Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion

Dana L. Robert
Christian Mission
BLACKWELL BRIEF HISTORIES OF RELIGION SERIES

This series offers brief, accessible and lively accounts of key topics within theology and religion. Each volume presents both academic and general readers with a selected history of topics which have had a profound effect on religious and cultural life. The word ‘history’ is, therefore, understood in its broadest cultural and social sense. The volumes are based on serious scholarship but they are written engagingly and in terms readily understood by general readers.

Published

Heaven Alister E. McGrath
Heresy G. R. Evans
Islam Tamara Sonn
Death Douglas J. Davies
Saints Lawrence S. Cunningham
Christianity Carter Lindberg
Dante Peter S. Hawkins
Spirituality Philip Sheldrake
Cults and New Religions Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley
Love Carter Lindberg
Christian Mission Dana L. Robert

Forthcoming

Judaism Steven Leonard Jacobs
Ethics Michael Banner
Reformation Kenneth Appold
Monasticism Dennis D. Martin
Apocalypse Martha Himmelfarb
Shinto John Breen and Mark Teeuwen
Sufism Shahzad Green
Christian Mission:
How Christianity Became a World Religion

Dana L. Robert
For Marthinus Louis Daneel
## Contents

List of Illustrations  ix  
Acknowledgments  x  

Introduction  1  

**Part I  The Making of a World Religion: Christian Mission through the Ages**  5  
1 From Christ to Christendom  7  
   From Jerusalem into "All the World"  10  
   The Creation of Catholic Europe, 400–1400  21  

2 Vernaculars and Volunteers, 1450–  31  
   Bible Translation and the Roots of Modern Missions  32  
   The Revitalization of Catholic Missions  36  
   The Beginnings of Protestant Missions  41  
   Voluntarism and Mission  44  
   Protestant Missionary Activities in the Nineteenth Century  48  

3 Global Networking for the Nations, 1910–  53  
   The Growth of Global Networks  56  
   International Awakenings  60  
   Awakening Internationalism  64  
   Postcolonial Rejection of Christian Mission  67  
   Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans in Mission  69
viii  Contents

Part II  Themes in Mission History  81
4  The Politics of Missions: Empire, Human Rights, and Land  83
   Critiques of Missions  87
   Missionaries and Human Rights  98
   Missionaries and the Land  107

5  Women in World Mission: Purity, Motherhood, and Women’s Well-Being  114
   Women as Missionaries  118
   Purity and Gender Neutrality  119
   The Mission of Motherhood  124
   Women’s Well-Being and Social Change  131

6  Conversion and Christian Community: The Missionary from St. Patrick to Bernard Mizeki  142
   Who Was St. Patrick?  144
   Bernard Mizeki, “Apostle to the Shona”  159
   Missionaries and the Formation of Communal Christian Identities  171

7  Postscript: Multicultural Missions in Global Context  173

Bibliography  178
Index  193
List of Illustrations

Maps

1 Christians by region in 400 8
2 Christians by region in 1600 32
3 Christians by region in 2010 54

Figures

2.1 Matteo Ricci and leading Chinese Christian Xu Guangqi 41
2.2 Tamil Bible translated by Ziegenbalg 43
2.3 William Carey and Mrityunjaya, his Indian assistant 46
3.1 World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910 55
3.2 V. S. Azariah, first Anglican bishop from India 56
4.1 David Livingstone memorial statue, Victoria Falls 86
5.1 Annalena Tonelli in Somalia 115
6.1 Icon of St. Patrick 145
6.2 Icon of Bernard Mizeki 160
6.3 Bernard Mizeki’s baptismal portrait 161
7.1 Apostolic evangelist preaching in Zimbabwe 175
There is an old joke about a man who wrote a very long letter to his son, ending with the postscript, “I’m sorry I wrote such a long letter. I didn’t have enough time to write you a short one.” After twenty-five years of teaching mission history and finding it endlessly fascinating, I have taken an eternity to write a “brief” history of my major field of research. Part of the struggle lies in deciding what must be included, and what can be left out.

But another challenge is that the historiography of Christian mission has been changing rapidly. Before the mid twentieth century, a narrative of European expansion dominated the field. By the mid 1960s, the subject of Christian mission – if noticed at all – was treated as a form of western hegemonic discourse wedded to economic and cultural imperialism, or European colonialism. Studies by nonwestern historians often focused on the limitations and advantages of mission in relation to nation-building or the creation of communal identities. By the late twentieth century, mission historians emphasized the complexity of intercultural and interreligious encounters, including the need to put indigenous leaders at the center of the picture. Women’s studies have entered the field, with gender finally recognized as an important dynamic in the mission process. Postcolonial perspectives vary widely, but in general both the missionary and the convert are treated as agents of hybridity, as cultural brokers in the border-crossing production of worldviews. For theologians, the study of mission history has continued to emphasize missions’ role in the transmission and creation of theologies. For ordinary believers, the missionary remains an exemplar of piety and embodiment of Christian identity.

I am indebted to many scholars who have shaped the above-mentioned perspectives. I find much merit in multiple approaches, and a discerning reader will find traces of them in my text. But in this study, which is meant to introduce missions as the object of historical rather than theological analysis, I argue that mission history can be explained as a series of boundary
Acknowledgments

crossings, driven by a universalist logic. Thus the meaning of Christian mis-
sion is integral to Christianity as a world religion that exists across time,
space, and cultures. Teachers and colleagues whose insights over the years
have substantially helped me to reach these conclusions include Charles
Forman, George Lindbeck, Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Gerald Anderson,
and Robert Hefner. I thank them all, though of course I take full blame for
weaknesses in my arguments.

For financial support in the writing of this book I wish to thank the ATS
Lilly Faculty Sabbatical Grant program, which helped me with a semester’s
leave in 2006. My friends Kip Knight and Peggy Day, and the DeFreitas
Family Foundation, have also provided research funds without which
I could not have written this book. Thanks go to Dean Ray Hart of the
Boston University School of Theology for his unflinching support in the
midst of many changes.

For help with the manuscript I thank Doug Tzan, who as a diligent research
assistant kept me from making mistakes. Doug also formatted the bibliogra-
phy. I am grateful to Todd Johnson for providing me with three original
maps. David Hempton and Angelyn Dries were valuable sounding boards
for some of my early ideas about this project. Martha Smalley of Yale Divinity
School invited me to present some of the research in the George Edward and
Olivia Hotchkiss Day Associate Lecture. I wish to thank Ellie Beatty, Ann
Braude, Shawn Daggett, Samuel Massie, Charles Robert, and Diana Wylie
for reading all or part of the manuscript and providing valuable critiques.
Thanks especially go to editor Rebecca Harkin, who asked me to write this
book and provided encouragement and feedback along the way.

I dedicate this book to my husband Inus, who is a constant source of
inspiration and encouragement.

Dana L. Robert
Somerville, Massachusetts
Introduction

Today roughly one-third of the people on earth are Christians. Not only is Christianity the largest religion in the world but it embraces a huge variety of forms, ranging from Catholics in Brazil, to Apostles in Zimbabwe, to Copts in Egypt, to Pentecostals in Ghana, to Lutherans in Germany, to House Church believers in China. The geographic range, cultural diversity, and organizational variety of Christianity surpass those of the other great world religions.

How did Christianity get to be so diverse and widespread? The movement of Christianity from one culture to another can be explained by the concept “mission.” The word “mission” comes from the biblical Greek words for “sending.” Christianity, like Islam, is a “sending” religion. Within its philosophical structure is the idea of universality – that the message it proclaims about Jesus Christ should be shared with all peoples. Its sacred text, the Bible, contains missionary documents that command Jesus’ followers to “go into all the world.” Within its 2,000-year history are myriad examples of Christians deliberately being sent or else informally crossing geographic or cultural barriers, and founding new groups of believers wherever they go. New groups in turn launch missions of their own. The history of Christian mission – and of churches’ particular missions – provides a useful framework for grasping the meaning of Christianity as a multicultural, global presence in the world today.

The stereotyped popular view of missions is at odds with their rich variety and fascinating realities. The word “mission” is often quickly reduced to western colonialism, rather than analyzed as a complex, multi-cultural historical process stretching across two millennia. The term “missionary” is caricatured as representing a white Anglo-Saxon man in a pith helmet, preaching to unwilling “natives” in a steamy jungle. Yet over the 2,000 years of Christianity, the “missionary” is likely to have been a Korean couple working among university students in China, or an Indian medical doctor...
2 Introduction

tending to refugees, or a Tongan family living peaceably in a Fijian village, or a Nestorian trader making his living along the Silk Road.

This book is a brief thematic history of an endlessly complex and detailed process in the history of Christianity. It does not and cannot seek to be exhaustive. It begins with a chronological overview of how Christianity spread around the world. This way of narrating the history of Christianity differs from traditional approaches by focusing on shifts in methods of communication and changes in sociopolitical contexts that opened the way for the transmission of Christian faith across cultural boundaries. The details of the beliefs and practices of Christians in each culture, and the history of the various churches, are largely omitted. In this chronological overview, Christianity becomes interesting as a catalyst for new identity-formation rather than as a fixed institution. The second part of the book examines selected major themes in mission history, namely the complex relationship between missions and western colonialism; the role of women in mission; and the role of the missionary in conversion and in the creation of communal identities. The two halves of the book represent different approaches to the same subject, and thus overlap slightly.

The words “mission” and “missions” will be used somewhat interchangeably, though with an emphasis on “mission” as the overview term, as in “the mission of the church”; and an emphasis on “missions” to refer to specific manifestations of mission, as in “Anglican missions,” or “faith missions.” The discerning reader will also notice that a disproportionate number of examples in the book are drawn from Africa. Since the book is a selective rather than exhaustive treatment of the subject, I have naturally leaned more heavily upon my own areas of expertise.

A few caveats are in order. Although this book is not a history of theology, for Christians the practices of mission are driven by theological beliefs. Thus even if the subject of mission is historicized as a set of human actions within history, or as the movement of religious ideas from one culture to another, theology cannot be avoided entirely. Indeed, one of the goals of this book is to explain why Christians have continued to engage in missionary activity over the centuries. What will not happen in this book is an analysis of debates among mission theologians. The purpose of Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion is to understand how cross-cultural mission is a central historical process in the formation of Christianity as a world religion.1

1 Because this book is intended to be a brief history, footnotes have been kept to a minimum and are used primarily to document direct quotations or major sources. For details of sources on particular persons or ideas mentioned in each chapter, see the Bibliography.
It should be noted that the book’s analytical framework is situated largely within the western traditions of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The chief reason for this is the need to focus on the last few hundred years of mission history, during which missionaries were largely westerners functioning in the contexts of western colonialism. Nevertheless, the assumption that Christianity is a multi-cultural religion guides the text from beginning to end. In global terms, mission is not primarily a rationale for western expansion, but the multi-directional movement of Christians who have crossed boundaries to share their faith.
Part I

The Making of a World Religion: Christian Mission through the Ages
1

From Christ to Christendom

In 1970 the British rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* hit the shelves of record stores. The deceased Judas, who betrayed Jesus to the authorities who crucified him, appears in the afterlife and sings the title song, “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you, what have you sacrificed? Jesus Christ, Superstar, do you think you’re what they say you are?” Referring to Jesus’ humble origins in Palestine, an obscure province conquered by the Roman Pompey in 63 BC, Judas asks him, “Why’d you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you’d come today you would have reached a whole nation. Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.”

The conservative Christian establishment found the portrayal of an earthy “rock and roll” Jesus with his long hair and hippie commune of male and female disciples to be disrespectful, if not sacrilegious. But for many American baby boomers in the 1970s, *Jesus Christ Superstar* blew like a fresh breeze across their predictable and boring suburban churches. Suddenly Jesus seemed like one of them. He defied authority, was filled with self-doubt, and “hung out” with a pack of friends. Even before the rock opera opened on Broadway and in London, American high school students bought the record and staged their own productions.

At the same time, behind the Iron Curtain in Estonia, Soviet communism persecuted religions and denied education to active Christians. In the early 1970s, teenagers huddled in secret, listening to illegal recordings of *Jesus Christ Superstar* smuggled from the United States. The combination of the outlawed religion with forbidden western rock music was a potent mixture. Years later, a leading Estonian Christian reminisced that his first real understanding of the faith had come from the humanity of the rock-and-roll Jesus he secretly encountered in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In the decades since it opened, the rock opera has been performed in Central America, eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and around the world.
8 The Making of a World Religion

Publisher's Note:
Permission to reproduce this image online was not granted by the copyright holder. Readers are kindly requested to refer to the printed version of this chapter.

Map 1 Christians by region in 400
Source: Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

While on one level Jesus Christ Superstar is a money-making musical, on another level its transcendence of Cold War geopolitical divisions – and the appeal of its rock-and-roll Jesus to youth everywhere – exemplifies the remarkable cultural fluidity of the Christian religion across the centuries. Whether told through music, art, sermons, or books of theology, the story of Jesus is repeatedly translated anew. Because of its embodiment in human cultures – an idea that theologians refer to as “incarnation” – the Christian message has outlasted clans and tribes, nations and empires, monarchies, democracies, and military dictatorships. When a handful of Jesus’ Jewish followers reached out to non-Jews in the Roman empire, they unknowingly set their faith on the path toward becoming a world religion. It appears that Israel in 4 BC was not such a “backward” place after all.

By the third century AD, Christians could be found from Britannia in the north to North Africa in the south, from Spain in the west to the borders of Persia in the east. The eastward spread of Christianity was so extensive that the fourth-century Persian empire contained as high a percentage of Christians as the Roman, with a geographic spread from modern-day Iran to India. By the seventh century, Christians were living as far east as China and as far south as Nubia in Africa.

The rise of Islam in Arabia during the seventh century halted Christianity’s eastward and southward expansions. Although Arab armies conquered the country of Jesus’ birth, by the end of the first millennium after his death the Christian religion had pushed northward across Russia, Scandinavia, and Iceland. The first Christian arrived in North America in AD 986 when a
short-lived colony settled in Greenland. By the late sixteenth century, substantial
groups of indigenous Christians were thriving in Angola, Japan, the Philippines,
Brazil, and Central America. By the early seventeenth century, South Africa,
Vietnam, and First Nations Canada all had significant Christian populations.
During the nineteenth century Christianity spread across North America,
North Asia, the South Pacific, and into different regions of Africa. The most
rapid expansion of Christianity took place in the twentieth century, as pockets
of Christians throughout Africa and Asia grew into widespread movements.

But the story of Christianity around the world is not that of a simple, linear
progression. To become a world religion, Christianity first had to succeed on
the local level. Specific groups of people had to understand and shape its
meaning for themselves. What in totality is called a “world” religion is, on
closer observation, a mosaic of local beliefs and practices in creative tension
with a universal framework shaped by belief in the God of the Bible, as handed
down through Jesus and his followers. As a world religion, Christianity thrives
at the intersection between the global or universal, and the local or personal.

A complicating factor in charting the spread of Christianity is that its
expansion has not been a matter of continuous progress. Rather, growth
takes place at the edges or borderlands of Christian areas, even as Christian
heartlands experience decline. Christianity has wilted under assault from
hostile governments, ranging from the Zoroastrian Persians in the fourth
century to the communist takeover of Russia that killed millions of believers
in the twentieth century. When circumstances change, loss of meaning can
hollow out the faith from within. In the wake of two devastating world
wars, secularism swept over Europe in the late twentieth century, and the
percentage of practicing Christians dropped. The pattern that historian
Andrew Walls calls “serial progression,” including expansion and contrac-
tion over time, means that the history of Christianity cannot be treated as a
monolithic enterprise, with its universal spread a foregone conclusion.¹ By
the mid twenty-first century, the most populous Christian areas of the world
are projected to be in the southern hemisphere, in Africa and South America.

The following chronology defines the history of Christianity as a move-
ment rather than a set of doctrines or institutions, notwithstanding that doc-
trines and institutions are important markers of group identity. As a historical
process, Christian mission involves the crossing of cultural and linguistic
boundaries by those who consider themselves followers of Jesus Christ, with
the intention of sharing their faith. The ongoing boundary crossings raise the
question of how the meaning of “Christian” continues to include culturally