Introduction

It happened around 1980. A pivotal change in the demography of Christianity occurred, and its implications are a long way from being understood. About that year the balance of Christians in the world shifted. Most now no longer live in the “West,” the center of Christendom for over a thousand years. Today most Christians live in Asia, Africa, and South America, and their numbers are growing. In the old Christendom the Christian population has leveled off or is declining. It is now empirically incorrect to speak of Christianity as a “western religion.” It is not. It is a world religion, and within it, the “West” represents a shrinking minority (Jenkins 2002).

In a previous generation people often used the terms “non-western world,” or “developing world” or “third world,” but these labels now seem antiquated. “Non-western” pitches too many different peoples into the same pot. “Developing” is hardly apt, as the economies of Brazil and India and China are poised to surpass Europe and America. The category of “third world” emerged during the Cold War, when the globe was divided between the American and the Soviet spheres of power. Today most people prefer the term “majority world,” which incorporates an obvious fact, and which I will use in this chapter.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to think of this massive change – some call it the “de-westernization” of Christianity – as mainly geographical or demographic. It is far more than that. This seismic shift is producing enormous changes in theology, liturgy, polity and ethics. Sometimes the transformation has been compared to the one that took place when a persecuted sect that some had referred to as “the Galileans” made the dangerous transition from the Levant to Europe, and then became the religious and cultural tradition of that continent, and some of the areas it conquered, for over a thousand years. But in some ways the present transition is even more massive, fundamental and complex. This time the movement is not just from one culture to another, but from one to many, and all at the same time. If the church fathers had to rethink the Gospel in terms of Greek philosophy and then of Roman law and still later Teutonic customs and practices, now a new generation of
fathers and mothers will need to rethink and re-institutionalize it in terms of a dozen world cultures, from Korean to Sri Lankan to African and Mandarin. And each of these will have its many sub-cultures, which will further enrich and complicate the task. In the long run the present transformation will be more fundamental and substantive than a mere change in the number of people involved. We are entering a new era in the history of Christianity for which there are few precedents.

The proper word here is “few,” not “none.” It should be remembered that during the critical early centuries of its history Christianity was expanding not only west and north, but also into Persia, Africa, China and India. The minority churches in Iran, Egypt and India, and the ancient Abyssinian Church in Ethiopia all bear witness to this nearly lost history (Johnson and Ross 2010). But as these areas become once again centers of vigorous Christian presence, their older roots are being uncovered and appreciated, and will undoubtedly enter into the shaping of the future of the Christian faith community.

It should also be added that this enormous multiple inculturation of Christianity is taking place, as it did not during its European sojourn, in a newly globalized world. This is one reason why, for the past five decades, the vanguard in the spread of Christianity around the globe has been the Pentecostal movement, with its impressive capacity to absorb and transform a variety of local religious and cultural forms (Anderson 2004). People in China and India and America differ from each other in many ways, but they also share more things than a Greek did with a Saxon twelve hundred years ago. The blinding advance of communications technology is, for bane or for blessing, knitting everyone together into a massive, throbbing, constant, instantaneous buzz. Music fads, poisoned waters, climate dislocation, diminishing fuels, food and water shortages, and epidemics show no passports when they cross boundaries. Indeed we may be living today in the twilight of the bounded nation-state as the building block of the international community. Christians in the West and in the majority world will have to grapple with all these factors as they learn how to live with each other and with their non-Christian neighbors.

There is a great deal of history and much numerical accounting to the story of how Christianity, in the lifetime of many people now living, has become a world religion. This chapter will include some of that vital information. But the key question here will be: what does this tidal change mean for our understanding of what it means to be Christians, not only in the majority (“non-western”) world but in the West as well? How will it alter our singing and our prayers? How will it challenge our views of who Jesus is and what God is like? How will it affect the way we raise our families, spend our money, and live our lives in politics, business and education? In the long run, and even in the short run, none of these things will remain unchanged. This will be challenging, even jarring, for many of us, but, as the dean of world Christianity studies, Andrew Walls, has said, Christianity is renewed and thrives as it interacts with new cultures (Walls 2004).

Africa

The story in Acts of the Apostles of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch suggests that Christianity may have reached Africa before it reached Europe. In any
case, there were Christians in Africa centuries before any European missionary set foot on the continent. The Coptic Church in Egypt and the Orthodox Church in Ethiopia date back to antiquity (Jenkins 2008). Centuries have passed. But recently some scholars have predicted that, as the twenty-first century unfolds, Africa might well become the center of the Christian world. Christian faith is thriving there in multiple forms, and the continent could be the arena in which the church and Islam will be pushed to find a way to live together, as they have at times in the past (Jenkins 2008).

Modern Christianity in Africa dates back to the arrival of European explorers, traders and missionaries in the late fifteenth century. The first missions were not very successful. Few people were converted, and those were mainly associated with foreign commercial enterprises. Another wave of missionaries began arriving in the middle and late seventeenth century, this time first Spanish and French Capuchins, and then French Dominicans. These also, however, met with only limited success (Sanneh 1983).

The next chapter in African Christian history features both missionaries – Baptists and others – and people who came to colonize, later including the freed slaves who settled Liberia. Liberian Christianity had a dual impact. On the one hand, the fact that the president and most government officials were Christians led to an integration of church and state, religion and public polity, that both reflected traditional African patterns, but also set the tone for the fusion of religious and political governance that has characterized much of the continent ever since. On the other hand, the theology and practice of Liberian Christianity was so directly derived from America that it delayed for a considerable time the much-needed cultural implantation (“Africanization”) of the faith. The man credited with being one of the first to sink Christianity’s roots into African culture is William Wade Harris, whose work in West Africa thrived in the early decades of the twentieth century. Beginning as a Methodist, “Prophet Harris,” as he came to be called, converted tens of thousands of people and began his own new denomination, creating a precedent for the pattern followed by what would later be called, first, “independent,” and later on, “African-initiated churches.”

Actually, the first of these “independent” churches was the United Native African Church, organized in Niger in 1891. The issue was then, and continued to be, to what extent African Christians had to preserve the forms of worship and organization brought by missionaries and to what extent they could create their own. What about drumming in worship services, for example? What about substituting African chants for the foreign melodies to which hymns were sung? How were pastors and bishops to be selected? These debates continued into the twentieth century, in which African-initiated churches multiplied and became a predominant force in the continent’s Christianity (Rasmussen 1996).

In their early history African-initiated churches mainly reflected the worship styles, polities and theologies of the European and American ones from which they had separated. But as they achieved genuine independence they began to introduce characteristically African cultural ways of interpreting the Bible and of calling on the Spirit. Their worship began to include drumming and dance; their prayers became more ecstatic; their polities were less formal and more dependent on gifted
leaders. They tended to emphasize healing, the exorcism of evil spirits and the benefits of faith for life in this world more than their European “parent” churches. They were not reluctant to venerate ancestors – a custom frowned on by Europeans. These developments allowed them to draw on comparable aspects of African traditional religions, thus creating a vigorous synthesis of old and new. In many ways these churches exhibit what could be called a “pentecostal” worship style (Kalu 2008).

The African-initiated churches assumed many shapes. But one in particular, the Church of the Lord (Aladura), is in some ways typical. Like several others founded (in 1929) by ministers or lay preachers of existing denominations, Aladura was started in Nigeria by Josiah Olunowo Oshitelu, a former Anglican. Like other founders, Oshitelu believed that among the various ways God speaks, He also speaks in dreams and can forgive sins and heal through them. Oshitelu was vehemently opposed to amulets and fetishes; consequently, some scholars believe that he may have been influenced by Islam’s prohibition of idols. Also, like other African-initiated founders, he found the role of the Old Testament prophet important and styled himself as one. But again, like other such leaders, he did not hesitate to pronounce against economic injustice, political corruption and colonialism. He predicted a catastrophic end to colonial domination and also to the missionary churches, which he accused of being too obsessed with money. All this brought him into disfavor with both the colonial authorities and the missionary organizations. But the Aladura Church spread rapidly, one of hundreds of such churches that combined the Christianity they had received with their own familiar culture.

In some ways the most important of all these African-initiated churches is the one founded in Zaire (when it was still the Belgian Congo) in 1921 by Simon Kimbangu. Previously associated with Baptist missions, he called the center that he founded “The New Jerusalem.” His followers called him a prophet (a “Ngunza”). The colonial authorities, however, were fiercely opposed to African-led religious movements and quickly arrested him. Placed on trial, he was condemned to death. The public prosecutor, however, eloquently insisted to the court that Kimbangu’s movement had resulted in no loss of life or property, and his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, where he died in 1951. Thus did a prophet become a martyr. His followers named his movement “The Church of Jesus Christ of the Prophet Simon Kimbangu,” and it grew to become in a few decades the largest African-initiated church, with over 500,000 members, and – after a thorough investigation by ecumenical authorities – became the first such church to attain membership in the World Council of Churches (in 1969).

Christianity in a variety of expressions has continued to grow and to thrive in Africa, claiming close to 450 million members. Several thousand African missionaries now serve in other countries, including some in Europe and North America. There are three major issues that need to be emphasized in describing the lives of these Christians today. First, despite years of effort, Africans still face desperate poverty, hunger, disease and, in many places, political graft and corruption. In some countries the churches remain the most dependable networks of social services and community coherence. Second, the recent split between the Anglican Church in Africa and its sister communions over issues of sex and family, including the ordination of gay clergy, reveals a genuine chasm between some of the cultural dimensions of each
side. Despite efforts by leaders, this split will not be easily resolved, and it suggests that further sharp differences may emerge in the future. Third, Africa is becoming the continent on which the current encounter between Christianity and a newly awakened Islam is assuming a high profile. Little more than a hundred years ago there were four times as many Muslims as Christians in Africa. But now the balance has shifted dramatically. Today Christians account for nearly 50 percent of the total population and have surpassed Muslims in total numbers. The encounter, however, is not just a numerical one. Historically, Christians and Muslims have been influenced by each other, and in many places they live side by side. Tensions have arisen, but some leaders on both sides hope that Africa may eventually provide an example of peaceful coexistence between the two faiths.

China

The earliest record of Christianity in China dates to 638 AD. These were Nestorian Christians, and Christianity has had a continuous life in China, albeit as a tiny minority, for all the centuries since then (Bays 1996). China became a favorite destination for missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Austin 2007). However, when the Chinese Communists won their decisive victory over the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai Chek, many people thought that Christianity might face virtual extermination in that country (Goodman and Segal 1997). Indeed the People’s Republic officials did send hundreds of missionaries home, deeming them agents of imperialism. But instead of shrinking or disappearing, the Christian churches, suddenly almost entirely under indigenous leadership, began to grow. Some became part of the government-sponsored “Three Self Movement,” while others refused to do so but met secretly or quietly and were sometimes called the “underground church.” During Mao’s Cultural Revolution the government persecuted all religions, and some Christians actually became martyrs. But still the churches, in their various expressions, continued to grow (Bays 1996). Most assumed a characteristically non-western style and texture, some absorbing elements of Chinese folk religion. Given the strong extended family traditions of China, it is not surprising that one of the largest Christian movements was called the “Family of Jesus” (Song 1986). Worship often included healing and ecstatic prayer. After the Maoist persecution abated, Christianity spread more rapidly, not only in villages and small cities but eventually in large cities and among intellectuals. Numbers of Catholics in China continued to grow as well, even though the Chinese government and the Vatican have not yet agreed on the status of the bishops that were appointed without Rome’s approval. Now, in the six decades since the Communist victory, estimates place the number of Christians at between twenty and thirty million. Some put the number much higher. At its current growth rate, Christianity could account for as much as 30 percent of the vast population of China within a generation.

More recently a more surprising development has taken place. The government of the officially atheist People’s Republic of China has begun to support some of the churches financially, some claim by millions of dollars. This aid, however, is restricted only to churches that the government recognizes. The unregistered or “underground”
churches do not receive it, and this has understandably led to tensions between the two. Still, the support goes on, and the registered churches accept it. Near Nanjing the municipal authority is constructing what can only be called a “mega-church” that will seat 5,000 worshippers. The government is also supporting institutions for the preparation of both Protestant and Catholic clergy. In an amazing turnabout, the senior official responsible for this ambitious policy, Mr. Wang Zuo An, proudly told an interviewer in 2011 that Christianity is now enjoying an unprecedented period of growth, the best in its history. He said that he did not believe there was any contradiction between the government’s official atheism and supporting religion, since religious people are Chinese citizens whose rights must be respected. It is also clear to observers that the government appreciates the social services that the churches render, for example, providing homes for the elderly, which it is reluctant to undertake itself.

But the question remains: why is Christianity growing so rapidly in China? Opinions vary. Some of course credit the Holy Spirit, but that leaves unanswered the question of the conditions under which the Spirit has been so successful. In a related way, some attribute it to the spiritual vacuum, the deep hunger that so many people feel after the failure of Maoism, which virtually no one (including, some would say, party officials) now believes. Others advance more pragmatic, even materialistic, causes. For many years Christianity was associated in the minds of many Chinese with the glistening prosperity of the West. In the next decades, however, given the spectacular economic ascent of China, one wonders how much longer this logic will survive.

India and Sri Lanka

The Christians of India claim, with some accuracy, to be one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. The Syrian Orthodox Church traces a tradition in India going back to the Apostle Thomas. The Roman Catholic Church has also had a long presence in India, as have various Protestant denominations, which began arriving in the nineteenth century. Christians have always been a minority among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, indigenous tribal religions and other groupings. In the twentieth century Indian Christians set an example for the rest of the world by merging several Protestant denominations in the Church of South India. They have also been theologically creative, focusing especially on the theology of culture (Boyd 1969; Panikkar 1981) and have provided some of the most brilliant and influential ecumenical theologians, including M. M. Thomas and Thomas Thangaraj (Thomas 1987; Thangaraj 1994). In more recent years Indian and Sri Lankan theologians, due in part to the minority situation in which they have lived, have taken the lead in inter-faith conversations (Samartha 1991).

One of the most creative movements in Indian theology, however, is called “Dalit Theology.” Once termed “untouchables,” and then (by Gandhi) “Harijan” (“children of God”), these long-persecuted people (referred to by some scholars as “subalterns”) prefer the term “Dalit.” The best scholarly study of this new Indian theology, and indeed of theology in general, in recent years is Dalits and Christianity by Sathianathan.
Clarke (Clarke 1998). This book is not confined to Christian–Hindu relations, but challenges many of the existing premises of Christian theology, especially its focus on words and concepts. Clarke rejects the idea that subaltern religion anywhere is largely invented and imposed by a dominant class. Rather, he demonstrates, it is a complex interweaving of useful pieces of the dominant religion constructively synthesized with the people's own symbols and phrased in a subtle and nuanced manner that transcends words. If one of the signal tasks of a future Christian theology is to think constructively not only about the inter-faith challenge, but also about the intra-faith tensions between dominant and subaltern classes within the same faith, Indian Christianity may well have set a high standard.

**Latin America**

Christianity arrived in South America at the point of a lance. Conquistadores from Spain and Portugal invaded and subdued large portions of the continent shortly after Columbus landed in 1492. They came, as Hernan Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico, put it bluntly, “To win souls for our Holy Mother Church, and to get much gold.” It has been demonstrated recently that Columbus himself had sailed with a religious motivation, to gain riches so that he could help finance another crusade to recapture the Holy Land from the Saracen.

Most of the major religious orders took part in what has been called “the spiritual conquest” of Latin America (Arciniegas 1967). They were inspired by different religious motivations, used different tactics and met with various degrees of success. Some of the Franciscans harbored the eschatological vision that the unspoiled peoples of this new land might cleanse the church of its corruption and hasten the coming of the Last Day. Some were theologically close to the radical “Spiritual Franciscans,” who insisted that the whole church should practice apostolic poverty, and were therefore persecuted by the Inquisition. They decided that putting an ocean between themselves and their pursuers might be wise. The indigenous people often admired the simplicity and self-sacrifice of these brown-robed missionaries, but the Franciscans made no effort to relate the Gospel to native patterns. Indeed, they burned and destroyed the symbols and implements of their worship.

The Dominicans came as well. But at least one of them, Father Bartolomeo Las Casas, soon became an eloquent defender of the rights of the Indians, and even of their religion. He insisted that the Spanish had no right to seize their property or to enslave them, and that their faith should be treated with respect. He decried coerced evangelism and argued that any conversion must come by way of peaceful persuasion. So strongly did Las Casas hold these views that he gained the enmity of the conquistadores, especially when he returned to Spain to argue his case before the royal court. Las Casas was not successful in his efforts to halt the persecution of the Indians, but his example helped to inspire the twentieth-century Latin American “theology of liberation” (Rothchild 1973).

Jesuits and other religious orders followed, but all of them faced the knotty issue of what, as messengers of the Christian Gospel, they were to make of the religion they found on that continent. Unlike Jews, Pagans or Muslims – with all of whom
they already had some familiarity – the Incas and Aztecs and others had a religious system in place with striking analogies to their own. They had priests, and altars on which they made sacrifices. They followed a ritual year and staged elaborate ceremonies and processions. They even used a gesture that bore a startling similarity to the sign of the cross. (It turned out to be an indication of the directions of the four winds.) The Christians missionaries were baffled. Some suggested that Christian missionaries must have arrived earlier and taught them the true faith, which had since then become corrupted. Others feared that Satan had inflicted on them an elaborate caricature of the Catholic faith in an effort to make them immune from the true version. As we shall see below, this argument has continued for centuries in Latin America in different guises, and became part of the charges lodged against Bishop Samuel Ruis of Chiapas, Mexico in the 1990s. A lively discussion about the connection between Christianity and indigenous Latin American religious traditions has also been central in liberation theology (Gutierrez 1973).

Another continuing theme in Latin American Christianity, which was in large measure Catholic for three centuries, is the extent and significance of papal control and authority. As the continent was being subdued, the pope bestowed on the kings of Spain and Portugal privileges that in many other places were reserved for the Holy See alone, such as the naming of bishops and whether and how to publicize papal rulings. The echoes of this restricted role of the papacy reached beyond the period of colonial control and into the political independency that spread throughout the continent in the nineteenth century. The effort of Rome to impose Vatican control has been a continuing one, even when it was formally conceded by secular rulers (Cleary and Gambino 1992).

When the wars for political independence erupted, church leaders took both sides. Those in the hierarchy tended to oppose it. But many parish priests supported it. Mexico provides a good example. Father Hidalgo y Costilla was a well-educated “criollo,” the name given to Mexicans of Spanish derivation. He had achieved a certain amount of notoriety since he flaunted the celibacy rule, was married and openly stated that he did not believe in hell. He also encouraged his parishioners to cultivate vines for wine, which had been outlawed by the colonial regime so as to ensure a market for Spanish wines. Hidalgo met regularly with other criollos to discuss politics in the salons in Queretaro. In 1810 his group came to the conclusion that independence from Spain was a necessity. On September 16, 1810, in the town of Dolores, Hidalgo declared the independence of Mexico. This became known as the “Grito de Dolores,” and continues to be celebrated today.

Hidalgo’s leadership in the struggle for Mexican independence is important in part because it set a precedent of priests’ actively participating in political life and, in certain instances, in armed struggle. In the following century Father Camilo Torres, from an aristocratic family in Colombia, joined the guerillas there and was eventually killed by the army, giving rise to a flood of songs and stories. Still later, several priests in Nicaragua supported the Sandinista movement there and, when it overthrew the existing regime, became cabinet officers. They continued to serve in the government, even though warned to leave it by Pope John Paul II, until the Sandinistas were turned out of power in an open election. One might add to the catalog of activist priests Bishop Romero of El Salvador, who, because he had exhorted the army not
to fire on peaceful protesters, was assassinated by a member of a right-wing death squad while saying Mass. Then there were the five Maryknoll church workers who were raped and slain, as well as the five Jesuits who were murdered in the same country (Hennelly 1990).

In 1968 the Catholic bishops of Latin American convened in the city of Medellin, Colombia to decide what the findings of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) meant for their own continent. Both there and in subsequent meetings they decided that the Council called upon the church to exercise what they called “a preferential option for the poor.” This phrase became a kind of cachet when theologians began asking what it would mean to “do theology” with such an option for the poor. The result was the “Theology of Liberation,” which at its organizational level was also a product of the “base communities” movement, an attempt by the church to organize small face-to-face groups of lay people to study the Bible, share food and song, and discuss the meaning of Scripture for their own lives. These base communities, known as CEBs (comunidades eclesiales de base), multiplied and spread throughout the continent and were soon viewed by some members of the hierarchy and by Rome with suspicion and distrust. When Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) was Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he issued two official warnings against the theology of liberation, and Pope John Paul II appointed bishops in Latin America who were not sympathetic to the movement. Ratzinger also temporarily silenced Fr. Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian Franciscan and a key spokesman for liberation theology. Meanwhile in Mexico, Bishop Samuel Ruis of Chiapas, the mineral-rich but impoverished southernmost province of Mexico, began introducing principles of liberation theology into his diocese, which was 90 percent indigenous. He urged the Indians to overcome tribal differences so that they could better demand their human rights from the central government. This contributed to the rise of the Zapatistas (named for Emilio Zapata, a leader of the Mexican Revolution), a largely non-violent protest movement. Bishop Ruis also encouraged the Indians to appoint their own deacons, who could be married men. And he devised a religious education curriculum that combined Mayan creation stories with biblical material. Rome was not pleased with any of this, but when the Vatican tried to force Bishop Ruis to resign it quickly had to retreat because he was the only person in the region who could mediate between the government and the Zapatista movement. All these incidents illustrate how the centuries-long tension between Latin American Catholicism and the attempt of Rome to extend its control continues.

Many of the first generation of liberation theologians are now older and less active. But the impulse of the movement continues to be felt. The Workers’ Party in Brazil was organized and led in part by members of base communities. After a couple of failures the party finally elected Ignacio “Lula” da Silva as president of Brazil. He immediately instituted policies favorable to the poorest stratum of the society. Other Latin American presidents are also sympathetic to the “preferential option for the poor,” thus bringing a Christian impulse to bear in government. Still, liberation theology as such never became a mass movement. Although it once inspired many thousands of people, its focus was on the flaws in the entire system of consumer capitalism. It had only limited appeal for those whose life options were pinched by
severe poverty, and who needed a religious worldview that offered more immediate assistance.

The failure of liberation theology to take genuine root among the masses opened the door for the other major development in the story of Latin American Christianity: the startling growth of Evangelical Protestantism and, more especially, of Pentecostalism. Starting in the early twentieth century with miniscule congregations in just a few countries, Pentecostalism, especially after World War II, spread with astonishing speed. There are already Pentecostal majorities in some Central American countries. Its offer of a sense of community and hope to often uprooted people in large cities, its emotionally explicit worship style, but especially its promise of healing, have enormous appeal. Pentecostals and other evangelical churches also exert an influence on family life by encouraging husbands to forgo alcohol and gambling and to be faithful to their wives and families, what one scholar has called a “reformation of machismo” (Brusco 1993). People by the millions have flocked to Pentecostal churches, sharply reducing the numbers of Roman Catholics.

In recent decades there has appeared in many Pentecostal churches a form of preaching often called the “prosperity gospel,” the “health and wealth gospel.” The preachers who proclaim this message insist that God wills to save people not just for an eternity after death, but also in this life as well. God promises not just salvation, but physical wholeness and material well-being. Worshipers are asked to find this earthly success by practicing personal responsibility, thrift, creativity and hard work. But they are also exhorted to give sacrificially to the church itself, at least a tithe of what they earn. The message is radically individualist. Referred to as an “investment,” this money – it is promised – will come back many-fold in earthly success. Unlike in liberation theology, there is little or no emphasis on collective action or responsibility for the common good.

This theology of prosperity is not accepted by all Pentecostals. In fact, many of the more traditional Pentecostal churches vehemently reject it as a betrayal of the teaching of Jesus, who said that the poor were blessed, or of centuries of Christian theologians who have decried the spiritual temptations inherent in accumulating wealth. Nevertheless, the message seems to cohere with the consumerist ethos of the global media culture, and it continues to spread (Chestnut 1997).

One of the principal vehicles of its growth is the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja universal de Reino de Dios). Founded in the 1980s in Brazil, this church appeals mainly, but not exclusively, to poor and working-class people. Its combination of prosperity gospel and the latest marketing techniques gives it its wide appeal. It also makes wide use of “exorcism,” the practice by which demons are ritually expelled from individuals by the preachers (Corten and Marshall-Fratini 2001).

Again, many Pentecostals are affronted by the message and program of the Universal Church, but scholars of religion suggest there are understandable reasons for its success. First, they point out, when poor people who are used to being the recipients of charity and donations begin to see themselves as donors, this has an empowering effect. Also, to think of one’s failures and shortcomings as the work of demons which can be expelled avoids the moralistic alternative of blaming it on
oneself. The Universal Church also incorporates amulets and other religious objects into its worship, something fiercely shunned by other Pentecostals, but which bridges the gap to folk Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions.

Meanwhile, in the Latin American Catholic Church itself, the most active current today is no longer liberation theology but the charismatic movement, a style of worship that borrows freely from Pentecostalism, including the practice of “speaking in tongues,” which scholars call “ecstatic utterance.” So far the Catholic charismatic movement has drawn mainly from the middle class and is not focused on issues of injustice or poverty. But, since one of the most vigorous trends in the Pentecostal movement at large is the development of social ministries, what some scholars call “progressive Pentecostalism,” in the future impulses borrowed in part from liberation theology may well also appear among the charismatic Catholics. In any case, the admixture of vibrant Pentecostal spirituality, concern for the poor and a vision of liberation could well produce a powerful Christian-based, social justice-oriented faith in the twenty-first century (Calisi 2011).

Korea

Among all the success stories about the growth of Christianity in the “majority world,” the case of South Korea is in some ways the most impressive. From a tiny minority before the Korean War, Christians now account for over one third of the population and constitute the largest Christian percentage of any Asian nation. The commitment and seriousness of Korean Christians always impresses visitors, and there are more Korean missionaries at work in various parts of the world than there are from any other country, with the exception of the United States. In recent years Korean missionaries have been especially interested in evangelizing China and, of course, look forward to ministering in North Korea when that becomes possible (Buswell and Lee 2005).

Although there had been sporadic Catholic missions to Korea since the late sixteenth century, little progress was made, in part due to the resistance of the authorities. Horace Allen, the first American Protestant missionary, arrived only in 1884. Again, progress was slow, until the Korean Christians became staunch opponents of Japanese occupation and thereby became identified with Korean national aspirations. They also translated the Bible into the vernacular, as opposed to the court language, and started educational institutions for women. Still, Christians were a small minority until after the Korean War, when they began to grow rapidly in number (Fisher 1977). Korean Christians seem to favor large congregations, and today eight of the largest single congregations in the world are located in Seoul. During the period of dictatorships in their country, again Christians often led the opposition. They created a Korean type of liberation theology that they called “Minjung Theology.” The word comes from a term for the common, often-overlooked people, and its thesis (similar in some ways to Latin American liberation theology) is that since God entered human history as a poor, persecuted man (Kuster 2010), the key location of God’s continued presence in the world is the poor. The church is secondary. A key idea in this theology is that of “han,” a Korean term that
signifies nearly bottomless suffering and rejection. Minjung theology makes han the central theme (Park 1993).

In recent decades one of the main motors for Christian growth has been a specifically Korean expression of Pentecostalism. It combines “speaking in tongues,” which most often happens with the whole congregation, rather than individuals doing it. It is also marked by receptivity to certain elements of shamanism, which has always been the most popular folk religion in Korea. A good example of all these elements is found in the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, which, under the leadership of Rev. David Yongi Cho, grew from small beginnings to become the largest single Christian congregation in the world. It claims 800,000 members. It is a Pentecostal church but, unlike some other Pentecostal churches, is enthusiastically ecumenical.

Christianity in Korea is identifiably Korean. It builds on a long tradition of national pride, deepened by the humiliation of the long Japanese occupation (1905–45), its separation into two countries and a long tradition of folk piety. Near to Seoul looms what Koreans call the “prayer mountain,” which was a locus of spiritual deepening and renewal even before the arrival of Christianity. With its striking combination of profound spirituality, sensitivity to indigenous traditions and concern for justice, there is little doubt that Korean Christianity will continue to be the agent of future Christian expansion in Asia.

The Middle East

The story of Christianity in the past hundred years has not been one of unlimited growth and success. While the Christian faith grows and diversifies in many parts of the “majority world,” the Middle East has witnessed its weakening and diminution. Due in part to political tensions related in large measure to the unresolved Israeli occupation of Palestine, and to Arab hostility toward the American “war on terror,” the ancient churches of Syria, Iran, Jordan and Lebanon have not fared well. The Coptic Church in Egypt, which accounts for 10 percent of the country’s population, found itself challenged by increased hostility from radical Islamists, but also cheered by the “Arab Spring” of 2011, in which many Coptic Christians took part.

The saddest story, however, focuses on the dramatic reduction in the number of Christians in Palestine and Israel. The statistics are deeply disquieting. Whereas Christians once constituted between 15 and 20 percent of the population of Palestine under the British mandate, they now account for 3–4 percent. Generally somewhat better off economically, better educated and with connections in other countries, Christians have been deserting the land where their faith was born. Unless some just and lasting solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict can be found, the exodus will undoubtedly continue. The grimmest forecast is that, without a radical change, in a few decades living Christian congregations could disappear almost completely from the places where Jesus was born, taught, suffered, died and rose. All that will be left in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth and the Jordan Valley will be empty shrines to a bygone era, visited only by pilgrims and tourists.
Conclusion

The demography, theology and witness of Christianity made a decisive turn in the late twentieth century. Some would call it “tidal” or even “epochal.” No one can foresee the full consequences of this revolution. Nor is it possible to speculate about the “future face” of Christianity, since it will undoubtedly have many faces. What is very clear, however, is that the centuries-old center of Christianity in Europe and its North American extension is no longer the center, and will become increasingly peripheral.

Ironically, it is possible that Christianity in the next century may resemble that of the first three centuries rather the intervening seventeen. Christianity in those first years was characterized by a marked heterogeneity and decentralization, often masked in standard histories by the expulsion of whole regions on theological grounds, which took place as Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches became more influential. The next phase in Christian history will be a history of a truly “world” Christianity. It may be both tumultuous and confusing, but it is bound to be vigorous and fascinating.

See also Missiology (Chapter 40), Liberation theology (Chapter 49), African theology (Chapter 53), Asian theology (Chapter 54), Pentecostal and charismatic theology (Chapter 55), Christian theology of religions (Chapter 57), Ecumenical theology (Chapter 67).

Bibliography


Further reading

Bellah, R. (2011) Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleoliths to the Axial Age, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (This is an epochal and ambitious study on a large scale of the emergence of prophetic religion and monotheism by America’s leading historical sociologist.)


Goosen, G. (2011) *Hyphenated Christians: Toward a Better Understanding of Dual Religious Belonging*, Oxford: Peter Lang. (Can one belong to and practice more than one religion? Increasing numbers of people do so, and this is the most thorough study to date of this growing phenomenon.)