

Factsheet on **Protestantisme**, Radicalization and Polarization



Part of a series of Factsheets on the Religion Radicalization Nexus within the context of EDUC8 Project.

Produced by the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven



Funded by the European Union

Introduction

Protestantism is one of the four major movements within Christianity. It distinguishes itself from other traditions by emphasizing **salvation by faith alone**, as well as the Bible as accessible **authority** for Christian life and teaching. There are an estimated 800 million to one billion Protestants worldwide who belong to various (sub)movements and denominations, including Baptists, Reformed Protestantism, the Pentecostal tradition, Lutheranism, and Mennonites. While the number of Protestants is **growing** in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania, it is **declining** or **stable** in Europe and North America.

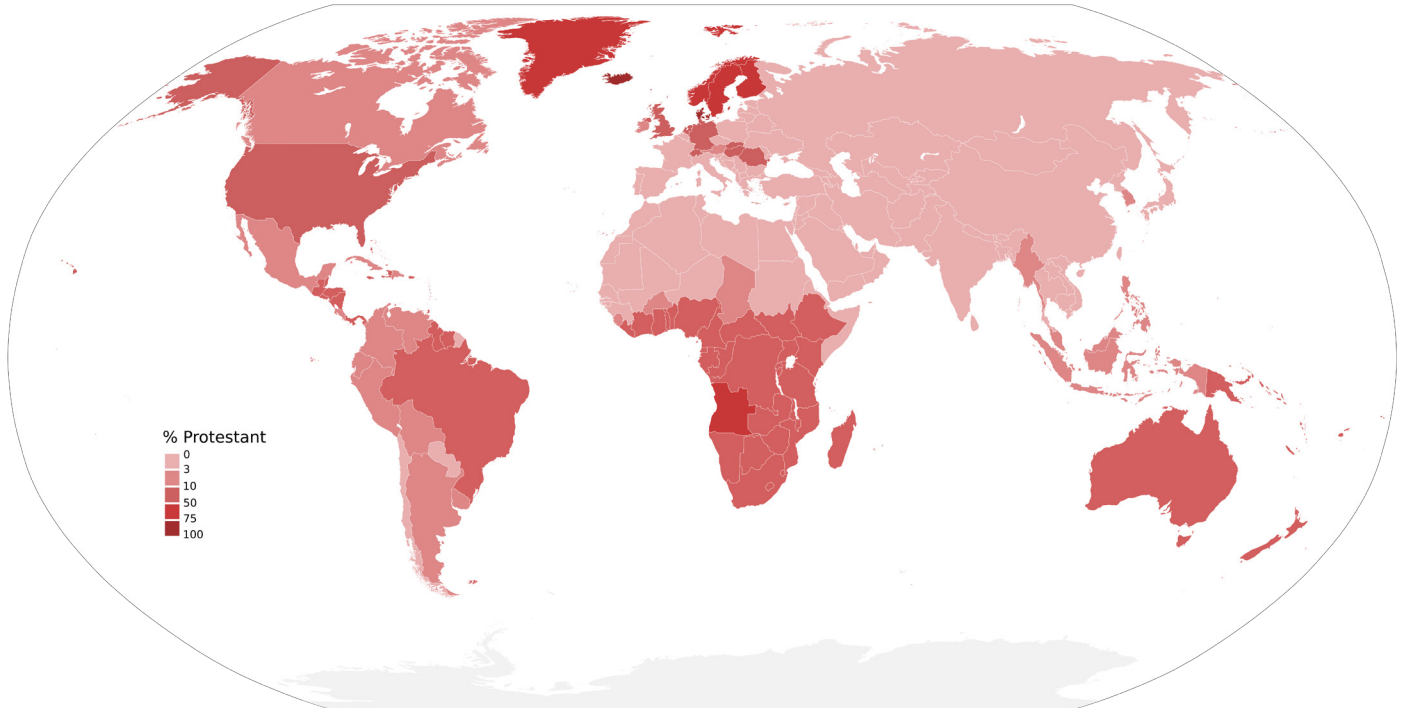


Figure 1. Self-produced map with data taken from the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd edition. The numbers include all denominations that can be classified as Protestant, including Pentecostals and Baptists.

Diversity

Protestantism is characterized by a **large internal diversity**. Although there are commonalities among churches, movements, and denominations, churches may differ from one another in form, structure, religious content, and stances on controversial issues. It is due to this diversity that Protestantism cannot be considered as a single entity. Different movements may be the majority in one country or region, while they may only constitute a minority in other countries or regions. Moreover, even if Christianity is the majority in many countries, Protestants are often in the minority compared to Catholics or Orthodox believers.



Figure 2. Lutheran confirmation (left); Pentecostal worship service (right)
Source: Pål Berge (left) Wikimedia Commons (right)

Structure

Due to Protestantism's **diversity**, there are different church movements and organizations. This results in there being no single uniform church. Different churches and organizations have different modes of decision-making and organizational structures. The churches are typically organized according to one of three types of structures: (1) In the **synodal church polity**, a hierarchy of councils governs churches. Decision-making takes place in a local church council or on a larger scale in councils of delegates from the churches and/or regional councils. (2) The **episcopal church polity** is a hierarchical structure with several levels of clergy in which the principal local authorities are called bishops. The bishops are responsible for making decisions and appointing people to positions within the church. (3) **Congregational churches** emphasize local independence and are often not affiliated with a larger church organization where decision making takes place. Thus, decisions are preferably only made internally in the local church. Despite the differences in authority and responsibility among the three types of churches, all local churches have some degree of autonomy and authority.

Emerging Issues

Protestant churches are affected by a range of global and local developments. These developments can be divided into external and internal developments. **External developments** are the social changes in society that pose challenges for churches. In the European context, these developments include secularization, migration and climate change. They present churches with theological challenges and force them to examine fundamental questions about how to be the church. At the same time, **internal developments** occur within the global Protestant context. Among these developments is a shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from Europe and the United States to the global South and Asia. Furthermore, other developments are taking place within formerly colonized states, such as a rethinking of theology within a postcolonial context and as it relates to ancient indigenous traditions. These developments have caused considerable debate and discussion within Protestant churches.



Figure 3. The Synod of Dort in 1618 was an assembly held over a theological disagreement within the Lower German church.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Condemnation of Violence

Protestants don't have a single strict stance on violence. In general, most Protestant traditions reject the use of violence. There have been many traditions that have influenced the social discussion of violence. In particular, the **pacifism** espoused by Mennonites has had a profound effect on society. Additionally, there are other traditions where modern versions of **just war theory** are strongly propagated and developed. Protestant ecumenical organizations and cooperative organizations within ecumenism have spoken out against violence and extremism in recent years. For example, the **Charta Oecumenica** signed by the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences states the following: '*We commit ourselves to work for structures of peace, based on the non-violent resolution of conflicts. We condemn any form of violence against the human person, particularly against women and children.*' (p. 8)

Polarisation

Protestant churches have to acknowledge that they have contributed to societal polarization in the past. Minorities within the Protestant movement have often been marginalized by Protestant majorities, and other Christian denominations have historically not been treated with much **respect**. A strong drive for evangelism has also made Protestants unable to truly engage in a dialog with other religions, and their openness has not always been strong. Although polarizing reasoning and processes may persist within certain churches, there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of **respectful dialogue with people of other faiths and to have unity among Christians**. In addition, there has been a stronger focus on dialogue with people with other beliefs, but this highly depends on the context. Protestants also advocate for **religious freedom** and strive to promote it throughout the world. The Protestant movements themselves were able to survive thanks to the freedom of religion that developed after the Reformation in the West.

Protestant churches participate in the dialogue among Christians and with other religions (e.g., World Council of Churches, Lausanne Movement, Parliament of the World's Religions). At the same time, many Protestants continue to stress the core values of their faith and adhere to certain "core truths". An example of this can be seen in the **Cape Town Commitment**, which was drafted at the Lausanne World Conference on Evangelization (2010): *"We affirm the proper place for dialogue with people of other faiths, just as Paul engaged in debate with Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue and public arenas. As a legitimate part of our Christian mission, such dialogue combines confidence in the uniqueness of Christ and in the truth of the gospel with respectful listening to others."*



Figure 4. Interfaith Prayer for Peace in 2013 with delegates from different religions.
Source: Mazur/catholicnews.org.uk

Cover: The Schlosskirche in Lutherstadt Wittenberg.
Photo by Sirleonidas, 2020 Source: Wikimedia Commons

This factsheet was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund - Police.
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