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THE NEW SHAPE OF
WORLD CHRISTIANITY

How American

Experience Reflects

Global Faith

 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

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The New Shape of World Christianity

A GOOD WAY TO BEGIN AN INQUIRY ABOUT THE AMERICAN factor in the new shape of world Christianity is to provide a brief sketch of that new shape. And the most important thing to realize about the current situation of Christianity throughout the world is that things are not as they were. A Christian Rip Van Winkle, who fell asleep under a tree midway through the twentieth century and then woke up this past week to the sound of church bells (or a synthesizer with drums) on a Sunday morning, would not recognize the shifted shape of world Christianity. It is as if the globe had been turned upside down and sideways. A few short decades ago, Christian believers were concentrated in the global north and west, but now a rapidly swelling majority lives in the global south and east. As Rip Van Winkle wiped a half-century of sleep from his eyes and tried to locate his fellow Christian believers, he would find them in surprising places, expressing their faith in surprising ways, under surprising conditions, with surprising relationships to culture

and politics, and raising surprising theological questions that would not have seemed possible when he fell asleep.

THE MAGNITUDE OF RECENT CHANGES

The magnitude of recent changes is the first thing, though not necessarily the most important thing, to grasp about the new world situation. A series of contrasts can underscore the great changes of the recent past:

- This past Sunday it is possible that more Christian believers attended church in China than in all of so-called “Christian Europe.” Yet in 1970 there were no legally functioning churches in all of China; only in 1971 did the communist regime allow for one Protestant and one Roman Catholic Church to hold public worship services, and this was mostly a concession to visiting Europeans and African students from Tanzania and Zambia.
- This past Sunday more Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the United States combined—and the number of Anglicans in church in Nigeria was several times the number in those other African countries.
- This past Sunday more Presbyterians were at church in Ghana than in Scotland, and more were in congregations of the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa than in the United States.
- This past Sunday there were more members of Brazil’s Pentecostal Assemblies of God at church than the combined total in the two largest U.S. Pentecostal denominations, the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ in the United States.
- This past Sunday more people attended the Yoido Full Gospel Church pastored by Yongi Cho in Seoul, Korea, than attended all the churches in significant American denominations like the Christian Reformed Church, the Evangelical Covenant Church or the Presbyterian Church in America. Six to eight times as many people attended this one church as the total that worshiped in

Canada's ten largest churches combined.

- This past Sunday Roman Catholics in the United States worshiped in more languages than at any previous time in American history.
- This past Sunday the churches with the largest attendance in England and France had mostly black congregations. About half of the churchgoers in London were African or African-Caribbean. Today, the largest Christian congregation in Europe is in Kiev, and it is pastored by a Nigerian of Pentecostal background.
- This past Sunday there were more Roman Catholics at worship in the Philippines than in any single country of Europe, including historically Catholic Italy, Spain or Poland.
- This past week in Great Britain, at least fifteen thousand Christian foreign missionaries were hard at work evangelizing the locals. Most of these missionaries are from Africa and Asia.
- And for several years the world's largest chapter of the Jesuit order has been found in India, not in the United States, as it had been for much of the late twentieth century.

In a word, the Christian church has experienced a larger geographical redistribution in the last fifty years than in any comparable period in its history, with the exception of the very earliest years of church history. Some of this change comes from the general growth of world population, but much also arises from remarkable rates of evangelization in parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the islands of the South Pacific—but also from a nearly unprecedented relative decline of Christian adherence in Europe.

The result of population changes—in general for the world, specifically for the churches—is a series of mind-blowing realities: More than half of all Christian adherents in the whole history of the church have been alive in the last one hundred years. Close to half of Christian believers who have ever lived are alive right now. Historian Dana Robert has summarized the demographic implications with a telling statement: “The typical late twentieth-century Christian was no longer a

Table 2.1**Christian Adherence by U.N.-Defined Region (in millions)
(approximate % of population in parenthesis)**

	1800	1900	2008
Africa	4.3 (4.8%)	8.8	423.7 (47.7%)
Asia	8.4 (1.4%)	20.8	355.0 (9.1%)
Europe (incl. Russia)	171.7 (91.8%)	368.2	556.4 (76.7%)
L. America	14.9 (92.0%)	60.0	530.2 (95.0%)
N. America	5.6 (35.0%)	59.6	220.4 (66.4%)
Oceania	.1 (5.0%)	4.3	22.8 (65.0%)

Source: David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Status of Global Mission, Presence, and Activities, AD 1800-2025," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32 (January 2008): 30.

Table 2.2**Evangelical and Pentecostal-Charismatic Adherents (in millions)**

	<i>Evangelicals</i>		<i>Pentecostal-Charismatics</i>		<i>Ev + Pen + Ch %</i>	
	1900	2000	1900	2000	1900	2000
Africa	1.6	69.6	.9	126.0	2.1%	25.5%
Asia	1.3	31.5	0.0	134.9	.001%	4.6%
Europe	32.4	21.5	0.0	37.6	8.1%	8.1%
L. Am.	.8	40.3	0.0	141.4	2.1%	35.6%
N. Am.	33.5	43.2	0.0	79.6	31.6%	40.0%
Oceania	2.2	4.4	0.0	4.3	36.7%	29.0%

Evangelicals = "A subdivision mainly of Protestants consisting of all affiliated church members calling themselves Evangelicals, or all persons belonging to Evangelical congregations, churches or denominations; characterized by commitment to personal religion."

Pentecostal-Charismatics = "Christian adherents belonging to identifiably Pentecostal churches and baptized members affiliated to nonpentecostal denominations who have entered into the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit; the Second Wave of the Pentecostal/Charismatic/Neocharismatic Renewal."

Source: David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

European man but a Latin American or African woman.”¹ The magnitude of recent change means that all believers, including those in the former Christian heartlands of Europe and North America, are faced with the prospect of reorientation. But the scale and pace of recent developments means that more than just history needs to be reoriented; the awareness of where North American and European believers now fit within that history requires reassessment as well.

The tables on page 22 present only cold numbers, but even if they can only be “best estimates,” they indicate changes of stunning proportion.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF NEW CHRISTIAN EXPRESSIONS

Almost as stunning as the magnitude of change in recent Christian history is a dramatic multiplication of the forms of Christian faith that are now found on the planet. Over the course of the last century, the Christian entrance into local cultures has accelerated as never before. Many factors have contributed to this acceleration, but the most important is translation. First came translations of the Bible into local languages, but translation has also carried liturgies, hymns, theology and devotion from the vast cultural archives of the Christian West into the emerging discourses of the world. Lamin Sanneh, an African from Gambia, was born a Muslim and as a youth memorized the Qur’an. He converted to Christianity as a young adult and then studied and taught Islamic history on several continents before taking up his current position at Yale as a professor of African studies, history and world Christianity. In a seminal book published in 1989, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Sanneh articulated an argument that he has fleshed out considerably since that time. In his depiction, the activity of Christian translation has brought unique spiritual empowerment to those who, often for the first time, hear the message of Scripture in their mother tongues.² Africans, for example, are drawn into

¹Dana Robert, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24 (April 2000): 50.

²Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989); and for further development, Sanneh, “Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation,” in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church*, ed. Philip C. Stine (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 1-23; *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*

stories about Jesus and are not surprised when Jesus speaks to them in dreams and visions—as, according to the New Testament, he did to the early apostles.

Before 1900, portions of the Christian Scriptures had been translated into about seven hundred of the world's languages; in the past century alone, more than sixteen hundred new languages have received at least part of the Bible. Evangelical Protestants have been in the forefront of this translation effort, but Roman Catholics have not been far behind.

Results from this unprecedented effort in Bible translation have been—at one and the same time—conservative, ironic, liberating and chaotic. They have been conservative because once marginalized people are given literature in their own language, they receive a tool that anchors them to their own past, their own traditions and their own culture. One of Sanneh's key arguments is that while the spread of Islam has drawn ever-increasing numbers to the globalizing influence of Arabic, the spread of Christianity binds ever-increasing numbers to their own local languages. Ironically, although missionaries may have been very clear about what they intended when they set out to translate the Scriptures, local people have often found in their newly translated Bibles things that the missionaries did not want them to see. In one such irony, straight-laced Victorians did not realize how much unintended support they brought to the ancestral African practice of polygamy by putting the stories of patriarchs like Abraham and David into local languages.

This wave of translations has also been liberating, especially because it has given to peoples all over the world a sense of being themselves the hearers of God's direct speech. Thus, in a world where fewer and fewer can escape modern electronic technology and the reach of "imperial" languages associated with that technology—Chinese, French, Spanish and especially English—the chance to hear the Chris-

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Additional crucial insight on this same theme is provided by Andrew Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in Stine, *Bible Translation*, 24-39.

tian message in one's own mother tongue takes on even greater significance. This contrast between universal languages from outside the community and new Christian material translated into a community's traditional language makes an evangelistic tool like the *Jesus Film* from Campus Crusade for Christ extremely important. Now available in over one thousand languages and having been viewed by a total count exceeding the number of people in the world, this cinematic version of the gospel of Luke offers the first high-tech voices that many native peoples have ever heard in their own language. The fact that these voices offer the Christian story has had a transformative influence in many parts of the world.³

Translation, by strengthening the Christian presence in many new locations has, however, also weakened some bonds of cohesion in worldwide Christianity and pointed in the direction of religious chaos. According to David Barrett, the great enumerator of modern world Christianity, about one-fifth of the world's two billion believers are "independent," that is, not associated with the churches, denominations and traditions that have long been equated with the essence of Christianity itself.⁴ This kind of independence often provides little sense of connection with past Christian wisdom or the present-day concerns of believers in other places. When new believers read the Bible in the local language within their own cultures, one of the dangers is always "syncretism," the excessive intermingling of a culture's non-Christian elements with the Christian message.

As many observers have pointed out, however, syncretism has become a difficult charge to apply with precision. It is often a question of the beholder's eye as well as what the beholder sees. Some believers in rural China may seem to incorporate a lot of ancestral superstition into their new-found faith; but such ones are also in position to ask why many Western Christians have, for example, so readily adapted themselves to the commercial Sunday, which from an orthodox Christian

³As of early July 2007, the film had been released in 1,004 languages; an audio version had been issued in over 404 languages; and a children's version was available in another 12 languages. See the Jesus Film Project official website: <http://www.jesustfilm.org> (accessed July 3, 2007).

⁴David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); plus updates in each January issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.

perspective can look an awful lot like simply caving in to non-Christian elements of modern Western culture.

If syncretism is a danger when Christian concepts, as well as Christian books, are translated into a new culture, the translation process also says something powerful in and to the new culture. Translation implies that the receiving cultures, with their languages, histories and assumptions, are worthy of God's attention; they are valuable entities that the entrance of God's word can change into something even better.

The contemporary multiplicity of world Christianity reveals itself in a rainbow of variations throughout the world. Germany still reflects the ancient church-state establishments of Europe where a majority of the population still designates a portion of their income tax to the churches, but where only 5 to 10 percent of the people actually attend church. But among those 5 to 10 percent are some very serious believers indeed. When they are moved to evangelize the increasingly pagan populations of Europe, their first step—as a matter of built-in cultural instinct—is to form a committee. But when the same motive arises among believers in the Philippines, the first step is to just get at it. In the Philippines, organizational structures for guiding the process come later, if they come at all.

Likewise in some Christian movements among high caste Brahmins in India, strong charismatic healing ministries are present among people who refuse to organize as a church. Meanwhile, also in India believers of the Mar Thoma Church practice ancient forms of liturgy descended from the very first Christian centuries, perhaps even from Thomas, the disciple of Jesus, whom the Mar Thoma Christians look upon as their founder. Yet today there are also many congregations of Indian Mar Thoma Christians in greater Chicago and other U.S. metropolitan regions.

And so it goes in the new configuration of world Christianity, with many now deeply rooted Christian practices that do not conform to traditional Western norms:

- Some Korean Christians treat respect for ancestors—both living and dead—as a Christian duty, even though to outsiders it might look

suspiciously like ancestor worship.

- In West Africa, suburban Christians on the way to the pharmacy for medication might pause to pray earnestly for divine healing—then resume the trip, fill the prescription and take the pills.
- In East Africa, a normal part of worship might include public and personal confession of sin along with repentance—a pattern growing out of the East African Revival that began in the 1930s and continues in different forms to this day.
- Meanwhile in Shanghai, members of the Local Church, or Little Flock, who are spiritual descendents of the ministry of Watchman Nee, also confess their sins to one another. Like the East African Revival, this broad stream represents local Christian appropriation of some elements of the Keswick movement, with its focus on higher spiritual life, which began in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century.
- Brazilian television features the preaching of numerous Pentecostal preachers, who proclaim their messages in loud flamboyant tones; but also on Brazilian television are channels where Roman Catholic priests provide much the same fare.

In a word, today's Christian situation is marked by multiplicity because of how deeply the Christian message, fully indigenized in local languages, has become part of local cultures. The new shape of world Christianity offers a mosaic of many, many varieties of local belief and practice. Immigration, the modern media, global trade and the ease of contemporary travel have stirred this mixture. In many places it is possible to find traces—or more—of American influence. But the multiplicity goes far beyond what any one influence can explain, except the adaptability of the Christian faith itself.

THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF THE NEW WORLD CHRISTIANITY

A subject with clear connections to the American presence in the world concerns material goods, or the realm of things that can be purchased.

The rapid diffusion of Christian adherence into parts of the world where churches barely existed 150 years ago has left a skewed distribution of resources. Today, unlike almost any other earlier period, the money and the strong educational institutions of Christianity are in one part of the world, while a majority of the active believers are located elsewhere. The result is that a Western Christian minority continues to mean a great deal for the Christian majority of the non-West. To be sure, theological education is now being offered to Nepalese in the Philippines, to Ukrainians in Romania, to West Africans in Kenya, to Latin Americans of all nationalities and traditions in Brazil, and to Chinese in Singapore. But Rome, London, Paris, Tübingen, Chicago and Boston remain destinations of choice for Christians from all over the world who seek out the highest forms of higher education.

This Western concentration of educational resources creates some odd blends of educational opportunity and inopportunity. Funding for studying the economic difficulties in modern Liberia, as an example, might be available at the University of Chicago, but probably not in Liberia. At Cambridge University, Boston University or Fuller Theological Seminary, a student wanting to study the East African Revival could find willing mentors and the possibility of fellowship support, but not as easily in Uganda and Rwanda, where such revivals actually began. As a specific example, the last few years have seen several excellent general histories of Christianity in Africa, which are cited in the "Guide to Further Reading," but not until 2005 was a thorough study produced by Africans.⁵ For the most part, scholarly understanding of the world's new Christian configurations remains unbalanced. While there is a rapidly growing quantity of first-rate information-gathering for the whole world, the oversight and much of the control of that information remains with the world's established educational systems.

Another sign of global diversity is the universalization of missionary service. Sometimes this new character is a direct product of the disproportionate distribution of resources that now characterizes the world

⁵Ogbu Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story* (University of Pretoria: Department of Church History, 2005). This book is now available as a 2007 imprint from Africa World Press (Trenton, N.J.).

church. In Africa prior to World War II, missionaries were often the featured speakers at revival meetings that could draw several hundred Africans to a single gathering. But after the war, most revival efforts in Africa were spearheaded by Africans, with dramatically multiplied numbers and greatly altered cultural expectations. With Africans in charge, few worried about one bed per body or one chair per person. Rather, these gatherings became more like the revivals of the early American frontier where families simply made do—for transportation, for sleeping, for cooking, for seating. Africans influenced by such African-led revivals now carry to other countries their commitment to the gospel—usually first to other Africans who have left the homeland, but then increasingly to populations at large. To note comparisons over time as I try to do in chapter five is to chart the magnitude of such changes. The proportion of American, and more generally Western, missionaries in the world total of Christian missionaries is sinking fast.

But missionary funding is not the same thing as missionary recruiting. Wealth and missionary service remain connected. Even with the very rapid growth in world missionary activity, the preponderance of funding for missions still comes from the West.

What is true for missions is also true for the elusive construct called “Christian civilization.” While it is impossible to define “Christian civilization” exactly, its general sense includes internalized self-discipline encouraging stable living and the postponement of immediate gratifications. It means a respect for the law, which in the West was long taken to be an objective reflection of God’s righteousness. And it includes organized public support (with funds) for looking after those least able to care for themselves.

To greatly oversimplify the situation that now exists in the world, some marks of “Christian civilization” continue to persist where few people go to church while they are often absent where Christian adherence abounds. To put it graphically, if on a Sunday you want to attend a lively, well-attended, fervent and life-changing service of Christian worship, you want to be in Nairobi, not in Stockholm. But if you want to ensure that your family is well provided for if you lose your job or if

you don't want to worry about how rising food prices might keep you from feeding your children, then you want to be in Stockholm, not Nairobi. In a word, the material conditions of Christianity's new world picture are opening up great opportunities, but they also pose great challenges to churches wherever they are.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The new situation of world Christianity also carries important political implications. At this level, the role of the United States as the major player in many of the world's markets, alliances and hotspots is clearly related to the movements of Christian history.

A first and most obvious implication is that both Christianity and Islam have been expanding with great rapidity precisely in those areas of the world that have been most buffeted by the forces of colonization, decolonization and now economic globalization. These terms are important enough to pause for brief definition.

Colonization refers to what took place in the expansion of Europe from early modern times (sixteenth century), with much greater intensity in the period of early industrialization (nineteenth century), and with continuing force past the mid-twentieth century. As a consequence of this expansion, much of Asia, Africa and Latin America came to be occupied, governed and economically exploited by various countries of Europe.

Decolonization took place at the end of the colonial period—for example, with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, the great burst of independence for African states beginning in the late 1950s and, one might say, with the triumph of Mao Tse-Tung's Communism in China in 1949.

The precipitate end of the West's direct imperial control of non-Western regions resulted in a combination of turmoil, strengthened local governments and continuing (if selective) appropriations of Western culture. Thus, for example, Kenyans speak British English and drive on the left side of the road, while across Lake Victoria to the west, Rwandans use French and drive on the right—even as most people in both nations speak several local languages and observe many local cus-

toms that straddle the new national boundaries. In China, the end of direct Western involvement in the era of Mao Tse-Tung led to massive efforts at wiping out “imperial” influence followed soon thereafter by massive efforts at appropriating selected aspects of Western capitalism. Throughout the world, the end of Western imperial rule has opened new possibilities, created new inequalities, overcome some tribal rivalries, inflamed others and—in general—accelerated the markers of social change.

Globalization refers to the process by which circulation of goods, products, money, services, movies, books, techniques, ideas and mental habits moves ever faster and easier. Even as globalization can lead to strengthened tribal identities and traditions, it almost always also draws people away from local traditions toward international practices. It is a loosely defined word used most often for economic analyses, but a word that applies just as well to the circulation of cultural ideals, practices and products as to economic ones.

Colonization, decolonization and globalization all undercut traditionally historic ways of living and thinking. Economic forces have drawn much of the world’s population into new relationships. These and other tectonic historical forces have created an openness to new religious perspectives. Christianity and Islam have been the major beneficiaries. But when either Christianity or Islam moves into newly globalized regions, inevitably Muslim and Christian practices shift to meet the requirements of local settings, even as they effect change in the local settings.

Where Islam advances with Christianity in offering destabilized peoples the balm of spiritual stability—and especially where the two advance in the same or contiguous places—the potential for strife also grows. In Africa, for example, a line drawn from west to east bisecting the top third of continent would also locate some of the bitterest civil conflict of past decades; it is a line that roughly coincides with where the growing forces of Christianity and Islam meet.

The rapid spread of Christianity in economically marginal areas also poses delicate questions for those concerned about the global economy. In the great *favellas* and *barrios* of Latin America and the Philippines,

as well as the teeming cities of Africa, Christian faith thrives among people whose economic existence is precarious. Sometimes that thriving comes about when Christianity is preached as a means to wealth; often it results when Christianity is embraced as a point of stability in an economically insecure world. Interpreted either way, it would seem shortsighted for policy planners to discuss economic globalization without also considering religious globalization.

But the story is different where Christianity spreads in places of economic strength, as especially in contemporary China. In this rapidly rising Asian power, the systems of belief that once guided society are passing away. Before Maoism imploded, it badly damaged ancestral reliance on Confucian precepts even as its own ineffective violence led to the suicide of communist ideology. In these circumstances, some highly educated Chinese are exploring Christianity not only for its message of personal salvation but also for its potential as a moral compass for all of society. David Jeffrey of Baylor University, who for fifteen years has been lecturing on Christian subjects at premier universities in China, has asked a speculative question that should give pause to analysts of world politics. Once before, Jeffrey observes, a great world power passed through tumultuous times as Christian ranks expanded on the margins of society. It was in the late third and early fourth centuries. In that turmoil the Emperor Constantine was converted and became, from the top of the imperial system, a supporter of Christianity as a new glue for the empire. Is it impossible to imagine that a new Constantine might exist somewhere in the junior ranks of the Chinese communist party?

The rapid spread of Christianity into new regions of the world also means that representatives from these regions will be more and more likely to bring Christian moral principles with them to international venues. Those moral principles, which emerge from Christian faith that is spreading so rapidly, are almost never liberal or modernist in either Catholic or Protestant forms. They are rather much more likely to be syncretistic, Pentecostal, strongly papal, neo-fundamentalist or starkly supernaturalist. As the worldwide Anglican Communion has experienced in its conflicts over the ordination of practicing homosexu-

als, the moral voice of the newer Christian regions of the world can be a strong voice indeed.⁶ For the Roman Catholic Church, for ad hoc assemblages of evangelical Protestants, for older Protestant denominations, for regional and global ecumenical ventures—as also for policy analysts not focused on religion—the attachment of the world’s new Christian communities to sterner interpretations of Christian faith is likely to have an ever-growing influence on international affairs.

NEW QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

As much as the new shape of Christianity in the world affects general world history, much more does it influence matters of Christian belief and practice. For many in the West, such matters may have seemed mostly settled. Now, when the gospel is being appropriated by multiplying new populations—when it is being seen through new eyes—believers wherever they live have the opportunity to reconsider the priorities of doctrine. The three questions that follow hint at the challenges of theological rediscovery posed by the church’s recent history around the globe, but of course there are many more.

1. How close is the world of spirits to the everyday world? In some regions it is now common for believers to recount first-hand contacts with an angel or a demon. The recent spread of Christianity has brought the supernatural and the natural much closer together than they have been in the West since the dawn of the Enlightenment. While belief in the immediate presence of God and the spirit world never died out in Western Christianity, more common for several centuries has been reliance on Bible reading, preaching and instruction of the faithful by acknowledged leaders. Yet some newly developed forms of Christianity have had little time or opportunity to develop a corpus of knowledge based on systematic inquiry into Scripture or to conform to a particular set of church authorities.

Rather, the genius of the faith in many emerging sectors of the Christian world is to merge the book of Acts with the local scene where

⁶See a full account in Kevin Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the spirits are often very close. Andrew Walls reports that in his early days as a teacher in Sierra Leone he was pushed out of his once-settled views when he came to realize that the book of Acts was being experienced right outside his classroom door.⁷ Westerners who minister in Latin America, China, the Philippines, Africa or the South Seas consistently report that most Christian experience reflects a much stronger supernatural awareness than is characteristic of even charismatic and Pentecostal circles in the West. In Western Christian history there is a long tradition of learned theological debate over cessationism—whether or not the implementation of Christian practice based on Scripture (Protestants), or Scripture with tradition (Catholics), has taken the place of more direct contact with God and the spirits more generally. In the Christian world as it exists today, that debate has been rendered moot by a tidal wave of Christian practice. With only some hyperbole, we might say that although some of the world's new Christian communities are Roman Catholic, some Anglican, some Baptist, some Presbyterian and many independent, almost all are Pentecostal in a broad sense of the term.

2. What is the unit of salvation? Protestant evangelicals usually think that salvation is one by one by one, as individuals come to develop “a personal relationship with Christ.” But much of the emerging Christian world has not experienced conversion individually. Conversion, instead, has taken place by families, villages or even lineages extending back in time. Group conversion is not without historic precedent. The great missionary to the Saxons, Boniface, regularly saw entire villages and clans turn to Christianity during his European journeys in the eighth century. In 1988, Russians and Ukrainians marked the 1000-year anniversary of Christianity in their part of the world. That momentous Christian beginning took place after Prince Vladimir had explored Islam, Judaism and Roman Catholicism before making his choice for Eastern Orthodoxy. Then he went back to Kiev and marched the whole city down to the river and had everyone baptized. A few decades ago, American evangelicals could hardly imagine genuine

⁷Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996).

Christian conversion taking place at the order of a prince. But today it is different. Striking examples of such conversions for whole villages and castes regularly attended the work of Bishop V. S. Azariah in India during the early decades of the twentieth century.⁸ Furthermore, as experienced in India more recently among the Dalits (also known as untouchables), in Fiji, the Solomon and other islands of the Pacific, and among the families through which Christianity spreads in Korea and the Philippines—it is more and more obvious that the converting work of the Holy Spirit is not limited to individuals only.

3. How should believers read the Bible? This question can be rephrased as, what is the biblical norm by which the rest of the Bible is read?⁹ A simplified list of possible keys to the whole Bible might include the narratives of the Old Testament, the Old Testament's wisdom or prophetic literature, the gospels of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament epistles or the book of Revelation. Historically in the West, the main interpretive starting points for understanding Scripture have been found in the Pauline epistles (for the Protestant reformers and many of their descendents), the Sermon on the Mount (social gospel Protestants), the Psalms (for strongly liturgical traditions), Old and New Testament prophecy (dispensationalism), and so on. Today, in much of the world it is as likely to be the narratives of Old Testament history, the Psalms (read socially and politically), the book of Acts (as direct model for contemporary action), the book of James (for its counsel about practical Christian living), or the book of Revelation (for its comfort in desperate times). To the extent that believers who use different parts of the Bible as keys to their Christian understanding talk to each other, the whole church is strengthened. To the extent they go their own way—or just shout at each other—the church is only fragmented.

A related question concerns the relevance for new Christians of the Western churches' great interpretive summaries found in the Apostles'

⁸Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). See also J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (New York: Asbury, 1933).

⁹Especially useful on this question is Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian definition of the divine-human nature of Christ. For many believers in the West it is unimaginable that these critical statements could ever be superseded, but since they arose at specific times in Western history and in response to specifically Western problems, it is possible that they will not seem as imperative to those for whom those times and problems are foreign.

The charismatic or Pentecostal character of much of the world's new Christianity poses a yet further question. It is one that has never been completely settled in traditional Western churches, but it is absolutely front and center for most of the newer Christian regions of the world: how much are the supernatural events that fill the pages of Scripture to be considered normative examples for what happens right now? Many traditional Christians in older regions believe, and often believe quite literally, that what is related in Scripture happened pretty much as it is described, but that belief has been hedged in by centuries of structured church practice. It is not so in much of the rest of the world, where miracles, healings and prophetic words from Scripture offer a day-to-day model for contemporary Christian practice.

The printed Bible runs to hundreds of pages. No Christian has ever read every page with equal emphasis. The Puritans were theologically minded people who found themselves pondering how the epistles of Paul illuminated other sections of the Bible. Many evangelical Protestants in North America have followed roughly in the same direction. Yet these instinctive preferences are by no means the only possibilities. The Old Testament book of Leviticus is, for some African Christians today, a key to other parts of Scripture. Its legal regulations concerning holy objects, sacred days and sacred places speak directly to the cultures they have inherited. Some Asian Christians begin with the Proverbs, a biblical book that extends the search for wisdom begun in Confucian and other ancient systems of thought. Some new Christian groups turn to Paul, but via the Old Testament patriarchs whose family histories and covenantal relationships accord well with the value systems of tribal organization. For many in newly Christian regions the book of Acts is normative; it is Scripture to be followed directly and completely.

No serious theologian doubts that all believers should read and follow the teachings of Scripture. But where should they start? What sections are normative in such a way as to enlighten the rest? How should they read the Bible in its parts and the whole? Answers to these challenging questions will go far in determining the new shape of world Christianity.

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The magnitude, the multiplicity, the material conditions, the political implications and the theological challenges of Christianity's current situation open a new epoch in religious history. This same history is also loaded with implications for world economics and world politics. Within a context of dynamic change, the United States and Christian believers in America are certainly part of the story. Attempting to define what that place has been and should be is the main purpose of this book. But before we attempt to probe this issue further, it would be wise to take a step back in time. Since hints of Christianity's new world situation were emerging in many parts of the world during the nineteenth century, it is appropriate to examine a few of those anticipations before addressing directly the question of the "American factor" today.