



Theology in the Context of World Christianity
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Chapter 1

THE EMERGENCE OF A GLOBAL THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

On October 31, 1517, a relatively unknown Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses of protest against abuses in the church to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This Latin document was quickly translated into German and, within weeks, had spread like wildfire across Europe, sparking what has become known as the Protestant Reformation. When Pope Leo X first heard about the ninety-five theses, he reportedly dismissed Luther as a “drunken German” who “when sober will change his mind.” Later, as the movement grew, he still dismissed the growing discontent and calls for reform as a mere “squabble among monks.”¹ However, before too many years had passed, everyone realized that, in fact, Christianity, and indeed Europe itself, was undergoing profound changes that would alter the entire course of Western civilization.

Today, many new changes are transforming the church and the world in ways unprecedented since the Reformation. For four hundred years Protestantism was essentially a Western cultural movement, with few African or Asian actors on the Christian stage. For example, when William Carey, the humble cobbler who was later called the father of the modern missionary movement, arrived in India in 1793 to preach the gospel, 98 percent of the entire world’s Protestants lived in the Western world.² Even one hundred years later, at the close of the “Great Century” of foreign missions and the dawn of the twentieth century, 90 percent of all Protestants still lived in the Western world. Is it any surprise that nineteenth-century Africans often referred to Christianity as the “white man’s religion”? After all, most Africans had never met a nonwhite Christian.

Is it any wonder that the most common description of a missionary in China was a *fan-kwei* or “foreign devil”? A Christian was as strange and foreign to a Chinese

1. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon, 1950), 85.

2. David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian*

Trends, AD 30–AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), 331.

as a Buddhist would have been to my grandmother, who lived her whole life in the United States and, I am confident, never met a Buddhist in her life. For much of the world, Christianity seemed inextricably bound up with the rise and fall of Western civilization.

We are now in the midst of one of the most dramatic shifts in Christianity since the Reformation. Christianity is on the move and is creating a seismic change that is changing the face of the whole Christian movement. Every Christian in the world, but especially those in the West, must understand how these changes will influence our understanding of church history, our study of theology, and our conception of world missions. This book focuses on the shift in theological discourse, whereby the universal truths of the gospel are being revisited and retold in new, global contexts, a process I am calling *theological translatability*. However, before the fruits of these new conversations can be heard, we must begin with a brief history lesson in the historical, geographic, and cultural translatability of the Christian faith.

CHRISTIANITY SURVIVES THROUGH CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSMISSION: KEY MOMENTS IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Advance and Recession

The cross-cultural transmission of the Christian faith has always been integral to the survival of Christianity. Andrew Walls, among others, has pointed out the peculiar nature of Christian expansion through history, that it has been one of serial, not progressive, growth.³ In other words, Christianity has not had an even, steady growth beginning with a central, cultural, and geographic center from which it subsequently spread to its present position as the largest, most ethnically diverse religion in the world. Instead, Christian history has been one of advance and recession. Christian history has witnessed powerful penetrations of the gospel into certain geographic and cultural regions, only to experience later a major recession in that region and, sometimes, even to wither away almost to extinction. Yet just as Christianity was waning in one quarter, it was experiencing an even more dramatic rebirth and expansion in another.

This advance-and-recession motif is such a major theme in Christian history that the imminent church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette uses it as a major organizing motif for his famous multivolume work, *A History of Christianity*.⁴ The important point is to recognize that despite what it feels like when a Christian is living in the midst of a particular cultural and geographic advance, if you step back and look at the whole picture of Christian history, you must conclude that there is no such thing as a particular Christian culture or Christian civilization.

3. Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 22–25.

4. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vols. 1 and 2 (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2000). Latourette uses as his heading for AD 500–AD 950 the following: “The Darkest Hours: The Great Recession.” The next section for AD 950–1350 he

titles, “Four Centuries of Resurgence and Advance.” Then comes, for 1350–1500, “Geographic Loss and Internal Lassitude, Confusion, and Corruption, Partly Offset by Vigorous Life.” Many of the subheadings also reflect this theme as, for example, chapter 28, “Western Europe: Decline and Vitality,” and chapter 40, “Stagnation and Advance: The Eastern Churches.”

This picture is in stark contrast to what one observes, for example, in Islam or in Hinduism, the next two largest religions after Christianity. Islam initially emerged in Saudi Arabia, and from that geographic and cultural center has spread throughout the world. Today, there are far more non-Arab Muslims than Arab Muslims. Yet, despite its diversity, Islam retains a distinctly Arab orientation. Devout Muslims insist that the Qur'an is untranslatable into any language other than Arabic. The call to prayer goes out in Arabic, regardless of the national language of the surrounding Muslims. All Muslims face Mecca when they pray. These are important indicators that Islam has had a progressive, not serial, growth. It has always enjoyed a single cultural and geographic center in Saudi Arabia and has never been forced to fully embrace cultural or geographic translatability.

Hinduism emerged in the Gangetic plain of North India over three thousand years ago, making it one of the oldest religions in the world. Yet Hinduism has never lost its cultural and geographic center in North India. Just as Islam can hardly be imagined apart from Saudi Arabia, the home of the holy city of Mecca, the Ka'aba, the black stone, and the tomb of Muhammad in Medina, so it is difficult to imagine a Hinduism that withers away in India but finds a new center in, say, sub-Saharan Africa. But this is precisely what has happened repeatedly in the history of the Christian movement. Dozens of examples could be highlighted throughout the history of the church, but I have chosen three "snapshots" taken at different points in church history to illustrate the cultural and geographic translatability of the Christian faith.

Snapshots of Geographic and Cultural Translatability in Christianity

Snapshot #1: From Jewish Birth to Gentile Home

Christianity began as a Jewish movement fulfilling Jewish hopes, promises, and expectations. Indeed, the continuity between Judaism and Christianity seemed so seamless to the earliest believers that they would have never thought of themselves as changing their religion from Judaism to something else. They understood Christianity as the extension and fulfillment of their Jewish faith. Yet, right in the pages of the New Testament we read the story of those unnamed Jewish believers in Antioch who took the risky—and controversial move—to cross major cultural and religious barriers and share the gospel with pagan, uncircumcised Gentiles.

Acts 11:19 begins by recounting how, after the persecution in connection with Stephen, these scattered believers began to share the gospel "as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews." The next verse records one of the most important missiological moments in the entire New Testament: "Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and *began to speak to Greeks also*, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (*italics added*). This is the beginning of a new cultural frontier, which, though radical at the time, became so prominent that it was considered normative Christianity.

At the time these unnamed believers from Cyprus and Cyrene began to preach the gospel to Gentiles, the church was comprised of Jewish believers and a few Gentile God-fearers like Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch, who had accepted the Torah.

In other words, the Gentile God-fearers had accepted the Jewish messiah as their messiah and were living out their new faith on Jewish terms. The cultural center of this young, fledgling movement, known simply as “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:14), was based in Jerusalem under apostolic leadership. Jerusalem was the first geographic center of the Christian movement and Judaism was its first religious and cultural home.

The importance of Jerusalem is underscored by what happened when news got back there about this surprising turning to Christ among Gentiles. The apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas down to Antioch to investigate this new movement. Later, Paul and Barnabas entered into such a sharp disagreement with some Judaizers who strongly opposed the Gentiles coming to Christ apart from Judaism (circumcision, submission to the Torah, dietary restrictions, etc.) that Paul traveled to Jerusalem to make his case before the apostles (see Acts 15).

The Jerusalem Council met to debate and discuss the basis for accepting Gentiles into the church. The group decided that Gentiles did not need to come to Jesus Christ on Jewish cultural and religious terms. They were not asked to submit to or to keep the many intricacies of the Jewish law, but only to respect a few broad guidelines that would clearly separate the Gentiles from their pagan past, while still affirming that sinners are saved not by keeping the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. The Jewish “center” formally recognized the presence of Christ in these new Gentile brothers and sisters. Since this “Way” now included Gentiles on their own cultural terms, it could no longer regard itself as a curious subset of Judaism. The faith had successfully traversed its first major cross-cultural transmission.

Snapshot #2: The Fall of the Empire and the Birth of “Barbarian” and Byzantine Faith

The turn of the fourth century in the Roman empire was marked by the most brutal persecution the church had ever experienced. Emperor Diocletian ordered the destruction of church buildings and Bibles, and he imprisoned many Christian leaders. All of this changed, however, when his successor, Constantine, issued an edict of toleration in 313. In the following decades, Christianity experienced dramatic expansion among Hellenistic Gentiles until Christianity soon became the “professed faith of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman empire.”⁵ In fact, Christianity became almost coterminous with the empire.⁶ Greek-speaking peoples with a Hellenistic culture and a pagan background were now the best example of *representative* Christianity. Indeed, by the fourth century, Jewish Christians represented only a tiny percentage of the church.

Throughout the fourth century the Roman empire increasingly showed signs of weakness and disintegration. Tragically, the moral and spiritual climate of nominal

5. *Ibid.*, 1:97.

6. *Ibid.*, 1:269. Stephen Neill tentatively estimates that the number of Christians in the empire on the eve of the Edict of Toleration (AD 313) was approximately five million (10 percent of

the population). By the time Emperor Justinian officially closed the School of Athens in 529 the number of Christians was closer to 25 million. See Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1990), 39, 41.

Christianity generally mirrored that of the declining empire.⁷ Looking back, Christianity might have shared the same demise as the empire, symbolized best by the famous sacking of Rome by the Goths in 410.⁸ Remarkably, however, Christianity found new vitality outside the empire, among new people groups moving westward into Ireland and Scotland and eastward into Arabia, Persia, and beyond.⁹ Many of the invading Germanic peoples were also brought to faith in Jesus Christ. In a matter of a few decades the church was facing another new cultural shock with the entrance of Visigoths (Spain), Ostrogoths (Italy), Franks (Northern Gaul), Burgundians (Southern Gaul), Vandals (North Africa), and Angles and Saxons (Britain) all entering the church in significant numbers. Centuries later, this pattern repeated itself. The relatively stable Carolingian empire, which had substantially been Christianized, eventually disintegrated, and a new wave of invasions began with the arrival of the Scandinavians, who were also, in turn, evangelized.

Not only was Christianity continually making cultural gains on one hand while suffering losses on the other hand, but the geographic center was also shifting. By the end of the second century, Rome, as capital of the empire, was the most important city for Christians. Indeed, even in the structure of Acts, we already see the strategic and cultural importance of Rome for Christians. However, in AD 330 Constantine relocated the capital to Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul), which he renamed Constantinople. By the time Rome was sacked in 410, Constantinople was the undisputed geographic center of the Christian faith.

Christianity experienced some remarkable advances in the East during this time, including important progress among the Slavic peoples. During the ninth and tenth centuries, when Christianity in the West had reached dangerously low levels of faith and practice, Constantinople represented the most vibrant expression of Christianity in the world. In fact, the Russian ruler Vladimir was so moved by what he experienced in Constantinople that he sponsored the propagation of Eastern Christianity throughout Russia. Christianity, it seems, was becoming accustomed to reinvigorating its vitality and inner life through cross-cultural transmission to new people groups and adapting to new cultural and geographic centers.

Snapshot #3: A Faith for the World: Missionaries and Migrations

The Protestant Reformation led by Luther (1483–1546), along with the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation led by Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), represent renewal movements that helped to stimulate new vitality among previously Christianized peoples who had become largely nominal. Christianity in the Middle Ages was still confined primarily to Europe, which remained the geographic center. However, a revitalized European Christianity eventually led to dramatic missionary endeavors

7. During this period the church was either focused on internal, doctrinal disputes as reflected in the ecumenical councils or they had become part of monastic communities that were not interested in revitalizing Roman civilization.

8. The official conquest of the empire is generally dated

as 378, the year the Goths killed the emperor in the battle of Adrianople.

9. St. Patrick arrived in Ireland around AD 432, Columba founded his famous monastery in Iona in 563, and Aidan founded Lindisfarne in Northumbria in 635.

that brought the gospel to many new people groups, including most of Latin America but also Asia. Fueled by missionary activity in the wake of the *Padroado* (1493),¹⁰ the Roman Catholic Church founded the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in 1622 to assist in training new missionaries, to oversee all Roman Catholic missionary work, and to coordinate major new missionary initiatives in non-Roman Catholic regions of the world.

Eventually the Protestants, beginning with the Moravians and later through the creation of dozens of new mission-sending societies, followed with their own missionary initiatives. The nineteenth-century missionaries planted the seeds for a future twenty-first-century Christian harvest beyond anything they could have imagined during their lifetimes. However, apart from missionaries committed to sharing their faith across cultural and geographic lines, Europe itself was engaged in the largest ocean-based migration in the history of the world. From 1500 until the middle of the twentieth century millions of Europeans relocated to the New World, bringing their faith with them and spawning the birth of massive new populations, largely Christian. The gospel, once again, proved it was culturally and geographically translatable. Soon the English-speaking world, including Britain and North America, became the most important new center of vibrant Christianity.

Living on the Seam of History

The purpose of these brief snapshots is to underscore the fact that the lifeblood of Christianity is found in its ability to translate itself across new cultural and geographic barriers and to recognize that areas that once were the mission field can, over time, become the very heart of Christian vitality, while those areas that were once at the heart can lose the faith they once espoused. Jerusalem, Antioch, North Africa, and Constantinople were all at one time at the center of Christian vibrancy. Yet all of these places have only a tiny remnant of Christianity remaining and, with the exception of Jerusalem, are almost completely Islamic.¹¹ In contrast, places like Lagos, Nigeria, and Seoul, South Korea, where the presence of Christianity at one time seemed almost unimaginable, are today vibrant centers of the Christian faith.

If you happen to live in the middle of one of these great cultural expansions, it is easy to be left with the impression that your experience and expression of Christianity is somehow normative for all Christians everywhere. It is also clear from the writings of Christians who happened to live in places that, in their day, were at the center of global Christianity, that they fully expected Christianity would always be dominant where they lived. The mission field would always be in *other* places and with *other* people.

Indeed, during the height of such a major cultural and geographic expansion it is difficult to imagine the day when Christianity might wither away in such a place.

10. The *Padroado* was the papal decree that divided the world between Spain and Portugal, initially giving Spain exclusive rights to the New World in the West and Portugal the rights to the East. Later the line was moved to give Portugal access to the New World (modern-day Brazil).

11. For an excellent study of the decline of Christianity in the East see, Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (London: Associated University Press, 1996).