Global Saints
Conservative Christianity in the Early Twenty-first Century

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Introduction

The global growth of conservative Christianity shows few signs of abating. While Christian observance has declined markedly over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries throughout Europe and to a lesser extent North America, a very different picture emerges in other parts of the world. In the ‘Global South’ in particular, which includes Africa, Latin America, and most of Asia, conservative forms of Christianity have grown exponentially since the early 1900s.

A core set of emphases frequently unites the otherwise disparate expressions of conservative Christian religiosity. Unlike their more liberal counterparts, conservative believers tend to dismiss Enlightenment-inspired approaches to the study of scripture, focusing instead on the divine inspiration of the Bible, or on the authoritative teachings and interpretation of Holy Writ provided by religious elites. Unmoved by celebrations of religious diversity, most conservative believers retain their commitment to evangelise non-Christians. Notions of salvation for these groups remain rooted in a traditional Christian narrative centred on the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. And the faithful typically condemn expansive definitions of the family and of human sexuality, by and large rejecting homosexuality and changing gender norms.

Despite traditionalists’ opposition to more liberal forms of religious innovation, modernising forces have shaped conservative iterations of the faith no less than they have shaped more progressive alternatives. The story of conservative Christianity in the early twenty-first century—whether in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, or Europe—repeatedly intersects with the ever-increasing influence of globalisation, consumer capitalism, and technological advance, not to mention persistent nationalistic currents.

Of course, deep-seated divisions remain. Disparate ritual practices and theological commitments, for instance, reveal strikingly divergent conclusions regarding proper attitudes towards the poor, the desirability of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, the utility of overt political action, biblical gender
roles, and the import of science, among other issues. The end result is a remarkably diverse set of twenty-first century Christians who, despite their disagreements, are nonetheless linked by a shared set of core convictions and by their connections to a rapidly modernising, globalised world.

Mapping Global Conservative Christianity

Considering the predominance of Catholicism throughout the world—in the early twenty-first century nearly 1.1 billion individuals identify as Catholic—it should come as no surprise that the largest contingent of conservative believers are found in the Catholic Church (Pew Forum 2011a: 21–26). Not all Catholics fit within the parameters of conservative Christianity defined above, to be sure, but the Church’s fidelity to tradition on a number of issues serves as a formidable counterweight to various liberalising trends. It is telling, for instance, that Pope Francis, who was elected to lead the Catholic Church in 2013, has reset the tenor of the Church’s message regarding everything from homosexuality, contraception, and to a certain degree abortion, yet nonetheless affirms Church doctrines that formally condemn such practices. Similarly, despite pressures to adopt a more egalitarian power structure, the Church continues to reserve ordination for men, preserving a male-dominated hierarchy. None of this is to deny the Catholic Church’s important contributions to a variety of causes that progressives would cheer, including efforts to help the poor, or to combat the excesses of global capitalism. The legacy of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) is especially significant in this regard. That said, the conservative implications of the Church’s organisational model and of many of its teachings are clear.

Whereas one out of every two Christians worldwide identifies as Catholic, Protestants account for 37 percent of the global Christian population. Like the Catholic Church, Protestants dot the entire spectrum of the liberal-conservative divide. Evangelical Christianity serves as the most visible expression of conservative Protestantism; roughly 285 million believers belong to explicitly evangelical churches, or self-identify as evangelical. Many more Protestants, however, likewise espouse a core set of a conservative evangelical emphases centred on the absolute authority of scripture, the importance of a ‘born-again’ conversion experience, as well as a strong missionary impulse (Bebbington 1989: 2–17; Marsden 1991: 1–6; Lewis 2004; Pew Forum 2011a: 17–18, 27–29, 69; Stanley 2013; Lewis and Pierard 2014).

The relative conservatism associated with evangelical-friendly forms of Protestantism has been bolstered over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic