Given the scores of editorial themes featured in the IBMR since 1977, readers may be surprised to learn that "conversion" has never been included among them. Of course it has been an implicit motif many times, since the subject is seldom far from the center of most mission-related discourse. Christian scriptures have a lot to say about conversion. Given humanity’s pervasive awareness that things, including us, are not as they ought to be, disappointingly deficient early believers must have been heartened by Paul’s assurance that they were being transformed into the likeness of Jesus the Christ, and that God’s comprehensive transformation project involved all of creation, including humankind.

While missionaries across the ecclesiastical gamut generally agree on both the need for and the fact of Christian conversion, sharp disagreement often exists regarding its description, its exact means, and its results. Contemporary Christian dissonance over conversion, Andrew Walls’s lead article points out, is nothing new. Our earliest faith forebears struggled, sometimes not very successfully, to distinguish between proselytism and conversion.

That first-century followers of the Way should have come to be regarded not simply as proselytes to the venerable religion from which their faith had sprung, but as converts to a Lord who invited them to turn their cultural, social, intellectual, and spiritual selves toward him, profoundly impacted the faith’s core DNA, ensuring both its universality and its particularity. Richard Peace’s helpful survey of conflicting understandings of Christian conversion and the official statement issued by the Seventh International Conference of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism together show, however, that despite the remarkable clarity of understanding achieved by the early church, we still have a long way to go.

Assent to, and recitation of, formulaic propositions about God are no proof of conversion, Christopher Wright’s essay reminds us. Whether in horticulture or in piety, so Jesus taught his followers, common sense goes far in discerning fraud from fact: “You will know them by their fruits.” And it is for their good fruits that both Kenneth B. Mulholland, who completed his earthly journey shortly after submitting his Pilgrimage, and Dorothy Davis Cook, this issue’s Legacy subject, are known.

Choo Lak Yeow’s survey of nearly half a century of theological education in South East Asia offers the sort of masterful overview possible only for someone intimately involved with that heartening story. And, finally, readers are once again indebted to David Barrett and Todd Johnson for their twentieth annual statistical table on global mission, this year drawing special attention to conciliarism, not as an end in itself, but as a means toward God’s mission of “reconciling the world unto himself.”

On Page

2 Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church
Andrew F. Walls

8 Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversion: A Missiological Challenge
Richard V. Peace

14 Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New
Christopher J. H. Wright

16 Noteworthy

20 After The Next Christendom
Philip Jenkins

23 Helsinki 2003: Jesus and His People
Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism

24 Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2004
David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson

26 Theological Education in South East Asia, 1957–2002
Choo Lak Yeow

29 My Pilgrimage in Mission
Kenneth B. Mulholland

32 The Legacy of Dorothy Davis Cook
Susan E. Elliott

36 Christian Publications in China
Wing N. Pang

38 Book Reviews

39 Fifteen Outstanding Books of 2003 for Mission Studies

46 Dissertation Notices

48 Book Notes
Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church

Andrew F. Walls

The word conversion has been used in Christian history in a multitude of ways. There have been at least two broad streams of usage, each with many divisions. In one stream conversion is spoken of essentially as an external act of religious change. In this usage Christian conversion refers to movement to the Christian faith, individually or collectively, on the part of people previously outside it. By extension, this usage can also indicate movement from one branch of Christian profession to another—from Catholic to Protestant, for instance, or vice versa.

In the second stream of usage, “conversion” denotes critical internal religious change in persons within the Christian community, and here the varieties of meaning raise complex issues. Sometimes “conversion” refers to subjective experience, sometimes to an assumed ontological change, sometimes to both. For centuries in the Latin West, the primary meaning of “conversion” was a person’s response to vocation to the religious or monastic life, turning from the life of the world to God. In Protestant devotion it came to refer to an early stage of the pilgrimage of the soul awakened to God. Catholics, Jansenists, mainstream Protestants, radicals Protestants, Puritans, Pietists, and Arminian and Calvinist evangelicals developed differing maps of the processes of salvation and differing paradigms of “normal” Christian experience. These in turn led to different assessments of the nature and significance of conversion and of its relationship to regeneration, justification, and other elements in the salvific process. They also raised the question whether conversion was always necessary where Christian nurture had been effective. New styles of evangelism, with new understandings of the saving process, that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries complicated matters further. Whole new vocabularies of evangelism came into existence, and the word “conversion” had a place in all of them. Where the vital question is “Are you saved?” or “Have you accepted Jesus into your heart?” “conversion” is likely to mean something rather different from what it means when the question is, “How long have you been at Sinai, and what is your law work?” as it might be in the older Scottish evangelicalism, or “Have you the form of godliness, and do you desire the power thereof?” which might be raised if an inquirer sought membership of an early Methodist society.

The Protestant missionary movement complicated the understanding of conversion still further. Missions aimed to bring into the Christian faith those who were outside it, but those who were most active in establishing missions were often evangelicals, who had a well-defined paradigm of “normal” Christian experience. The evangelical conversion they had experienced had taken them from the “nominal” Christianity professed throughout the society in which they had grown up to “real” Christianity issuing in a holy life. This process was typically marked by a period of deep consciousness of personal sin followed by a sense of joyous liberation dawning with realization of personal forgiveness through Christ. Missionaries with this background expected to see a similar pattern of experience in those who came to Christian faith, even in societies where there had been no previous Christian profession. In this way, the distinction between the two streams of usage—the one relating to externally recognizable adhesion to the Christian faith and the other relating to internal personal change—became blurred. This was not the first time that such blurring occurred. There had long been confusion within the first stream of usage when referring to such celebrated conversions as those of Constantine and Augustine, where “conversion” might be used equally of their identification (in their different ways) with the Christian community, or of the particular critical experiences that led them to it.

This essay does not attempt to disentangle these linguistic and conceptual complexities. It seeks to focus on the simplest, most elemental feature of the word “conversion,” the idea of turning. There is ample biblical warrant for this focus in the insistence with which the Scriptures of both testaments call for turning to God. One might almost say that conversion represents the specifically Christian understanding of the response to God’s saving activity. The events that best illuminate our understanding of it are described in the New Testament.

The Jewishness of the Early Church

The earliest church, as we meet it in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, was utterly Jewish. It was made up, virtually without exception, of people of Jewish birth and inheritance. They met every day in the temple (Acts 2:46), where they regularly attended “the prayers” (Acts 2:42), that is, the temple liturgy, thus congregating in a place where (beyond an outer court) none but Jews could go. Presiding over the church was James, the brother of Jesus, a man nicknamed “The Righteous” by his neighbors, who recognized that he was righteous in the Jewish sense of heartfelt obedience to the law. Whatever the differences among them in background and language—and that there were such differences, and that they had theological aspects, is clear from the record—they all saw Jesus and his work from the perspective of Israel’s history, hopes, and expectations. Their priorities and concerns are thoroughly Jewish: as the disillusioned disciple on the way to Emmaus says, they had seen Jesus as the one who would set Israel free (Luke 24:21). On the mount of ascension the preoccupation is the same. Realizing that they are standing at the threshold of a new era, the disciples ask the Lord if he is now about to give the kingdom back to Israel (Acts 1:6). They cannot conceive of Jesus’ saving work without its political climax in the history of Israel because, in Jewish terms, salvation is unintelligible without the salvation of the nation. Nor does Jesus deny this idea or tell them they have misunderstood his mission; he simply tells them that the times and seasons are in the Father’s hands (Acts 1:7).

There were, of course, things that marked out the company of Jesus believers from all other varieties of observant Jew. What outsiders would probably notice first was a distinctive lifestyle...

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None of these things, however, meant that these people had taken on a new religion. Rather, these beliefs gave them deep insight into, and deeper understanding of, the religion they had always had. They did not even know that they were Christians; the word had not yet been coined (Acts 11:26). They needed no special name; they were Israel. They had no less reverence for the Torah than before, but more; they remembered that Jesus had said that not the smallest letter of the law would be lost by his agency. They had not less reverence for the temple, but more, for they remembered how Jesus had cleansed it and called it his Father’s house, recalling the old scripture about the zeal of God’s house consuming his chosen one (John 2:17). They saw no reason to cease animal sacrifices; in the light of the Suffering Servant’s self-offering, they understood them better. Their favorite title for Jesus, Messiah, was steeped in the history of Israel and in convictions about Israel’s destiny. Jesus made sense of Jewish history; everything about him made sense in Jewish terms. This did not mean, however, that the Jesus community accepted the life of the Israel of that day. On the contrary, their preaching, as it is described in Acts, carries the note of crisis, a repeated call for decision. A new age had arrived; it was time for Israel to turn from the old ways (Acts 2:28–30).

This note of crisis, focused on the call to turn, was not new. It was one of the dominating themes of the Scriptures of Israel. The root shubh occurs in the Hebrew Bible no less than 750 times with the sense of turning, or (in a causative form, with God as agent) in the sense of being turned, brought back, or restored. These uses are especially characteristic of the prophetic Scriptures. These often show Israel worshiping gods other than Yahweh, setting up a society marked by opulence, extortion, injustice, and oppression of the poor, giving Israel’s God a bad name among foreign nations (Isa. 2:6–18; 5:6–13, Ezek. 36:22). The consequences are defeat, occupation, and exile (Isa. 1:1–9). But the same Scriptures use that same language of turning to show a process whereby God “turns the nation back” and restores it, rescuing the defeated nation, bringing back the exiles, and receiving the praise of a righteous, redeemed people (Isa. 51:11). Indeed, even when apostasy is rife, there is a “righteous remnant” that is the nucleus of the true Israel (Isa. 8:16–18; 10:20–22). The Messiah, the personal agent of God in restoring Israel, reigns forever over the restored nation with a rule that is unfailingly just and equitable (Isa. 11:1–5). Moral renewal follows inner transformation: people will adhere to God from their hearts (Jer. 31:31–34). And this change will herald universal renewal, in which the flora and fauna and the whole environment are enriched and violence is unknown, and the Gentiles will acknowledge Yahweh as their own God (Isa. 11:6–9). The messianic age will bless the whole world. The recurrent call of the prophets is for Israel to turn to face the age to come; that is, the call to conversion.

Such is the framework within which that earliest church did its thinking. We see the framework even in the Synoptic Gospels.
The focus of the Messiah’s work is the renewal of Israel. (The angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus because he will save his people—that is, Israel—from their sins, Matt. 1:21.) The story of the ministry of Jesus has as a preface an account of John the Baptist—indeed, Mark even calls John’s ministry “the beginning of the Gospel” (Mark 1:1). The ministry of John, like that of the earlier prophets, is a call for turning—for conversion. He calls for radical change of mind (“repentance”) in the light of the establishment of God’s personal rule (“the kingdom of God,” see Matt. 3:1–11). And the change of mind is symbolized in the rite that gave “John the Dipper” his nickname. Almost certainly John did not invent baptism. Something like it was already in use as a purification rite at the initiation of Gentiles who wished to enter Israel. It was a symbolic washing away of the filth of the heathen world. John’s revolution was to require the baptism of Jews; the covenant people, according to the preaching of John, needed cleansing as much as did any idolatrous Gentile. Jews who sought John’s baptism implicitly recognized their moral equivalence with Gentile outsiders.

John’s revolution was to require the baptism of Jews, the covenant people.

The early chapters of Acts depict a community whose original members would have received John’s baptism, and whose whole education prepared them for the arrival of the messianic age, and with it the restoration and renewal of Israel. The community proclaims the arrival of the Messiah, and those who so recognize Jesus accept baptism, thus acknowledging their need for change of mind, and “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38–39). In the prophetic writings the Spirit of God indicates a divine activity particularly marking the messianic age (Joel 2:28–32). Believers undergo a radical change of lifestyle; they share their property, share their meals, and give careful attention to marginalized people (Acts 2:43–45; 4:32–35; 6:1–4). In doing so, they turn away from the exploitative ways so often characteristic of the life of Israel, the things that the prophets had denounced. This is the messianic community, the community that has morally turned, a righteous community. Here is the evidence that the restoration of Israel has begun. Jesus is saving his people Israel, heirs of the prophetic promises and of the covenant, from their sins (Acts 3:24–26).

This church is completely Jewish in composition and thinking, Jewish at the very roots of its identity. There is no sign of their going into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature. And perhaps by this means Greek pagans could get their first inkling of who Jesus is by hearing of him as the divine lord, Kyrios, just as other devotees addressed Kyrios Sarapis.

This piece of cross-cultural communication was soon reinforced by a decision of permanent significance for the Christian faith. As people of Greek and pagan background responded to this presentation of Jesus in Antioch and far beyond it (for Antioch, rather than Jerusalem, turned out to be the missionary church), the status of those who responded had to be considered. And at the so-called Apostolic Council described in Acts 15, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, themselves pious, law-keeping people under the presidency of James, the outstandingly law-righteous brother of the Lord, agreed that followers of Jesus the Messiah, even if not ethnic Jews, had indeed entered Israel. They did not need the traditional signs of Jewish religious culture, circumcision and Torah-keeping.

Disruption and Change

Left to themselves, the earliest church members might have continued to demonstrate the messianic renewal and restoration of Israel, sharing in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, breaking social bread together, and attending the temple liturgy (Acts 2:42) until Jerusalem fell about their ears. But they were not left to themselves. What happened was no part of deliberate church strategy, and the people responsible for it were not apostles or leading figures in the church. We do not even know their names. Nevertheless the events mark a turning point in Christian history. It seems to have begun with Stephen’s explosive preaching and the disturbance that followed it and led to his death. Many believers were forced out of Jerusalem; it would be natural for them to seek shelter in the Jewish communities beyond Israel (Acts 6:8–8:1). Most of them did what they had done in Jerusalem and proclaimed Jesus as Messiah in the Jewish communities (Acts 11:19). But some people (it is remarked that they were of Cypriot and Libyan background), arriving in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch, began to talk about Jesus to “Greeks”—that is, to pagans (Acts 11:20).

This meant talking about Jesus in a new way. There was little to be gained by stressing the ethnic term “Messiah.” It could be translated into Greek easily enough, but the translation (“the Smear One”) would still seem odd to anyone not well acquainted with Jewish institutions. Explaining it would require a lengthy introduction to the Scriptures; and supposing there were Greek pagans with the interest and stamina to pay attention, they might still be puzzled to see any relevance to their own situation. Why should they rejoice that the national savior of Israel had arrived? What sort of good news to them was the restoration of Israel?

The believers from Cyprus and Cyrene, although for them personally the messiahship of Jesus must have seemed the key to the Gospel, took a different route. Linguistic translation was not enough; conceptual translation was necessary in order to convey the fact that Jesus had ultimate significance for Greek pagans, just as he had for devout Jews. They presented Jesus as Lord, Kyrios. It was a word that Jews could use readily enough of the Messiah; Peter speaks to a Jewish audience of Jesus being made “both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). But the believers must have known that in Antioch “Lord” was the title of cult divinities like Sarapis. And perhaps by this means Greek pagans could get their first inkling of who Jesus is by hearing of him as the divine lord, Kyrios Iesous, just as other devotees addressed Kyrios Sarapis.

This piece of cross-cultural communication was soon reinforced by a decision of permanent significance for the Christian faith. As people of Greek and pagan background responded to this presentation of Jesus in Antioch and far beyond it (for Antioch, rather than Jerusalem, turned out to be the missionary church), the status of those who responded had to be considered. And at the so-called Apostolic Council described in Acts 15, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, themselves pious, law-keeping people under the presidency of James, the outstandingly law-righteous brother of the Lord, agreed that followers of Jesus the Messiah, even if not ethnic Jews, had indeed entered Israel. They did not need the traditional signs of Jewish religious culture, circumcision and Torah-keeping.
To explore the significance of the decision, we should remember Israel’s long missionary tradition whereby Gentile proselytes had been welcomed to the fold of Israel. Rabbinic literature compared them to stags, whose natural habitat was in the wild, grazing with sheep of the flock. Synagogues in the dispersion often had numbers of such people, and the later chapters of Acts suggest that they were fertile soil for the preaching of Paul and other missionaries (Acts 13:48; 17:4). Israel had long known of people like David’s Moabite ancestor Ruth, who declared that their people would be Israel, and their God Israel’s God (Ruth 1:16). But a Gentile male needed to undergo circumcision, receiving the mark of the covenant with God, as the sign of adoption into Israel. Later the further requirement of baptism gave additional solemnity to the transition of the proselyte from the heathen world of the nations to the life of the Nation.

Furthermore, several passages in the prophetic writings indicated that the messianic age would see floods of Gentiles seeking the God of Israel. Thus in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 many peoples will decide to go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. In Zechariah ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the edge of his robe and go with him because they have heard that God is with him (Zech. 8:23). So as Jerusalem believers listened to the reports of the missionaries of the Antiochene church, they would receive a yet higher sense of confirmation that the promised messianic age had arrived. But these same Scriptures talked of the word of the Lord going out from Zion (Isa. 2:3) and of “the mountain of the Lord’s house,” that is, the hill on which the temple stood, being established as the principal mountain (Isa. 2:2). Perhaps it is not surprising that many Jerusalem believers took it for granted that the believing Greeks in Antioch and beyond should be treated as enlightened Gentiles had always been treated in Israel. They were proselytes, stags that had chosen to graze with the sheep. In addition to the baptism they had received (and there was in any case an established custom of baptizing proselytes), they should be circumcised and, being thus incorporated into Israel, keep the Torah as good Israelites. After all, the Torah was Israel’s most precious possession, given by God himself and marking Israel out from other nations—should not all followers of Israel’s Messiah keep and cherish it? And what greater gift or blessing could these newly adopted Israelites receive? If circumcision was the mark of the covenant, should not those newly brought within the covenant carry that mark? The only way of life known to the earliest believers in Jesus—the only known Christian lifestyle, to use anachronism—was that of pious, observant Jews. It was the way of life sanctified by the Messiah himself, maintained by his closest disciples (Peter had never eaten anything common or unclean), and outstandingly patterned by the brother who had grown up in the same home as the Messiah.

It is not surprising that many Jerusalem believers evidently thought on these lines. Nor is it too surprising that numbers of new Gentile believers were ready to go along with the argument. Some of them had doubtless attended the synagogue for many years, convinced that Israel’s God was indeed God, keeping, perhaps, such parts of the Torah as they could manage, but holding back from the irrevocable step of circumcision. Now that they knew Jesus Messiah, might this be the time to take on the whole yoke of God?

The opening of the Epistle to the Galatians, the source that reveals that some Gentile believers found the argument for Torah and circumcision attractive, also reveals Paul’s reaction to it. It is not just disagreement—it is white-hot indignation. His emotions are so strong as to strain his syntax, and his language becomes so robust that some English versions translate rather coyly. Paul will not allow it even as an option for people brought up as Hellenistic pagans to adopt, on coming to Christ, the lifestyle of very good, devout, observant Jewish believers. The followers of Jesus are not proselytes. They are converts.

This was no unilateral decision of Paul’s, though it is he who builds on it a whole understanding of Christian justification, first in Galatians and later in Romans. We are assured in Acts 15 that it reflected the mature decision of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, and the specific advice of James and of Peter. It marked the church’s first critical departure from Jewish tradition and experience. It built cultural diversity into the church forever. What is more, it gave rise to situations that were open-ended and unpredictable.

The Significance of the Convert Model

One way of assessing the significance of the decision of the Jerusalem council that Gentile converts did not, like proselytes, need Torah and circumcision is to consider what the implications of the opposite decision would have been; that is, if the council had decided to retain the long-standing proselyte model and require the new believers to live under the same regime as the original believers in Jesus. It is safe to say that huge areas of Hellenistic social, family, and intellectual life would have been left untouched by Christian faith. Whole stretches of Paul’s letters would have been unnecessary. Consider, for instance, the passage in which Paul discusses what a Christian should do if invited to dinner by a pagan friend who may have bought the meat from a temple where it had been offered in pagan sacrifice (1 Cor. 10:27–30). This was an entirely new problem for believers. No apostle or elder, however experienced, had had to face it, because they were all observant Jews, and everyone knew that observant Jews did not sit at pagan dinner tables. Had Corinthian believers become proselytes and adopted the Jerusalem church lifestyle, there would have been no problem; the invitation would not be extended, or would be refused if it were. But Paul envisages a new sort of Christian lifestyle, where believers do

The followers of Jesus are not proselytes. They are converts.
The way of proselytes is safe. Converts face a much riskier life.

Christ must be formed among Galatian Christians if Galatia was to meet the Christ of God. Is it significant that Paul’s tone is harsher with the Galatians, who were, with excellent motives, rejecting the call to a converted Hellenistic lifestyle, than it is with the Corinthians, who were making a mess of constructing one? In that converted lifestyle every aspect of Hellenistic life and all its institutions must be turned toward Christ. And there were no precedents; the guideposts familiar to early believers were there no longer. At the Jerusalem council no one could have been certain what the converted Hellenistic lifestyle, without the framework of the Torah, would be like—except that it must recall the Christ who walked in Palestine and reflect the activity of the Holy Spirit. Christ would be made flesh once more, made manifest where he had not walked in flesh before, as he was received by faith in Hellenistic society.

Hellenistic social and family life created new situations for believers in Jesus and required Christian choices to be made on a daily basis. The choices were of a different order from those facing dispersion Jews in their cultural adjustment to the Hellenistic world, even though Jews and Christians had so many attitudes in common. Greek-speaking Jews were negotiating someone else’s culture while retaining their identity; Greek Christians were negotiating their own culture while expressing a Christian identity. Not only were new social situations constantly arising; an intellectual environment that combined the influences of Greek philosophy, Roman law, Eastern mysticism and spirituality, and astral science was giving rise to questions that no believers had found it necessary to ask before. That intellectual environment was the highway to a great outworking of creative theological activity, but it must have often seemed to old-style Jewish believers to be dangerous, uncharted territory. Had the Jesus community retained the proselyte model, Christians would almost inevitably have been taken out of the intellectual mainstream and shut up to their own sacred books. But as converts, believers in Jesus were required to turn their processes of thought toward Christ, to think Christ into the intellectual framework of their time and place. The eventual result was Christian theology as we know it.

The outcome of conversion was thus culturally and intellectually dynamic, creative, and innovative. As segments of Hellenistic social reality and structures of Hellenistic thought were turned toward Christ, they received new life and meaning. The general effect of the proselyte lifestyle would almost certainly have been to draw the new believers’ energies in another direction. It might have produced very devout Christians, but their effect on their society and its ways of thinking would have been negligible.

On many occasions since Galatians was written, good Christian people have tried to ensure that those they have brought to faith would become as much like themselves as possible; have the same priorities and avoidances, hold the same things important, take the Torah and circumcision of those who evangelized them. And it is safer. If any conservative-minded Jerusalem believers read 1 Corinthians, they would no doubt have found all their fears about the decision of the Apostolic Council confirmed and would have been doubly sure of the folly of leaving raw believers, newly brought out of paganism, without the guidance of the Torah. The way of proselytes is safe. They give up their old customs and beliefs and take up those of someone else. There is a sacrifice involved—they give up their national heritage and social affiliations. But once this is done, the guideposts are clear; there is a precedent for every eventuality, every situation has been met before.

Converts face a much riskier life. Converts have to be constantly, relentlessly turning their ways of thinking, their education and training, their ways of working and doing things, toward Christ. They must think Christ into the patterns of thought they have inherited, into their networks of relationship and their processes for making decisions. And new issues, cultural or intellectual, where it is necessary to make a Christian choice, are arising all the time and with no exact parallels in the past. Proselytes may walk by sight; converts have to walk by faith.

The distinction between proselyte and convert is vital to Christian mission. It springs out of the very origins of that mission, demonstrated in the first great crisis of the early church. The later church has seen many heresies come and go, but the earliest of them has been by far the most persistent. The essence of the “Judaizing” tendency is the insistence on imposing our own religious culture, our own Torah and circumcision. Christian conversion as demonstrated in the New Testament is not about substituting something new for something old—that is to move back to the proselyte model, which the apostolic church could have adopted but decided to abandon. Perhaps they remembered the word of the Lord—his only recorded utterance on the subject of proselytes—that proselytes, won by infinite pains, readily become children of hell (Matt. 23:15). Nor is conversion a case of adding something new to what is already there, a new set of beliefs and values to supplement and refine those already in place. Conversion requires something much more radical. It is less about content than about direction. It involves turning the whole personality with its social, cultural, and religious inheritance toward Christ, opening it up to him. It is about turning what is already there.

Christ is formed among the elements of the preconversion life as he is received by faith there. And as the Gospel crosses cultural frontiers, many things, as the apostles and elders at Jerusalem realized, are open-ended and unpredictable. The realization would be unbearable but for one thing: the knowledge that new believers receive the Holy Spirit. In the Acts 15 account, it was the fact that God, who knows the heart, had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as well as to the apostolic company; that reality clinched the matter for Peter (Acts 15:8). The Hellenistic way of Christian living would be constructed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In a very profound sense conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit in the church.
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Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversion: A Missiological Challenge

Richard V. Peace

We are seeing today a lively interest in Christian conversion, which perhaps reflects the fascination North American culture has had with spirituality since the 1990s. That interest arose, not coincidentally, just as the baby-boomer generation started passing through midlife, a time of increased interest in the meaning of life. This interest in spirituality and conversion has continued unabated into the new millennium, fueled by the needs and interests of both Generation X and the millennial generation.

In the New Testament the word epistrophē (conversion) means turning around—that is, reversing direction and going the opposite way. One turns from the way of sin to the way of Jesus. The other key New Testament term, metanoia (repentance), also conveys the idea of turning, but it focuses on the inner, cognitive decision to make a break with the past. Metanoia must be combined with pistis (faith) in order to bring about epistrophē (as in the summary in Mark 1:15 of Jesus’ message). So when Paul describes to King Agrippa what he preached to Jew and Gentile, he says it is “that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance” (Acts 26:20). Christian conversion is characterized by a decision (repentance) based on understanding (awareness, consciousness, conviction) to turn around from a life of sin (darkness, disobedience, waywardness) to the way of Jesus (light, God, holiness), with a resultant new way of living in the context of the kingdom of God. In theological terms, conversion is the human experience of salvation (vs. the inner reality of regeneration, which is the hidden work of God).2

The most famous example of conversion in the New Testament is Paul’s turning on the Damascus road. This experience is so central to the New Testament (where it is related three times in the Book of Acts and referred to by Paul in four major texts) and to the church (from it the mission to the Gentiles emerged, which ultimately led to the Western church and much of the missionary movement) that it has become for many people the paradigm of true conversion.3

Once we move beyond this biblical definition into the world of the church, however, we encounter different understandings of what constitutes genuine Christian conversion. Disputes among the various branches of the Christian family have erupted as one view of conversion has been used to argue against the legitimacy of all competing views. One’s view of conversion is significant, however, for it shapes and determines one’s view of evangelism. This matter therefore has deep missiological significance.

In this article I consider the way conversion is understood in five major Christian traditions: evangelical, Pentecostal, mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox. For purposes of this exploration, I use the typology for conversion suggested by Scot McKnight, who speaks of “three basic orientations to conversion: socialization, liturgical acts, and personal decision.” He notes that “each is aligned with a major component of the church, and each appears to be allergic to the others. Evangelicals worry about Roman Catholic conversions; Roman Catholics are uneasy with evangelical conversion; mainline denominations are uncomfortable with both; on the rebound, evangelicals and Roman Catholics lift their eyebrows at mainline Christianity. . . . These groups squabble and feud with one another, usually politely but sometimes polemically.”4 We consider these orientations in reverse order.

Conversion Through Personal Decision

Evangelicals. I begin with evangelicals because conversion has been central in this tradition, both in its self-identity and in its practice of ministry. I include in this group both fundamentalists and charismatics, since they share with evangelicals a common understanding of conversion, though with differences in practice and in certain theological positions.

Within the evangelical world, conversion is a defining emphasis. One cannot be considered a Christian unless one has been converted—and the more like Paul’s Damascus road experience, the better. This kind of conversion is a sudden, punctiliar event, triggered by an encounter of some sort (with truth, with Jesus, with conviction of sin, with the plan of salvation, etc.) that marks the beginning point of the Christian life.

The strength of this perspective is its simplicity and functionality. Salvation becomes a matter of believing certain doctrines, trusting Jesus for forgiveness, and praying a prayer of commitment. Conversion is an individual experience that can be dated exactly. This view of conversion also provides laypeople with a concrete way by which to be witnesses for Jesus. They simply need to memorize a “plan of salvation” and share it with others.5 It is all quite well organized, simple, specific, and understandable.

Understanding conversion to be a matter of a personal decision effected by simple belief and prayer has resulted in countless men and women who have started to follow Jesus. The growth of many national churches around the world can be traced back to this perspective on conversion. It has generated the many evangelistic ministries with which we are familiar: mass evangelism, door-to-door visitation, tract distribution in public places, and many others.6

Unfortunately, a large percentage of these conversions are later abandoned. For example, Donald Miller noted in connection with the Harvest Crusades of evangelist Greg Laurie: “Greg Laurie’s staff estimates that 16,000 conversions occurred at Harvest Christian Fellowship in the five-year period from 1986 to 1991. . . . Perhaps only 10 percent of these decisions resulted in long-term changes in personal behavior.”7 This is a stunning statistic but not much different from what one hears informally from other evangelical evangelists. Such “erosion” raises the question of the validity of this personalistic definition of conversion. Can genuine Christian conversion regularly occur via a presentation of the “facts of gospel” that are believed and affirmed by a “sinner’s prayer”? Evangelical missions must wrestle with this question.

My own sense, based on years of experience in evangelical evangelism both in North America and abroad, is that while

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conversion can indeed take place in such circumstances, it is by no means as automatic or certain as evangelicals teach or imply. Bibliically, the real challenge for the church is to make disciples (i.e., those who are actively and consciously following the way of Jesus), not to make converts (those who take a tentative first step toward Jesus). For evangelical missions, evangelism and spiritual formation need to be relinked. Much can be learned from both liturgical and socialization traditions of conversion that can aid in this process of making disciples by connecting them to communities and to worship rather than leaving converts to find their own way in the Christian life.

There are additional weaknesses in the decisionist tradition. In many cases this “technology of conversion” leaves potential converts frustrated, bewildered, and angry. “I tried it, but it didn’t work. Christianity is not for me.” Could it be that our evangelistic efforts result too often in immunizing people against Christianity, with only minimal positive results? Is evangelism really meant to be a matter of percentages: the more people contacted, the more converted, without regard to the vast number of people alienated by this process?

Another weakness is that such a perspective often fails to recognize that genuine conversion takes place in a variety of ways. For example, research indicates that no more than 30 percent of all conversions are punctiliar in nature. Most conversions take place over time, often with many fits and starts as one moves toward Jesus and his way. For most people, conversion is a process, not an event.9 Paul’s conversion is not the only paradigm for conversion in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark we have the story of the unfolding conversion process of the Twelve, which gives us another way of thinking about conversion and doing evangelism.

Pentecostals. The Pentecostal view of conversion is similar to a traditional evangelical view, namely, that conversion takes place when an individual turns from sin to Jesus via repentance and faith and so receives Jesus as Lord and Savior. In many places, however, the Pentecostal view leads to a greater fervor in seeking to lead others to conversion. Evangelicals may have the same beliefs about conversion, but often it does not lead to an impassioned outreach ministry, whereas Pentecostals groups (especially in the Two-Thirds World) tend to practice continuous outreach involving every member. This evangelistic fervor comes from an eschatological urgency that insists that time is short—the Lord may return, or you may die—so decide for Jesus today!

Furthermore, Pentecostal conversions are typically more intense than those experienced by evangelicals. Evangelical conversion can be solely cerebral, merely a matter of believing a few things and praying a simple prayer. Pentecostal conversion, in contrast, is often accompanied by signs of power that convince converts that God is immediately active and present in their lives. Especially in the Two-Thirds World, so-called power evangelism is a potent force for conversion.10

Conversion Through Socialization

Mainline Protestants. McKnight asserts, “For many Christians conversion is a process of socialization.”11 From this perspective, Christianity is a matter more of nurture than of decision; the key decision is made on behalf of individuals as parents bring their infant children for baptism. The decision later required of these baptized children when they become adults has more to do with continuing alignment with the community than with following Jesus. The key activities of postbaptism nurture in mainline churches are Sunday school instruction (for children), catechism and confirmation (for teens), and active participation in church leadership (for adults). In a mainline Protestant context people may be uncomfortable speaking about “becoming a Christian.” It is more natural to talk about “being a Christian.”

In his helpful article “The Mainline Protestant Understanding of Conversion,” Donald McKim lists eight theological images of conversion.12 One image is that of transition, as in the theology of Horace Bushnell: if children are nurtured in the Christian faith, they will never know themselves as anything other than Christians. Today’s mainline church no longer holds a single view of conversion, nor is the operative view of conversion based on Reformation theology. Rather, it emerges from whatever central image captivates a particular congregation or denomination. Those who are guided by the image of liberation theology, for example, would understand conversion differently from those whose focus is feminist theology.

In point of fact, I find that mainline churches generally display a curious reluctance to talk about conversion at all.13 It is almost as if members believed that the word itself has been co-opted by other theological traditions and thus is not to be used because it connotes something with which we are uncomfortable. “Conversion” may be viewed as a power word, with those who use it seeking domination over others, defining for others what their experience must be. In addition, in mainline churches there is a kind of delicacy to inquiring about conversion, almost as if to raise the question is to suggest that some might be converted and others not.

In such a context it is easy enough to allow conversion and the work of conversion (i.e., evangelism) to drift from the center of one’s ecclesiastical vision, as I think it has for many mainline churches. Significant amounts of money, though, have been spent in recent years in mainline denominations to promote the work of evangelism. For example, an independent fund within the United Methodist Church pays for professors of evangelism in Methodist seminaries. Mainline denominations have offices of evangelism that produce literature and seminars. Resolutions about evangelism are passed in Synod meetings. Unfortunately, though, nothing much gets done, largely because of a reluctance to put conversion into the center of our theological horizon.

There is a difference among church members, with some seeming to have a vital faith, and others what must be described as a nominal faith. Gordon Allport noted this difference in his seminal work on racial prejudice, in which he distinguished between those whose faith is intrinsic and those whose faith is extrinsic.14 For the former, faith is alive, real, and personal; for the latter, it is more a matter of form, duty, tradition, and obligation. The challenge for the mainline church is to help members move from extrinsic faith (nominalism) to intrinsic faith (inner conviction). This change is a kind of conversion in itself.

Mainline churches need to help their membership commit themselves consciously to what is implicit in church activity and membership. Without such consciousness, church membership...
becomes like club membership: you hang out with nice people, but when you go home, such membership makes little difference in your life and the lives of others. We need to create ways for people to grow in all aspects of faith: belief, commitment, service, relationships, justice, spirituality, and more.

Nominalism is the danger in the new paradigm in North American evangelism expressed by the dictum “belonging before believing.” This evangelistic strategy—invite people into the community first, and in that context tell them about Jesus—is commendable. I believe it rescues evangelism from the highly individualistic tone it has often assumed in North America, for it

puts belief in Jesus in the context of the community of Jesus. It rescues conversion from being a kind of legalistic insurance policy that guarantees heaven and allows it, instead, to become incorporation into the kingdom of God in the here and now. The danger of this perspective, however, is that it calls people to community without sufficient focus on what it means to be a child of God whose primary allegiance is to Jesus. Faith in Jesus needs to be internalized in order to be real.

Conversion Through Liturgical Acts

McKnight refers to mainline Christians as “socialized converts,” and he imagines them asking “liturgical converts” why so much attention is given to baptism, the Eucharist, and “official rites of passage.” And indeed also for “personal-decision converts,” the focus on sacraments is difficult to understand. How can one be converted without experiencing conversion or community, these other Christians ask?

Roman Catholics. Catholic reflection on conversion is caught between the experience of Augustine and the fact of infant baptism. Is conversion an experience, or is it a grace mediated by the church? For Augustine, conversion came in a moment when he heard a voice telling him to pick up the New Testament and read. As he did, “there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.”

There is an interesting body of literature dealing with conversion in the Roman Catholic Church, shaped in particular by the writings of Bernard Lonergan. Contemporary Catholic writing insists that “conversion cannot be isolated and reduced to a self-conscious moment.” Yet it is aware of the problem when the subjective (experiential) element of conversion is removed or muted. Karl Rahner is “concerned that the administration of the sacraments in the average parish often ‘masked’ the experience of conversion behind baptism, confirmation, and first communion.” Rahner goes on to encourage Catholics to give up their suspicion of “the conversion phenomenon” and embrace the whole idea of conscious conversion.

When conversion is the outcome of a ritual that is entered into for a variety of reasons—custom, expectation, family, convenience, social status, as well as genuine faith—it can result in nominal faith. “I am a Catholic because I was born a Catholic and baptized a Catholic.” Even though the ritual itself is filled with meaning and power, that meaning and power can be sapped (in the here and now at least) by the motives and responses of those participating in the ritual. In the same way that “praying the sinner’s prayer” (in the evangelical context) or “joining the church” (in the mainline context) can be mechanical and devoid of real content and meaning, so too can one’s baptism be empty in liturgical churches. In each instance the challenge is to help the convert move from the event or the experience into a genuine discipleship.

Conversion. The Catholic Church recognizes the problem because of the defining power for them of Augustine’s experience of conversion. Their challenge is to maintain a sacramental view of theology while emphasizing the experiential side of conversion. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a movement within the Catholic Church that seeks to promote the process of conversion.

Orthodox. Though similar to the Roman Catholic Church in its strong, priest-centered, liturgically oriented community, the Orthodox Church has been more closely tied to ethnic identity. A recent article on the character of Orthodox churches in the United States thus identifies the various branches of the church by their regional origin: Greek Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, and so forth. In speaking of the addition of church members, Archbishop Paul of Finland has said, “Nowadays people become members of the Church in infancy through Holy Baptism.” This comment well expresses the family-oriented, community-based nature of much of Orthodoxy. The strong tie between the church and ethnic communities means that much of the growth is what could be called biological growth. Outreach to others beyond one’s ethnic community has not been a high priority in many Orthodox churches.

Adults wishing to join the Orthodox Church are encouraged to attend an Orthodox church so as to become familiar with the services and how to take part in them. Then, in due course, they are baptized and undergo chrismation, a sacrament similar to confirmation. Once baptized, such a person is a member of God’s family, which is the key issue. “However careless and indifferent the baptized may be in their subsequent life, this indwelling presence of the Spirit is never totally withdrawn. But unless [they] co-operate with God’s grace . . . it is likely that the Spirit’s presence within [them] will remain hidden and unconscious.”

Salvation is found in the church. Ware quotes approvingly the assertion by Aleksei Khomiakov: “No one is saved alone. He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her and in union with all her other members.” In other words, salvation is ecclesial. Ware adds that salvation is also sacramental, for in the sacraments a person is made one with God. In this same vein, Alexander Schmemann asserts that the mission of the Orthodox Church is found in Word and sacrament. To celebrate the liturgy is to be the kingdom of God; to experience the liturgy is to experience God. “The sacrament is a manifestation of the Word. . . . This is why the reading and preaching of the Gospel in the Orthodox Church is a liturgical act, an integral and essential part of the sacrament.”

Certainly the apostle Paul would seem to support this view, when he writes, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

The word “conversion” does not seem to be part of the functional vocabulary in the Orthodox Church. It is not that Orthodoxy is uninterested in conversion, salvation, justification, or sanctification but that it talks about these realities in a different way. Only when one reads the small but growing missiological
Between Past and Future (EMS 10)
Evangelical Missions Entering the Twenty-first Century
Jonathan J. Bonk, ed
This volume traces its origins to the 2001 annual meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society with the theme of “Lessons in Mission from the Twentieth Century.” The papers from this meeting, combined with insightful essays by other EMS members, reflect upon the history of evangelical missions and upon its future. “May God give us grace to draw from the lessons presented in this book in ways that will enrich us as people, as a church, and as a community calling others to come worship Jesus Christ.” A. Scott Moreau.
WCL384-7    William Carey Library, 2003
List: $14.99    Our Price: $11.25    3 or more: $9.75

Churchless Christianity (Revised Edition)
Herbert Hoefer
The purpose of this book is to describe a fact and reflect upon it theologically. The fact is that there are thousands of people who believe solely in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior but who have no plans to take baptism or join the Church. Churchless Christianity is based on research from the early 1980s among non-baptized believers in Christ in Tamilnadu, India. This revised edition includes all the original text plus five additional chapters and a new foreword.
WCL444-4    William Carey Library, 2001
ISBN: 0878084444    Paperback, 376 pages
List: $17.99    Our Price: $11.75    3 or more: $9.89

*3 or more of the same title. Prices do not include shipping. Prices are subject to change without notice.
literature in the Orthodox Church does one begin to hear more familiar words and phrases. The main task of mission is the conversion of those outside the Church. Thus preaching is preaching with a purpose, that people might believe and be converted. ‘Conversion’ is the proper word to use, since those who are outside the Church need to be introduced to the grace of God in Christ. Yet mission is not just to the outsider but also the way in which Church people . . . try to arouse the sleeping faith of the nominal Christian.

Orthodox evangelism has a different tone to it, however. As John Meyendorff states in his introduction to James Stamolis’s book, “A church can be ‘witnessing’ and therefore preaching through its prayer, through its sense of being ‘different’ from the surrounding society, and through its celebration of the Kingdom of God, present, by anticipation, in the liturgy. The way the Orthodox have succeeded in experiencing their worship as communion with the risen Body of Christ, and in using it as a powerful educational tool, is probably the most distinctive trait of Eastern Christianity, in contrast to the Western tendency of identifying mission with activism and organization.” In this view, liturgy itself is the method of evangelism.

Thus the challenge for the Orthodox Church is to invite people convincingly to come into the service of worship; to learn the service and how to participate in it, and so to prepare themselves to be baptized and join the Orthodox Church in order to participate in the mysteries of Christ. In this age of fascination with the spiritual, the Orthodox way will have great appeal to many. It rings of mystery, which is engraved in the buildings themselves, displayed in the multiple icons, and demonstrated in the liturgy. Those from nonliturgical traditions have much to learn about the power of mystery and the appeal of community as we seek to reach out to this current age.

The downside of this approach is the same as for the Roman Catholic Church: when the meaning of ritual is lost, one faces the risk of nominalism. Hence the call in the Orthodox missiological literature to wake the sleeping faith of nominal Christians.

Summation

So who is right? Who has understood accurately the nature of Christian conversion? Who has translated this understanding into an effective ministry of evangelism? Is conversion a matter of making a decision for Jesus? Or joining a church? Or being baptized?

I hope that my position, implied in the discussion so far, is clear: no single view fully captures the nature of conversion. All views contribute important parts to a holistic understanding of conversion and hence of evangelism. Holistic evangelism will invite people into the kingdom of God. It will invite them to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith in the context of the community of God’s people, which has worship and the sacraments at its center. Such evangelism will invite nominal Christians to become active followers of Jesus. It will engage genuine seekers as they explore the issues that will move them forward in their pilgrimages. It will not settle for cultural faith. It will have as its goal the genuine conversion of others, even as the evangelists themselves continue their own conversion process.

The Missiological Challenge

While we can and should learn from one another when it comes to conversion, in fact there is much suspicion between Christian traditions over the issue of conversion. For example, evangelicals feel quite free to seek converts from the Orthodox Church in Russia because, in their eyes, the Orthodox are not real Christians and need to be converted. For their part, the Orthodox in America are quite open to receiving new members from other churches because their church is the one true church. Those outside Orthodoxy are schismatics who need to return home to the real church. Mainline Christians are suspicious of all talk of conversion and so resist efforts at conversion, whether these originate from without (proselytizing) or even from within their own denomination (sponsored by denominational evangelism commissions). Roman Catholics are baffled when they see fellow Catholics leaving to join a nondenominational charismatic church that is unconnected to historic Christianity.

Given this situation, there is some urgency to expand our understanding of conversion. Our suspicions of one another impede the real task of evangelism, which is to proclaim Christ to those who do not know his name or follow his way.

Is there not a common core of understanding about conversion upon which we can all build? I suggest the following:

1. The real question when it comes to Christian conversion is conscious commitment to Jesus (by repentance and faith). Such a commitment is expressed in a variety of ways—through belief, via baptism and confirmation, in membership and participation in a Christian community, through participation in the sacraments. In the end, conversion is about the human experience of God’s saving grace—awareness, consciousness, commitment, deliberately turning one’s life around, coming to a whole new understanding of what life is all about.

2. Nominalism is an issue in all Christian denominations. Thus the challenge for all churches is to have in place a vigorous program of spiritual formation with the aim of encouraging ongoing spiritual pilgrimage so that nominal faith will grow into vital faith. Can we not assist one another in such formational activities rather than poaching each other’s members?

3. Different denominations emphasize different issues: belief, liturgy, or membership. The challenge is to recognize and build upon the evangelistic opportunities that each church affords. For example, in Orthodox missiological literature, the evangelistic nature of the Great Liturgy is recognized and promoted. And in mainline churches with rich and powerful community in place, can we not with deliberation work at inviting others into this community? Evangelicals have much to contribute in promoting an alternate worldview to that of consensus reality, namely, a worldview that takes seriously the supernatural.

4. Each denomination can and should grow in its understanding of conversion, without losing touch with its own distinctives. Evangelicals must need to become newly interested in incorporating new believers into programs of spiritual formation (which include a renewed sense of worship) as a necessary part of the evangelistic process. Mainline churches need to move beyond comfortable membership to serious consideration of the faith upon which the church stands and deliberate commitment to that which is distinctive to Christianity. Liturgical churches need to translate the meaning of the liturgy into the life, practice, and beliefs of their members. No one church has a complete understanding when it comes to conversion; each church can learn from the others.

No single view captures fully the nature of conversion.
5. Do not be preoccupied with conversion, but do not neglect it either. Conversion is only a beginning, merely the first step. It is not the whole of the Christian life. In fact, the proof of conversion is the fruit of one’s life. To be preoccupied with conversion only is to neglect what conversion is meant to introduce: life in which there is conscious awareness of God and God’s love. To neglect conversion, however, is to forget that all pilgrimages have a beginning; without the beginning, no journey is possible.

It would be ideal if each Christian group could embrace and implement these five points. In the real world, however, change occurs slowly; old animosities die hard, and new ways of viewing the realities closest to us evoke resistance. What might we realistically expect? In the short term our hope might be to influence some within our traditions to broaden their view of conversion (and hence evangelism). For evangelicals to realize that genuine conversion is a process for most people, not an event, is a significant step forward. And for mainline Christians to explore the difference between nominal and vital faith could bring real change. As for liturgical Christians, to see the power of personal experience in the context of sacramental worship would address some of their issues. Beyond that, it would be wonderful if we looked upon one another less as enemies and more as people whose theological commitments are real, deep, and reasoned, even if we disagree with those reasons. Perhaps we could even learn to cooperate in outreach to those without faith traditions who are fascinated by the spiritual and seeking to know God.

Notes


2. In his masterful volume Conversion in the New Testament (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), Ronald Witherup states: “After careful consideration I have come to believe that the NT shows a fairly dramatic evolution of the concept” (p. 2).


5. For a discussion and critique of this view of “witnessing,” see my article “Holy Conversation: The Lost Art of Witness,” Word and World 22, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 255–63.


8. When we were students at Fuller Seminary in the 1960s, my wife and I helped start the mission organization African Enterprise, which does citywide evangelism in Africa and elsewhere. When we returned from South Africa, we helped start Clear Light Productions, a media-based evangelistic organization located in Boston. I have been a professor of evangelism at evangelical seminaries for over twenty-five years.


11. McKnight, Turning to Jesus, p. 5.


13. I say this as a United Church of Christ minister and as one whose role as a seminary professor takes him into a number of mainline contexts.


15. As in the widespread Alpha movement.

16. McKnight, Turning to Jesus, p. 7.


20. Ibid., p. 115, quoting Rahner.

21. Ritual, though, can lead to genuine inner reality later in life.


25. Ibid., pp. 144–46.


27. In neither of the standard texts by Father Kallistos Ware in which the Orthodox position is explained to outsiders is “conversion” listed in the index, nor is “justification” or “sanctification”—two words that figure large in Protestant texts on this particular topic.

Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New

Christopher J. H. Wright

The Hebrew word most commonly associated with repentance and conversion—sub—is much more often addressed to Israel than used in connection with the other, noncovenant nations. God most eagerly seeks the conversion of his own people, who seem most often bent on turning away from him in the “conversion” of apostasy rather than turning toward him in the conversion of repentance and restoration. The word sub is used of turning in either direction. So any missiological reflection on conversion must wrestle with this issue of the continuous need of God’s people for radical conversion themselves, rather than being seen only as the agent of the conversion of others. It is often pointed out that the so-called conversion of Cornelius, for example, was just as much (and necessarily) the conversion of Peter, or the conversion of the Ninevites an unsuccessful conversion of Jonah.

In this article we examine what the Bible reveals about those who are converted into allegiance to the God of the Bible and into membership of God’s people from a position of having previously stood outside that relationship. What are the implications of such a conversion?

Blessing of the Nations

The familiar words of Genesis 12:3 set the agenda for Israel’s missional existence in history. So important are they that Paul calls them the Gospel in advance (Gal. 3:6–8). God declares his intention that through Abraham and his descendants, all nations on earth will be blessed. There is no mention here of this blessing coming by the mechanism of conversion as such. But if the nations are to be blessed, or to find blessing, in the same way as Abraham, then we expect that they must follow the footsteps of his faith in, and obedience to, the God who called him. The path to blessing for Abraham meant leaving his home country (in that sense also turning from his ancestral gods), trusting in the promise of God, walking in obedience, and teaching his household to “keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). Though not described as conversion, some of the key elements are already signaled here: forsaking, trusting, obeying, following.

This hope of blessing for the nations, when it does issue in an offer of, or a call to, conversion, generates some interesting prophetic texts. Jeremiah holds out to the nations contemporary with his own the same conditional terms for repentance and restoration that he consistently held out to Judah—at least until Judah had gone beyond the possibility of those options (Jer. 12:14–17). This text is remarkable for the way Jeremiah speaks to the nations words otherwise spoken to his own people. The nations (like Israel) could be uprooted and destroyed, or they could be restored and rebuilt. The deciding factor would be their willingness to (1) identify with and learn the ways of Israel and (2) accept the reality of the living God Yahweh. On those terms they could actually be “established among my people”—a quite remarkable offer, based effectively on conversion. It is difficult for us to grasp this concept of the repentance and conversion of nations (see also 18:1–12), but it stands as an irreducible part of the Old Testament faith.

The Book of Jonah stands as the most remarkable illustration of the principles affirmed so starkly in Jeremiah 18. Jonah contains at least two actual conversions (the repentance of the Ninevites and the repentance of Yahweh—his change of plan regarding them) and one conversion stubbornly resisted—that of Jonah himself. If the prophet is intended to represent Israel, then the book is an appeal for their conversion to Yahweh’s heartbeat of compassion for the nations.

Isaiah raises the stakes still further. The great vision that he has in common with Micah pictures the nations coming up to Mount Zion in a corporate turning to Yahweh and his ways (Isa. 2:1–5; Mic. 4:1–5). Significantly, the expectation that the nations will eventually do this is taken as motivation for Israel to start doing the same here and now. Isaiah presents this as a challenging call (2:5); Micah states it as a stark contrast between the determination of Israel to walk in the name of Yahweh and the continuing historical fact that the nations walk in the name of their own gods (4:5).

In Isaiah 19, after a scorching declaration of God’s judgment

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on historical Egypt of the prophet’s day, the prophet portrays an eschatological future in which the historical relation of Israel and Egypt is turned inside out. “On that day” (the language of the unspecified future), there will be an altar to Yahweh in the midst of Egypt (v. 19)—the land whose Pharaoh had refused even to acknowledge such a God in his country (Exod. 5:2). Egypt will cry out to Yahweh against their oppressors (as the Hebrews had done against the Egyptians), and he will send them a savior to rescue them (v. 20), a remarkable replay of Moses’ mission. Yahweh will strike Egypt with a plague, but this time he will heal them (v. 22). Then comes the key conversion text: “They will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them” (v. 22). What follows is even more amazing. On the basis of this conversion to Yahweh, Egypt, along with Assyria, will join Israel as part of the people of Yahweh. “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’” (vv. 24–25).

Not only, then, will these ancient enemies of Israel be the beneficiaries of the Abrahamic covenant (that is, they will receive the explicit blessing of Yahweh), but also they will become the agents of Abraham’s blessing—they will share in the task of being “a blessing on the earth.” The converted become the converting; the blessed become the blessers.

There is something profound here about the nature of conversion: in conversion people receive the names, the identity, the mission, the privilege, of Israel; yet they preserve the ethnic and cultural identity that is theirs by creation. This combination is not surprising when we remember that the purpose of God’s election of Israel was for the restoration of creation. Even before Paul developed his second-Adam Christology, there was a Jewish tradition that regarded Abraham as God’s fresh start for humanity—a new Adam. Certainly Paul could affirm that if anybody turns to Christ and is “in him,” then that person is not just an heir of Abraham but also a new creation.

Radical Displacement of All Other Gods

From the Old Testament perspective, conversion has three major implications. In the first place, the nations that set foot on the road to Yahweh in Zion will abandon their walking in the name of their own gods (Mic. 4:1–5). The ends of the earth that turn to Yahweh to be saved will accept the demonstrable futility of “a god that cannot save” (Isa. 45:20). Instead, they will universally acknowledge that “only in the Lord” are “righteousness” (probably equivalent to saving righteousness, see v. 21—“a righteous God and a Savior”) and “strength” (v. 24). The conversion of Egypt includes the sole acknowledgment of Yahweh, following the exposure through judgment of the worthlessness of the idols they had previously consulted (Isa. 19:3). The nations that will come to the light that will shine from Israel in Isaiah 60 will “proclaim the praise of the Lord” (v. 6), no longer that of their own gods, and their offerings “shall be acceptable on my altar” (v. 7), not at the shrines of other gods.

This expectation is turned into a messianic vision and summons in Psalm 96. A new song is to be sung. This new song remixes the old words, for the content is nothing other than the name, the salvation, the glory, and the marvelous deeds of Yahweh (vv. 1–3). These phrases are culled from the old, old story of Yahweh and his love. Yahweh’s name—revealed at the burning bush; Yahweh’s salvation—as they marched out of Egypt; Yahweh’s glory—in tabernacle and temple; Yahweh’s marvelous deeds—the etcetera of the great epic of their national history. These were the lyrics Israel had been singing ever since they crossed the Red Sea. What is new is where they are now to be sung, and who is going to be singing them—all the earth . . . among the nations . . . among all the peoples.” The new song makes the old words true for new singers. Conversion of the nations thus implies not only the acceptance of Israel’s God, but also acceptance of the saving significance of Israel’s story.

The ironic historical background to such a vision was the fact that Israel, who should have been the choirmaster for the singing of this new song among the nations, was instead busy singing the songs of the nations by going after their gods instead of preserving their exclusive, covenantal loyalty to Yahweh. So while the psalmists applied their faith imagination to the conversion of the nations, the prophets had to apply their rhetorical energy to the conversion of Israel.

Ethical Transformation

The nations will come up to Yahweh in Zion with clear ethical intent: conversion will mean a change of “walk.” The Lord will “teach us his ways” so that “we may walk in his paths” (Isa. 2:3)—the very thing that Israel also needed to learn. The ways of Yahweh should have been the ways of Israel, and in that ideal sense, the nations who wished to convert and be restored by Yahweh, according to Jeremiah, would need to learn the ways of Israel as well as acknowledging the sole deity of Yahweh (Jer. 12:16). The great challenge presented to apostate Israel by Elijah was that they should turn from worshiping Baal to acknowledge Yahweh alone as God. The narrative makes it clear that this ought to have been more than a change of merely verbal or cultic allegiance. The worship of Baal was what legitimated the actions of Jezebel and Ahab—that is, trampling on justice, judicial murder, and confiscation of land by unfettered royal power. The worship of Yahweh demanded a social ethic of economic justice and limits on political power, which would preserve a land safe for Naboths to live in.

The story of the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 involves not only his eventual recognition that “heaven rules” but also his acceptance of Daniel’s amazing counsel: “Alone for [or break off] your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed” (Dan. 4:27). Amos could not have put it better. Conversion entailed moral change in the area of social and political responsibility—even for pagan kings. Conversion, in this case, also included a return to sanity, implying that worship of false gods that permits arrogant imperialism and flagrant exploitation is actually a kind of madness. In both of the above cases, conversion was addressed to the political, social, and economic spheres, not merely to religious allegiance.

In the light of this strongly ethical dimension of conversion, there is even greater significance to the term Jesus chose to use in his so-called Great Commission—namely, to go and disciple the nations. For this too is an ethical term, calling for a radical change...
of personal allegiance and a range of ethical commitments. Sadly, one must admit that much evangelical mission has handled the Great Commission as a mandate only for a rather narrowly defined evangelism, omitting the biblical emphasis on discipleship, teaching, and obedience that these verses contain.

End to Commitment to War

Both Isaiah and Micah in their vision of the conversion of the nations envisage the effect of their submission to the judicial sovereignty of Yahweh. The diversion of so much effort and so many resources, things that could be used productively to nourish human life, into weapons of destruction will cease. Nations will not take up the sword against one another and will not “learn war” any more. The portrayal of war as something that consumes resources, and as an acquired skill that generates its own lethal pedagogy, is frighteningly realistic. Only conversion to the living God and his ways can bring an end to both. Psalm 46, which pictures the present reality of the nations in tumult, ends with the great statement of hope that God “makes wars cease to the end of the earth” and recognizes that this can come about only when the nations acknowledge that Yahweh is God, when he is “exalted among the nations.” Conversion of the nations to the living God is the only hope for world peace.

We recognize this as ultimately an eschatological hope. Only God can, and only God will, put an end to war. But the fact that we have this sure hope, like other aspects of biblical eschatology, should fire us to appropriate action in the present that erects a signpost to the future. We live now under the ethical mandate of the beatitude “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”—that is, they will have the character of God by working now for what God will ultimately complete.

Implications for Missions

What is the meaning of the conversion of the nations in the Old Testament for New Testament faith and mission? In what sense, if any, are we to call nations to conversion today? Since the people of God now exist as a multinational community in Christ and cannot be identified with any single nation or state, can we even speak of a “converted nation” or a “Christian nation”? Do we expect nations to display the marks of Christian discipleship, as set out, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount? If not, where do we take this Old Testament theme?

First, there is no hermeneutical validity in seeking to reestablish some kind of political theocracy on Old Testament lines in modern nations. Even in Israel the marriage of faith community and royal political state was never easy, was frequently compromised, and ended in messy divorce. Attempts to create Christian states, from Constantine to Calvin and beyond, have more often than not ended in tears, tyranny, and torturers.

Second, the clearest fulfillment of the Old Testament message regarding the nations appears in the New Testament mission to the nations. The blessing of the nations, interpreted through the missional mandate of Jesus and the centrifugal mission of the church, is not a matter of the conversion of states.

Noteworthy

Personalia

C. Douglas Lovejoy was named executive director of the United States Catholic China Bureau, effective January 1, 2004. He succeeds Janet Carroll, M.M., who served in that role since the bureau’s inception in 1989. Author of a 1987 doctoral dissertation on the Catholic Church’s reopening in China, Lovejoy was director of university development for Asia at Princeton University. See www.usccb.net.

The Board of Directors of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Collegeville, Minnesota, named Donald B. Ottenhoff, senior editor of the Christian Century, as the institute’s executive director, beginning June 1, 2004. He will succeed Patrick Henry, who is retiring after twenty years. Ottenhoff, a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), joined the editorial staff of the Christian Century in 1991 and has been senior editor since 1998. For details, visit www.iecr.org.

Died. Donal Lamont, 92, Roman Catholic bishop and Irish missionary, an outspoken opponent of racial discrimination in the white-ruled British colony of Rhodesia, in Dublin, August 14, 2003. Entering Rhodesia in 1946 to establish a Carmelite mission, Lamont was appointed bishop (1957) and president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Rhodesia (1970). He helped found the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission of Rhodesia (1974). He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978, following his 1977 expulsion from Rhodesia for his outspoken protests against the policies of Rhodesia’s last white leader, Ian Smith.

Announcing

On October 9, 2003, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts, unveiled the World Christian Database, an online resource that serves faculty, students, religion scholars, church leaders, missiologists, and journalists seeking information and analysis on the global Christian movement. This initiative presents the core data supporting the World Christian Encyclopedia and World Christian Trends. The WCD, according to center director Todd M. Johnson, includes detailed information on 34,000 Christian denominations and on religions in every country of the world. In addition, extensive data is available on 238 countries and 13,000 ethnolinguistic people groups, as well as data on 7,000 cities and 3,000 provinces. Statistics in the WCD provide a significant update of the data published in WCE/WCT in 2001. For more information, visit www.globalchristianity.org.

The premier issue in October 2003 of Global Missiology, an online-only journal that promises “exchanges between researchers, practitioners, and scholars who have an international scope and global concerns,” featured an unpublished lecture, “Missions According to Scripture,” by Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper. The editor is Enoch Wan, chair of the Division of Intercultural Studies and director of the doctor of missiology program at Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon. For more information, visit www.globalmissiology.net.
and governments, even though church history does contain remarkable cases of the conversion of heads of state who in turn provided access and patronage for the evangelistic work of the church. We are to pray for governments. We are to bless the nations. So one way in which the Old Testament vision of the conversion of the nations is to be worked out is through obedience to the Great Commission—namely, discipling (Matt. 28:19–20) and proclaiming repentance and forgiveness (Luke 24:47).

Third, however, we should remember the paradigmatic nature of Israel in the plan of God. They were intended to be a light to the nations. What God did in and for them and what God said and revealed to them were all ultimately aimed at a wider audience—the rest of the nations, for whose blessing Israel was called into existence in the first place. One of the most glaringly obvious messages in the scriptures of Israel is that God holds kings, governments, and nations to account. God, as supreme moral judge of all the earth, demands that they do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly (Mic. 6:8, originally addressed individually but also, given the whole context of the prophets, a message for governments). Therefore it seems entirely right that part of our Christian responsibility, standing as the spiritual heirs of the prophets of Israel, is to call nations and their governments to account and, where necessary, to repentance. Even in praying for them, we are presuming the reality of the higher sovereignty of God, to whom they are responsible. So, like Daniel, we should have the courage to say, even to secular governments, “Break off your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed” (Dan. 4:27).

Conversion of Individuals in the Old Testament

While the promise of God to Abraham that the nations would be blessed through him points toward an eschatological ingathering that only God would accomplish, the history of Israel in the Old Testament period does testify to significant numbers of those who stood originally outside the covenant community being blessed through it, coming into membership of it, or professing some kind of conversion to Yahweh. This phenomenon is more at the level of individuals or groups, rather than of nations, but it does offer some interesting perspectives on our inquiry.

From the very beginning, Israel emerges into history and onto the pages of the Old Testament as a “mixed multitude.” The exodus narrative records that a great many other people left Egypt along with the Israelites (Exod. 12:37–39), and the next section of text outlines some regulations for the Passover to take into account the presence of such foreigners and to give criteria for their acceptability or otherwise at the Passover meal. Later we see that there was a substantial resident alien population at the time of the united monarchy (2 Chron. 1:17–18). Throughout, there was a remarkable openness to the inclusion and absorption of aliens into the Israelite community at various levels—including religious.

The Passover regulations make it clear that a resident alien could be included in the worshiping community, celebrating the foundational event in Israel’s redemptive history, provided he accepted circumcision (Exod. 12:48–49). On that basis he and his family were to be treated as fully equal to the native born. This...
Conversion demands rejection of other gods, inclusion in the worshipping community, and ethical transformation.

Religious inclusion of “converted,” or assimilated, persons then extended in many directions: the annual feasts (Deut. 16:11, 14), the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29), the ceremony of covenant renewal and commitment (Deut. 29:11; 31:12), and inclusion in Sabbath rest (Exod. 20:9–11; 23:12; Deut. 5:12–15). Since many of these events were part of the social and economic rhythm of the life of the community, the inclusion of the converted alien was very comprehensive. Indeed, because of the vulnerable social status of such people, the law repeatedly advocates their protection: from general oppression (Exod. 22:21; Lev. 19:33), from injustice in court (Exod. 23:9; Deut. 10:17–19; 24:17–18), and from exploitation in the workplace (Deut. 24:14–15). In short, they are to be treated as equal before the law with the native born (Lev. 19:34). For the resident alien, then, conversion—at least according to the ideals of Israelite law—meant complete inclusion, participation, and equality within the living community of God’s people.

The position of the foreigner who remained one (i.e., did not assimilate through circumcision) was more ambiguous. But two texts are quite remarkable in their vision for such people. At the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8, in the midst of praying that God would hear the prayers of his people Israel in all kinds of circumstances, Solomon prays thus for non-Israelites: “When a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you” (vv. 41–43).

This text is remarkable in its very anticipation that such things would happen—that is, that foreigners would be so attracted to the power and presence of this God, Yahweh the God of Israel, that they would come from afar to pray for his blessing. But it is also remarkable in the reason Solomon offers as an incentive to God for answering the foreigner’s prayer—namely, that the name of Yahweh should be known universally. We may not know if the text anticipates the conversion of the foreigner to become a worshiper of Yahweh (though it may be implied by the very fact that the foreigner brings a request to Yahweh’s temple), but the vision is amazingly missional in its scope (and it is repeated at v. 60). For the foreigner, then, clear implications of conversion include, at the very least, gratitude for answered prayer and the spreading fame of the name of Yahweh.

Isaiah 56 also addresses individual foreigners with words of hope. From having been previously excluded from Yahweh’s sacred assembly, they are promised “the full works,” as conversion experiences go: they can come to the holy hill; they can come into Yahweh’s house; they can even bring their sacrifices to the altar (vv. 6–7). Those who come from the uncircumcision of the foreign nations are accepted at the holy altar of Yahweh. On what basis was this inclusion and acceptance offered? Their whole-hearted commitment to the Lord, in covenant service, love, worship, and obedience (v. 6). The conversion is very clear; their inclusion is equally emphatic. Notably, the words of inclusion are spoken directly by God; the assumption is that the existing covenant community should echo the welcome.

The classic Old Testament convert is Ruth. Indeed, one might say that the book affords us one of the most beautiful descriptions of conversion, when Boaz sums up what Ruth has done: “May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” (Ruth 2:12). For Ruth, the result of conversion was her experience of the matching hesed (i.e., faithful, loyal love) of Boaz. The model response of Boaz to this vulnerable “convert” provided for her, protected her, and eventually incorporated her into an Israelite family, in Israel’s land, blessed by Israel’s God. For Ruth, conversion led to inclusion, not only in the covenant community, but also in the ancestry of the royal house of David and the messianic lineage of Jesus (Matt. 1:5). If Israel was supposed in some way to emulate Boaz (who is certainly presented as a model Israelite), then the book challenges any kind of ethnic exclusivism and calls for a welcoming inclusion of those who make genuine confession of conversion to the Lord God of Israel.

Summing up this section, then, we can immediately see some aspects in common with those noted above with reference to the nations. There is the radical rejection of other gods and exclusive commitment to Yahweh. There is inclusion within the worshipping community—by the covenant ritual of circumcision (the alien), and by explicit and frequent listing with the rest of the nation in the festivals, covenant ceremonies, and so forth. And there is also the demand for ethical transformation: by the foreigner convert’s accepting commitment to observe God’s covenant law. The conditions for the foreigner are no different from those demanded of apostate Israelis who are called to repent and convert back to true allegiance to Yahweh—let it be in truth and justice (Jer. 4:1–2), and let it involve the radical rejection of oppressive ways and commitment to social compassion, integrity, and honesty (Ezek. 33:14–16).

New Testament Perspectives on Conversion

As in the Old Testament, so in the Gospels the call to repent and “convert” is addressed primarily to Israel. God’s people need to return to their God. But our theme asks us to look rather at the conversion of those who, from outside the believing community, “turned to the Lord.” This focus sends us primarily to the Book of Acts, though obviously Paul addresses the issue also in some of his letters. It seems that the same necessities of conversion are found in the New Testament as in the Old Testament, and the same expectations of what ought to follow for the convert.

Thus, first, there is the clear demand for the radical rejection and displacement of all other gods than the living God, now revealed through his Son Jesus Christ. Paul makes this point in some haste and embarrassment in Lystra (Acts 14:15–17). He repeats it as the burden of his missionary career since his own “conversion” (Acts 26:18). And in case it might be thought that this represents the Gentile Luke’s slanted reporting on the matter, Paul himself expresses it in virtually identical terms in what may be his earliest letter: “You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus” (1 Thess. 1:9).

Second, conversion leads to inclusion. This can be risky. We are well aware of the danger often faced by converts: danger from the
communities they have left and are thought to have betrayed. Certainly Paul experienced such hostility repeatedly. But those who have the courage to welcome the convert also take risks of misunderstanding from both sides. Ananias certainly needed courage and faith to welcome Saul of Tarsus as a brother within hours of his conversion (Acts 9:10–19). Alleged converts can be false, intent on subverting the faithful from within. The fear of Saul by the vulnerable church in Jerusalem could have barred him from inclusion and welcome. But the risky friendship of Barnabas at that crucial time achieved it.

But there is also theological risk. And sometimes only God can persuade people to take that risk—even if he has to use angels, visions, and ultimately a whole church council. Thus, Peter’s acceptance of Cornelius into baptized membership of the new followers of the Way, because of his manifest faith in the message of Christ and the evident work of the Holy Spirit, exposed Peter to severe criticism from fellow Jewish believers. Peter’s explanation was initially accepted, to general rejoicing (Acts 11:18). The issue rumbled on, however, and was brought to a head by the success of Paul’s mission among the Gentiles.

Should these converts to Christ be accepted and included without also becoming proselytes to Judaism? What should be required of them? Such questions about the implications of conversion were exactly what the church faced as a result of the success of its own mission (Acts 15:5).8

The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 addressed two issues—the theological grounds of inclusion, and the practical follow-up to inclusion for those who had professed conversion. The theology was sorted out on the basis of Old Testament scriptures. The ingathering of the Gentiles, far from being a problem in relation to the scriptures, is precisely their fulfillment. (James quotes Amos 9:11–12; he could have quoted at least a dozen other texts of similar import.) The practical problem is sorted out with a wonderfully inclusive pragmatism: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19 NIV). Would that this principle operated in all evangelistic and discipleship programs!

Paul’s letters affirm very strongly this new inclusion of his converts in the community of this new people of God. Ephesians 2:11–22 is probably the locus classicus, with Paul telling his Gentile readers that from being far off, they have been brought near. From being aliens and strangers (to Israel’s citizenship, Israel’s promises, Israel’s hope, Israel’s God, and Israel’s Messiah), they have now become citizens of God’s own country, members of God’s own family, and the place of God’s own dwelling—a radical conversion indeed! And it has been argued that a major purpose of all Paul’s letters, indirectly, is to foster this sense of new identity and inclusion among his convert communities. They must know who they now are because of their allegiance to Christ.

Third and finally, it is clear, also from Paul’s letters, that conversion also involved radical ethical transformation. Paul’s account of his ministry to Festus includes so much of importance. Not only was Paul intent on turning people from the worship of idols to the living God, not only did he offer such converts the inclusion of having “a place among those who are sanctified” (Acts 26:18), he also “preached that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance” (v. 20). Very John the Baptist, very Jesus, very James, very Jeremiah.

Notes

1. The equivalent word in the New Testament, epistropheō, is more commonly used of the conversion of unbelievers.

2. The approach adopted will be fairly synchronic; that is, I will not be concerned to trace historical developments within the literature and traditions of the Bible or to take into account other critical issues of that nature.


5. The laws of Deuteronomy 23:1–8 are thought by some scholars to be the background to Isaiah 56, though it is a debatable point.

6. Note, in view of comments below, that it was to Yahweh that Ruth had fled, not primarily to Israel (except of course geographically). Throughout the narrative she continues to be called “the Moabite.”

7. I acknowledge that some prefer not to use the term “conversion” of Paul’s Damascus road experience, since he was obviously not a pagan converting to the God of Israel, nor a Jew converting to Christianity in an anachronistic sense. Nevertheless, Paul’s encounter with Christ included a repentance, a turning, an acknowledgment of the lordship of the risen Christ, and a commissioning—all of which may be fairly described as conversion, even if the term needs to be carefully qualified in the case of Jews who, like Paul, find in Jesus of Nazareth a fulfillment of their ancestral faith.

8. The answer clearly was that they should be converted to Christ, not proselytes to Judaism. This conclusion, in Andrew Walls’s analysis, was an utterly key decision and distinction at this early stage of the church. It enabled a genuine Greek church to emerge. To become a Christian meant converting to Christ—that is, turning everything in one’s life, history, and culture toward Christ for redemptive purging and re-creation. It did not mean becoming ethnically or culturally a “proselyte”—a naturalized Jew—for that route preserved the old ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile, which, as the very heartbeat of Paul’s gospel passionately affirmed, had been utterly dissolved by the cross of Christ. As Walls commented (in conversation), Paul seems not to have got so angry with the Corinthians, who at least were attempting to be genuinely Greek Christians, even if they were making a mess of it, as he did with the Galatians, who were denying the universality of the Gospel by reasserting an ethnic, national, law-based foundation for belonging to God’s people. The vast, global, and cultural diversity of the Christian church today is the legitimate fruit of this essential distinction between conversion (i.e., conversion to Christ within any culture) and proselytism (which essentially says, “You first must become like us”). Sadly, Christian mission has not always preserved this distinction.
After The Next Christendom

Philip Jenkins

When I published The Next Christendom, I was surprised by the public response precisely because so little of the material was terribly new, at least to anyone who had taken the trouble to observe religious trends over the previous two or three decades.1 I was fascinated by the reactions of alarm and near-horror that surfaced in liberal circles, aghast at the prospect of legions of Southern fundamentalists about to begin a Long March against the centers of Western Christianity. Somewhere in the background liberal reviewers were recalling the famous question asked by Harry Emerson Fosdick back in 1922—“Shall the fundamentalists win?”2 And although the answer to that question had been in the negative in 1922, perhaps in the new century the fundamentalists were about to win on a global scale. Demographic facts alone seem to suggest that this time, Fosdick’s nightmare might come true. Conservatives, in contrast, were delighted by the prospect of a traditionalist and biblically oriented Christianity arising in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the creation of what American politicians once termed a Solid South.

Obviously, I did not intend to describe such a stark dichotomy, either as a ray of hope or as a dreadful warning. The South is anything but solid, and the churches of these continents exhibit a full range of political and theological tendencies. Just in the past few months, a major theological battle has raged between two of Africa’s leading Christian clerics, Nigeria’s Akinola and South Africa’s Ndungane, over the issue of homosexual rights within the Anglican Communion. Neither, surely, is any less African than his rival.3 Yet having said this, I would reassert some basic points of my argument, which I think can be accepted regardless of any political implications. The first fact, which I believe is not open to serious controversy, is that over the past half-century, the center of gravity of the Christian world has moved decisively to the global South, to the continents of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and that trend is continuing apace. The growth in Africa has been awe-inspiring. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, during the twentieth century the proportion of Africans who were Christian rose from 9 percent of the whole to almost half, and Christian African countries have among the world’s most dramatic rates of population growth.4 Within a quarter century, half the world’s Christians will be located in just the continents of Africa and Latin America. Based on plausible projections that take account of the impact of AIDS, I have suggested in The Next Christendom that by about the year 2050, the proportion of the world’s Christians who are non-Latino whites will have fallen to perhaps one in five or, probably, even less than that. A Southern population boom is coinciding with a dramatic Birth Dearth in the advanced industrial countries.

The population shift is especially marked in the Catholic world, in which Euro-Americans are already in the minority. The figures for African growth are staggering, from around 16 million Catholics on the continent in the early 1950s to 120 million today, and probably to 220 million by 2025. By 2025, according to the World Christian Encyclopedia, almost three-quarters of Catholics will be found on the three Southern continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and that proportion will grow as the century progresses. North America and Europe account for roughly a third of Catholics today, but that number will fall to a quarter by 2025.

Even so, these figures actually understatement the Southern predominance within world Catholicism, since it fails to take account of Southern-derived immigrant communities in Europe and North America. Within the United States these communities are primarily Latinos, who should represent a quarter of the nation by 2050 or so, but Asian communities also have sizable Catholic populations. By that point, the United States will probably make up around 6 percent of the world’s Catholics, but a large proportion of those believers will be “Southern” by ethnic and cultural heritage. Current trends suggest that their religious practices and values will long remain quite distinct from those of older American populations. These immigrant communities should be of incalculable significance for spreading and reinforcing Christianity to their countries of origin, such as Korea and Vietnam. Both for Protestants and Catholics, the dialogue between diaspora communities and home nations could be very important in shaping religious trends well into the new century.

European and Euro-American Catholics within a few decades be a small fragment of a worldwide church dominated by Filipinos and Mexicans, Vietnamese and Congolese. We can already get a sense of this change from the numbers of Catholic baptisms, since regions with the largest number of baptisms are also the centers of the most dynamic growth. Of eighteen million Catholic baptisms recorded in 1999, eight million took place in Central and South America, and no less than three million in Africa. Today, the annual baptismal totals for Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are each higher than the combined figures for such familiar Catholic lands as Italy, France, Spain, and Poland. The shifts within the Anglican world are if anything even more dramatic. Already, the Nigerian church alone accounts for a quarter of the world’s Anglicans, and a far higher proportion if we remove from the picture the millions of merely nominal believers found in Great Britain. In my lifetime, the heart of the Anglican Communion has decisively relocated to Africa, and a new African self-confidence was in evidence during this past year’s controversies over homosexuality.

Theological Ramifications

The numerical changes in Christianity are striking enough, but beyond the simple demographic transition, there are countless implications for theology and religious practice. Very generally, and with plenty of obvious exceptions, Southern Christianity, in terms of both theology and moral teaching, really is more conservative than its Western or specifically American version. Obviously, Western reformers do not like this fact—James Carroll has complained that “world Christianity [is falling] increasingly under the sway of anti-intellectual fundamentalism”—but the cultural directions are hard to ignore.5

The denominations that are triumphing all across the global South are stalwartly traditional or even reactionary by the standards of the economically advanced nations. The churches that

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have made most dramatic progress in the global South have either been radical Protestant sects (evangelical or Pentecostal) or been Roman Catholicism of a traditionalist and orthodox kind. Just consider the Roman Catholic tradition. Except for indulgences, the list of horrors that Reformation critics charged against the medieval church are all much in favor in Third World Catholicism, including the worship of the Virgin Mary, the invocation of saints, the working of miracles, and supernatural cures of the sick.

Let me pursue this Reformation analogy a little. While Southern Catholics are very comfortable with Counter-Reformation values, a full-scale Reformation movement is taking place on the Protestant/Pentecostal side of things. Northerners need to be reminded that we are joining this Reformation already in progress. The booming Pentecostal and prophetic churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are thoroughly committed to a kind of restoration of primitive Christianity that would have made sense to Luther, however far removed it may be from the thought world of Northern liberals. While American reformers dream of a restored early church freed from hierarchy, superstition, and dogma, Southerners look back to a New Testament church filled with spiritual power, able to exorcise the demonic forces that cause sickness and poverty.

Today, as in Luther’s time, exposure to the spirituality of the Book can have explosive consequences. To quote a modern-day follower of the African prophet Johane Masowe, “When we were in these synagogues [the European churches] we used to read about the works of Jesus Christ . . . cripples were made to walk and the dead were brought to life . . . evil spirits driven out . . . That was what was being done in Jerusalem. We Africans, however, who were being instructed by white people, never did anything like that. . . . We were taught to read the Bible, but we ourselves never did what the people in the Bible used to do.”6

This notion of a restored New Testament church is strongest in the Pentecostal and prophetic churches, but similar ideas are also found in the offshoots of Western communities like the Anglicans and Lutherans. And this powerful supernaturalism is also a strong characteristic of Southern Catholicism.

The most successful Southern churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and puritanism, all founded on clear obedience to authority. Across the denominational spectrum, Catholics and Protestants alike preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary, and apocalyptic. In this thought world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith healing, exorcism, and dream-visions are all fundamental parts of religious sensibility.

At this point, we might recall the concept of globalization that has been so unavoidable over the past few years. If in fact every corner of the world is being subjected to a common barrage of media influences that are overwhelmingly from the West, why are we not seeing a kind of cultural homogenization? Why is the global South not absorbing Western moral and religious liberalism? And why are they not secularizing? One explanation is that perhaps I did not stress as clearly as I might have done—or that people failed to grasp, no matter how clearly I tried to make the argument!

Solid South. The first I have already discussed, namely, the idea of the Solid South. I do not for a second dispute the existence of powerful liberal and progressive trends in Southern churches, nor that such trends may grow stronger over time.

Shades of conservatism. Let me say more about the distinction I was trying to draw between different kinds of conservatism. I tried to argue that a person could be highly conservative or fundamentalist in theological or biblical terms, while being activist or even radical in a social or political sense, and that this combination is far more common than is appreciated by some Western academics, for whom the label “fundamentalist” serves to stifle further analysis. In the United States or Europe, the term “fundamentalism” usually suggests a bull-headed obstinacy in the face of facts, a tendency towards repression, especially against women or the sexually unorthodox. In fact, the biblical enthusiasm I have described is embraced by exactly those groups ordinarily portrayed as the victims of reactionary religion, particularly women. Instead of fundamentalism denying or defying modernity, the Bible supplies a tool to cope with modernity, to allow the move from traditional societies, and above all to assist the most marginalized members of society. I have admired the New York Times columns by Nicholas Kristof, whose praise of the social role of Christianity in Africa has run so contrary to the normal expectations of liberal readers.

Disparate statistics. I am still made deeply unhappy by some of the statistics cited for religious organizations worldwide, a point that applies with equal force to Christians and Muslims. While absolute numbers do not matter enormously, they are significant in suggesting relative influence and potential growth. While I have enormous respect for the World Christian Encyclopedia, I was struck by the large disparities that separate estimates about the size of Christian populations, especially in countries in which the religion is officially disapproved. To take a major example, the Encyclopedia gives India’s current Christian population as 62 million, around 6 percent of the whole. This includes 41 million “professing Christians” and 21 million “crypto-Christians.” This overall number is far higher than that reported by Indian census data, which are the figures used by U.S. government agencies. The CIA Factbook says there are around 24 million Indian Christians, and this number is reproduced by the U.S. State Department.8 Undoubtedly, Indian census counts discriminate against religions held by the underclass, which results in an undercounting of Christian strength. It is far from clear, though,
whether that undercount can explain the huge discrepancy (almost 40 million people!) that separates our sources here. In China, similarly, the World Christian Encyclopedia gives a figure of 90 million Christians, double what is commonly accepted by other sources. If the current estimates are too high, then any projections of future numbers are necessarily exaggerated. In each of these cases, the high estimates for crypto-Christians may prove to be correct, and David Aikman’s recent Jesus in Beijing underlines the strength of Chinese Christianity. But it is important not to fetishize numbers, nor to forget that these estimates are always just that—estimates, always subject to revision and reevaluation.

**Realigning our expectations.** I would make a caveat about what we might call the usefulness of the rising churches of the global South and their relevance to ecclesiastical debates in the North. As I tried to argue repeatedly in the book, the Southern churches will define themselves according to their own needs and interests. In understanding recent rhetorical uses of the Solid South—for instance, within the Anglican Communion—I describe what I call the “two dreams” that have dominated Western Christian approaches over the past half century or so. One is the Liberation Dream, the idea that a new Third World Christianity would deploy the radical texts of the biblical tradition in the service of an insurgent liberation theology. The other is the Conservative Dream, the more modern idea that the conservative churches of the South would cling to fundamentalist readings of the Bible and help restrain liberal trends in the North, especially in matters of gender and sexual orientation. My argument is that both expectations, liberal and conservative, are substantially wrong.

In summary, I am very pleased that books like The Next Christendom have helped stir American awareness of the emerging global patterns of Christianity. This Southern growth is a massive social fact, a dramatic change of religious geography that certainly carries vital lessons. In some cases, though, I fear that the wrong lessons have been drawn, as Americans and Europeans continue to view the rising churches through the lens of Western needs and interests, and their own immediate controversies. In contrast, I believe the issues raised are far more basic, raising for instance the question of whether New Testament Christianity is, as it appears, immensely more relevant to an agricultural or industrializing society than to an advanced postindustrial land.

**Notes**

Helsinki 2003: Jesus and His People

Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism

Conference statement:

The Reunion of Jesus and His People

We rejoice that Jewish people worldwide are finding their Messiah. Wherever the name of Jesus (Yeshua) is being proclaimed, He is being recognized by His own, despite the obstacles of misunderstanding, opposition, anti-Semitism and prejudice. We are particularly encouraged by the vibrant witness of Russian-speaking Jewish believers worldwide and the creative and courageous indigenous leadership they bring to our movement.

We also rejoice in the breaking down of barriers among those in local congregations and communities who were formerly divided on religious, ethnic and other grounds. True reconciliation takes place through the receiving of the peacemaking love of God, demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of the Messiah.

We observe with concern that there are those who do not consider verbal proclamation of the gospel to Jewish people a necessary part of the Great Commission. While we appreciate all those who care for the material needs of Jewish people, we are saddened when the eternal need of the Jewish people is not directly addressed.

We acclaim Jesus, who, like His people, experienced persecution and rejection. He is their Lord and Savior. We rejoice that despite efforts to legislate against evangelism, Jesus and His People are being reunited.

Who Is This Jesus?

We rejoice that in spite of current spiritual counterfeits and mystical speculation prevalent in the search for Jewish identity today, Jewish people are recognizing the uniqueness of Jesus and embracing Him as their Messiah.

We observe with concern the challenge to the deity of Jesus by some in the broader Messianic movement. A proclamation of a lesser Jesus, though more palatable to the Jewish community at large, will inevitably lead to a false gospel message.

We acclaim that Jesus is the one whom Moses called “a greater prophet” than himself. Indeed He is the one of whom the law and the prophets speak. There is salvation in no other name. He is both the suffering servant and God incarnate. This Christology is fundamental to our evangelism.

What of His People?

We rejoice that there is today increased freedom and opportunity to proclaim the Good News of the Messiah to Jewish people in areas that were previously closed, such as the former Soviet Union.

We rejoice in the progress towards reconciliation between Jewish and Arab believers which testifies that the bond believers share in Jesus transcends all political and geographic barriers.

We observe with concern whenever the national identity of Jewish believers takes precedence over their unity with others in the universal body of believers.

We observe with concern the need of the Jewish people for safety and security throughout a world where anti-Semitism and racial prejudice are still active. We also note the concern for preservation of Jewish identity in post-modern and pluralistic environments.

We acclaim Jesus as both the road and the map to true shalom with God and one another, and pray that those who seek peace and pursue it will know the presence and help of the Prince of Peace in all they do.

We acclaim Jesus, the true representative of Israel, as the key to His people’s search for identity and purpose.

What Is Our Response?

We call on one another, as those involved in the ministries of evangelism, teaching and congregational planting, to work in cooperation to bring Jesus and His People together. May we be quick to resolve issues among us and be united in the highest standards of ethical conduct and personal relationships. May we celebrate our diversity within our unity in Jesus.

We call on one another to share the need for Jewish evangelism with the emerging churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America. We call on our brothers and sisters there to pray and work for the salvation of the Jewish people.

We call on believers worldwide to share the Good News with the Jewish people, making every effort to relate the gospel in culturally appropriate ways, while maintaining that there is salvation in no other name.

We call on the Jewish people to recognize their Messiah and to follow Him. Israel is still chosen to fulfill her calling as His people, and this can only be accomplished when she recognizes the rightful place of Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

Ultimately we call on the name of the Lord and implore Jesus, in the power of His Spirit and to the glory of His Father, to strengthen us for the task, to unite us in His name, and to come quickly for His people and for all the world.

This statement was issued by the Seventh International Conference of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism, (LCJE) held in Helsinki, Finland, on August 7–12, 2003. More than 200 participants from eighteen countries and five continents met to consider the theme “Jesus and His People.” For further information, see www.lcje.net.
Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2004

David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson

The table opposite is the twentieth in an annual series describing statistics and trends in world mission, reporting on the previous year’s annual Christian megacensus—the totality of churches’ and church agencies’ annual censuses of their adherents, activities, personnel, finances, ministries, and all aspects of their mission in the world. This year we add five new lines: Lines 48 to 51 describe the mushrooming of Christian conciliarism, and Line 16 highlights a parallel non-Christian religious megabloc of staggering complexity.

What Christian Councils Contribute

A brief list of twelve words beginning with “c” may help: conciliarism contributes communication, consultation, conversation, communion, collegiality, confessionalism, cooperation, collaboration, centering on common fellowship, common witness, and common service in the cause of Christ.

A Phenomenal Worldwide Explosion

In this report, “councils” are ongoing bodies whose members are organized Christian denominations. Four varieties are tabulated opposite, as follows:

Confessional councils (Line 48). Termed Christian World Communions (CWCs) since 1957, these 310 major organizations at the world level each represent a single ecclesiastical tradition or family, such as Lutheran or Methodist or Anglican or Baptist or Roman Catholic or Russian Orthodox. The earliest were the 20 Orthodox and 13 Catholic patriarchates, who recorded councils at a steady rate from the second century on. Membership of each CWC is restricted to denominations sharing a common tradition. By contrast, the next three categories of councils admit denominations from two or three neighboring countries.

International councils of churches (Line 49). These 115 councils include 12 world, worldwide, or global councils (WCC, WEA, ICCC, WCBC, et alia), 40 continental councils (AACC, AEA, CCA, CCEE, CEC, CELAM, CLAI, CONELA, SECAM, etc.), and 63 regional councils (based on the United Nations’ twenty-one regions of the world).

National councils of churches (Line 50). Denominations of any tradition working within a single nation are admitted to these 890 councils in 205 countries. A few are plurinational councils with denominations from two or three neighboring countries.

Local councils of churches (Line 51). These councils number at least 9,700 in 180 countries. Each brings together any or all denominations and churches within a single city or metropolis (at present 2,500 councils are located in the world’s 4,830 metropolises and megacities [see Lines 7 and 8], for example, the Council of Churches of the City of New York); also counted here are councils in a province or other subnational political entity or area. Some 3,000 of them are linked to the Ecumenical movement (Britain has 600 such local ecumenical councils, USA 260, Netherlands 210, Sweden 75, Canada 70, Papua New Guinea 30, Indonesia 20, Myanmar 15, South Africa 14, India 14, Kenya 8, etc.); one thousand are linked to the Evangelical world; several hundred are linked to the Roman Catholic world; and the remaining 5,000 have no wider structural links.

National Councils Proliferate Globally

Arguably the most effective and powerful of these four groupings are the 890 national councils. By ecclesiastical heritage they form five categories. (1) Evangelical councils (NAE, EAGB, etc., usually called Fellowships or Alliances) number 160 in 140 countries. (2) Protestant councils restricted to Protestant bodies number 75 in 35 different countries. (3) Independent councils number 230 in 115 countries, run by and for Postdenominationalist and Charismatic churches. (4) Roman Catholic councils (national episcopal conferences) number 220 in 210 countries, in 74 of which Catholics have no non-Catholic conciliar involvement. (5) Ecumenical councils, with as equal members Anglican, Catholic, Evangelical, Independent, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations, number 205 councils in 150 countries. In 95 of these countries the Roman Catholic episcopal conference is also a full member of or is in close working relationship with the national Ecumenical council.

Christian and Non-Christian Megatrends

How valuable or effective is all this vast mass of conciliarism? One answer is simply to quote the formal, official themes announced long beforehand and repeated in titles of papers, speeches, broadcasts, and publications of the global Synodus Episcoporum (Synod of Catholic Bishops), which has convened twenty times for a total of 400 days in the last thirty-seven years: “Evangelization in the Modern World” (1974); “So That We Might Be Witnesses of Christ Who Has Set Us Free” (1991); “Christ Is Our Hope: Renewed by His Spirit, in Solidarity We Bear Witness to His Love” (1995); “Jesus Christ the Savior and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: ‘... That They May Have Life, and Have It Abundantly’ (John 10:10)” (April 1998); “Jesus Christ and the Peoples of Oceania: Walking His Way, Telling His Truth, Living His Life” (November 1998).

Most of the other 11,014 ongoing councils of churches in 2004 proclaim similar basic, hard-hitting, christocentric themes for each new meeting.

But lastly, we remind ourselves that the major strategic objective of all this conciliarism is to better reach and serve the world’s 4.2 billion non-Christians. To illustrate the magnitude of this task, consider our definition of Line 16: “Chinese universists: 400 million in 105 countries, being followers of a unique complex of many elements: universalism (yin/yang cosmology, with dualities earth/otherworld, evil/good, darkness/light, originating as far back as 3000 B.C.), ancestor cult, Confucian ethics, divination, festivals, folklore, goddess worship, household gods, local deities, mediums, metaphysics, monasteries, Neo-Confucianism, popular religion, sacrifices, shamans, spirit-writing, Taoist and Buddhist elements.”

How do we bring together these two mighty forces—Christian conciliarism and non-Christian universalism?

Theological Education in South East Asia, 1957–2002

Choo Lak Yeow

After World War II the economies of virtually all the nations in South East Asia were in shambles. Building up theological education in such dire times could not have been more difficult or more challenging. The first steps were taken at a conference on theological education held in Bandung, Indonesia, in February 1952. A follow-up conference in February/March 1956 in Bangkok, Thailand, established an association of theological school principals, which in 1957 founded the Association of Theological Schools and Colleges in South East Asia. The association, originally comprising sixteen schools, was formed to establish standards for theological education in the region, to promote mutual understanding, and to advise and assist in the solving of problems in theological education, with special reference to the sociopolitical issues unique to doing theology in South East Asia.

Between 1957 and 1981 the association did all it could to encourage and assist member schools in building up their national faculty and library resources. A postcolonial South East Asia called for seminary teachers who not only were fully qualified educationally but also were in tune with the rapid sociopolitical changes taking place in the region, possessing a theological mind-set capable of understanding what was taking place around them culturally, politically, economically, socially, and religiously. Sufficient library resources were also needed for adequate research and to enable students to keep abreast of current scholarship.

Culturally, the region was beginning to embrace, and once again be proud of, the age-old cultures that had been put down by the former colonial masters. Politically, the challenge to prepare honest and efficient leaders was as difficult as it was urgent. Economically, the region needed to learn how to function more self-sufficiently and how to stimulate growth. Socially, almost every country in the region did its best to deal realistically and cohesively with its varieties of races and tribes. Religiously, interfaith dialogues were seen as a sure way to avoid religious conflict and cohesively with its varieties of races and tribes. Religiously, interfaith dialogues were seen as a sure way to avoid religious conflict and cohesively with its varieties of races and tribes. Religiously, interfaith dialogues were seen as a sure way to avoid religious conflict and cohesively with its varieties of races and tribes. Religiously, interfaith dialogues were seen as a sure way to avoid religious conflict and cohesively with its varieties of races and tribes. Religiously, interfaith dialogues were seen as a sure way to avoid religious conflict and cohesively with its varieties of races and tribes. Religiously, interfaith dialogues were seen as a sure way to avoid religious conflict and cohesively with its varieties of races and tribes. Religious, interfaith dialogues were seen as a sure way to avoid religious blood-letting in the street. Doing theology in South East Asia had to account for all these Asian givens.

As the economy improved, so did the numerical growth of churches, so much so that almost all denominations began experiencing growth pains. Member schools realized that they must produce enough qualified graduates to meaningfully pastor congregations, some quite traditional, others experiencing charismatic renewal.

In the midst of all these exciting developments, attempts to engage more fully the supporting churches of the member schools often achieved only partial success. More would have to be done in this area.

ATESEA

In 1981 the group changed its name to the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA). This name change reflected our belief that the association should relate not only with our member schools but also with their supporting churches in order to bridge the gap that too often separated seminary and church. Furthermore, the need to make theological education available beyond the four walls of the seminary was keenly felt. Both concerns led our association to bring together three groups in the church that normally do not mingle much with each other: church leaders, social-action activists, and theological educators. Between 1983 and 1986 these leaders met in Theological Seminar Workshops, which considered issues such as doing theology with Asian resources, including folk stories, people's movements, and women's participation and leadership in Asian churches.

The association soon began to reap benefits from the labors of leaders who had sought to pay more attention to the so-called Critical Asian Principle, which “seeks to identify what is distinctively Asian and uses this distinctiveness as a critical principle of judgment on matters dealing with the life and mission of the Christian community, theology, and theological education in Asia.”1 One example is ATESEA’s doctorate of pastoral studies, which endeavors to blend academic and pastoral training in a program that is fully attuned and relevant to Asian realities.

By 2002 ATESEA had grown to ninety-two member institutions in fourteen places: Australia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. From the beginning, its headquarters have been alternately in Singapore (1957–74, 1981–98) and Manila (1974–81, 1998–present). ATESEA schools currently enroll approximately 10,000 students, most of whom are pursuing first degree in theological study, with a much smaller number doing research at the master’s or doctoral level. The total faculty at all institutions is approximately 550; the libraries collectively contain 778,000 volumes.

The number of faculty members and the library resources vary greatly from school to school, with some institutions in large urban settings, and others in rural areas. Some of the larger programs are the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Manila, and Trinity Theological College, Singapore, each with twelve faculty members holding a Ph.D. or Th.D. and with over 35,000 volumes in its library. Only slightly smaller are Sekolah Tinggi Teoloji, Jakarta, Indonesia; Taiwan Theological College and Seminary, Tainan; Tainan Theological College and Seminary, Tainan, Taiwan; and the Theology Division of the Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong. These four institutions are almost ready to offer their own doctoral programs, for which a minimum of twelve faculty members with the Ph.D. or Th.D. degree are needed, as well as a library of at least 30,000 volumes.

Some of the member institutions publish their own journal of theology or are responsible for publishing their denominational theological journal. Such efforts are surely milestones in the making and shaping of theology in South East Asia.

ATESEA itself began publishing the South East Asia Journal of Theology in 1959. In 1983 it merged with the North East Asia Journal of Theology (published in Tokyo from 1968) to become the East Asia Journal of Theology, published from Singapore. The name changed for the last time in 1987, when it became the Asia Journal of Theology. Overall, it seeks to encourage Asian theology and scholarship, to explore the relation between the Gospel and

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Asian culture, and to study the problems that arise in teaching theology.

Besides the *Asia Journal of Theology*, ATESEA sponsored thirteen volumes of occasional papers between 1983 and 1994:

- Theological Education for Women (1983)
- Management and Accountability in Theological Education (1986)
- Doing Theology and People’s Movements in Asia (1987)
- Doing Theology with Religions of Asia (1987)
- Women’s Participation and Contributions in Asian Churches (1988)
- Doing Theology with Cultures in Asia (1988)
- Challenges and Opportunities in Theological Education in Asia (1988)
- Doing Theology with People’s Symbols and Images (1989)
- Theology and Communication (1990)
- Doing Theology with God’s Purpose in Asia (1990)
- Doing Theology with the Spirit’s Movements in Asia (1991)
- Doing Christian Theology in Asian Ways (1993)
- Doing Theology with the Festivals and Customs of Asia (1994)

In addition, ATESEA has published several collections of significant papers from a variety of sources as part of the series “Doing Theology with Asian Resources”:

- Theology and Politics (1992)
- Theology and Cultures (1995)
- Theology and Religious Plurality (1996)
- Innovative Theological Education in Asia (forthcoming)

**SEAGST**

In 1966 the predecessor of ATESEA established the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST). The three main reasons for founding such an institution were to counter a brain-drain problem, to save money, and to develop contextual theology. The bright students sent overseas in the 1950s and 1960s either did not return to Asia or, if they did, could not overcome their reentry problems. Second, it was—and still is—much less expensive to do graduate study in Asia than to do it in the West. Third, graduate programs in the West are simply not Asia-oriented. To encourage the development of contextual theology in Asia, it makes sense to pursue graduate study in Asia.

SEAGST began with a master of theology program, followed by two doctoral programs: in theology, begun in 1972, and in pastoral studies, started in 1981. Tjaard Hommes played a significant role in the latter. What started with a handful of graduate students now has an average of 150 master’s and doctoral candidates in any given year. As of November 2001 there were ninety master’s candidates and sixty-three doctoral students.

Twenty-six of ATESEA’s ninety-two schools participate in SEAGST, which is organized under a “cluster” system in eight areas, each with its own dean and several with their own registrar. The graduate school was organized originally in five areas—Hong Kong, Malaysia-Singapore-Thailand, Philippines, Taiwan, and western Indonesia. The other three have been established more recently: East Indonesia (2000), Myanmar (2001), and Sri Lanka (planned for 2003). The participating schools provide library resources for the candidates’ research and qualified faculty to mentor the master’s and doctoral candidates. This arrangement has considerably reduced the expenses normally incurred by graduate schools.

As of May 2002 SEAGST had granted 202 degrees: 111 master of theology degrees, 53 doctorates in theology, and 38 doctorates in pastoral studies. The steady progress shown by SEAGST is surely a token of greater accomplishments to come. It is indeed very gratifying to see the master’s and doctoral graduates rendering yeoman service in both the churches and the seminaries. Indeed, most of the leaders of our churches and the heads of our seminaries have come from the ranks of ATESEA/SEAGST.

**Contextualize to Stay Relevant**

The era after World War II was one of nation building in many parts of the world. In Asia the newly independent nations were beginning to learn to rule themselves and by themselves. What was the role of the church in such circumstances? How was doing theology a help or a hindrance in postcolonial Asia? And when Asian nations started to get rich and then, after July 1997, faced—and continue to face—an economic crisis, what role did and does theology have? Very great indeed!

It is very clear that from their inception, both ATESEA and SEAGST sought to interact with contemporary theological, educational, social, and political issues and concerns facing church and society. By logic and necessity, both ATESEA and SEAGST had to contextualize to stay relevant. We see this emphasis in the thrust of the master’s theses and doctoral dissertations, whose methodological underpinning displays the Critical Asian Principle. The Asian orientation of this work adds to the growing body of contextual theological literature in Asia.

It is worth noting that quite a fair portion of theses and dissertations have been written in the writers’ mother tongue. For example, SEAGST students have written doctoral dissertations in Chinese and Tagalog—the first such works in the history of the church in these languages.

**Interactions**

Unfortunately, Asia must carry the burden of denominational battles emanating from the West. The scars and wounds of such conflicts live on in Asia and inevitably take a long time to heal. It does seem, though, that God has used ATESEA, SEAGST, and the Asia Journal of Theology to be a small dose of the balm in Gilead. Within our institutional structures, leaders from main-line churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Iglesia ni Cristo (Tagalog “Church of Christ”) have assembled to do theology together, doctrinal differences notwithstanding. At the risk of being simplistic, we could say that while others talk of ecumenism, the ATESEA circle practices it.

One specific example of theological educators from different denominations and churches coming together to do theology is the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA), whose aim is to “strengthen, through concentrated joint efforts, the formation of living theology and to facilitate the growth of a

Ten years later, in 1997, ATESEA brokered the establishment of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS), a biennial gathering of theologians that endeavors to build on the aims and program of PTCA. The first congress was held at the Somang Retreat Centre, Sawon, South Korea. CATS II met in Bangalore, India, in 1999. CATS III, with the theme “Visioning New Life Together Among Asian Religions,” was held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 2001. The fourth congress met in August 2003 in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

ATESEA member schools in Australia and New Zealand include Roman Catholic leadership and participation, but unfortunately this level of ecumenism does not exist in the rest of our constituency. Through networking with the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College, India, there is some intrinsic connection with the Mar Thoma Church, which is also true in a much lesser degree with our member schools Seminari Teoloji Malaysia and the Trinity Theological College in Singapore. Apart from this much-treasured connection, the Orthodox family in Asia is not very physically visible in theological education.

Almost from the beginning, Pentecostals have been actively involved in ATESEA, for example, in Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in Baguio City, Philippines, and lately Tung Ling Bible College in Singapore. The same is true with evangelicals generally, as illustrated by the Christian and Missionary Alliance’s Alliance Biblical Seminary in Manila and Campus Crusade for Christ’s East Asia School of Theology, Singapore. In 2001 the association received into membership the College of Mission, New Era University, Quezon City, Philippines, an institution affiliated with Iglesia ni Cristo.

The Asia Theological Association (ATA), an evangelical organization that accredits many Bible schools in Asia, also sponsors the Asia Graduate School of Theology, with its own master’s and doctoral programs. Very unfortunately, and except for institutions mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the constituency of the ATA typically does not favor cooperation with ATESEA.

From the beginning, the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, which became the Programme on Theological Education and is currently known as the Ecumenical Theological Education Desk, has been a close partner and enabler. Samuel Amirtham, when he was director of the Programme on Theological Education, was responsible for engaging ATESEA in the formation of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI). The Ecumenical Theological Education Desk still continues to provide small grants for women doctoral candidates within ATESEA.

Looking Ahead

Luxuriating on a bed of roses has never been the lot of theological practitioners in Asia. Invariably, and almost inevitably, success is followed by a coming short of the mark. To begin with, theological education in Asia has not always reckoned in a timely manner with the numerous changes taking place in South East Asia. For example, the knowledge explosion that is sweeping the region has generally left theological instruction both breathless and far behind what is happening.²

Additionally and almost without exception, Asian theological educators are far behind when it comes to relating theology to scientific and medical issues, for example, the ethical-theological implications of biochemical warfare or of cloning. We are almost clueless when it comes to dealing with the fast-advancing body of scientific and medical knowledge, let alone relating it to doing theology.

Finally, I perceive that Asian theological educators, not to mention church leaders, are not sufficiently involved in relating theology to politics, despite the best efforts of both ATESEA and SEAGST. Not surprisingly, then, Asian church leaders and theological educators have been ineffective in persuading churches to be actively engaged in conflict resolution and in cultivating reconciliation processes in the midst of the senseless massacres taking place in so many killing fields in the region.

In the future, a new generation of church leaders and theological educators in Asia will build on the present programs of theological education. As they do so, they will need to be conscious of the growth needed in all dimensions: hand (skills and art in ministering), head (critical theological reflection), and heart (spiritual formation). Specifically, the new leaders must consider the following tasks:

- addressing adequately the highly complex Gospel-cultures matrix;
- nurturing intellectual efforts to discover the truth of the Christian faith as a living tradition with the capacity to illumine our human situation and provide motivation and direction for transforming it;
- fostering a critical framework for doing theology in the midst of Asian givens;
- encouraging theological educators to experiment with various forms of worship and also to use various media in worship such as traditional dance, music, and musical instruments;
- exploring ethics involved in the latest medical developments (e.g., human cloning);
- advancing conflict-resolution in places that have become scenes of bloodshed;
- doing advocacy work to enable churches and other religious institutions to prevent extreme fundamentalists in their midst from practicing terrorism;
- bridging the liberal-evangelical divide; and
- continuing to encourage all, but with special attention to ATESEA’s smaller member schools, to develop their national faculty members and to increase significantly their library resources, to include the use of computers, CDs, and the full range of audiovisual aids.

Is the future of Asian theological education bleak? By no means! On the contrary, I am persuaded that doing theology in Asia has a bright future, provided its practitioners are bent on relating the proclamation of the Word of God to Asian givens. In

The knowledge explosion has left theological instruction breathless and far behind.
My Pilgrimage in Mission

Kenneth B. Mulholland

My pilgrimage in mission has been both continual and incremental. I was born on October 24, 1937, in Oak Park, Illinois, and grew up in neighboring Forest Park. My parents, though stable and respectful of religion, neither belonged to nor attended church. My father, a newspaperman, provided me with my first window on the wider world. He inevitably returned home from downtown laden with most, if not all, of Chicago’s daily newspapers. Paging through them was part of our family routine.

When I was about ten, an aunt introduced me to Sunday school at the neighborhood Evangelical and Reformed Church, where I was later confirmed. My first impression of missionaries, derived from the presentation of a visiting missionary to Africa, was that of religious adventurers. As a preteen boy, I was more impressed with slides of animals and safaris than with those of chapels and groups of believers.

Through the witness of high school friends, I came to a personal and decisive commitment to Christ during the summer before my senior year of high school. This step dramatically altered my religious understanding. My attempt to earn God’s favor by my good works and moral lifestyle was replaced by gratitude for God’s unmerited grace. Motivated by an overwhelming sense of God’s love, I desired with all my heart to obey him whatever the cost and to share the Gospel with others.

During my senior year in high school, I was among several students in our class of 800 who made a determined effort to challenge our classmates to Christian commitment. We carried Bibles or New Testaments to school and distributed tracts when appropriate. We sought to write reports, essays, and term papers from a Christian perspective, participated in Hi-Y and Hi-C (high school Christian clubs), took an active role in student leadership, and increase my awareness of the global nature of Christian faith. A sociology course on race and culture awakened me to the plight of ethnic and minority groups, as well as heightened my concern for the dispossessed, marginalized, and oppressed. The study of world religions strengthened my conviction regarding the uniqueness of Christianity while at the same time instilling in me understanding of and respect for adherents of non-Christian religions. A course on the history of U.S. foreign policy made me aware of the global impact of the United States for both good and ill.

A turning point in my life occurred in 1959 at the conclusion of my senior year. Elmhurst’s youthful Greek professor, Ken Ziebell, proposed that a group of Elmhurst students spend the summer overseas to take advantage of a thaw in the cold war that, for the first time, made it possible for tourists to travel behind the iron curtain in their own vehicles. June would be spent together in Western Europe, and July in the Soviet Union.

Some measure, ATESEA, SEAGST, and the Asia Journal of Theology, have blazed trails for posterity to follow—and now posterity must turn the trails into highways!

During the past half century a foundation has been laid for theological education in South East Asia. Current and upcoming builders could perhaps take inspiration from the ambition of Paul, who was not satisfied with past accomplishments. Indeed, he sought to “proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand’” (Rom. 15:20–21). May the insights gained and lessons learned from ATESEA’s ongoing endeavor to grapple with the Gospel-cultural matrix continue to bear fruit so as to bring the Good News much more visibly and understandably to the peoples and cultures of South East Asia. In all the past achievements and future possibilities, to God alone be all the glory!

Notes

2. I have coined the verb “billgate,” meaning “to make available, disseminate, and transmit information in a lightning-fast manner.” With the advent of the chip generation and the lightning-fast manner in which Bill Gates’s Microsoft has impacted our world, it is almost literally true to say that bits and bytes of knowledge are doubly fast chipping in and swiftly fast-tracking out. Doing theology in Asia, however, is often perceived as falling far behind the “billgating” processes.

Kenneth B. Mulholland was the Elmer V. Thompson Professor of Missionary Church Planting and former dean of Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of Missions. He and his wife, Ann, served for fifteen years as missionaries to Central America under the United Church Board for World Ministries. Editor’s note: Kenneth Mulholland succumbed to cancer on September 8, 2003.
and Czechoslovakia. In August we would split up to participate individually in ecumenical voluntary service work camps, a forerunner of summer missions, located at various sites in Europe and the Middle East.

The month of traveling in Western Europe made my college history major come alive as I visited the places and identified with the events about which I had read. The experience behind the iron curtain introduced me to Communist society. Encounters with students, worship with both Orthodox and Baptists, conversations with church leaders, interaction with convinced Communists, and observation of the oppressive nature of Marxist societies shaped my critique of Communism and gave me a profound appreciation of the persecuted church in Communist lands. Visits to memorial sites and a tour of Auschwitz generated sympathy for the suffering of the Russian and Polish peoples, as well as a visceral identification with the horror endured by the Jews during the Holocaust.

After ten days of traveling overland by myself from Vienna to Jerusalem, I arrived at the work camp in Ramallah, Jordan, where I joined twenty or so participants representing a variety of ecclesiastical affiliations and nationalities. One of our first tasks was to erect a large cross overseeing the work site, where we would supplement a large, newly constructed central leprosarium by building three cottages for married couples who had leprosy. We also laid out an internal road system.

On weekends we had opportunity to become acquainted with biblical sites. Visits to Anglican and Lutheran churches, as well as to a variety of schools and other ministries, introduced us to the broad range of Protestant mission endeavors. Along the way we gained some exposure to Roman Catholic religious orders and the various Orthodox churches. In this brief time I became deeply appreciative of the Arab Christian community.

The presence of Islam in the Middle East was inescapable: the mosques, the call to prayer, and the holy places met me everywhere. The issue of Christian witness in Muslim lands was new to me. Now I faced questions of how to communicate the Gospel effectively not only to secularists, Communists, and nominal Christians but also to adherents of a completely different faith. I was profoundly impressed by the dedication of missionaries from a variety of nations and churches, as well as by devoted national Christians and their pastors.

If the presence of Islam was inescapable, so was the Arab-Israeli tension. I was exposed for the first time to the Palestinian point of view. I sensed the tension and the frustration created by the burgeoning refugee camps filled with persons no one seemed to want. I learned a great deal about the duplicity of British foreign policy, the development of Zionism, and the events leading up to the Arab-Israeli war. Never had I experienced the level of hatred that existed between Palestinians and Israelis. I realized the dilemma this enmity posed for Americans who desired to support the state of Israel, yet also desired the friendship of the Arab world.

An unexpected result of the work camp experience was meeting the woman who was to become my wife, Ann Christensen, one of the participants. Ann was a Presbyterian missionary (fraternal worker) to Lebanon. Our acquaintance at the work camp developed into a two-year romance by correspondence and a wedding in 1961, three weeks after she returned to the United States upon the completion of her four-year term of service. Later, God blessed our union with three children.

**Entering the Pastorate**

From that summer abroad, I returned to the United States to begin studies at Lancaster (Pa.) Theological Seminary, still determined to be a pastor, but now intentionally committed to support the international mission of the church to the best of my ability. I was convinced of the abiding validity of the Great Commission, but also deeply aware of the cost of following Christ and bearing witness in lands where Christians were in the minority.

During my second year of seminary I served as student assistant pastor at First Reformed United Church of Christ, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. On one occasion I prepared to preach on Acts 1:8 to encourage the congregation to become more active in local evangelism. As I prepared, however, I realized that I could not with integrity urge them to bear witness in Jerusalem unless I was willing to bear witness to the ends of the earth. No longer was it sufficient to circumscribe God’s call on my life to the pastorate of a neighborhood church without being willing to serve God anywhere in the world where I could best be used by him. The ensuing spiritual struggle resulted in a firm commitment to consider missionary service and, following our wedding, led Ann and me to initiate contact with the United Church Board for World Ministries (UCBWM).

Following graduation from seminary in 1962, I became the full-time pastor of Bethel Charge—three rural congregations of about 200 members each—located in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. Ann and I remained in contact with the UCBWM concerning possible missionary service in the future.

The move to Lebanon County involved significant cultural adjustment and exposure to sectors of society with which I had little previous familiarity. It prepared me well for what lay ahead. In one of the churches parishioners preferred to speak Pennsylvania Dutch, switching to English out of courtesy to me. I sampled foods I had never before tasted. A product of urban America, I learned to adapt to the values and ways of rural America, including gardening and hunting. Our churches were located on the rim of Appalachia, and I became acquainted with rural poverty. An Assemblies of God pastor and I began a chaplaincy ministry, which endures to this day, in the county prison. Concerned about racial justice, I became a supporter of the civil rights movement, missing Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech only because of an unexpected death in the parish.

**Called to Latin America**

In 1965 the UCBWM contacted us with word that they were interested in appointing us to teach at the Theological Institute of the Evangelical and Reformed Synod of Honduras. They wanted someone with pastoral experience and academic aptitude, although an advanced degree was not essential, given the level of instruction. The missionaries wanted us to come, and the national church agreed. Ann and I had always envisioned missionary service in either the Middle East or Ghana, but after a prayerful struggle, including the issue of proper timing to leave Bethel Charge, we agreed to serve.
Following missionary orientation and language school, we arrived in Honduras. Although my primary responsibility was leadership development, I became involved in multiple phases of mission work. These included administration of educational and medical work, evangelistic preaching, an interim pastorate, and relief work occasioned by various natural disasters and the 1969 war between Honduras and El Salvador.

The most defining moments of our first term, however, centered on the development of theological education by extension (TEE) not as a replacement for, but as a supplement to, the residential program in place at that time. While the residential program trained promising young single adults, many mature adults were already exercising leadership in churches around the north coast, often in places underserved by pastors with multiple churches or preaching points under their care. These leaders lacked both credentials and access to further training. By creating a multifaceted, multilevel approach to leadership training, we were able to increase enrollment from six students to more than fifty and to create access for many real leaders who would otherwise be denied needed training. These experiences became the focus of my S.T.M. thesis at Lancaster Theological Seminary (1971), later published under the title Adventures in Training the Ministry (1976).

My election, in 1968, as the only North American missionary to serve on the executive committee of the Latin American Association of Theological Schools (ALET) provided a magnificent opportunity for exposure to theological education from Mexico to Ecuador. The evangelical church in Latin America was growing faster than leaders could be trained by traditional methods. TEE opened the door for a multiplicity of alternative delivery systems that transformed theological education and provided a catalyst that would influence leadership training throughout the entire world.

**Digging Deeper, Reaching Wider**

For me this period was a time of theological refoasing as well. The ecumenical shift toward humanization as the goal of mission seemed to me incompatible with the biblical witness. In protest, I supported the Frankfurt Declaration (1970), in spite of its overly strident tone. Later I affirmed the validity of the conclusions set forth in Latin American Church Growth (1969), a controversial book by William Read, Victor Monterroso, and Harmon Johnson. Church growth and multiplication are a legitimate outcome of mission and, except in contexts of extreme resistance, should be expected. At the same time, rampant oppression and social injustice, apparent in Central America, could not be ignored by the church. Mission involved a social dimension as well as an evangelistic focus.

In 1971 I enrolled in a doctoral program at Fuller Theological Seminary. When we arrived in California, not only was the counterculture everywhere apparent and antiwar protest increasing, but the Jesus movement was gaining in momentum. Surprisingly, I found myself cast in a pastoral role at a Jesus People commune. How could I, a slightly older “establishment type,” relate well to the Jesus people? I came to the conclusion that my missionary experience had taught me to accept their faith as an authentic expression within their particular cultural framework rather than imposing upon them my patterns of worship, dress, and behavior. That same cultural awareness proved helpful in launching a ministry among the deaf during an interim pastorate of thirteen months.

As I neared the conclusion of my dissertation at Fuller, Ann and I received an invitation to return to Latin America as missionaries. I was invited to teach in the area of pastoral theology at the Latin American Biblical Seminary, located in San José, Costa Rica. The seminary, founded by the Latin American Mission, was both interdenominational and international and was known throughout the continent to be in the vanguard of progressive evangelical thinking. We became the first UCBWM missionaries ever assigned to Costa Rica, the result of a new partnership between a mainline mission agency and a seminary from the faith-mission tradition.

We returned to Costa Rica days after nearby Managua, Nicaragua, had been devastated by an earthquake; we soon recognized that Latin America was being convulsed by a series of political and economic shock waves other than those occasioned by natural disasters. Repressive right-wing dictatorships and leftist, often Marxist, movements vied for the loyalty of Latin Americans. The emergence of liberation theology provided a popular rationale for church involvement in the political arena. Although the seminary faculty moved gradually to embrace liberation theology as a contextual response to the existing oppression in Latin America, I sought to formulate a socially responsible posture consistent with a full-orbed evangelical theology. I felt it necessary to take into account God’s transcendence as well as his immanence and to recognize humankind’s sinful nature as well as human dignity and potential. In this effort the newly formulated Lausanne Covenant (1974) was especially helpful. I learned much from both Latin American and North American colleagues, several of whom had attended the Lausanne gathering, including a close personal friend, Orlando Costas.

**Ann and I were involved in a remarkable movement of the Spirit of God that brought thousands to a living faith in Christ.**

Soon thereafter, I became a part of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, whose members recognized the legitimacy of the issues posed by liberation theology, but who sought a more biblical response to those issues.

Also out of Lausanne came the emphasis on unreached people groups and the necessity of continued cross-cultural mission effort. This emphasis challenged missiologies that stated that foreign mission activity should be withdrawn from countries with a Christian presence because the established church in each country was now solely responsible for the evangelization of that nation, regardless of the size of the church or whether the church was confined to just a single ethnic or people group in the country. Soon the U.S. Center for World Mission was founded as a catalyst for this emphasis; I became an early supporter and, years later, a board member.

In Costa Rica Ann and I were involved in a remarkable movement of the Spirit of God that brought thousands to a living faith in Christ and resulted in unprecedented evangelical church growth and significant renewal among Roman Catholics. The movement magnified the lordship of Christ and placed great emphasis upon serious discipleship. My involvement helped me to come to a deeper awareness of the fullness of the Holy Spirit and a greater appreciation of the Pentecostal and charismatic streams,
as well as an awareness of the excesses to which they were sometimes prone. My capacity and desire to praise God grew greatly. The reality of spiritual warfare was impressed upon me as I encountered demonically possessed individuals and, through my counseling ministry, recognized the grip the occult exercised in people’s lives.

Training Missionaries

In 1980, after nearly fifteen years as field missionaries, we accepted a long-standing invitation from Robertson McQuilkin to join the faculty of Columbia Graduate School of Bible and Missions, the graduate division of what was then called Columbia Bible College but is known today as Columbia International University. Known for its missionary training emphasis, Columbia seemed the right place to continue fulfilling the Great Commission by equipping pastors with a global vision as well as training missionaries.

Knowledge gained from our years of service in Central America, rural Pennsylvania, and the 1959 trip through Europe, Russia, and the Middle East provided the backdrop for shaping the direction of Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of Missions. Priorities included commitment to alternative educational delivery systems; recognition of the need for partnership with Christian churches and missions; emphasis on Muslim studies, tent-making ministries, and church multiplication; and preparation of pastors to make a global impact as they ministered in increasingly multicultural contexts.

My pilgrimage in mission did not stop with the move to Columbia. Preparation for teaching a wide variety of courses has provided a wonderful opportunity for in-depth learning, as has interaction with students, many of whom have had significant international experience before enrolling at Columbia. Ministry opportunities in Asia, Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, and Latin America have offered firsthand exposure to field missionaries and national leaders. Participation in the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) has proved to be a wonderful opportunity for wrestling with pertinent issues and for developing a network of colleagues in ministry, many of whom have become valued friends. My 1990 presidential address to the EMS gave me an opportunity to describe the role of the missions professor.

Participation on the boards of significant mission-related agencies, associations, and ministries further expanded my understanding of the mission community and underscored the need for vision, accountability, cooperation, and sound management. Involvement in the AD2000 and Beyond movement resulted in a major role in drafting the 1997 President’s and Dean’s (PAD) Declaration in Pretoria, South Africa. This declaration represented 250 presidents and deans of educational institutions from fifty-three nations and called for all training schools to take the necessary steps to further the goal of a church for every person and the Gospel for every person.

In October 2001 I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, an incurable but treatable cancer, which has severely limited my mobility and compromised my immune system. I rejoice in the reality of being a member of the universal body of Christ as I receive continual outpouring of godly counsel, genuine concern, and much prayer both locally and from around the globe.

The Legacy of Dorothy Davis Cook

Susan E. Elliott

Too often the lives, contributions, and legacies of missionary nurses have been ignored in our mission histories. Here I wish to highlight the remarkable ministry and service of Reverend Sister Tutor Dorothy Davis Cook, Church of the Nazarene missionary nurse who served in Swaziland from 1940 to 1972.

Modern nursing began with a call from God. According to Florence Nightingale’s own testimony, “On February 7, 1837, God spoke to me and called me to His service.” Similar experience awaited the woman who would become known as the Mother of Swazi Nurses. On a Sunday afternoon in September 1928, sixteen-year-old Dorothy Davis heard the voice of God calling her to Africa. The key verse that day was Psalm 2:8—“Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.” Nightingale did not know that in being obedient to God, she would change the health and well-being of the world. Dorothy did not know that day that her inheritance, her children, would be the Swazi women she raised and trained to be Christian nurses.

Dorothy Fay Davis was born in Hugo, Colorado, on March 29, 1912. Raised in a Christian home, she spent the majority of her childhood in Alhambra, California. She graduated from Pasadena College (now Point Loma Nazarene University) in 1934. A statement under her senior photo reads, “Pasadena College has given many talented people to the mission field. This year we are proud to have one who has consecrated her life to this cause.”

Following her Pasadena years, Davis continued her education at the Nazarene Samaritan Hospital in Nampa, Idaho. Established in 1920 and since closed in 1951, Samaritan Hospital opened for the purpose of preparing nurses for medical missions. Davis graduated from Samaritan in 1938 and then completed her bachelor of science degree at Northwest Nazarene College, also in Nampa. She was appointed to Nazarene missionary service on November 22, 1939.

Swaziland

After six weeks at sea crossing the Atlantic, which was then a World War II battlefield, Davis arrived in Africa on June 4, 1940. Her first year of service was in the north of Swaziland. The village of Endzingini (sometimes spelled Indzingini) is where Harmon Schmelzenbach had first opened the African missionary program of the Church of the Nazarene and where missionary nurse Lillian Cole built the first Nazarene hospital. In addition to seeing

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clinic patients and caring for orphans, Davis began learning the Zulu language—and the importance of prayer in a missionary’s life.9

The Swazi had migrated to this region over 300 years earlier. The Kingdom of Swaziland is a small country (6,704 square miles), with the borders determined by the British and Dutch colonialists, the Zulu War, and the Boer War. King Sobhuza II was Ngwenyama (the Lion) of Swaziland from 1921 to 1982, keeping the nation and culture of the Swazi alive. Upon the request of the king, the Nazarene hospital had been moved from Endzingini to the city of Bremerdorp (now Manzini), which was more centrally located in the country. There the missionaries recognized the value of training nationals to care for their own. The first Swazi trainee was pulled from the hospital garden to be an extra pair of hands in surgery. She did so well that a nurse’s aide program was initiated. Missionary nurse Jennie Evelyn Fox expanded the program to four years and added basic midwifery.7

Davis felt the call to teach nursing and so was transferred to the Raleigh Fitkin Memorial Hospital and Nazarene Nursing School in Bremerdorp to serve as a “sister” (i.e., registered nurse) and later take leadership of the Swazi nursing program. The king was very supportive of Davis’s service to his people. However, Swaziland was also a member, though unwillingly, of the British Empire until 1968 and subject to British standards for the nursing profession. These standards influenced both Davis’s own further education and the nursing regulatory process that she helped formulate.8

Building the Foundation

In early 1943 Davis placed herself on night duty in the hospital so that her mornings and evenings would be free for teaching and for clinic visits. She always integrated nursing education with Christian education. Mildred Dlamini, a student in Davis’s first class, recalled, “Sister Davis, she worked very hard with first year students in homes and in the hospital.11

During the ensuing years, Davis expanded her credentials both in nursing and in ministry. Her professional growth and development included learning about, and then teaching about, new diseases and causes of ill-health common to Swaziland. These included syphilis (the most common cause of morbidity and mortality), malaria, bilharziasis, leprosy, tuberculosis, trauma (from drinking, fights, and automobile crashes), burns from cooking fires and lightning, malnutrition, and pregnancy-related complications. In an effort to remain current with advancing nursing science knowledge, Davis subscribed to the American Journal of Nursing.10

In 1945 Davis completed all requirements in Zulu study. In 1946 she became a certified nurse midwife, thus meeting a British requirement. Believing that she should train with Bantu nurses in the care of Bantu patients (Bantu were, and are, the majority in the region), Davis resisted pressure to train in a white hospital and completed her midwifery training at McCord-Zulu Hospital in Durban, South Africa. Because of her accomplished midwifery skills, she would later be called upon to deliver very high-risk patients in homes and in the hospital.11

In focused preparation for serving as the principal of the Nazarene nursing school, Davis next completed her sister tutor training in London, England, in 1951. This too was a requirement of the British government. Back in Swaziland, creative teaching was a necessity for Davis. She stated, “I always took some of the nurses with me and used it as a teaching point. They always

While teaching nursing, Davis was also building a spiritual foundation by preaching and opening churches.

Nazarene while on furlough in California. Back in Swaziland she held services in the hospital wards and daily in the nursing school chapel. For a time she was in charge of all Nazarene Sunday schools in the country. Nurse Hope Dlamini reported that before Davis and students opened the antenatal and child welfare clinic for the day, Davis held a service.15 Nurse Martha Zubuko, former student of Davis and now a pastor’s wife at the Enculwini church, clinic, and school started by Davis, stated: “Dorothy was a preacher. She was not only a nurse, she was a preacher. She conducted services in the morning and used to attend the prayer and fasting services. On Sundays . . . she has to go outside and take some nurses outside to go and preach. And I was one of those whom she helped spiritually.”16

Davis placed herself in a unique position in her effort to share Jesus Christ one-on-one with her students. During the
Davis lived with the students, sharing common eating and bathroom facilities with them.

break was when a student became pregnant and had to be dismissed from the home and school. The twenty-four-hour-a-day relationship between Davis and her students lasted until 1966.17

Establishing the Legacy

Davis’s reputation as a quality nurse educator extended beyond the borders of Swaziland. She was appointed to serve on the High Commission Territories Nursing Council, the British governing body for Swaziland, Basutoland (Lesotho), and Bechuanaland (Botswana). The council early recognized the Nazarene Nursing School as the first in the territories to meet all standards established for nursing education. With Davis as sister tutor, the next step was to raise the bar so that Nazarene nursing graduates would be eligible for state registration. Eva Manzini Mthethwa was the first Swazi nurse to pass all exams and become registered in Swaziland and later was the first Swazi to be promoted to sister.18

The stories of changed lives through the ministry and service of Davis through Christian nursing education and the influence these lives have had on the physical and spiritual health of their nation are many. Joyce Viakazi Mamba entered Raleigh Fitkin Memorial Hospital (RFM) at the age of three, abandoned by her mother, a traditional healer. She was raised by the nurses and then became a nurse. She later studied nursing education at the Royal College of Nursing in London, returning to develop new programs within the Nazarene Nursing School. Amy Joyce Manthata was born at the Nazarene Endzingini Mission Station. She graduated from Davis’s program and became the first Swazi sister to be promoted to matron of RFM.19

Davis went against the recommendation of the mission’s council when she accepted physically disabled Maggie Makubu into the nursing program. In Maggie, Davis saw the potential of a good nurse, and she was not disappointed. After Maggie completed her schooling with Davis, Nurse Makubu received a scholarship from the World Health Organization and studied public health in India. She was appointed the first principal and program developer of the Swaziland Institute of Health. Later she became the first Swazi nurse to earn her Ph.D. and the first to be elected to the Swazi Senate. Dr. Makubu was very impressed with Davis’s making time in her heavy teaching load to spread the Word of God. She made sure she followed Davis’s example, doing the same at the government school.20

Nester Themsisile Shongwe (class of 1966) was appointed Swaziland’s chief nursing officer. She credits Davis for the government nursing school, for Davis’s graduates hold all faculty and leadership positions. Nurse Elizabeth Mndebele (class of 1964) also works for the government. She remembers Davis training the students to be multipurpose nurses where there was no doctor and to view teaching nursing not as a job but as a calling. Davis saw in Nurse Mndebele the potential to teach and gave her a typewriter so she could learn a new skill in preparation for that role. Nurse Mndebele has now trained over 3,000 Swazi laypersons from across the country to serve as community-based health workers.21

Davis’s legacy has been felt in many nations. Former students have completed graduate studies in England, India, Australia, and across the United States. This researcher is part of her international legacy. What I learned, both through short-term missionary nursing service in Swaziland and through research for this article, has led to the degrees and other credentials needed to share the Gospel in the setting of professional nursing and medical conferences on five continents.

Going Home

Dorothy Davis dared to do the impossible and became the Mother of Swazi Nurses. She had adopted the women of Swaziland, but finally in 1972 it was time to leave them to carry on. She had actively protected, nurtured, and trained the girls, some of them from birth, who would be registered nurses. She comforted and guided them through their homesickness, their study and romances, their successes and failures. She worked hard to instill in them a sense of self-esteem, self-worth, and a strong moral character. Davis prayed for and with each of her children, mentoring them in biblical ways and into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For her service, by order of Queen Elizabeth II, she was honored with the Member of the British Empire award. Also for her service, an entire issue of the 1971 Swaziland Nursing Journal was dedicated and devoted to her. The Dorothy Fay Davis Silver Medal was established to annually reward the nursing student from the three territories who received the highest score on final examinations. Finally, she received the Church of the Nazarene Distinguished Service Award.22

She worked hard to instill in the nurses a sense of self-esteem, self-worth, and a strong moral character.

The exact date of her Swaziland farewell party is not known, but a photo confirms that “Mother of Swazi Nurses” was written on the cake, which was shaped like a Nightingale lamp. A student presented the following farewell speech:

Miss Davis, we are very grateful to God who called you to Africa, to your parents who willingly offered you to God’s service, and above all your obedience to the will of God. You have held out this light to the people of Swaziland. They have seen your good works and are glorifying God.

To Miss Dorothy Davis Sister Tutor, to show appreciation for
her faithfulness in the work, for her loyalty to the hospital and her coworkers, to the one who had the riches of earth and fame pass her by that we gain eternal life. All that we are and hope to be, we owe to Mother Davis.23

Saying good-by was most difficult for Dorothy. Was she really going home, or was she leaving home? She recorded her speech that day in her journal.

Finally Farewell. I thank my God for you all every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you, I pray with joy, because of the way in which you have helped me in my work of the gospel, from the very first day until now. And so I am sure of this: that God, who began this good work in you will carry it on until it is finished in the Day of Christ Jesus. You are always in my heart! (Philippians 1:3–7).

I came. I came young and inexperienced. I came to give my all without reservation. I may have given something to you. You have given me more. Forever I am in debt to you.

I have lived. I have lived among you, been one with you, and in living have found complete fulfillment and supreme joy. You are my children. I delivered some of you. Most of you have been in my classes.

Thank you for loving me, for understanding my strange foreign ways, for your patience, for your kindness. Today I am rich because of you. You are my inheritance.

I am going. The time for my departure is at hand. I have finished the work God gave me to do in Swaziland. I wish I could have done better. However, it is a great comfort to me to know that you have grown up and that the work is in good and efficient hands.

Your Mother and your Teacher, Dorothy Davis.24

Davis returned to Southern California. There she worked for a period of time as a hospital supervisor and lived at Casa Robles, the Nazarene missionary retirement center. In 1984 her life again changed, and she inherited yet another family, when she married Ralph Cook, a retired missionary. Unfortunately, they had only seven years together.

Davis lives out her life in failing health only a few miles from where she was raised in Alhambra, California. She continues to be a prayer warrior. She wonders why anyone would want to know her story, and she wonders why God has not yet taken her home to heaven, where she longs to go.

Notes

1. Sources for this study include three interviews with Dorothy Davis Cook, as well as interviews with other missionary and Swazi nurses. Dorothy gave me full access to her personal journals, diplomas, transcripts, writings, photo album, home movies, and collection of religious study resources. Other documents were collected from the official archives of the Church of the Nazarene in Kansas City, Missouri; Northwest Nazarene College (now University) in Nampa, Idaho; and the Church of the Nazarene Regional Office in Florida, South Africa. Documents were also provided by the archives of the Royal College of Nursing in Edinburgh, Scotland.

2. Copied from the Florence Nightingale Museum, 2 Lambeth Palace Road, London.

3. Dorothy Davis Cook, interview by author, February 28, 1998, Alhambra, California. Her well-worn King James Version Bible has Psalm 2:8 underlined, with a marginal note “September, 1928—called.”


5. “Dorothy Davy Fays Samaritan Hospital Summary Sheet” (October 4, 1938), Northwest Nazarene University Archives, Nampa, Idaho; Samaritan Hospital School of Nursing Diploma and Northwest Nazarene College Diploma, June 1, 1938, personal papers of Dorothy Davis Cook; Dorothy Davis Cook interview by author, October 8, 1999, Alhambra; General Board of the Church of the Nazarene, “Contract for Foreign Missionary Work,” November 22, 1939, personal papers of Dorothy Davis Cook.

6. Dorothy Davis Cook, personal journal, 1940; Lydia Wilke Howard, interview by author, February 28, 1998, Alhambra. Howard, also a missionary nurse, traveled to Swaziland with Davis. Readers may gain further information about Nazarene missions and about other missionary nurses in Swaziland from the following volumes, all published in Kansas City by the Nazarene Publishing House: L. Chapman, Africa, O Africa (1945); E. Cole, Give Me This Mountain (1959); J. Gardner, The Promise (1992); and H. Schmelzenbach III, Schmelzenbach of Africa (1971).


9. Dorothy Davis, Bremerdorp, letter to Dear Friends, July 28, 1943, Regional Archives; Mildred Dlamini, interview by author, August 9, 1999, Manzini, Swaziland.

10. Davis, Nursing in Swaziland, p. 42; D. Drew, Mbabane, letter to the Medical Superintendent, Raleigh Fitkin Memorial Hospital, Bremerdorp, September 9, 1945, Regional Archives.


12. Sister Tutor Diploma, University of London, having taken training at the Royal College of Nursing, September 5, 1951; Dorothy Davis Cook, “When God Calls” (n.d.), personal papers of Dorothy Davis Cook.


14. Below see list of writings by Dorothy Davis Cook; Swaziland Government Health Department, The Nurses and Midwives Act (1965); Nester Thembisile Shongwe, interview by author, August 9, 1999, Mbabane, Swaziland.


18. Davis, Nursing in Swaziland.


Christian Publications in China

Wing N. Pang

Christian books are currently being produced in China by three types of publishers: (1) the China Christian Council, (2) seminaries and provincial Christian councils, and (3) non-Christian publishers, such as university or secular presses and the Religion and Culture Press of the government State Administration of Religious Affairs. A summary of this publishing effort, much of which is unknown in the West, may yield useful insights into the needs and interests of the church in China today.

China Christian Council

Between 1979 and 2001 the China Christian Council (CCC) published 104 books on subjects of interest to Christians, including devotionals (33 titles), Bible commentaries (24), histories of the church in China (16), Christian themes treated by the fine arts (14), and books on theology (10) and church ministry (7). In addition, the CCC has also published audio and video products. Of the 104 titles, 28 are Christian works by authors outside of China. Some of them are Chinese translations of Christian classics, and some are authored by overseas Chinese Christians. Among them are such time-honored Christian classics as The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. Two of them are works by Seventh-day Adventist Ellen G. White. The majority of these 28 titles are by evangelicals, especially overseas Chinese evangelicals. The best-selling authors on the CCC publishing list include Zhou Lian-Hua, former senior pastor of Grace Church in Taiwan, Kou Shi-Yuan of Family of Christ, and Zheng Guo-Zhi of Campus Crusade. The Chinese translation of Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Church and a few titles of John Stott’s Bible Study Series have also been well received by Christians in China. Some CCC-published books are reprints of works by Chinese fundamentalist authors in the 1930s and 1940s, including Jia Yu-Ming’s eight-volume Essentials of the Bible (Sheng Jing Yao Yi), a Bible exegesis series with a strong commitment to dispensationalism and a typological methodology.

The CCC is the only legal Bible publishing agency in China. Between 1981 and 2001 the CCC, through Amity Press in Nanjing, published over 28 million copies of the Bible. Efforts have been made to produce a variety of Bible editions and Bible study reference works, including the dispensational Scofield Reference Bible and, starting in 1991, the Chinese Study Bible (by Rock House Publishers), the most popular footnoted Bible among overseas Chinese Christians. In addition, the CCC has also published the Chinese Chain-Reference Study Bible (by the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong), Today’s Chinese Bible, the Chinese translation of the New Bible Commentary (by IVPress), and the Encyclopedia of the Bible (by Christian Communications Limited in Hong Kong). The Chinese Bible with leather cover and zipper is marketed as a gift edition, and English-Chinese Bibles are published for the educated, especially college students and young English-literate professionals. These various editions illustrate the commitment of the CCC to reach specific target groups.

CCC publications about the history of the church in China have dealt with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. These books, especially the more recent, feature testimonials about Christian contributions to the general society, as well as theological discussion of the relationship between Christianity and society.

Seminaries and Provincial Christian Councils

Up to 1998 Chinese seminaries and the Christian councils of several provinces have published a total of 133 titles. Nanjing Seminary, which during this period published 55 titles, is inter-

Selected Bibliography

Works by Dorothy Davis Cook

1943 Nursing Procedures. Bremersdorp, Swaziland: Raleigh Fitkin Memorial Hospital.
1953 (with E. Mthethwa) Nursing Procedures. 2d ed. Bremersdorp, Swaziland: Shirley Memorial Press.

Works About Dorothy Davis Cook

ested in works that are more academic, primarily textbooks for seminarians, church workers, and students in their correspondence program. Nanjing Theological Review, published semiannually, is the most scholarly theological academic journal published in China. Yanjing Seminary in Beijing has published a total of 10 titles, mostly academic works.

Provinces with the greatest numbers of Christians have been the ones whose Christian councils have published Christian works; specifically, the Christian councils of Jiangsu (44 titles), Zhejiang (13), Fujian (6), Jiangxi (3), and Shanghai (2). Most of these publications are devotionals or books of sermons, including some by authors outside of China. For example, the Jiangxi Christian Council published Billy Graham’s Peace with God.

Non-Christian Publishers

The Chinese government State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) has compiled a list of all books on Christianity published by non-Christian publishers in China from 1978 to 2002. The list contains 382 titles, either authored by scholars and researchers from secular universities or research institutions, or translated directly from Western classics. The publishers include China Commercial Press, Sanlian Press, Dongfang, and other secular Chinese publishing agencies. SARA is also active in publishing books on Christianity under Religion and Culture Press, its own imprint. Its titles include Josh McDowell’s Evidence That Demands a Verdict. Though these titles are mainly scholarly works, we find evangelical classics such as Cowman’s Streams in the Desert and James Reid’s Facing Life with Christ. It is noteworthy that Streams in the Desert was published by both CCC and secular publishers, which indicates its broad appeal in China.

In 1999 secular presses published 33 books on Christianity in China; 48 were published in 2000, and 37 in 2001. The volume of publications on Christianity indicates continuing strong interest in Christianity as a topic for discussion within academic circles in China.

Concluding Observations

In roughly the last two decades, then, we see that over 600 titles were published in China on the subject of Christianity. Furthermore, we can say that inputs to Chinese publications on Christianity is possible, not only for the CCC and its publication agencies but also for secular scholars and researchers.

Publishers in Hong Kong and the United States (e.g., David C. Cook) are working in cooperation with the church in China to produce more Christian books.

The market in China for Christian books is strong. Most publishers we spoke with have said that Christian publication is a lucrative business in China. The demand is so great that secular publishers have been enthusiastically entering the market. Whereas the CCC sells its products at cost, secular publishers charge three or more times the price for comparable books. In Hong Kong, the center of Christian publications in Chinese, a print run of 5,000 copies is considered successful. In China, 20,000 copies is the minimum number needed to go to press.

The demand for Christian books in China is so great that secular publishers have been enthusiastically entering the market.

Most Christian publications in China sell over 100,000 copies, and many titles sell well beyond that figure. The best seller is always the Bible. In the year 2002 alone, 2 million copies were printed and distributed.

Some Christian topics are poorly covered in Chinese publications. For example, there is a lack of publications on topics of practical theology such as counseling. There are still not enough books to meet the practical needs of the believers.

Overall, the theology of Chinese Christian literature leans toward fundamentalism, reflecting the missionary influence of the 1930s. The majority of books published for the church in China are conservative, which reflects the market. Many books published sixty years ago are still best-sellers.

Although there has been much discussion about theological construction in China recently, little has been published on this subject except some articles in periodicals.

We praise the Lord for the hunger for Christian literature evidenced in China today and for the publications being made available in China. We are grateful that the church in China is moving ahead to meet the challenge. And we are glad for the level of cooperation with authors and presses outside China, which enhances the mix of Christian subjects and titles available to the Chinese reading public.

Notes

1. Used by permission of Christianity in China, copyright 2002.
2. The CCC is an independent national organization of Chinese Christians for church affairs that is recognized by the government. It is neither a church council in the usual sense nor a national church. The CCC views itself as an umbrella organization serving all Protestant Christians in China. According to its constitution its purpose is to unite Christians in China and to help churches to develop their ministries (1) in conformity to the teachings of the Bible, the Three-Self principle, and patriotism, (2) in accord with the rules and regulations of China’s churches, and (3) in accord with China’s laws.
3. Titles of Christian interest published by the three types of publishers discussed above may be found at www.christianityinchina.org. Under Archives, select China Contours. At bottom of page, click on Newsletter Articles Table of Contents. Then select Christian Publications in China, by Wing Pang.
Book Reviews

Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals.


With signed articles on more than four hundred prominent evangelicals and evangelical forebears, the Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals, edited by Timothy Larsen of Wheaton College, will serve as a handy reference tool. The articles, ranging from 500 to 2,000 words, are written by academic specialists, are well edited, each with brief bibliography appended, and are presented in a convenient A–Z format.

In his introduction the editor accepts the 1730s "as the decade that launched the evangelical movement" but includes "a 'prehistory' of evangelical forebears ... by whose work evangelicals have often been shaped." Living persons are included if they were born before 1936. Thus he describes the chronological scope of the volume as "from John Wyclif to John Wimber via John Wesley."

Also in the introduction it is important to note two other qualifications for selection of persons included in the dictionary. First, for a definition of evangelicals the editor uses the so-called quadrilateral proposed by David Bebbington: conversionism, activism, biblicalism, and crucicentrism, along with Mark Noll's descriptive approach, which is biased "towards figures who have had a substantial impact in the wider evangelical movement." Second, the geographic scope "is the English-speaking world, understood in its traditional sense as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa." Very few persons from non-English-speaking countries are included. These two qualifications pose problems that will be discussed below.

Most of the major figures that one would expect to find in such a work are here, ranging from the Protestant reformers to Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, Finney, Moody and Sankey, Simeon, Spurgeon, Sangster, Alexander Duff, A. T. Pierson, Charles Fuller, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, Machen and McIntire, Clyde Taylor, Harold Ockenga, Henrietta Mears, Carl Henry, Leighton Ford, Bill Bright, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson. Anglicans are abundant, including John Stott and archbishops Coggan and Carey (but not William Temple).

Anyone with a special interest in world mission and global Christianity will be disappointed. While Zinzendorf, Eliot, Carey, Judson, Livingstone, Marsden, Martyn, Hudson Taylor, John R. Mott, and Lesslie Newbigin are covered, how could E. Stanley Jones be left out? If you include Tony Campolo and Charles Colson, why not David Bosch and Andrew Walls?

Henry Venn is in, but Rufus Anderson is not; Peter Wagner is in, but Donald McGavran, Herbert Kane, Ralph Winter, Bob Pierce, and Tom Houston are missing. Elisabeth Howard Elliot is in, but not her brother David Howard.

Today one has to question why evangelicalism should be viewed as restricted to the English-speaking world, given the fruit of evangelical missions around the world (remember the Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Alliance). Are there no evangelicals in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America who have made a significant impact and contribution? To its great credit, evangelicalism in the twenty-first century is far wider than its traditional Anglo-Saxon base.

Then there is the problem of defining evangelicalism. Carl Henry (presumably with tongue in cheek) once defined an evangelical as anyone who subscribed to Christianity Today. The Bebbington quadrilateral is not much better. Bishop Stephen Nellig (who is not in the dictionary), got it about right when he said that "an evangelical is one who accepts the supreme lordship of Jesus Christ; who accepts the Holy Scriptures as the final guide to the faith and life of the church; who believes in the necessity of personal conversion; who believes in the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit; who believes in the obligation resting on every believer to be a witness for Jesus Christ in life and in death. . . . Everything else is subsidiary."


―Gerald H. Anderson

Gerald H. Anderson, a senior contributing editor, is Director Emeritus of the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut.

China Diary: The Life of Mary Austin Endicott.


Born to a life of privilege as the daughter of a wealthy town mayor, Mary Austin had nothing in her background to prepare her for the hardships she would face as a missionary wife in China from 1926 through the 1940s. In 1925 she married James G. (Jim) Endicott, the China-born son of a pioneer of the Canadian Methodist West China Mission, and, in her words, "married China." Mary Endicott did not actually keep a China diary, but she was a dedicated correspondent; over 5,000 of her letters survive in the Endicott Collection at the National Archives of Canada. Part of a Life Writing series, this book is a judicious presentation of many of these letters, skillfully woven into a coherent biography by her daughter Shirley, who taught sociology at the University of Toronto. The result is an unusually frank, intimate, and detailed account of her marriage, her life as a prominent missionary wife, and her struggles with faith and family.

Although she rebelled early against her family's strict Methodism, Mary Austin retained both a deep faith and an interest in missions. As a university
student she became involved with the Student Christian Movement and sought a more personal faith. This impulse drew her to study groups and to the 1924 Washington missionary conference, where she met Jim Endicott, whose religious views matched her own. Their China experiences radicalized them both, and they became supporters of the Chinese Communists. In June 1947 the Endicotts returned from China and settled in Toronto. There Mary shared Jim’s work in the peace movement, even at the cost of lifelong friendships. In her final years she worked with a number of prison inmates at Kingston (Ont.) Penitentiary. A talented poet and writer, Mary found that her marriage to China had changed her life utterly, yet her Christian commitment to a life of service never wavered.

This engrossing biography should be essential reading for anyone interested in Christianity’s encounter with China’s modern revolutions, and the utterly neglected topic of the missionary wives.

—Margo S. Gewurtz

Margo S. Gewurtz is Professor of Humanities and Master of Founders College, York University, Toronto, Canada. A Canadian, she has published numerous essays on Canadian missionaries in China and their Chinese partners.

Fifteen Outstanding Books of 2003 for Mission Studies

In consultation with thirty distinguished scholars from around the world, the editors of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research have selected fifteen books published in 2003 for special recognition of their contribution to mission studies. While continuing to confine the list to English language materials, this year for the first time digital resources* have been included. We commend the authors, editors, and publishers represented here for their contribution to the advancement of scholarship in studies of the Christian mission and world Christianity.

Bays, Daniel H., and Grant Wacker, eds.
The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History.
Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press. $60.

Center for the Study of Global Christianity.
*Tuscaboa: Univ. of Alabama Press. $60.

Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Mass. Free access.

Daniel, Inus, Charles Van Engen, and Hendrik Vroom, eds.
Fullness of Life for All: Challenges for Mission in Early Twenty-first Century.
Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi. €75 / $89.

DeRoyatis, Amy.
Moral Geography: Maps, Missionaries, and the American Frontier.
New York: Columbia Univ. Press. $24.50.

Flett, John, Thomas F. Foust, George R. Hunsberger, and David J. Kettle, comps.

Frederiks, Martha.
We Have Toiled All Night: Christianity in The Gambia, 1456–2000.
Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum. €29.90.

Froehle, Bryan T., and Mary L. Gautier.
Global Catholicism: Portrait of a World Church.

Glasser, Arthur F.
Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible.

Johnston, Anna.
Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800–1860.
Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press. £45 / $65.

Mullins, Mark R., ed.

Pemberton, Carrie.
Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West.
Leiden: Brill. €75 / $87.

Phan, Peter.
In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation.

Robert, Dana.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. $32.

Sanneh, Lamin.
Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. $12.

Thomas, Norman E., gen. ed.
Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press. $130.
The history of missions is a great story. The Church has met and overcome obstacles in the past that stood in the way of carrying out the Lord's mandate. But we face new challenges in the 21st century that demand new strategies for responding to the Great Commission.

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**Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples.**


Top-down, deductive theology meets its bottom-up, praxis-driven counterpart in these previously published writings. Here is Sobrino at his most searing and uncompromising. His topics are perennial: the place of theology; the meaning of martyrdom; the contours of conversion; the difference between sadness and suffering, pessimism and despair.

Sobrino's gaze shifts between local and global: four decades' experience in El Salvador has generated wisdom to be shared with a world that badly needs it. Here is a work of terrible dignity, fierce passion and compassion, and measured yet unflinching judgment of the forces of darkness. But through the pessimism, hope shines; though constantly suffering, the people know joy; and though unquestionably bloody, this church stands unbowed, believing that the anawim (Heb. "poor") are God's poor: bent-over, bowed down, but recipients of God's promised healing and sustaining outreach.

Sobrino reminds us that we, the faith-filled faithful, must be that godly gesture. Archbishop Romero, the six murdered Jesuits and their two domestic staff, the four women missionaries, and more than 70,000 anonymous martyrs exemplify God's outreach. Their faith not only keeps their own memories alive, but it is also the seed of the church.

Martyrdom is explored in a vibrant,
moving, and contemporary way, as Sobrino reflects on these many lives, conversions, and deaths. Jesuán identifies the nameless martyrs who lived for what Jesus lived for and died for the reasons he did (p. 122); they are the “crucified peoples” of the subtitle (p. 155).

Here is a book for theologians, missionaries, and Christians of every persuasion and profession: a book to inform, challenge, and inspire. The writings certainly merit being gathered in translation, but they also cry out to be read, pondered, and applied: one local theology will then have demonstrated its global relevance. To fulfill their promise, these powerful words must encourage readers to step onto the very path they trace.


Anthony J. Gittins, C.S.Sp., is the Bishop Francis X. Ford, M.M., Professor of Catholic Missiology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. A resident alien in the U.S., he comes from England, via Sierra Leone, where he served as a missionary.


No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions.


Just eleven days before he died, Paul Tillich gave a lecture entitled “The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian” (1965). In this lecture Tillich expressed his hope for the future of theology, that it would see “an extensive and intensive mutual interpenetration of systematic theology and the religious history of mankind.” Now, forty years later, that is very much what we see happening.

Missiological studies from the evangelical perspective have come a little late to the scene but are now catching up fast, and in these two books there is plenty of food for thought on how Christian theology needs to change in light of the multifaceted encounter with transformed world religions. Such a theology must examine how one should evaluate Christianity’s absolute claim on truth in relation to the comparable truth claims of other religions.

Harold Netland has written one of the very best accounts of the roots of contemporary religious pluralism; very convincingly he analyzes the challenge to Christian mission that comes from pluralism. The book has two parts. The first explores historical, social, and cultural contexts within which religious pluralism has emerged and become so influential. Netland not only gives a persuasive description of how the religious landscape is changing and how religions are transformed but also moves on to the normative questions. In the second part of the book he attempts to respond to issues raised by religious pluralism. What distinguishes this approach is the insight that contemporary pluralism cannot be understood adequately apart from appreciation of the broader historical, social, and intellectual transformations of the past several centuries.

The most influential apologist for religious pluralism in the West is John Hick. Netland thus devotes several chapters to a thorough analysis of Hick’s...
The Omphalos and the Cross: Pagans and Christians in Search of a Divine Center.


Juxtaposing omphalos (Gk. “navel” of the earth) and cross as contrasting symbols seeking “a divine center” (chap. 1)—one of space, the other beyond time—is an intriguing approach to the diversity of religious influences in the Roman and post-Roman epochs. The volume takes on significance and strength by allowing voices, pagan and Christian, to speak in their own terms and increasingly over against one another. Paul Cholias (retired, Kentucky State University), however, hesitates to enter contemporary academic fracases.

Chapters 2–5 consider the rise and fall of “oracular” religion, using both classical and Christian sources in an evolutionary narrative of their historic encounter. Especially strong are discussions of Delphic (chap. 4) and Sibylline (chap. 5) oracles as these emerged and were modified or reinterpreted with the passage of time and the change of dominant religiousness. Chapters 6–10 refocus on the rise of specifically Christian thought and practice within Hellenistic Judaism and Greco-Roman religiousness.

The key to understanding Cholias lies with the impossibility of achieving balance for religious freedom under the reversing roles of persecutor and persecuted in imperial Rome and then the Christian empire (chap. 9). Chapter 11 serves as the capstone, illustrating the “Christianization of paganism” and the “paganization of Christianity.” These developments are paradigmatic of “missionary endeavors,” which the “silence of the gods” and the “fall of Rome” precipitated.

Newer, better translations exist of patristic texts than those of mid-nineteenth-century series, though considering Cholias’s extensive quoting, he may have wanted to avoid copyright infringement. He does not refer to critical editions, classical or Christian, which mitigates his scholarship. And giving some attention to aesthetic and not merely literary materials as sources would have enlarged his perspective. In light of the author’s propensity to introduce Hebrew, Greek, and Latin terms into the text without explication, and to include untranslated French citations in the footnotes, one is not certain who the intended audience is for this discerning.

It is refreshing that evangelical theology has come forward with substantial contributions to the theology of religions. The famous epistemological dictum that there is no view from nowhere also applies here. We can attempt to enter into the spirit of the other, follow in another person’s footsteps, place the sandals outside the mosque, and do a lot of other things. But if we do not maintain some point of view as a basis, the result is meaningless relativism and an absolute dizziness. The strength of these contributions to an evangelical theology of religions is that they fully grasp this requirement.

—Viggo Mortensen

Viggo Mortensen, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, holds a chair in global Christianity and ecumenical concerns and is Director of the Danish Center for Multireligious Studies. From 1991 to 1999 he served as director for the Department for Theology and Studies in the Lutheran World Federation, Geneva.
Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century.


Energetic twentieth-century North American women missionaries helped build a global church with majority female membership, despite widespread social and theological misgivings about women serving as evangelists. In this strong and inclusive collection, based partly on a Boston University seminar series, Dana Robert draws together research taking up where her own pioneering overview of the period in American Women in Mission (1997) left off.

Two intriguing studies in the section covering 1920–45 show American women providing crucial training and inspiration to men in indigenous ministry—in the Pacific Northwest and in China. An Indian example illustrates the disappointments of devolution, where female initiative was curbed when local male church control replaced the supportive personal ties previously animating “woman’s work for woman.” Also explored are the unexpected biographical trajectories of two Bible-school founders, Susan Strachan (headquarters manager, magazine editor) and Dora Yu (physician and revivalist, though initially dubbed “Bible woman”). Their stories underline, incidentally, how little “domesticity” alone encapsulates modern female mission agendas.

In the longer second part, covering the period after World War II, the Southern Baptist Convention is featured twice. A delightfully original piece describes the role of its Girls’ Auxiliary in empowering educational mission. A second piece documents recent female reverses. Accounts of impressive Catholic women involved in Latin American and African liberation prove to be real eye-openers. Sensitive analyses highlight mission and cultural stereotypes constraining Korean women evangelists in the United States today and their counterparts in Indonesia. Africa misses out on the primary research its church membership merits, though students will find a helpful literature survey and a brief discussion of witness to African-American Muslims.

Overall, these wide-ranging vignettes, superbly introduced and chronologically contextualized by Dana Robert, advance greatly our understanding of missionary women. Now historical and missiological scholarship elsewhere needs to catch up, so that we can also grasp the particular “gender barriers” that British and continental European women “Gospel-bearers,” along with their female converts, encountered in mission.

—Deborah Gaitskell

Deborah Gaitskell, a South African, is a Research Associate of the History Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and an editor of the Journal of Southern African Studies.
Christology: A Global Introduction.


Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Finnish associate professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, is known as the author of introductions to ecclesiology and pneumatology. Now he offers a four-part introduction to Christology.


The second part, “Christ in History,” surveys the history of the church and of dogma, starting with the early Christological disputes and ending with the collapse of the quest for the historical Jesus. As a Lutheran, the author favors Luther over Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, and Arminius (the last is not mentioned).

The third part, “Christ in the Contemporary World: Western Christologies,” deals not only with the well-recognized classics (by Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Rahner, Moltmann, and Pannenberg) but also with work of the Eastern Orthodox theologian Zizioulas, the Anabaptist Kraus, the evangelical Grenz, and the pluralist Hick. I would have liked the author to discuss more than just one Roman Catholic author (including, for instance, Schillebeeckx).

The fourth part, “Christ in the Contemporary World: Contextual Christologies,” analyzes non-Western Christologies: Latin American (esp. Sobrino), African (esp. Bujo), and Asian (esp. Samartha). The description of these three is preceded by a survey of process Christology, feminist Christology, black Christology, and postmodern Christology. One might quibble with the subtitles of these last two parts. Process and postmodern Christologies are indeed Western by nature. And the Christology of Barth may in fact be more contextual than various Christologies dealt with in the fourth part!

This book is an excellent introduction to Christology. It is clearly written and liberates this discipline from its Euro-American captivity. Christology indeed belongs fully to the church universal. I consider this book as a genuine ecumenical achievement, so well has the author drawn various denominations and confessions into the dialogue.

We need to go one step further, however. Christology also needs to be thoroughly missionary. Although the author pays a little attention to Hinduism and Buddhism when dealing with Kraus and Hick and with Asia, he does not engage
the views of Jesus Christ in the Koran, in the writings of the Jew Lapide, by the Dalai Lama, and so forth. I challenge users of this textbook to add the missionary dimension: we can share Christ adequately with non-Christians in East and West only to the extent that we know the essence of their own views on this matter.

—Jan A. B. Jongeneel

Jan A. B. Jongeneel, a contributing editor and Professor of Missiology at Utrecht University, served as a Reformed missionary in Indonesia.


The authors are expert witnesses in the case of Christianity and Islam. Peter Riddell is director of the Centre for Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian Relations at London Bible College. Peter Cotterell is associate senior lecturer at the Centre and former principal of London Bible College.

The book is divided into three parts, which the authors call distant past, medium past, and recent past and present (p. 8). One of the pleas the authors repeat throughout the book is that for a meaningful twenty-first-century dialogue to take place, Islam needs to free itself from its fixation on the past. In Part I they tell how Islam got started: Muhammad’s visions and writings, the organizational structure and subsequent divisions, the official doctrinal statement of Islam, and then the relationship between the Qur’an and Christianity. Part 2 presents a historical overview of Islam from the seventh to the twentieth century (pp. 83–148). The summary is concise and clear.

Because so much is still being written about the content covered in Part 3, “Looking Around” (chaps. 10–13, although chap. 9 belongs here also), this section is perhaps the least captivating of the book. Sixty-seven pages are far too few to give anything but the sketchiest outline of the context of a world crisis.

The words “in context” in the title indicate the authors’ efforts to restore some balance to the Islam-Christianity debate. The perception among many Christian and non-Christian writers is that in the past the debate was unbalanced, that the Western world has been pro-Christianity and anti-Islam. Over the past decade the presentation often appears to have gone to the other extreme, with radical Muslims being given excessive media attention.

Without being overtly provocative, the authors make many pleas throughout the book for a balanced presentation. Otherwise, they insist, no correct understanding is possible of the two religions. Mutual understanding is possible only when all of the historical, social, theological, and philosophical facts are laid on the table, even though many Christians and Muslims may not want to know the facts. This book is too brief to bring out all the relevant facts, but hopefully it will stimulate informed debate to move in that direction.

Islam in Context is most detailed on history, skimpy on philosophy, but comprehensive on social, ethical, and theological issues. This book is excellent for anyone looking for an introductory textbook to the Islam-Christianity debate. —Brian L. Fargher

Dissertation Notices

Clarke, Clifton Roy.

Eitzen, Hartwig.
“Dependent, Independent, Interdependent? A Case Study in Mission Partnership Between North and South America.”

Fox, Frampton F.
“Money as Water: A Patron-Client Approach to Mission Dependency in India.”

Griffith, Herbert.

Hostetter, Steven J.
“Institutional Culture in the Bible College and Its Relationship to Organizational Members’ Values.”

Klingsmith, Scott.
“Factors in the Rise of Missionary Sending Movements in East-Central Europe.”

Knoper, Mark J.

Lee, Gun Ho.

Middleton, William Haydn.
“Conflict and Persecution: A Comparative History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in Jamaica and Hayti from Its Beginnings in 1789 until 1838.”

Qoursheh, Amjad M. M.
“A Muslim’s Perspective Towards Hans Küng’s Concept of Global Ethic: Theoretical Analytical Critique and Comparative Study.”

Padwick, Timothy John.
Feb. 23–27, 2004

Digital Video and Global Christianity. Dr. James M. Ault, James Ault Productions, in a practical workshop, covers how to use digital video to portray the life of faith in community. Cosponsored by United Church of Christ Wider Church Ministries. Eight sessions. $125

March 1–5

Servant Leadership: Biblical Principles for Mission. Dr. Donald R. Jacobs, Mennonite Leadership Foundation, and Dr. Douglas McConnell, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, lead a study of biblical personalities to establish foundational principles for responsible leadership in mission. Cosponsored by Eastern Mennonite Missions and Mennonite Central Committee. Eight sessions. $125

March 15–19

Unbound by Time: Isaiah Still Speaks. Dr. William L. Holladay, Andover-Newton Theological School, discusses the historical and theological background to important texts in the book of Isaiah and how they fit into Christian proclamation. Cosponsored by Maryknoll Mission Institute and held at Maryknoll, New York. Eight sessions. $140

March 22–26

Christian Approaches to World Religions. Dr. Timothy C. Tennent, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, offers an evangelical perspective that calls for honest engagement and fruitful dialogue with adherents of other faiths. Cosponsored by the Baptist Convention of New England and Greenfield Hill Congregational Church (Fairfield, Conn.). Eight sessions. $125

Mar. 29–Apr. 1

Cultures, Interpersonal Conflict, and Christian Mission. Dr. Duane H. Elmer, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, helps Christian workers strengthen interpersonal skills and resolve conflicts among colleagues, including host-country peoples. Concludes Thursday. Cosponsored by Black Rock Congregational Church. Eight sessions in four days. $125

April 13–16

Evaluating Cross-cultural Missions: A Korean Case Study. Dr. Chun Chae Ok, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, Korea, and an OMSC Senior Mission Scholar in Residence, draws on the rapidly growing Korean missionary movement to offer criteria for assessing different approaches to cross-cultural mission. Cosponsored by United Methodist Board of Global Ministries and Wycliffe International. Four morning sessions. $90

April 19–23

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