

# THE UNEXPECTED CHRISTIAN CENTURY

The Reversal and Transformation  
of Global Christianity, 1900–2000

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SCOTT W. SUNQUIST

Foreword by Mark A. Noll

  
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# Foreword

MARK A. NOLL

The great merit of Scott Sunquist's book is to narrate the recent history of Christianity as a genuinely and thoroughly *world history*. It is no longer fresh news that over the course of the last century the Christian faith has expanded into world regions where it was previously unknown, and that it has also receded significantly from areas that it once dominated. A distinguished array of learned experts—Andrew Walls, Dana Robert, Philip Jenkins, Lamin Sanneh, David Martin, among others—has provided landmark academic and popular publications announcing these facts. Such scholars have been joined by editors, denominational officials, mission executives, interested laypeople, and sometimes governmental leaders in analyzing, interpreting, projecting, strategizing, and reconceptualizing in the face of these new realities. Nevertheless, accessible histories that feature the broad general developments of the recent past, and yet that remain connected to particular stories of particular places, remain rare. *The Unexpected Christian Century* is a notable addition to such efforts.

Scott Sunquist features five themes that serve him well for charting a complex history. These themes are his way of keeping faith with both forest and trees—both the large-scale patterns in recent history and the individual people, movements, denominations, conflicts, circumstances, tragedies, and triumphs that make up the nitty-gritty of historical development. Others might come

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up with different interpretive categories, but it is hard to imagine a better set for summarizing a history that sprawls in every possible direction.

One theme describes twenty-five notable Christians as illustrating the most important world Christian developments. They include figures like Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Popes John XXIII and John Paul II, who are widely recognized in North America and Europe. But to follow Sunquist as he explains why Simon Kimbangu, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, John Sung, and Georges Florovsky belong on such a list begins to reveal the broader dimensions of a *world* history.

It is similar with the interinfluencing of modern Christianity and modern warfare. The blow to the traditional European churches from World War I and World War II is well known, but not the very significant fallout of these conflicts for Christian faith throughout the whole world. How these large wars, as well as a never-ending series of smaller conflicts, have both promoted and retarded Christian expansion shows how thoroughly the “sacred” and the “secular” have marched together in the recent past.

The apparently most conventional chapter of the book sketches the story of Christianity’s major denominational families: Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and the newer spiritual and Pentecostal movements. Yet as Sunquist traces the unfolding trajectory of these families throughout the globe, they come alive with telling interpretive impact. How Orthodoxy survived under Communist rule, how the Catholic church balances decline in Europe with dramatic expansion in the global South, how formal and informal instances of Protestant ecumenicity affected vast numbers, and how the universe of nonaligned Christian movements has burgeoned spectacularly—these individual stories, when woven together, demonstrate the relevance of traditional denominational history to the new global Christianity. As only one of many examples, Sunquist shows that, in their particular local engagements, similar traits can nonetheless be observed in many of the world’s Pentecostal and independent spiritual movements. Just this kind of approach is needed to realize how much, despite also real differences, has been shared by John Sung in China, Aimee Semple McPherson in Los Angeles, Pandita Ramabai in India, the Methodist Pentecostal Church in Chile, and the Church of God in Christ led by Charles Mason.

Sunquist’s fourth theme is migration. Bible readers should not be surprised at the revelations of this chapter. For believers, the scriptural accounts of the exodus, the Hebrew experiences of exile, the itinerant teaching of Jesus, and the journeys of the apostle Paul have always defined the character of living Christian faith. The settled history of Western Christianity, however, had made it easy to forget the unsettled character of this biblical record. A

welcome corrective comes in seeing how important migration has become in the contemporary Christian world: non-Christians pouring into Europe from Africa and the Middle East, Christians from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the South Seas pouring into the United States, urbanization and economic opportunity drawing millions of believers into the world's great cities, warfare destroying Christian communities in some regions and planting the seeds for new churches in others, political change and disease sending still others to new places. More clearly than ever, it has become obvious that "the church on the move" is simply *the* church.

The book's last major theme considers Christian interactions with other religions. For an era like ours, violent clashes inspired by religion are a fixture of the daily news cycle. In Europe, India, Burma, Nigeria, Egypt, and other regions, the intermingling of religious communities has sparked well-reported acts of violence. As the pages below indicate, however, more peaceful encounters have been just as important for the global Christian picture. With nearly infinite variety, the world has witnessed a growing number of venues with Christian-Hindu, Christian-Buddhist, Christian-Muslim, and Christian-nativist interaction. How such interactions will develop in the future is not foreordained by how they have come to exist in recent decades. But observers and those who must make decisions will explore future possibilities with much greater wisdom if they pay attention to how that development took place.

The book ends with a series of conclusions explaining the significance of a genuine world history of Christianity. Those conclusions are, of course, historical. But for those with eyes to see, they also open the door to compelling theological and spiritual insights as well.

Professor Sunquist would be the first to acknowledge that his book cannot be the last word on realities of a Christian movement that now is at home in almost every corner of the globe. Readers who pay attention to what he has written will, nonetheless, find the book a godsend for opening up a vitally important history and pointing the way toward responsible Christian life in the future.

# Preface

One of the most influential classes in my seminary education was on the book of Acts taught by a great New Testament textual scholar (and full-blooded Pentecostal). Acts has many textual questions, and it also has classic expressions of Pentecostal Christian life. It was a great experience as well as a great course. What was most memorable, however, was the first week. The professor asked us to read through the whole of the book of Acts in one sitting and come to class prepared to talk about it. At the beginning of the next class he simply asked, “Well, what did you notice?” Everyone sat in silence hoping that someone else would state the obvious, because the obvious would implicate all of us. No one wanted to be the person to make the corporate accusation that we were all guilty; actually, we are all guilty today.

“Dr. Fee, the obvious thing we all noticed is that Christianity—or being a Christian—as told in the book of Acts, is nothing like Christianity today. What was going on in the lives of the apostles and those early Christians is like . . . well, it’s like a whole different religion.” I do not know who said this, but I wish I had been honest enough to state the obvious. Christianity as it has been practiced in the West for the past, well, at least for the past millennium, bears only slight resemblance to the life of the early Christians. The good professor drove home this point merely by asking us to read through the Acts of the Apostles.

## **The Unexpected Christian Century**

The twentieth century redrew the lines on the religious globe. However, most of the rewriting was done through a great and surprising transformation of

Christianity; in fact, it was a great reversal. When Christianity entered the twentieth century, it was a confident, strong, imperial religion of the West. Many of the leaders accepted the scholarly dictum that the twentieth century would be the “Christian century.” No scholar—or as far as that goes, not even a madman—predicted that at the end of the twentieth century Christianity would not be recognized even as a cultural factor in Europe by the nations that today compose the European Union. No prognosticator predicted that more Christians would be worshiping each Sunday in China than in Europe or North America. And, what might be surprising to us today, even the greatest mission leaders at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 had pretty much given up on Christianity in Africa. Most of the missionary leaders, even in their most optimistic moments, thought Islam had the upper hand and believed Africa would become a Muslim continent. Fast-forward and we find that the opposite is true, for there are more Christians than Muslims in Africa today.

Yes, the twentieth century surprised the religionists, the historians, and the politicians. It was one of the three great transformations in Christianity in its two thousand years. The first took place early in the fourth century, when Christianity began to get imperial recognition in three small nations and one empire: Osroene, Armenia, Ethiopia, and the Roman Empire. Royal conversions not only ensured that the religion would not be wiped out by belligerent rulers spreading other religions but also that Christianity would begin to develop differently with the support of kings and queens. Christian buildings began to look very nice. Christian life was no longer threatened. It was possible to fit into the larger culture very comfortably with little need for sacrifice or compromise. Christianity in these kingdoms and empires had moved from being a persecuted minority to being a favored faith. This changed everything.

The second great transformation occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This was the period of the European Reformation, but that was not the supremely important transformation that I am thinking of. From about the 1450s to the 1550s Christianity broke out of its small enclaves of Western Europe, South India, and Ethiopia and became a truly worldwide religion. It didn’t have to happen that way, but it did. Muslim rulers, or certainly the Chinese, could have dominated the world. Instead, and very much for theological reasons, it was the Christians from Iberia who spread the Christian faith to places as far away as the Moluccas, the Kongo (Congo), Peru, and even Japan and China. As late as 1492 it was still not clear whether Christianity would devolve into a tribal faith of Western Europe.

The third great transformation took place in the twentieth century, a great reversal that I have written about before. It was certainly a reversal in that

the majority of Christians—or the global center—moved from the North Atlantic to the Southern Hemisphere and Asia. But it was also a reversal in that Christianity moved from being centered in Christian nations to being centered in non-Christian nations. Christendom, that remarkable condition of churches supporting states and states supporting Christianity, died. The idea of Christian privilege in society was all but killed. And yet the religion seemed stronger than ever at the end of the twentieth century. No one saw this coming.

An important dimension to that transformation was what might be called the globalization of the faith. Christianity was already spread to almost every region throughout the globe before 1900. However, Christianity was developing very distinctively by region and continent and ethnic group. For example, Latin America was Catholic. Vietnam was also Catholic. The East Coast of the United States was almost completely English-speaking and either Euro-American or African American. All of this changed in the twentieth century. Christianity participated in (we might even say was one of the pioneer movements in) globalization. By the end of the twentieth century we find African Independent Churches in Ukraine, New York, and London, not just in southern or western Africa. Independency and Spiritual churches (where the authority is found in the Holy Spirit) now span the globe, whereas they were almost nonexistent in 1900. Here are a few global statistics that reveal the dramatic change that took place in Christianity and what this book will describe.

1. In 1910 Europe was 90 percent Christian; in 2010 Europe was less than 84 percent Christian.
2. In 1910 Asia was 2.4 percent Christian; in 2010 Asia was about 9 percent Christian.
3. In 1910 Africa was 9.4 percent Christian; in 2010 Africa was 48 percent Christian.<sup>1</sup>

A thick description of this great change would reveal much more than these statistics tell. For example, less than 5 percent of the Christians in France are active, meaning they attend Mass regularly. Close to 9 percent of France is Muslim, which means that there are more active Muslims in France than active Christians. Another way of looking at the great transformation in global Christianity is to reflect on this fact: a larger percentage of people attend church in China, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and South Korea than in

1. Johnson and Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity*.





Peter Becker

**Figure 1.** One visible sign of the decline of Christianity in the West is the number of churches and monasteries that have been sold and used as restaurants, night clubs, dance halls, or even Hindu temples. Here St. Peter's Episcopal Church, built between 1873 and 1883 and vacant from 2005 to 2014, is under construction to become the new home of the Waldorf School of Philadelphia, in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

almost any country in Europe today. It is amazing to think of South Korea, the land of Buddhism and Shamanism, as being more Christian than England or Poland or France, but it is true.

The causes of this globalization include the spread of Pentecostalism, but other causes include forced migrations of people, ongoing missionary work, and the advances in communication and transportation. As a result, it is not really possible to talk about Christianity by region or continent because so many of the themes are global. In the past it was necessary to talk about Christian development by country and region since Christian development was very national. We would study Lutherans in Germany and Denmark, and Catholics in France and Italy. Today the important themes that help to explain the nature and identity of Christianity are not geographically determined. We understand more clearly what Christianity is today by looking at major movements and themes of the twentieth century. Thus this volume will help to explain the religion that is Christianity by looking at major themes rather than going from country to country or continent to continent.

## The Unexpected Century from Five Vantage Points

Our study of the great transformation—at times we will call it a reversal—that took place in twentieth-century Christianity will unfold almost as five separate stories. Others have told and will tell the story of modern Christianity as a single story or as geographic stories.<sup>2</sup> I have written this type of history for a few decades. However, sometimes we learn more if we focus on only certain parts of the drama rather than on the whole story. I have this bad habit when I go to a play (seldom) or opera (even more seldom) of watching just one performer. I imagine what he or she must be thinking and how it must be to be in the performance as that person. What we do in this volume is like looking at an opera from the vantage point of five participant observers. We could describe an opera from a seat midway in the opera house. That would be one perspective. But let's imagine for a moment that we are a flutist in the orchestra pit. That would be a whole different experience, having to look up at only part of the acting and sitting with low lights on our sheet music. Again, we could describe the opera from the view of the stage crew. They would view the opera very differently, seeing what goes into the entrances and exits of the singers. Again, what would it be like to observe the opera as the prima donna, from a place where the spotlight is on us as we stand on the stage and sing our leading solos? Finally, we can describe the opera from the position of the conductor, who has an enviable place of observation, but has to look in so many directions to monitor singers, actors, choirs, and orchestra players. Each perspective would be unique, but by looking from all these perspectives together we would have a much better understanding of the complex art form called opera.

In this volume we will look at Christianity in the twentieth century from five different perspectives—or through five different lenses. First, however, we need to know something of how Christianity became the religion it was in 1900. How did Christianity, a West Asian religion whose genesis is told in the book of Acts, become a Western religion with foreign outposts? What did global Christianity look like in 1900? We answer the first sweeping question in the introduction. The second question is the story of chapter 1. After the first chapter—describing what worldwide Christianity looked like on the edge of the great reversal—we pick up the first lens. The first lens (chap. 2) is actually twenty-five lenses, like the compound eye of a honeybee. We look in this chapter at what might be considered the twenty-five most influential

2. See Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (hereafter *HWCM*), in two, soon to be three, volumes.

Christians of the twentieth century. In other words, who were the people around the globe who were having the greatest impact on shaping Christianity, the faith we have inherited? These twenty-five represent most continents, both genders, and all four confessional families. This is the personal, or biographical, lens. The second lens (chap. 3) is the political lens; we look at the impact that political changes had on the Christian movement. Movements of secularization (including Communism), colonization, and decolonization are major themes in this chapter. But closely related to these political movements is persecution. We have heard it said many times that the twentieth century was the century of greatest persecution and martyrdom for Christianity. I am not sure how we would measure or test such a claim, but it is no exaggeration that the twentieth century was a century of much martyrdom and persecution.

The third lens (chap. 4) is church families, or confessional families. We look at how the four major church families (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Spiritual) fared during the century. Their stories were very different, as we will see. This lens helps us to see that theology, identity in society, and religious practices do make a difference. The fourth lens (chap. 5) may not have been predicted, but it has always been important in understanding Christianity from the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 until today. This lens is migration. We look at how migration has shaped Christianity as people are enticed and pulled to other lands and (mostly) how they are pushed out of their land or country. The fifth and final lens (chap. 6) we look through is the lens of the world's religions. Christianity has been shaped by its encounter, relationship, and at times conflict with other religions. The twentieth century was noteworthy in that Western and Asian theologians developed a robust series of theologies of religions, trying to make sense of the ongoing vitality of other religions. The reigning assumption had been that the other religions would eventually capitulate to Christian missionary activity. The twentieth century proved otherwise. Many religions were revived by their encounters with Christians and Christian beliefs.

We conclude this volume with a word of hope and a word for history. As a historian I am quite aware that history is always with us. Certain traditions and habits, both good and bad, are woven into our present practices and beliefs. Unaware of this history, we often react against something we do not like (pews, liturgy, hymns, Sunday school, etc.), and lose both the meaning and the form. Thus in the concluding chapter you will hear a plea for a healthy, if not robust, appreciation of Christian history with all of its variegated blessings and curses. But as dark as this history may look, and as persistent as the persecution may continue to be today, the Christian faith is still one of hope

and promise. Eschatology, where the future lies, is pulling us forward, and it is important to be able, with the wisdom of the future hope, to trace the lines of grace today. Christians should be able to see grace and hope where it may seem to be almost extinguished by deceit, violence, and seduction. Still the light shines. The church is still the signpost and hope for a cynical and lonely world.

# Introduction

## From Jesus to the End of Christendom

In this introduction we will, with broad brushstrokes, tell the story of how following Jesus changed from stories like Acts 2—or for that matter, Acts 3 and Acts 4 and every other chapter of Acts—to the imperial forms of Christianity that dominated the world in 1900, the year our volume begins. So let’s look at this story spanning nineteen centuries, noting the major shifts and turns that took place until we end up with Christianity of the imperial age, or the Gilded Age, when almost all Christians lived in the West. In fact, in 1900 82 percent of Christians lived in the North. The center of Christianity was also still in Europe. This *introduction* is about how Christianity, an Asian religion, became a European and Euro-American religion. This *book* is about how the twentieth century, actually just the latter half of the twentieth century, changed all of that.

### **The Earliest Jesus Followers: The First Two Centuries**

Jesus was a real person who lived in West Asia at the corner of three continents and at the edge of two mighty empires. He was not a generic or theoretical human being, but a specific, culturally embedded peasant and a wandering Jewish teacher who lived, taught, acted, was killed, and was buried. He ate grilled fish and wore sandals. He was remarkable to a small crowd of mostly Jewish followers, but he would not be the subject of this book if he had merely been a wonder-worker and then stayed in the ground. His closest followers, many of them women, claimed to have seen him after his death, when he

changed all their lives by giving them an impossible assignment, which they accepted. Simply put, they all understood that the formerly dead Jesus told them to tell people from every culture in the world to follow him; “to make disciples” was his expression. And so they did.

The early Jesus followers, as far as we can tell, talked about Jesus wherever they traveled and performed miracles in his name. The beginning of Christianity was a movement, the Jesus Movement. By the end of the first century there were Jesus followers, loosely connected by the teachings of Jesus, from Spain to Persia, and possibly all the way to India. Spread without political will or military might, this movement was the most remarkable eruption of a religion ever on the globe. Immediately the teachings were being gathered and translated into Greek, Syriac, and Armenian. Other languages soon followed. A few centuries later and Christian communities could be found, headed up by regional leaders (bishops), from Afghanistan to South India to present-day Yemen and Ethiopia and Sudan, all across North Africa, and in Europe and the British Isles. It was a diverse movement becoming a major transcontinental institution, still with no political support. There was much persecution. Some of the earliest writings, besides the biographies of Jesus, were written to encourage Christians to be strong and faithful to Jesus even when being persecuted. Generations after the death of Jesus, these followers had remarkable resolve. Other early writings were defenses of the new religion as it was being attacked by philosophers, by other religious leaders, and even by the military. It was a precarious existence until a few rulers accepted the faith as their own.

In rapid succession the king of the small kingdom of Armenia, Tiradates III; the Roman emperor, Constantine; and the emperor of Ethiopia, Ezana, all turned to Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The results transformed the new religion. In regions where there was no political support and little tolerance, such as Persia after 225, the followers of Jesus remained few. In the ancient world, and, up through most of the world even in modern times, a “people,” or a nation, had a religion, a single religion. Celts worshiped Lug and Athenians worshiped Athena. Hebrews worshiped YHWH. A people were identified with their God. Thus the early spread of Christianity depended to a great extent upon the conversion of rulers. When Constantine converted to become a follower of Jesus, he quickly made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, an empire that included many nations. That was really the only option: a single religion for a people.

1. There was another small client kingdom, Osrhoene, with its capital, Edessa, that turned to Christianity much earlier, but this was not an independent kingdom, and it was soon taken over by the Roman Empire (216).

The ruler determined the religion. Our modern concept of toleration did not develop until the eighteenth century.

## **Christianity Becomes the Great Church**

From the beginning, Christianity had a missionary impulse. Believers understood that being a follower of Jesus meant taking the faith to others. These believers also understood that the faith could be translated into different languages and different cultures. In each location where the teachings were taken, Scriptures were translated and liturgies became part of local customs. One of the important themes of Christianity from the fourth through the tenth centuries was the struggle for cultural appropriateness and ecumenical (all-the-world) unity. Is it still the same religion if worship is done in different ways? Most religions require prescribed methods of worship or of ritual. Can we really say that this new group is following the same religion if they celebrate Easter on a different day? In some regions a particular language became the trade language and then it slowly became enshrined as the Christian language. In Persia the trade language of Syriac became the Christian language, and in Western Europe Latin became the worship language. In Eastern Europe Greek was the language of worship. Having a single language for worship in a region helped with unity, but this unity slowly developed into a type of religious hegemony of one culture or one language over others. In South India, Christians were worshipping in Syriac, a language that was all but dead, but the Christians spoke Telugu or Tamil in their daily comings and goings.

Something essential to the DNA of the gospel—the importance of the nations—was lost in this type of unity. Empires are concerned about unity, and so emperors called for and supported councils that would bring things into a common order. Councils were called to help bishops enforce common beliefs and practices in the diverse lands. Diversity in Christianity from the very beginning was a matter of how Christian belief was to be expressed in local cultures. Local beliefs and practices, as well as great philosophies of the age, were part of the cultural context that Christian teachings spoke to and spoke into. Thus most of the early councils reveal the struggle of Christian leaders to express the meaning of Christ in ancient philosophic concepts. Some of these expressions that were agreed upon in the fourth or fifth century made perfect sense to ancient Christians steeped in Greek philosophy; they make less sense to us today. For example, we seldom talk about the substance or essence of Jesus today in our devotions or our evangelism, but it was very important as Christianity was beginning to speak into Greek philosophy. The church

must be one, but it must also be as diverse as the nations of the world. Local contextual expressions must not overshadow the concern for unity. Unity was a very important concern for bishops and emperors. Actually, it was also very important for Jesus (John 17).

The impulse for unity often became a need for uniformity. One way Christians resisted this social and political control, as well as the newfound wealth in the church, was in the formation of monastic orders. Monasticism developed first in North Africa and Syria, and soon spread to Italy and France and among the Celts in the British Isles. Ascetics sought to preserve the life and teachings of Jesus by leaving family, home, and village. Fleeing to the desert, they sought closer communion and identity with Jesus, in the pattern of John the Baptist. Many monks, such as Saint Anthony in Egypt, became models for Christians living in the cities. Their lives of self-denial and poverty pointed away from the wealth and pomp of imperial Christianity and toward the suffering Messiah. Thus in the early Middle Ages the church struggled to maintain unity (often imposed by rulers) and purity (often in the model of desert monks).

## Monastic Christianity and the Conversion of Tribal Europe

Monastic Christianity developed as a structure parallel to local parish Christianity. In this separate structure monks preserved the missionary character of Christianity as they set up houses throughout Europe and scattered in regions of western Asia and North Africa. When a few monks (often twelve, in the pattern of Jesus and his disciples) set up a monastery, they would soon start copying the Scriptures and constructing a church building. Much of the conversion of the tribes of Europe occurred in this fashion. Benedict of Nursia (480–543?) is considered the father of monastic (also called *coenobitic*, or common life) communities, whereby monks took vows of obedience and lived together in daily patterns of prayer and work: *ora et labora*. Other patterns, or rules, were established in the West, with greater or lesser times given for work and worship. With the many invasions of tribes from central Asia (Ostrogoth, Visigoth, Hun, Vandal, etc.) from the second through the eighth centuries, it was monastic communities that preserved the “memory” of Europe and of Christian teachings. Most of the literate people in Europe lived in monasteries or in palaces. Culture was preserved, teachings spread, and slowly the illiterate tribes were converted and learned the basic practices of Christians. It was a long and slow process that took about one thousand years. Rulers like Clovis and Charlemagne of the Franks and Ethelbert of the English came to faith and enforced the faith. Many were compelled to “come



in” to the church, and so the peaceful and gentle Messiah became identified with military conquest and enforced belief. It was a long and slow European devolution from Jesus as the Good Shepherd to Jesus the conquering King.

Outside of Europe monastic forms of Christianity were also the main missionary form of the faith. In Syria monks lived in caves or alone in the wilderness among the wild beasts. They became voices in the wilderness, calling the people to be faithful and not trust in worldly goods or positions of power. In Asia Minor monastic communities (practicing coenobitic forms of asceticism) were more common. It was in this region where monks began to locate their communities closer to the urban centers to serve the people in the cities. The earliest hospitals, such as they were, were developed by monks. Food distribution for the poor and care for the sick in times of famine and plague were monastic endeavors by the early fifth century. Monastic forms of Christianity responded in diverse ways to popular and political culture, but everywhere they both preserved the Christian tradition and served as a signpost of Christian responsibility.

In Persia monks were identified as “Sons of the Covenant” or “Daughters of the Covenant,” and they often built their places of refuge farther and farther out, slowly evangelizing frontier regions in Persia and to the east. By the seventh century (635) some of these Persians had wandered all the way to China, to the capital of the Tang Dynasty in Xian. In China they began to translate and paraphrase many Christian teachings, and they started other monastic houses throughout the country. Some Chinese nationals were coming to faith in Jesus in the seventh century, whereas in Scandinavia and Ukraine it would be three centuries later before missionaries were able to establish an ongoing presence.

Monastic forms of Christianity preserved and spread the teachings of Christ, but the results were not the same in all regions. Western Europe was slowly evangelized, and more and more lands became church lands. Monasteries (and cathedral schools), as places of learning, became the earliest forms of universities. Monks, and later friars, moved away from a prophetic stance—resisting the domination of the church by political leaders—to become institutional leaders. Outside of Europe, monastic forms of Christianity had different histories. In Persia, where Christianity was persecuted by Zoroastrian leaders from the middle of the third to the middle of the seventh century, monasteries were places of Christian refuge; persecution limited the ability of monasteries to develop either as missionary bases or as great centers of learning. Christianity atrophied under the Persian, and later Arab, rulers. Asia was unique in that Christians encountered multicultural and ancient religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), as well as a newer multicultural religion, Islam.

## Resistance to Jesus: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam

Asian and North African Christianity had a troubled history when compared to Christianity in Europe. The conversion of emperors and kings in Europe made it possible for Christian liturgy, theology, and practice to develop in a protected environment. Except for Armenia and Osroene in far west Asia, Asians never had this benefit. Christianity was tolerated under the pluralistic Parthians, but from 225 on, under a fundamentalist reform of Zoroastrianism in Persia, Christianity has constantly been under pressure or persecution for about eighteen centuries. It is a wonder Christianity survived at all.

Only in Asia did Christianity encounter large transcultural (often called “world”) religions. In Persia it was Zoroastrianism; in India it was Hinduism and its reform movement, Buddhism. By the middle of the seventh century it was Islam. All of these religions had an inner strength and coherence because of their transcultural nature: they were not tribal faiths. Christianity’s success in its encounter with transcultural faiths is always more limited than in its encounters with tribal faiths. In India, Christianity survived, but it began to be shaped by the caste structure of this culture: Christians formed their own social group, mostly involved in trade. In Persia Christians were not allowed to propagate their faith, and soon they were not allowed to repair their existing buildings or to build new ones. Christianity that is cut off from its missionary expression atrophies, and so it happened in Persia.

With the arrival of Arab Muslim invaders in the middle of the seventh century, Christians saw some relief. Whereas Zoroastrians believed in two gods and seemed to worship fire, the Muslims, like Christians, believed in one God and called him Allah (Persian Christians used the Syriac term *Al-o-ha*). For a time Christian life seemed to improve; Christians were among the most literate and well educated, so they helped with accounting and running prisons for the Arabs. But slowly, restrictions were imposed on the Christians, and they found that once again they were living as a *melet* (ghetto) community. All evangelistic outreach was outlawed, and soon Christianity, as it were, was turned in on itself in Persia as well as the Middle East and North Africa.

The rise of Islam hemmed Christianity in to Western Europe. Christians who lived in West Asia and North Africa were cut off from the larger ecumenical community, were restricted in public witness, and had to pay excessive taxes. Conversion to Islam was encouraged by many means. Not all were violent, but restrictions were enforced by the sword. Christian piety required, or at least strongly encouraged, pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to walk where Jesus walked, but Muslim rule restricted such travel. Many pilgrims were killed, and so Christians developed a narrative of militant support of innocent pilgrims.

Military monastic orders were founded (Knights of the Templar) to protect pilgrims, and then crusades were planned to reclaim “Christian lands.” How did this all happen?

Today it is hard to imagine Christian military conquest, but it made perfect sense in 1095, when Pope Urban II called for a military conquest of the Holy Land. Christendom, a union of empire and religion, viewed land and territory as a nation-state views it today. For Christendom, the empire or nation is Christian, and therefore the land and people must be protected. The Christian idea of the kingdom of God was conflated with the Holy Roman Empire or the Kingdom of Russia. The idea of sacred land and holy sites helps to explain Europeans’ preoccupation with the Holy Land. A secondary concern, one that became much more important in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was trade: how can Europeans get the delicious spices from the Far East when Muslims are blocking the way? Christianity was hemmed in, and in 1491 it looked like Christianity would remain only as a tribal religion of Western Europe with some small outposts in Ethiopia, India, and the Middle East.

## **Sixteenth Century: Two Great Transformations of Christianity**

In some ways Christianity had lost its missionary dimension during the Middle Ages. As a result it was hard for Christianity to have a critical, and therefore prophetic and missional, distance from its own context. When this happens, Christianity becomes seduced to local power and privilege. Theological controversies were inward looking, and the nations were not even in view. Christians who challenged the Christendom culture were labeled heretical. Jan Hus and John Wyclif in the fourteenth century, and Pierre Valdès (also known as Peter Waldo) much earlier, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, called for changes that looked very much like those demanded by the later Reformation leaders. All were calling for a faith that was closer to the Bible, which meant all people would need to read the Bible in the vernacular. Churches in the West had added numerous practices such as pilgrimages and forms of penance that Reformers wanted to remove to draw closer to Jesus as described in the Bible.

All of this changed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Once Christendom broke out of its Western European isolation, Christianity entered a new phase. It is one of the three great transformations that have taken place in Christianity in two thousand years. Christianity developed four major families from two, and Christianity became a world religion.

## From Two to Four Families: Reformation and Division

For most Protestants the sixteenth century was a great century; it was the period when a more pure and biblical form of Christianity was rediscovered. Christian Europe was *reformed*. The mystery and magic of Roman Catholic practices were made reasonable. In some ways, the Renaissance call of *ad fontes* (Back to the sources!) was expressed in the church as a call back to Greek reason and rational thought. Pilgrimages were critiqued, and reading and preaching in the common language were required. The Reformers, however, had different ideas of what the original sources of Christianity were, and this was part of the problem. Was the original “source” of Christianity the Holy Spirit–directed church we see in Acts? For those who answered yes, a new form of Christianity developed that we might call the “Spiritual” family of Christianity. They formed churches that were called out to be faithful to how the Holy Spirit guided them. Other churches protested certain practices such as vestments, Latin liturgy, the papacy, and so on. These began another family of Christianity known as “Protestants.” Most Protestants developed churches in their own languages and thus in their own nations. National churches developed. Scotland, after a long struggle, followed the teachings of John Calvin and formed a Reformed Church. England followed a “middle way” and formed a national church called the Anglican Church (Church of England). Southern Europe, closest to and including Rome, stayed Roman Catholic. A number of countries followed Luther, and so their national churches were called Lutheran or “Evangelical” for their focus on the gospel (Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark).

Christianity became divisive in Western Europe in the first decades of the 1500s. Things didn’t really settle down until many were killed (mainly over definitions of the Eucharist and the role of bishops), and many friends were at odds with one another. It was a bloody mess of disagreement over what the church was and what it was to do. The final gasp of violence was the Thirty Years’ War, which ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Again, for many Protestants it is a noble period because the Reformed (Calvin) or Lutheran (Luther) or Anglican (Cranmer et al.) or Mennonite (Menno Simons) church began around noble concerns for a more pure church. However, for Roman Catholics and Orthodox it is a terrible blot on the church’s history to see how division marred the witness of Christ in the world. It was an age when all Europeans were Christians, all kings and queens were responsible to help lead the church, and all matters religious were life-or-death issues. The Crusades were still a vivid memory, and the Muslims (considered heretics by most Catholics) had only recently been removed from Roman Catholic Spain (1492). Great theological

and biblical writings were produced during the period. It is a bittersweet irony that such violent conflict can often also bring out some of the best in us.

Two of the major outcomes of the period were that Christianity divided, using much of its energy against itself, and that most of the newer churches developed a theology of the church that was static. The definitions of church that most Protestants developed defined the church in opposition to the Roman Catholic tradition. Thus one of the classic definitions of the church that came out of the Reformation was “Where the Word of God is rightly preached and heard and the sacraments are rightly administered.”<sup>2</sup> Some added the carrying out of church discipline, but the definitions had no reference to mission or outreach because the definitions were being made in a divided and Christian Europe. It was assumed all people were Christian, so the “true church” must have the true marks proving that it is not a “false church.” Protestants, both because of their theology (three marks of the church) and their lack of ability (behind in naval technology), did not participate in the great missionary work of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

## Christianity Breaks Out of the Small Corner, Europe

The Portuguese and Spanish were more advanced in all things nautical, and so they were the ones who moved out from Iberia down the coast of West Africa and across to the Caribbean and Brazil in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Roman Catholics maintained a fragile royal-religious cooperation. It was assumed that the national rulers were in service to the pope (or at least popes were very clear on this). Thus the popes, through various papal bulls, established royal patronage for papal missions. In brief, all lands that were claimed by the kings and queens of Portugal and Spain were to be claimed in the name of the pope. The church made it clear that the Portuguese rulers were to finance the various missions to evangelize lands they claimed. To rule meant to evangelize the local people. All were to be brought under the rule of the pope, as well as of the secular rulers. And so immediately friars and monks were on ships heading for newly discovered lands. The methods of evangelization in this early period were often medieval (convert or else!), and yet Latin America was slowly evangelized. Christian outposts were established in Portuguese colonies: Goa, Brazil, Mozambique, Timor, Malacca, Kongo (Congo), Luanda (Angola), Guinea, Macao. The Spanish conquered large areas and sent in monks and friars to bring Christian civilization to their regions: the Americas and Philippines.

2. Leith, *The Church: A Believing Fellowship*, 21.

Less than a century after breaking out of the peninsula of Western Europe, Roman Catholic missions were establishing churches with local people in all of the Americas, the Caribbean, West Africa, East Africa, India, the East Indies, Japan, Vietnam (Annam and Cochin China), and even China. It is really a remarkable moment in global history. Christianity, which had been blocked in a small corner of the world by the surrounding Islam, broke out by going out the back door (to the unexplored west) and ended up circling the globe and encircling Islam. Even in areas where they did not have colonies or an empire, Roman Catholic missions established churches, farther out and farther in than the sailors and soldiers dared go. In this great movement of humanity and the remarkable spread of Christianity, Protestants were left behind.

### **Christian Mission Recovered: Seventeenth through Nineteenth Centuries**

After the period of reformation and Iberian colonization, Christianity became more missionary throughout. More money was spent on missionary work. Kings and popes spent more time establishing churches in newly discovered lands. Much of the evangelization was simply enforcing the same basic theology and structures (even the Latin language) that were in Europe, but some missionary orders were more concerned to present Jesus in Asian or American or African clothes. The Society of Jesus (Jesuits), founded by Ignatius of Loyola at the time of the Protestant Reformation, developed a new approach for monastic order, an approach that asked questions about local cultures and formed missionaries in newer, individualistic ways. Today it is called Ignatian spirituality.

#### **Catholic Missionary Work**

The Jesuits became the new pioneer missionary order outside of Europe and the police enforcers of the Catholic Reformation in Europe. They were the first to reach Malacca (now Malaysia), the Spice Islands (Moluccas) of the East Indies, Japan, China, and Vietnam. They were the first Christian martyrs in what would become the United States (in present-day Georgia and Florida). The Jesuits, in a sense, were Renaissance scholars who studied well and took that zeal for learning to study local cultures. Many of their pioneers developed the first glossaries, translations of the liturgy, and even books on local flora and fauna. In Asia they sought to present the gospel in local forms as they sought to take on the role of a local holy man (*sannyasi* in South India, *bonze*

in Japan, and Confucian literati in China). In short, the Jesuits were the first modern missionaries as they sought to present Christian faith in local forms and language. Before this time (and for centuries later) missionaries for the most part were transplanting the faith and the forms as one unit.

The Jesuits were not the only missionaries seeking to extend the Spanish and Portuguese empires' rule in all areas of life. Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Capuchins, and others traveled on royal ships, establishing monasteries, churches, and relocation communities (*reducciones*). Until the nineteenth century all Catholic missionaries were men, and most were "religious," that is, members of a religious order. By the middle of the sixteenth century most of the Americas south of the Rio Grande were moderately Christian. However, the rulers in church, missions, and government were Iberians. This would set in motion a racist hierarchical reality for all of the Spanish Americas. The Kongo in Africa, evangelized by southern European missionaries, was for a time a third Christian kingdom (Ethiopia and Nubia were the other two). Coastal areas of East Africa and South India were also evangelized. In the seventeenth century the Jesuits started an important Jesus movement in Japan. All of these movements were initiated by royal missions of Spain and Portugal until the Vatican established its own missionary initiative, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) in 1622. Tension existed for centuries in Catholic missionary labors over who really controlled, directed, and therefore had to financially support these important missions. It was inconceivable to Catholic royalty and to the papacy that new lands would not be Christianized, for Christendom by definition required it. The papacy soon realized that friars and monks sent by the pope had less-divided loyalty in such an important task, and so they sought to more directly guide the work of the newly globalized Catholic Church.

## Protestants Awaken to the World

Looking from the advantage of the twenty-first century and the rapidly growing churches of the global South, it is hard to believe that Protestantism started in the sixteenth century but did not become a global force until the nineteenth century. This was three hundred years after the Roman Catholics entered the global missionary movement. Of the reasons for the late arrival of the Protestants, two are the most significant and important. First, Protestants were not dominant naval powers. Some of the strongest regions for the Reformation (Germany and Switzerland) had no navies and relied on overland trade or trade with Roman Catholic countries. Missionary work required transportation to far-off regions, and such transportation was not readily available to

most Protestant nations. Second, Protestants were not safe and secure until late in the seventeenth century. Mission for Protestants in their infancy years really meant survival and fighting off or converting Roman Catholics. With the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the religious lines of Europe were set, but there was still much to be done in Protestant Europe before there was enough security and confidence to begin to think about the rest of the world. Contact, or some basic knowledge of non-Christians, is a prerequisite for the missionary call. Early Protestants lacked that reality.

Protestant mission was also hampered by an underdeveloped theology of the church. Reformation churches were concerned to recover (as they understood it) not only a more robust theology of Christ and the Eucharist but also a theology of the church that lifted up the importance of the verbal proclamation of the Word. Preaching and proper practice of the sacraments were central to the definition of the church for most churches that were protesting against Roman Catholic eucharistic theology. What Protestants lacked was a recovery of the basic missionary nature of the church given by Jesus to the apostles before his ascension. Missing this missionary understanding of the church, Protestants were more focused on purifying Christian churches than on converting non-Christians. In fact, a theology had developed that taught that the disciples had obeyed and fulfilled Jesus's command to preach to all the nations, and so, in a sense, non-Christians had already had their chance.

When Protestant missions did finally commence, it was in a pattern similar to that followed by the Catholics: a Christian king seeking to convert his lands. The first king was Fredrick IV of Denmark, who, feeling the competition of Catholic kings, decided he should also send missionaries to his small holding in India. Thus in 1706 the first real overseas Protestant mission was founded. It was not really until the end of that century, with the arrival of English Baptists in India (1793), that nonroyal Protestant missions began. In the early nineteenth century Protestant missions were still more eccentric than integral to Protestantism. One of the struggles of early Protestant missions was a simple question of transportation. Most of the means of transport were from ships owned by private companies whose sole concern was profit from trade: the British East India Company (EIC), the Dutch West Indies Company, and so on. These companies had little to no concern for evangelization. For example, Robert Morrison, first Protestant missionary to China, had to sail from London to New York and then sail on a US boat to East Asia, since no EIC ship would take him to Hong Kong. Later, Protestant missions and both companies and countries negotiated common callings in the growing empires. Many times governments would subsidize mission schools so more civil servants could be trained. At other times governments signed treaties with local rulers



protecting the latter from the “invasion” of missionaries. It was impossible for missionaries from the West not to be identified in some way with Western imperial powers, whether they wanted to be or not.

Protestants developed patterns of missionary work much like the Jesuits, with concern for local cultures, especially learning languages. Because of the strong Protestant principle of having the Bible in the language of the people, Protestants everywhere began by learning the local languages and translating the Bible and publishing glossaries. As medical understanding grew, Protestants pioneered in surgery, vaccinations, and other innovations throughout the world. Education and medicine became the two great and powerful tools in the toolbox of Protestant missions. Translation enhanced the spread of the teachings of Jesus, whether there was greater or lesser cooperation with colonial powers.

## **Christianity, Modernity, and Missions in the Nineteenth Century**

Christianity in the nineteenth century was closely wedded to the advancing Christian kingdoms in the world. Throughout the nineteenth century, when Chinese saw British boats unload kegs of opium followed by missionary families, it was difficult not to see that this was all part of the same foreign invasion. Chinese culture was being attacked through the body and the soul. When missionaries in East and West Africa brought in pianos and organs and taught against polygamy, dancing, and the use of drums, it was hard not to assume that this was all an attempt to erase African cultures. Protestants in the late nineteenth century, unlike those of the early nineteenth century, were more sophisticated and had the modern ideology of progressivism and social Darwinism. Missionaries often saw themselves as helping lower civilizations rise to become more civilized like them. The missionary calling was confused with the civilizing effort of Western nations. Jesus’s mission was to make people like Jesus; civilizing meant to make people like us. The two became confused in the late nineteenth century.

Modernity is in part a movement led by rational application of the mind to understand and even quantify the natural world. The modern or Enlightenment world studied the universe in all its great expanse and all its microscopic detail. This movement did not find God. God became an unnecessary presupposition for the modern person. Christianity dwelled in an uneasy alliance in this new world. As a result Christians struggled to make sense of how to appropriate this new knowledge. All Christians had to deal with the new reality. Some adapted

the new teachings and saw that in the Bible and Jesus's teachings there is also development and progress. However, in the original teachings of Jesus, as these Christians read them, the real Jesus was not the miraculous atoning savior; he was a model and example of what it means to be fully human. Jesus was more like a perfect human than a God-man. These teachings emphasized the humanity of Jesus and the goodness of humanity. People and societies would be nurtured and slowly evolve or develop to greater peace and harmony. The era was an optimistic and progressive one, and this version of Christianity became known as liberal or modern Christianity.

Other Christians responded by confronting the new teachings, holding on to the past and affirming a scientifically verifiable Bible. They used the word "inerrant" to describe the Bible and began to defend literal (can we say scientific?) interpretations of the Bible. In an effort to fend off newer theologies that treated the Bible as any other history book and Jesus as any other man, these Christians circled the wagons and established fundamental teachings about Jesus and the Bible that must be believed. Some of this group remained evangelical (focused on the evangelistic message and the need for conversion); others turned fundamentalist (more concerned with hard scientific facts to prove the Bible and creation). Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, was being divided from within. Without any outside persecution, Western Christianity began subdividing and rapidly declining. Missionaries in the early twentieth century carried these tensions and convictions with them throughout the world.

We have concluded our very cursory overview of nineteen centuries of Christianity. We have left out many important themes, and almost all names and places, but we have tried to explain some of the major trends and movements so that our coming tour through the twentieth century will make sense in context. Before looking through our five lenses we need to stop and describe Christianity from the end of the Gilded Age through the Great War. It was a transition period, so looking at these two or three decades will help us to better understand what a miracle the great reversal was for Christianity in the twentieth century.