

WWL 2018

Church History & Facts - BHUTAN

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
793,000	20,000	2.5

Source: Open Doors estimate of number of Christians 2017

How did Christians get there?

Portuguese missionaries made an unsuccessful visit in the 17th century. Bhutan remained officially closed to Christianity (as well as to all other external influences) until just before the failed coup in 1964/1965. In October 1963, the Canadian Jesuit priest, [William Mackey](#), was invited by the king and prime minister to take up residence and set up an English-language school system as part of a series of modernization efforts, and stayed until his death in 1995. Sources name 1965 as the date when church activity became visible and started to grow.

What church networks¹ exist today?

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Open Doors estimates that Christians make up around 2.5% of the total population. Christianity is said to be concentrated in towns and in the south, where a strong influx from migrants from Nepal and India has taken place over the years, leading to efforts by the government to “Bhutanize” those minorities. Roman Catholics are a small minority with most Christians belonging to a variety of Pentecostal networks.

¹ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in the Pentecostal/Charismatic/Independent Charismatic renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ²
OD estimate 20,000	1,800	90,200	661,000	26,500	-	87	220

Source: WCD, May 2017

Most Christians come from a Nepali background, many of whom are living in the south. According to WCD, an estimated 83.4% of the population practice different forms of Buddhism. The remaining part of the population mainly practices Hinduism (again, mostly of Nepali origin). Official numbers say that 28% of the population was of Nepalese ethnicity in the 1980s, but some estimations run as high as 40%. Some Bhutanese are of tribal origin, the others are either ethnic Tibetan or mixed Tibetan with South Asian origin.

Notes on the current situation

Christians in Bhutan face many critical issues such as disunity, lack of trained leadership, insensitive influence by foreign groups (who often do more harm than good), lack of religious materials in the national language, and the tendency to be fixated on healings and miracles. Christians also struggle with a lot of social problems as well as challenges in their family life.

Christians continue to be monitored by the state and their worship gatherings are sometimes threatened and closed. Two pastors were arrested in March 2014 on charges of evangelism and only released eight months later. This shows that Christianity is still seen as a foreign and dangerous religion and serves as a warning for the whole Christian community.

Word count: 591

² This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.