
This review is written in memory and honor of Ogbu U. Kalu, the book’s main editor, who was called home to glory in January 2009. He sets the tone for the issues dealt with by the essays by using Andrew F. Walls’s observation that ‘the labors of the missionary movement, and the cross-cultural process in Christian history, have borne fruit and catalyzed a shift in the center of gravity of Christianity that has immense implications for the theology of the future and for the way we tell its story’ (3-4). Walls was a participant in the conference where the papers for the volume were initially read. The book brings together carefully selected papers that are representative of the general tenor of the July 2001 Currents in World Christianity project held in Pretoria, South Africa. As Brian Stanley, the director, points out, the conference was the last public event of the project. This was a Pew Charitable Trusts-sponsored initiative coordinated by the University of Cambridge. As Stanley notes in his preface to the book, the Currents in World Christianity initiative ‘combined an interest in the modern history of Protestant missions with an emphasis on the religious aspects of globalization’ (x).

A significant aspect of this volume is the amount of attention given to studies of Christianity from the global south by local scholars, including specific case studies located in China (chapters 8 and 10), Ghana (chapter 11), Kenya (chapter 12) and India (chapters 9 and 14). These regional and contextual studies, combined with Afe Adogame’s chapter on ‘Globalization and African New Religions in Europe’ (chapter 13) and Joel Carpenter’s groundbreaking essay on New Evangelical Universities (chapter 7), most of which are located in the Third World, are extremely insightful. They provide very useful perspectives to readers with an interest in Christianity in the non-Western world, something like a kaleidoscope of how the faith has developed as it moved from north to south in the processes of globalization.

The book is divided into five parts, with each focusing on a particular dimension of the appropriations of Christianity within local contexts, or how particular streams of Christianity such as Pentecostalism have emerged in non-Western religious practice. Ogbu U. Kalu’s opening chapter helps readers appreciate the exact contributions that Africa in particular and the Third World in general have made to global Christianity. To that end he, like Jehu Hanciles’s contribution on ‘African Christianity, Globalization, and Mission’, privileges the view that in spite of its missionary history African Christianity is ‘a genuine African construct’ and not a purveyor of ‘a product made in America and exported around the world in the form of “a new Christian fundamentalism”’ (80-81). Arguing against claims by such scholars as Paul Gifford that Pentecostalism is a North American export into regions like Africa, Kalu notes that ‘scholarly concern should privilege how transnational cultural forms are appropriated, set in motion, and “domesticated”, investigating the way in which local cultural lenses refract the light in global cultural processes’ (9). As Christianity is experienced and translated into other cultural symbols, Kalu further notes, ‘the indigenous principle blossoms’ (9).

The essays in *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity* were selected to reflect this worldview, a selection that makes the subtitle *Global Processes and Local Identities* more than apt for the book. The essays take an approach to the study and understanding of Christianity
that focuses on its indigenous roots without failing to acknowledge the benefits of what Kalu refers to as ‘external interventions and spiritual flows’ (10). This leads to Paul Freston’s conclusion from his study of ‘Globalization, Religion and Evangelical Christianity in the Third World’ that developed Western trends are not necessarily more indicative of our global religious future than trends anywhere else. Even in cases where Third World Evangelicals seek some kind of contact and relationship with their First World counterparts, Freston rightly points out, these international contacts ‘do not indicate dependence at all, but rather a source of symbolic legitimacy for fighting local battles’ (35). Thus although the emergence of new evangelical universities in non-Western contexts may suggest the imitation of a historic pattern of development first pursued by Western missions, the new initiatives are aimed at seeking reality in faith within the contexts of revived and developing societies (163). Brian M. Howell and Anthony D. Fuente’s contribution that analyzes ‘Protestantism and Popular Culture in the Philippines’ is a powerful case study of this development. Such case studies in the book do not necessarily suggest that every missionary endeavor sustained colonial hegemonic tendencies in the global south.

To this end, Dana Roberts notes that missionaries contributed to what she calls ‘Christian internationalism’ by actively promoting the indigenization of non-Western Christianity. They promoted indigenous cultures with Christian expression through the separation of Christ from culture (105), including the translation of Christian literature into indigenous languages and the provision of Christian literature for the use of women and children (115). The closing chapters on local portraits of Jesus Christ in Africa, gendered appropriations by female charismatic leaders in Kenya, and globalization and new African religious movements in Europe serve to illustrate local appropriations of global Christianity. With the shift in the demographic center of gravity of the Christian faith from the north to the south, it is becoming clear that understanding the faith and appreciating its movements, contours, and ebbs and flows will be difficult without paying significant attention to what is happening to the faith in the global south. Ogbu U. Kalu has edited a volume that will serve institutions of higher learning in the history and mission of Christianity as they attempt to understand the implications of the southern shift of a faith that has been in transition since its birth in the Middle East, a region in which it remains a minor religion.

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