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# Christian History as World History: A Review Essay

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## Abstract

This review essay discusses the status of “World Christianity” as a field of study, then highlights the features of the book at hand. It is an exercise in world history more than church history, focusing on how Christianity in various parts of the world responded to the twentieth century’s greatest challenges. The book addresses the rise of millenarianism and fundamentalism, neo-orthodoxy, liberation theology, Pentecostalism, and ecumenism. But its more intent focus is on how Christianity addressed the century’s world wars, colonialism, nationalism, secularism, rise of radical Islam, human rights, migration, and the growing power of the state.

## Keywords

World Christianity, twentieth century, world history, racism, genocide, human rights, church-state relations, Pentecostalism, secularization

One of the liveliest and fastest growing fields in the study of religion these days is the one that this journal has made no little effort to promote: World Christianity. This interdisciplinary realm was pioneered by historians Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Daniel Bays, Robert Frykenberg, and Dana Robert,<sup>1</sup> but it also enjoys lively engagement from religion scholars such as Afe Adogame and Birgit Meyer, social scientists Timothy Shah and Mwenda Ntarangwi, and theologians too, namely Timothy Tennent and Peter Phan. The Yale-Edinburgh Group, founded in 1992 to “promote research and in-depth study of the history of the Christian faith outside the West,” as Walls, a founder, put it recently,<sup>2</sup> continues its lively annual meetings, alternatively held at Yale and at

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Edinburgh. Its directory lists some 500 participants. Meanwhile, Adogame and colleagues at Princeton Theological Seminary are now convening annual conferences on World Christianity. The second meeting, held in March 2019, reached its capacity of two hundred and had to close admissions. Centers and institutes for the study of World Christianity are springing up all over the North Atlantic world, notably in Edinburgh, Cambridge, Leiden, Boston, Calvin, and St. Louis Universities, plus several American theological schools as well: Gordon-Conwell, Asbury, Trinity, and Fuller.

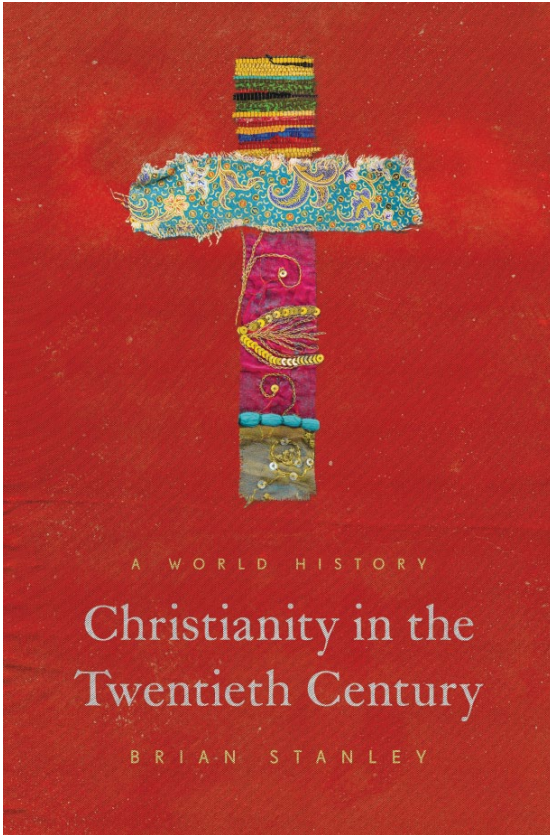
Not long ago, someone on the Yale-Edinburgh email network asked for advice on a good textbook overview of the field. Recommendations came pouring in, and the texts readers mentioned revealed a variety of approaches: theological, comparative, phenomenological, historical, and missiological.<sup>3</sup> Textbook publishers do not lead out in front of customer demand, so we should assume that the field is burgeoning as a classroom subject too.

Historian Brian Stanley, director of the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at New College, University of Edinburgh, thus enters a busy and already crowded field with his new historical account, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History*.<sup>4</sup> This book is a timely offering because it is richly interpretive, just when the study of World Christianity is starting to turn more intently to interpretive themes and issues. Many of the field's early enthusiasts were more eager to make discoveries about Christianity's emergence in new places than to reflect on the broader realm of inquiry. Recall one of Lamin Sanneh's early attempts at a definition: "World Christianity is the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that previously were not Christian."<sup>5</sup> Upon further reflection, however, the field's scholars, Sanneh and Walls included, have been realizing that this definition is not sufficient. What makes Christianity "World Christianity" is not only that it exists in realms outside of its former heartlands in the West. That might be an argument for multiple "Christianities," existing independently in various places, but World Christianity is in fact a religion with worldwide connections and relationships.<sup>6</sup> Brian Stanley's book sets out to demonstrate this grand assertion repeatedly and to tease out some rich implications. Rather than taking a strictly chronological approach, he chooses fifteen themes of high importance to twentieth-century history and the history of Christianity. He ranges the world to tell a remarkable story of how Christianity addressed its main challenges in the twentieth century: world wars, colonialism, nationalism, secularism, Christian rivalry with Islam, human rights, migration, and the growing power of the state.

One of the freshest and most intriguing features of this book is that it frequently pairs nations from very different parts of the world to show how Christians responded to these challenges. The chapter on encounters with state-enforced secularization juxtaposes France and China. Christian-infused nationalism features Poland and South Korea. The chapter on human rights and indigenous peoples compares Canada and South Africa. The chapter on ethnic hatred and genocide compares Rwanda and Nazi Germany.

Many of Stanley's choices of national settings for addressing themes are familiar to Western readers, but there are many refreshingly new approaches, too. To illustrate his assertion that World Christianity is not just "out there" in Africa, Asia, and Latin

America, Stanley takes the reader also into Scandinavia, Poland, and Greece. And he delves into other places not well covered in the standard accounts, such as Indonesia, Australia, and the South Pacific. My only disappointment regarding coverage was that there was so little on India, the world's second most populous nation. India was the magnificent obsession of Great Britain, both for its central role in its empire and for



the challenge of Christian missions there. The end of colonialism and the continuing struggle of Indian Christianity to forge its own identity over against Hindu revivalism and nationalism is a huge story. Given the main events and themes of the twentieth century, it is curious that India did not get more coverage.

Church historians frequently arrange their narratives to follow the development of the faith from the inside out, paying the most attention to what Christianity generates. Stanley pays attention to internal developments for sure; readers get satisfying treatments of the rise of millenarianism and fundamentalism, neo-orthodoxy, liberation theology, Pentecostalism, and ecumenism. Stanley's approach, however, is much more centered on world history than on church history. He is more interested in the great, world-historical events

and forces that animated the twentieth century and how developments within Christianity arose "in the fullness of time," as attempts to bring the gospel to bear on the times. As a fellow historian, I find this approach to be very satisfying. It takes the world seriously, recognizing that the church is embedded in it—incarnated, if you will. Stanley identifies the waters Christians swim, the currents we navigate. The church is not merely reactive; it has its own sources of creative energy and motion, but it never plays them out autonomously. There is always a dialectic at work: gospel and culture, or more properly, gospel in culture.

Stanley is neither an antimodernist nor a progressive in his understanding of what the past can offer for today. His approach is sober, measured, and careful to allow contrary voices to be heard. He is, like many historians, an ironist, reputedly

suggesting that we need to be careful what we wish for, lest we be brought low once again by unintended consequences. Stanley does emulate one trait of church historians, however, at least of the more traditional sort. In a manner much like Andrew Walls, he pauses to reflect on what lessons might be learned from the past, and what a Christian theological sensibility might add to our learning.

So, for example, at the end of his chapter on racial-ethnic hatred and genocide in Rwanda and Germany, Stanley says that in both cases, nationalisms nursed historic grievances that Christians seemed powerless to counter. Christians did not inspire the genocide, but they tolerated it. One lesson to draw from these tragedies, Stanley argues, is that it is naive to think that Christian political theologies that focus solely on justice will eliminate problems. One's sense of what is just is easily blown off course by local sentiments, grievances, pressures, and prejudices. More than justice, Stanley insists, we need a robust understanding of sin's power to distort and subvert our sense of what is true and just. Christians need to practice continual self-criticism and repentance, for these evil distortions can infect the church as well as society. Today, as we see the rise of nativism and xenophobia worldwide, and as we see leaders of some of the most exuberant Christian movements of our time praising rulers who trade on these passions, this advice is timely indeed.

Stanley concludes by saying that the greatest religious change of the twentieth century has been the rise and salience of Pentecostalism. The greatest challenge? The capitulation of the gospel to racism and nationalism. And what might be the greatest challenge of the new century? The capitulation of the gospel to the idols of individual enrichment and self-fulfillment.

One can only guess at the origins of this book, but I suspect that much of it arises from teaching. I can imagine Stanley producing remarkable lectures through the years that addressed these major twentieth-century themes, then fleshing them out into chapter-length studies. Even so, I don't think this book would work well as a basic text. It is a bit too thematic and selectively focused for that use and does not aim at either narrative continuity or comprehensive regional or ecumenical coverage. But these chapters will offer great grist for discussion in seminars on World Christianity and superb background for professors' lectures. Compared to the other texts that the Yale-Edinburgh list-serv readers recommended, this work has an unmatched interpretive grasp of the faith's encounters during perhaps the most turbulent century of world history. It is a great gift to the study of World Christianity.

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## Notes

1. Dana L. Robert gives a lively and accurate account of how this group engaged the concept and set a research agenda for it in the early 1990s. See her review essay "Locating *Relocating World Christianity: Interdisciplinary Studies in Universal and Local Expressions of the Christian Faith*," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43, no. 2 (April 2019): 126–33.

2. Walls, "Note on Daniel Bays from Andrew Walls," Yale-Edinburgh list-serv posting, May 15, 2019.
3. The Yale-Edinburgh networkers commended the following books: Dyron Daughrity, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Daughrity, *To Whom Does Christianity Belong? Critical Issues in World Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Daughrity, *Rising: The Amazing Story of Christianity's Resurrection in the Global South* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018); Charles Farhadian, ed., *Introducing World Christianity* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011); Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 2 vols. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001–12); Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who They Are, Where They Are, and How They Got There* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011); Jacobsen, *Global Gospel: An Introduction to Christianity on Five Continents* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Rebecca Moore, *Voices of Christianity: A Global Introduction* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2018); Frederick W. Norris, *Christianity: A Short Global History* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002); Lalsangkima Pachuau, *World Christianity: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018); Ian Shaw, *Christianity: The Biography; 2000 Years of Global History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017); Allen Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology: Twenty-First-Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).
4. Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018), pp. xxi, 477; \$35.
5. Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 22.
6. E.g., *Relocating World Christianity: Interdisciplinary Studies in Universal and Local Expressions of the Christian Faith*, ed. Joel Cabrita, David Maxwell, and Emma Wild-Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

### Author biography



Joel Carpenter is provost and professor of history emeritus, Calvin University, Grand Rapids, MI. His latest book, co-edited with Rebecca Shah, is *Christianity in India: Conversion, Community Development, and Religious Freedom* (Fortress, 2018).