant Dinka and Nuer populations than other South Sudanese peoples. In fact, discrepancies in P/C adherence often reproduce localised patterns of conflict, displacement, and resettlement as well as origin.

A Growing Movement

The first Christian encounters in South Sudan took place in the late nineteenth century. The dynamics of South Sudan’s contemporary Christian landscape suggests a critical distinction between early conversions connected to mainline churches and later ones of an American-influenced, Bible Literalist, and Evangelical form. Early Christian influence was limited and largely restricted to an urban, educated elite by the time foreign missionaries were expelled in 1964. Since then two major changes have taken place: firstly, a significant number of people have become self-professing Christians; secondly, many of these have joined P/Cs.

Christianity in ‘modern’ South Sudan has three distinct phases, each connected to a moment in regional history. These are: one, the coming of colonial-linked missions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; next, ‘the Second Wave of Christianisation’ (O’Byrne 2016) of the 1960-70s, which saw not only the expulsion of foreign missionaries but largescale south-north labour migration and a general indigenisation of protestant churches; lastly, refugee-based entanglements with American-influenced Protestantism from the late 1980s onwards, an ongoing process O’Byrne (2016) terms ‘the Third Wave of Christianisation’, probably the most important process in the current growth of P/Cs in South Sudan.

Indeed, many South Sudanese first experienced P/C Christianity during the Second Sudanese War (1983-2005). Until this time, Christianity had generally not spread far beyond urban centres. Displacement changed this, however, with huge numbers of South Sudanese converted to multiple denominations. In the refugee camps, the churches that gathered the most converts were international – primarily American – in origin and distinctly Bible Literalist in orientation. Alternatively, among the approximately 1.5 million South Sudanese in greater Khartoum,

indigenous PEC churches gained such widespread following that they were once called the 'fastest growing movements of Christian conversion in the world' (Hutchinson 1996: 337).

With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, decades of civil war led to South Sudan's July 2011 independence. When the new state granted access to foreign missionaries a huge growth in the numbers of P/C churches followed. Moreover, the resettlement of refugees in countries like Australia and the USA saw many South Sudanese join new churches. Such resettlements re-focused spiritual orientations towards international or diasporic congregations and, when resettled pastors returned, they brought new doctrines with them. Consequently, many 'First' and 'Second Wave' churches have begun (re)producing forms of Christianity reminiscent of 'Third Wave' churches.

Further Reading

Brown, Elijah M. 2008. *The Road to Peace: The Role of the Southern Sudanese Church in Communal Stabilisation and National Resolution*. PhD Thesis, The University of Edinburgh.

Brown, Timothy 2011. *Building Social Capital in South Sudan: How local churches worked to unite a nation in the lead up to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement*. University of Ottawa.

Hutchinson, Sharon Elaine. 1996. *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

O'Byrne, Ryan Joseph. 2016. *Becoming Christian: Personhood and Moral Cosmology in Acholi South Sudan*. PhD Thesis, University College London.

Zillinger, Martin. 2014. "Christian Modernizations. Circulating Media Practices of the Mission along the Nile. Modernisations chrétiennes. Pratiques circulantes des media le long du Nil." *L'Année du Maghreb* 11: 17-34.