Describing the Worldwide Christian Phenomenon

Todd M. Johnson and Sandra S. Kim

Christians can be found today in every country in the world. Although Christianity has been gradually expanding since its earliest days, only recently has it achieved a near-ubiquitous presence around the world. In 1942 Archbishop William Temple spoke of “a Christian fellowship which now extends into almost every nation” as “the great new fact of our era.” Kenneth Scott Latourette opened his book The Emergence of a World Christian Community (1949) with the words, “One of the most striking facts of our time is the global extension of Christianity.” In each case these writers acknowledged that, by the middle of the twentieth century, Christianity had reached a new level of engagement with the world’s population. John J. Considine of Maryknoll took the matter further with his statement that “Christianity is not true Christianity unless it embraces all mankind—unless it is World Christianity.” This article examines in detail the strengths and weaknesses of three different terms currently used to describe this worldwide phenomenon.

Early Christians Anticipate Universal Expansion

One of the most significant features of nascent Christianity was its universal outlook. Jesus told his followers to “go . . . and make disciples of all nations [ethne]” (Matt. 28:19). John was later given a glimpse of the future, as he saw “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). Early Christians understood this Christian responsibility in terms of the oikoumenos—that which belongs to the oikumene, or whole inhabited world. Kenneth Cragg observed that “the faith is not fulfilled unless the oikumene, with its cultures and claims, is both the measure and test of their trust.” James Addison noted, “We shall not know the possibilities of our own religion until it has come to include all for whom it was meant. . . . For only a Church in which all races are at home can bring to full expression the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Christians, therefore, even as a tiny minority in the Roman Empire, had reason to anticipate a future worldwide fellowship where all languages, tribes, and peoples would contribute to the whole of Christianity.

The Rise and Fall of Christendom

Over the course of many centuries and especially with the rise of European Christendom (by 1500, fully 92 percent of all Christians were Europeans), and then later with its world empires, Christianity increasingly became identified with the political and economic agenda of the West. “It is simply impossible to overlook the fact that the ‘great era’ of Christian missions occurred as people of European origin extended their political and economic control until it encompassed 84 per cent of the land surface of the globe.” This European colonial system, with its global preeminence, gave rise to the idea that the Christian faith is exclusively Western—even though significant non-Western Christian movements were already present in the sixteenth century.

Although Christianity was dominated by the North from 950 to 1950,7 its center of gravity has been steadily shifting southward.8 In the early part of the twentieth century, Christianity broke the bonds of Europe and the Americas and began to spread widely in Africa and Asia. Nonetheless Cragg noted that “the geographical universality of the Church, or nearly so, had been achieved only in the context of a deep cultural partiality.”9 Cragg was aware of burgeoning movements of indigenous Christianity, but he recognized that Christianity was largely still characterized by Western culture.

Only in the late twentieth century did Christianity around the world begin to disentangle itself from its colonial character. This change was entirely appropriate, for “the full-grown humanity of Christ requires all the Christian generations, just as it embodies all the cultural variety that six continents can bring.”10 No longer is the picture of the average Christian a white Westerner. Indeed, in 1980 an average of 7,600 such Christians were abandoning the faith each day.11 Rather, we have witnessed the coming of age of the younger churches within the context of decolonization and rising nationalism. In spite of the accusations of anti-Christian nationalists and of critics who accused it of being cultural-imperial in nature, Christianity provided the tools (e.g., education) for national resistance to colonial domination.12 Instead of destroying indigenous societies, Christianity, especially with its emphasis on the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular, allowed for the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures.13 Churches persisted and grew in the face of opposition because of the strength it provided people in sociopolitical, economic, and cultural upheaval.14

Not only is the church growing in the non-Western world, but the voice and sense of identity of Southern Christians among the global Christian community is growing as a result of globalization. The European colonial empire system left a legacy of “a global religious heritage”—a common experiential and historical interconnectedness between former colonies and imperial powers.15 This legacy is being transformed by the exponential rise of the world population, urbanization, and migration in the last two centuries. Much of the global population growth in the coming decades will occur in urban centers, and fifteen of the seventeen urban conglomerations over 10 million in population are located in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.16 These burgeoning urban centers are also the loci of new Christian growth in the South. Christian ecclesiology and theology will likely develop in this context and be exported to the rest of the world. This trend is especially important in light of Andrew Walls’s observation that the course of Christian history is “not progressive but serial,”17 which implies that the South might be the center of Christian life for some time to come.

Three Terms for Worldwide Christianity

Current literature describing Christianity on a worldwide scale uses three different phrases: “Christendom,” “world Christianity,” and “global Christianity.” These terms are often used interchangeably, and their usage seems to vary from author to author. Each phrase, however, carries particular connotations that have

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evolved over time and are continuing to be redefined today. Here we examine the three in some detail and comment on their suitability as terms in the twenty-first century.

**Christendom.** The Christendom model of conceptualizing the international scope of the Christian faith is rooted in geopolitical and economic power. It is a loaded term that has been shaped over the course of nearly sixteen centuries of official Christianity in the Western world in which ruling powers of a nation would determine which religion, or more specifically which form of Christianity, would have dominion or reign supreme. (This practice goes back to the seventeenth-century principle of cuius regio, eius religio, literally, “whose the region, his the religion.”) As seen through the lens of this model, the Christian faith is successful when it “gain[s] more quantitative power in the world, and more territory.” In the Christendom model, Christian mission is seen as expansion and the goal as acquisition of more territory. The task of mission is the purveyance of a common culture and thought life, and consequently it tends to breed intolerance. Mission in the Christendom model is not primarily concerned with indigenous appropriation and expression of the Christian faith on a grassroots cultural level; rather, it is more concerned with the presence and influence of the Christian faith on the geopolitical level. To put it another way, the Christendom model tends to emphasize a top-down approach from a position of power and influence rather than an organic bottom-up inculturation of the faith.

According to Douglas John Hall, this enmeshment of Christian mission with the territorial expansion of Western geopolitical powers is in essence “a palpable missiological confusion” rooted in the desire of the West to be able “to tell the Christian story as a success story.” Today the confusion is heightened, for current immigration/emigration trends demonstrate that there are no clear-cut boundaries with practitioners of other faiths being solely in far-off lands. Now they are next-door neighbors. Additionally, there is no longer a clear-cut moral and cultural superiority of the Christian faith in the West. As a result of this decline, Hall argues, the West now has the opportunity to reexamine and embrace the Christian faith with fresh insight and conviction, shifting from a position of dominance to being the salt, yeast, and light of the world.

“Christendom” thus seems inextricably tied to European dominance. Philip Jenkins tries to introduce a new usage of the term when he refers to the rise of Christianity in the global South (not Christianity as a whole) as “the next Christendom.” Jenkins goes further to say that the rise of the church in the non-Western world will lend a creative and diversifying fire to the cultural mix for all Christians, not only enabling those in the West to see Christianity “with fresh insight and conviction” but also transforming Christianity into a truly global expression of the faith. Jenkins aptly describes the contours of the rise of Southern Christianity, although his referring to it as “the next Christendom” may not ring true. What he is describing is not a geopolitical reality but a religious and cultural one. Consequently, “Christendom” or “next Christendom” may not be the best term to use in describing the reality of Southern Christianity or of Christianity as a worldwide phenomenon.

**World Christianity.** Conceptualization of Christianity as “world Christianity” developed slowly in the early part of the twentieth century. Missionary publications before World War I refer to “world evangelization” but stop short of using the term “world Christianity.” This restriction in usage is understandable, because as recently as 1900 over 80 percent of all Christians were still located in the Western world. As found in the reports and records of the conferences in Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928), and Tambaram (1938), the phrase “world evangelization” was used by Western missionaries to speak of bringing the Christian faith to distant lands of unbelievers.

“World Christian” appears as a transitional phrase that emerged after World War I as an educational concept to help (specifically American) Christians gain more respect for other peoples of the world. The term thus predates “world Christianity” and refers to cultural awareness and sensitivity. The phrase “world Christianity” emerged after World War I in recognition not only of the numerical strength of Christianity around the world but also of the contributions to be made by each of the different cultures represented. The timing was more than coincidental, as Western Christians lost confidence in their cultural form of Christianity in the trenches of World War I. The phrase became focused on “international friendship” to unite the church, though not so much on diversity of cultural and theological expression. There was not yet an overt acknowledgment of the contributions of non-Western Christians, although indigenous voices were increasingly important in global gatherings.

This gradual change can be seen in the composition of world missionary conferences. In Edinburgh in 1910, only 17 of 1,100 delegates were “nationals” from mission fields. At Jerusalem in 1928, a quarter of the delegates came from younger churches, and at Tambaram in 1938 half were non-Western. Nonetheless, as late as 1959 Latourette, while issuing a call for a “world Christian fellowship,” admitted that “Christianity is still chiefly the faith of Occidental peoples.” “World Christianity” was still used more

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In recent literature “world Christianity” has been used to describe the remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity of Christianity around the world. According to Lamin Sanneh, “World Christianity is not one thing, but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but . . . without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame.” This positive sense can be seen in the ubiquitous use of the term in the academic study of Christianity. A quick Web search located nearly thirty different professorships and other academic positions incorporating “world Christianity” (a few use “global Christianity”) in today’s seminaries and universities.

**Global Christianity.** The phrase “global Christianity,” in contrast, has a much more recent history and is often used to describe the cultural and theological rather than political dimensions of the Christian faith as it finds expression across the globe. The first usage of “global Christianity” appears to be in the opening sentences of the preface of David Barrett’s *World Christian Ency-
clippedia. In 1981 he wrote (fittingly, from Nairobi, Kenya), “In 1968, a group of church demographers met and decided that the time was ripe to undertake, for possibly the first time in Christian history, a comprehensive survey of all branches of global Christianity.” Barrett and his colleagues considered the global reach of Christianity in all its forms as worthy of empirical study. Empirical study has since enhanced Christian awareness of the global nature of Christianity by showing its ecclesiastical diversity (37,000 denominations) and its ethnic and linguistic reach (among 9,000 of the 13,000 peoples in the world).

More recently, scholars such as Dana Robert, Philip Jenkins, and Mark Juergensmeyer all utilize “global Christianity” in describing the “fluid process of cultural interaction, expansion, synthesis, borrowing and change” that takes place in any global religion, and here more specifically the Christian religion, which has always “maintained permeable boundaries.” In their view, “global Christianity” has developed as a result of “increasing indigenization within a postcolonial political framework,” involving “urbanization, dislocation caused by war and violence, ethnic identity, the globalizing impact of cyberspace, and local circumstances…. The time when Christianity was the religion of European colonial oppressors fades ever more rapidly into the past.”

The global reality of the Christian faith is no longer about “faithful replication” of the European model but about increasing local cultural expression in the larger world community of saints as the result of increasingly varied movements of people, ideology, and technology.

Choosing Terms

Having seen the negative implications of “Christendom,” we are left with either “world Christianity” or “global Christianity” for describing worldwide Christianity. We have seen how the former has evolved from its earlier connotations of Western paternalism in an ecumenical context. Today it has more positive connotations. The latter term, “global Christianity,” to which we now turn, has a more recent history.

In current literature, Bert Hoedemaker outlines “the problem of unity and diversity, of ‘one gospel and many cultures,’” as one brought on by the “power of emerging global Christianity as a rival to major alternatives such as ‘secular civilization’ and non-Christian religions” (emphasis added). Hoedemaker wedds this dominant conception as expounded by Lesslie Newbigin to the term “global Christianity.” According to Hoedemaker, “global Christianity” is a force birthed from the “‘secular’ creation of a certain global unity” and the result of modernity.

Sanneh then juxtaposes “world Christianity” with “global Christianity,” equating only the former with successful, variegated, indigenous expressions of the Christian faith as created from below, whereas for him “global Christianity” is equivalent to cultural imperialism with the creation of uniformity and replication of European expressions of Christianity.

Sanneh is not incorrect in correlating “global Christianity” with globalization. The very nature of globalization itself, however, is multilayered; it is a multifaceted phenomenon that has contradictory movements within itself that are in tension. Yale University’s Center for the Study of Globalization (http://www.ycsg.yale.edu) defines globalization in both positive and negative terms. Globalization is not the same as Westernization nor just about economics. Globalization, instead, refers to “increasing global interconnectedness, so that events and developments in one part of the world are affected by, have to take account of, and also influence, in turn other parts of the world. It also refers to an increasing sense of a single global whole.” It assumes multiple levels, from economics and politics, migration and social interaction, music and culture, and permeates all facets of life.

For our purposes it is important to note that globalization takes place from two different directions—from the global level to the local, and from the local level to the global. This synergistic dynamic from the top down and from the grassroots up has been labeled “global” or “globalisation.” David Smith is particularly helpful in distinguishing between globalization from above and globalization from below. He delineates the former as “the spread of economics”; it is “a reconstruction of the processes of imperialism in which the institutions of Western capitalism ’send out voracious tentacles all over the globe seeking markets and profits’ to the advantage of an already rich and powerful minority based mainly in North America and Europe.”

Globalization from below, in contrast, is the dynamic “resulting from person-to-person contacts through Non-Governmental Organisations, cultural exchange programmes and the work of missions…. [It is exposure of the West] to the cultural, religious, social and economic realities of peoples in the southern hemisphere…[and it is] driven not by the search for profit but by a spirit of human solidarity and compassion.” It is this globalization from below—that focuses more upon culture, religion, and ideology—that shapes Christianity on a global scale.

All Christians can “embrace the larger story as ‘our history’ because it clarifies their identity as members of a common—though culturally variegated—experience over time.” Just as the nature of globalization in and of itself is complex, so the effects of globalization on Christianity are also complex and sometimes even contradictory.

Thus, we feel that Sanneh’s division between “global Christianity” (i.e., Western domination of the world) and “world Christianity” (i.e., the diversity of Christianity around the world) is overstated. While tensions between these two concepts exist, we do not believe that the preference of one term over the other is so obvious. A far more nuanced approach to both terminologies is required.

Definitions

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “global” as “comprehensive, all-inclusive, unified, total, spec. pertaining to or involving the whole world; world-wide; universal.” “World” is defined as “of or pertaining to the whole world, embracing the whole world, world-wide, universal.” Thus, these two words, used as adjectives, can have strikingly similar meanings. Furthermore,
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“global” is defined in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* as “distributed over or extending throughout the entire world.” In relation to our two terms for describing Christianity, these definitions indicate little or no difference.

In a chronological sense, “world” belongs to the modern era with its connotations of “uniformity” and “empire,” while “global” belongs to the postmodern era with its connotations of “hegemony,” “diversity” and “fragmentation.” Thus either term carries with it much potentially negative baggage. Sanneh’s attempt to clarify these two phrases is valuable, especially in leading us to give closer attention to their connotations. A survey of the literature throughout the twentieth century, however, reveals that the two phrases have come to be used interchangeably, as is also the case in the new century. A closer look at the literature through the past century indicates that “global Christianity,” more so than “world Christianity,” is used to connote the panoply of cultural expressions of the Christian faith around the world. In fact, historical evidence would indicate that “world Christianity” has had a longer association with the notion of the Christian faith as a singularity replicated by the West worldwide.

We feel that either term can be used in the positive sense that Sanneh assigns only to “world Christianity.” It seems that younger Christians, whether in Africa, Asia, the Americas, or Europe, seem to prefer the term “global.” Nonetheless, in the final analysis, either “global” or “world” can refer to a phenomenon spread across the entire earth. “Global Christianity” or “world Christianity,” then, is all forms of Christianity among all peoples, languages, and cultures. It is up to us who utilize either term to carefully define and discern the specific tenor of its usage. We truly live in the age of global Christianity, of world Christianity, of worldwide Christianity, of Christianity on six continents, of Christianity in every country of the world, and, perhaps soon, of Christianity among every people in the world. What this great fact means to particular Christians will continue to challenge both local and global expressions of the faith.

Notes

7. In this article we use “West” and “North” interchangeably. We are also equating “non-West” with “South.” Both of these dichotomies are used in the literature we are interacting with. For statistical evidence for the dominance of the North, see Todd M. Johnson and Sun Young Chung, “Tracking Global Christianity’s Statistical Centre of Gravity, A.D. 33–A.D. 2100,” *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 369 (April 2004): 166–81.
18. Christendom is “the portion of the world in which Christianity prevails or which is governed principally under Christian institutions” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*). See also Smith, *Mission After Christendom*, pp. 88–90.
20. Ibid., pp. 21–22, 64.