

CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Roger P. Schroeder, SVD

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

Introduction

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the
earth,
making it bring forth and sprout, . . .
so shall my word . . . not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

(Isa 55:10–11)

This beautiful passage from the prophet Isaiah reflects the power of God’s word itself to bear fruit and bring forth life. All grace comes generously and lovingly from God, and all humanity and creation are being drawn back to God. This is God’s mission (*missio Dei*) of love, salvation, and justice. The natural phenomena of rain and snow can also open up a powerful image or parable. As moisture falls, it forms an intricate network of waterways—trickles, streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans—and in the process people, earth, and creation are “watered.” And at the same time, the moisture evaporates, being drawn back to the heavens.

A significant part of the waterway system represents the church’s participation in God’s mission, as the church serves as a visible sign and community of the reign of God. However, the waterways cut and flow through a variety of terrains, both shaping and being shaped by the physical environment around the world—water trickling over gentle hills into Asian rice fields, the swift Colorado River cutting into the floor of the Grand Canyon over centuries, fresh spring streams in the Alps, the seasonal streamlet through a desert area, the complex network of Iguazu waterfalls of Argentina and Brazil, a still pond in an African savanna, and the powerful waves of an ocean.

This book strives to describe two dimensions of this phenomenon. My first goal is to describe the various waterways of Christianity over time and space. We call this the history of the world Christian movement or Christianity from a *global perspective*. We recognize through faith that the water of God’s word nourishes all peoples and lands and that other religions

also somehow serve as waterways of God's grace. Of course, there are also underground streams representing the movement of God's Spirit in ways unknown to us until they find their way to the surface or we make an effort to tap them. While acknowledging this more expansive movement of God, here we shall focus on the "Christian waterways." The second goal of this book is to describe the common components of the Christian waterways found in many different contexts throughout history. I refer to these as the "threads" of Christian Tradition. They are constant and changing, common and diverse. These two formidable goals intersect in order to understand Christian Tradition in global perspective. We begin by introducing the global perspective contribution.

In the year 635 CE, Alopen and his small group of East Syrian Christian monks came to the end of their long journey across Asia and over the Silk Route. They arrived in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the first capital of the ancient Chinese Empire and the largest city in the world at that time. The Chinese emperor welcomed them as religious and peaceful persons and invited them to translate their sacred writings into Chinese. Later, after hearing about Jesus Christ in his own language, the emperor gave the monks permission to share the Christian message in China. He even funded the building of the first church in the capital. The number of churches, monasteries, monks, and Christians grew. This amazing story marks the beginning of the first era of Christianity in China, which lasted over two hundred years.

Most Christians and students of church history are not familiar with this movement, which occurred before Boniface, the Apostle of Germany, was even born. Or that there were thriving Christian communities in present-day Iraq, Iran, and India for several hundred years before Patrick stepped foot in Ireland. The history of Christianity has normally been told and retold—whether in Vietnam, Germany, Chile, or the United States—from a Eurocentric perspective. In fact, the "good news" in the early centuries of the church spread more quickly north, south, and east of Jerusalem rather than westward into Europe. Only much later, in 1500, does Christianity for the first time in its history find itself in "a rather lopsided situation" whereby the "majority of the world's Christians resided in the European West" (Irvin and Sunquist 2001, 504). That perception unfortunately continues to a great extent even though the majority of Christians since the end of the twentieth century live—or were born—in Africa, Latin America, Asia, or the Pacific. It is estimated that by 2025, two-thirds of Christians will be of the Global South (Jenkins 2002, 3).

I personally became aware of this problem of perception in the early 1990s, when two of my Filipino students critiqued the brief description of the beginning of Christianity in the Philippines from Anglican Bishop

Stephen Neill's *A History of Christian Missions* (1964/1986), stating, "That's not the way we understand our history." On the one hand, Bishop Neill, who worked in India, taught in Nairobi, and contributed significantly to the ecumenical movement, and Kenneth Scott Latourette of Yale Divinity School, author of the seven-volume work *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (1937–45), were more aware of the geographical expanse of Christianity than their contemporary church historians. The latter were writing what was called *church* history, in contradistinction to the *mission* history of Neill and Latourette. On the other hand, both Neill and Latourette proceeded "to tell the story of Christianity as essentially a phase of Europe's worldwide ascendancy" (Sanneh, 98). People like Nosipho Majeke, K. M. Panikkar, and J. F. Ade Ajayi, and E. A. Ayandele represent the earliest voices signaling the need for a new perspective for understanding Christian history. The comments of my Filipino students reflected this growing wave of postcolonial critique.

A number of historians began developing the theory and methodology for such an approach (Irvin 1998, González 2002, Sanneh 2002, Shenk 2002, Walls 2002) and the second generation includes the work of Tan and Tran (2016) and Cabrita, Maxwell, and Wild-Wood (2017). Gambian-born Yale professor Lamin Sanneh, who succeeded Latourette, made the connection between the shifting Christian demographics and a new way of understanding and writing the history of Christianity, and he called for "fresh navigational aids" (2002, 113). Using the metaphor of geography, Cuban-American Justo González described "the changing shape of church history" in terms of the need for a new cartography, topography, and evaluation of continental shifts (2002) to reflect the changes of perspective from "one center" to "polycentric," from a limited "mountaintop" view of the powerful and important to include a "down-to-earth" view of the ordinary and often marginalized Christians, and from an evaluation of the major shifts in history and developments based on a single perspective to one based on several perspectives.

Attempts to offer such a "new" church history" (Bevans and Schroeder 2003) have been written or edited by scholars such as Adrian Hastings (1999), David Chidester (2000), Martin Marty (2007), Robert Bruce Mullin (2008), Dana Robert (2009), Robert Louis Wilken (2012), and Lalsangkima Pachuau (2018). The eighth and ninth volumes of *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (2005–9) should also be mentioned. Two prime examples are *Christianity: A Short Global History* (2002) by Frederick Norris and the three-volume *History of the World Christian Movement* (2001, 2012, unpublished) by Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist. The latter drew from over a hundred scholars representing the full spectrum of ecclesiastical and national backgrounds and expertise in developing a single historical account

from multiple perspectives. For this book I want to acknowledge my incalculable debt in particular to the monumental, multi-volume *History of the World Christian Movement*, which is the fruit of so many live and virtual conversations among those representing the multi-vocal histories of Christianity. I was fortunate to be included as one of those conversation partners along the way.

Alongside these attempts to write a broad global history, the post-colonial shift has also lifted up the urgent need for non-Western local, regional, and/or denominational histories. They benefit the particular peoples and serve as a necessary contribution to the overall history. Of the literally thousands of such recent studies, some representative examples (included in the bibliography at the end of this volume) are by such authors as Cyprian Davis, Enrique Dussel, Mark Noll, Samuel Moffett, Angelyn Dries, Lamin Sanneh, Peter Phan, Paul Kollman, Ogbu Kalu, and Alan Anderson. Multi-volume works have also been sponsored by such ecumenical groups as the Church History Association of India (CHAI), Comisión de Estudios de Historia de la Iglesia en América Latina (CEHILA), and Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Furthermore, the lacunae of written histories of women in the church and in mission is thankfully being filled by such authors as Mary Malone, Dana Robert, Susan Smith, and Frances Adeney.

Christian Tradition in Global Perspective is situated within this field of the “‘new’ church history.” Therefore, this book attempts to recount the history of Christianity from a polycentric perspective and to be inclusive of the roles and movements of non-Western people, women, laity, and others who often have been excluded from the written histories of Christianity. This history strives to include, as much as possible, the lived reality of Christian communities along with the official councils of the church, and it places the history of Christianity within its various social and political contexts. While written from the author’s Catholic perspective, the book is inclusive of other Christian denominations, churches, and movements, that is, the various streams within Christianity. From this perspective the church is not just an institution but also the emergence of a movement.

Writing such a global history also raises the issue of distinguishing chronological periods and shifts. How will the parameters of a particular historical period be determined? The choice of beginning and end dates, such as the Edict of Milan (313) or the French Revolution (1789), is influenced by certain geographical, ecclesiastical, and/or other perspectives. However, Susan Smith (2007, xv) warns that thematic periodization tends to be drawn from an androcentric reading of history. I chose particular dates around global themes in *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (2004), coauthored with Stephen Bevans, for the models of mission. However, in this current volume the periods consist of blocks of centuries,

while allowing some occasional overlap and flexibility between them for the sake of understanding particular developments and movements. As one exception, the year 1453 was chosen as the midpoint from a global perspective in line with the international body of consultants working with Irvin and Sunquist. It marks the end of Byzantine Christianity and the beginning of a new distinct phase of Christian history with the Portuguese in sub-Saharan Africa, and of course with Spain and Portugal in the Americas and Asia soon after that. How the world changed in those fifty years!

As mentioned earlier, this history of world Christianity from the Acts of the Apostles until the end of the twentieth century serves as the context or backdrop for understanding the nature, breadth, and pluriformity of the church's Tradition. A clarification of the term *Tradition*, as used in this volume, is necessary. It is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, *Tradition* encompasses the "stuff" of Christian faith, action, and thought—scripture, theology, liturgy, doctrine, ethics, and the lives of holy women and men—with its pluriformity and the ambiguity of grace and malpractice. "Tradition, in other words, is the way that the faith we believe today is the same faith that Christians *have always* and *will always* believe" (Bevans 2009, 92). However, what is handed down is not just content, but a *sense* and a *love* of the faith. As a verb *Tradition* represents the "process" of passing on, internalizing, and shaping the Christian faith in new contexts. It is "the faith of the church in action." The "stuff" of Tradition provides the source, parameters, and agenda for "traditioning," which needs to be both faithful and accountable to the past and responsive and creative in the present. My colleague Stephen Bevans uses the image of the baton in a relay race. Tradition is both what is passed and the process of the passing. Furthermore, references are made to specific traditions, such as the Franciscan or pacifist traditions. Without denying the legitimacy of such terminology, these smaller traditions (spelled with a lowercase "t") will be treated as specific elements or manifestations of the more long-term threads of Tradition (spelled with a capital "T"), such as the "Franciscan tradition" as a religious movement of Christian Tradition.

I approach the deep and varied Christian Tradition by focusing on six primary threads throughout its global history. In reference to our initial image, the threads of Tradition could be considered common components within the Christian waterways. They also express the rich variety of diversity both synchronically and diachronically. The primary threads to be treated explicitly are (1) scripture; (2) liturgy, sacraments, and art; (3) ministry and organization; (4) spiritual, religious, and social movements; (5) theological developments; and (6) mission, cultures, and religions.

The choice of key threads developed to a great degree from the course "Tradition: Sources through History," a formerly required foundational

core course in the curriculum for graduate-level theology and ministry students at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. I acknowledge my debt to Dr. Amanda Quantz, with whom I developed and often taught this course. I learned much from Dr. Quantz, an academic church historian in the interdisciplinary area of historical theology and visual art, with an additional interest in Franciscan religious history, Eastern Christianity, and papal history from a global perspective. I also team taught this course and learned a great deal from Dr. Stephen Bevans, a systematic theologian whose particular areas of study are contextual theology, mission theology, ecclesiology, and ministry. Quantz and Bevans were also consultants for the History of the World Christian Movement project referenced earlier.

As for other literature, my particular choice of components was drawn from the nine threads of Christopher Bellitto's *Ten Ways the Church Has Changed* (2006)—with its Roman Catholic and more Eurocentric-leaning perspectives—and the three thematic chapter subsections of Norris's *Christianity: A Short Global History* (2002), which have broader ecumenical Protestant and strong global perspectives. While such a title as *Christian Tradition in Global Perspective* could easily require a multi-volume work, this work is intended to present an overview or panorama with a minimum of detail necessary for that purpose. After reading this book, the reader should hopefully be able to (1) identify from a global perspective the nature, breadth, and pluriformity of the church's Tradition; (2) interpret key eras, centers, figures, movements, and some particular threads of Tradition in a basic global historical framework of Christianity; and (3) make helpful and insightful connections among historical and contemporary events, issues, and developments.

Methodologically, each chapter, arranged chronologically from the beginning of Christianity until the end of the second millennium, begins with a description of the historical context from the global perspective and then focuses on outlining the six threads of Christian Tradition for that particular period of time. One can then focus not only on a single thread but also see the interrelationships among the threads. Recommended further readings are given at the end of each chapter.

Writing a book with such an ambitious scope is quite daunting and humbling. I am very aware of my own limitations and social location. I am a Roman Catholic priest of the missionary congregation of the Society of the Divine Word, and I am a male of the Baby Boomer Generation from the United States. All of these elements influence my fundamental approach to understanding and writing the history of Christianity. At the same time, I continue the process of situating and expanding my faith and my theological, historical, cultural, political, and human understanding in relation to a Christian spectrum that is ecumenically and contextually ever expanding

for me. I have found myself enriched and challenged culturally, ecumenically, professionally, and personally in such settings as the following: living and working for six years in Papua New Guinea; communicating for thirty years with colleagues in the ecumenical American Society of Missiology; participating in two summers of linguistic studies with evangelicals of the Wycliffe Bible Translators; lecturing at Asbury Theological Seminary (Kentucky), Andrews University (Michigan) of the Seventh Day Adventists, Unisa–University of Pretoria in South Africa; and providing an interview for Moody Bible Institute (Chicago). I have also been enriched through a thirty-year relationship with Lakota on two South Dakota reservations; engaging encounters with Christians in places like China, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Ethiopia, and Mongolia; and interactions with Christians and followers of other religions from around the world, who are or were my students at Catholic Theological Union. Finally, I am constantly stretched and informed by the perspectives and history of many others through my reading and study.

I want to offer several final points. First, the use of the term *global* in the title is not linked to the complex phenomenon of globalization but rather is meant to represent a polycentric and inclusive approach to Christian history and Tradition as explained above. Second, a number of eminent scholars argue for the use of *world Christianity* over *global Christianity*. However, like Lalsangkima Pachuau, I consider the terms “synonyms and use them interchangeably” (2018, 2). Third, I have not included extensive quotations from primary texts. And, finally, the style of in-line references (rather than footnotes or endnotes) is intended to facilitate a more fluid narrative style in the text and reduce the overall length of the book.

Christian Tradition in Global Perspective is not just a collection of “their” stories and traditions but a collage of *our* rich, shared Christian Tradition—the waterway system of the church’s participation in God’s mission over two thousand years.