

The crypto-Christians: One of the world's largest religious groups

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 14, 2009](#) issue

For most American Christians, restraints on the open expression of religious loyalties normally involve situations in which believers might be seen as imposing their views on others—through evangelism in the workplace or school, perhaps. But in many parts of Africa and Asia, in societies dominated by other religions or by militant atheist regimes, Christians experience such negative pressure that they refrain from even admitting they are Christians. Millions survive as crypto-Christians.

Just how common these covert believers are is a mystery. In theory, hidden believers should be immune to study, as they would never break cover; the people who can be studied are only the less discreet. But we often do hear of crypto-Christians, and the stories are startling. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, as of 2000 Syria's Christian population was fewer than 5 percent, but most observers think that number is far too low. And the true number has surely risen with the influx of Christian Iraqi refugees. A million semiclandestine Iraqi believers would raise the size of the Christian minority to at least 10 or 12 percent.

In India, some guess the number of crypto-Christians is 20 million. Worldwide, the crypto-Christian population runs well into the tens of millions. For what it's worth, the *World Christian Encyclopedia* speaks of 120 million hidden believers. If that figure is right, crypto-Christians would by themselves constitute one of the world's largest religious groups.

Although many of these believers are isolated individuals and families, some sizable communities have demonstrated astonishing powers of survival. In the 17th century, the Buddhist/Shinto nation of Japan annihilated a Catholic missionary presence that seemed to be on the verge of converting the nation. After persecutions that killed tens of thousands—even a suspicion of Christian loyalty could lead to execution—the organized church presence was destroyed by 1680. Yet many thousands of “hidden Christians,” *Kakure Kirishitan*, somehow maintained their secret traditions in

remote fishing villages and island communities, and they continue to this day.

This catacomb church strayed from mainstream Catholicism, and many of its practices make it look like a Shinto sect: its eucharistic elements are rice, fish and sake. Its followers once knew nothing of the wider church, believing themselves to be the world's only true Christians. The stunning 1997 documentary *Otaiya* allows us to hear very old believers reciting Catholic prayers that first came to the region over 400 years ago—some recalled in church Latin and 16th-century Portuguese. Believers lovingly display a fragment of a silk robe once worn by one of the martyred European fathers. The film shows us the two last living members of the indigenous hereditary priesthood, both frail men in their 90s—the distant successors of St. Francis Xavier and the Jesuit pioneers.

Jesus reportedly warned his followers never to deny him publicly, lest he deny them at the Day of Judgment. Throughout the history of Christianity, though, conquests and revolutions have repeatedly led to persecutions and forced conversions, and at least some Christians have responded by maintaining a subterranean faith. When the Muslim Ottomans overran the Balkans and the Near East, many Christian believers publicly accepted Islam but continued to practice their true faith at night and in secret places. They became *Lino vamvakoï*: they were like a cloth in which cotton (*vamvaki*) was covered by linen (*lino*), so that they showed only one side at a time.

The phenomenon of crypto-Christianity is likely to become much more common in the coming decades. Defensive tactics are scarcely needed when the vast majority of Christians live in self-defined Christian nations, but they become acutely relevant when millions of believers live in deeply hostile environments, in societies that are (for instance) predominantly Muslim or Hindu.

That is especially likely in a global age, when the faith is spreading rapidly in Africa and Asia, powered by new forms of media and electronic communication. In turn, the rapid spread of Christianity inspires opposition from other established faiths and ideologies. In the worst cases, believers can survive only by practicing concealment and subterfuge, however they reconcile that behavior with the text of scripture. Whatever the prognosis, crypto-Christianity is an important—and evocative—part of the worldwide Christian story.