

THE ONGOING TASK

Agenda for a Work in Progress

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The term “global” immediately questions the edges of traditional history that from its (modernist) golden age in the nineteenth century has been located on the national stage. Challenged by the pluralism and “other centeredness” of postmodernizing culture, the central tenets of such modernist nation-making history have been widely challenged, though, as some of the contributors to this volume suggest, the challenge has been longer coming in certain areas of history than in others. The revisionism that has crept into the discipline has tended to go two ways: either through world systems theory toward universal and comparative history, or through gender, ethnic, or political foci toward “bottom up” studies locally or regionally situated. This trend has been driven by waves of theory, including new societies theory, frontier theory, gender theory, and the crossover effects of developments in literary theory and social theory. In neither direction — outward toward comparative history or inward to local history — have the challenges of globalization theory, questioning such quanta as time and space, and requiring the description of “glocalities” really been tackled.

Likewise, the challenges implicit in the term “Christian historiography” — a phrase that immediately places faith and discipline in tension — have not been unpacked. The master in the field, Herbert Butterfield, grappled with the questions of faith in the context of international history and “scientific history” rather than in the dystopian context of the postmodern world. Consequently, Butterfield’s work leaves much to be done in the overlapping fields covered by this volume.

The historiographical task ahead of us can be visualized in terms of four categories: (a) epistemology, or ways of knowing in Christian history; (b) re-

search methodology of historiographical enterprise; (c) new definitions; and (d) agenda for accomplishing the task.

Epistemological Challenges and Responses

One of the key problems associated with a project to reorient Christian historiography is to move forward rather than relapsing into Babel. The methodological problem is considerable. Many historians have enough trouble finding the time and research resources to finish many *local* projects. To take on a vast global enterprise is a daunting prospect indeed. This hesitation is reinforced by a strong suspicion bred into us by the way we have traditionally learned church history via texts like Latourette (1953), Walker (1985), etc. According to the standard account, the Christian testimony moved from Jerusalem to Rome, then to England and Northern Europe; and then, after several centuries, to the United States and eventually through the missionary movement in English to the rest of the world. It presumes the Europeanization and, more recently, the Americanization of cultures that local historians, in their sympathy for the subjects, resist mightily. And so they should. Reinforcement of such homogenization cannot be the aim of a new historical paradigm if the aim is that of keener understanding.

The epistemological problem mentioned above, however, suggests that all resistance to the global ideal is not simply based on historical sympathy. It also stems from the fact that our imaginations fail to encompass the breadth of the subject. We do not easily think globally; our natural human reflex is to write within the comfortable national boundaries that have shaped the paradigm for historiography — which after all arose as partner to the nation-making process in early modern times and determined the burying places of the ancestors. Even the paradigm for cross-cultural work which has been dominant in many of our circles, and which has given rise to the institutional “ecumenism” of groups such as the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne movement, does not have within it the fullness of the biblical concept of *oikumene*. It remains tied to the concept of international cooperation of national representative bodies. How then do we begin to construct a global historiography?

The biblical response would seem to be that the choice is between Babel and the Body — the confusion of tongues, or the unity given us in the Body of Christ. We are impelled by the ideal of the Body to seek for more adequate ways of expressing the “fullness of Christ.” In the words of Andrew Walls,

“Christ belonged to all humanity, and that the good news of Christ could be intelligibly received by all humanity” (Walls, 1996: xviii) has motivated the ceaseless effort to witness to the gospel in all cultures. Consequently, we have an imperative to be faithful not only to the global historiographical challenge but to the *Christian* historiographical challenge.

Traditionally, following the logic of Augustine of Hippo in his *City of God* and the even more inexorable logic of having to present the content of church history in a prescribed introduction to church history in theological colleges around the world, we have understood the “events” of church history sequentially. Such logic forces events into time frames that may or may not be justified by the events themselves. Alternatively, a biblical, multi-centered approach will lead to a more relational understanding of events. These may be evaluated in terms of how they represent God’s redemptive actions in history. This requires a more organic model than is normal in most Western historiography, a model with Jesus Christ as the center of a relational process and network. We need to ask: “What was God doing here and here and here at the same time?” God was acting around the world through Christians and non-Christians alike. A true global history will pay attention to these factors.

In responding to the epistemological question, “What is a global historiography?” typically we start with a rather casual assumption that what we are talking about allows for easy exchanges between the terms “globe,” “global,” and “globalization.” Similarly, “ecumenism” and *oikumene* at first sight appear to be equivalent. But as we engage in serious discussion and seek to clarify our conceptions of the world and of the globe, we soon discern that these terms are still being filtered through the preconceptions of nation-based histories. For those who come from countries with a long tradition of a state church, and with institutional ecumenism in place, the equivalence between ecumenism and *oikumene* is taken for granted. It is less obvious to those who came from countries with a stronger revivalist tradition or multi-national and multi-ecclesiastical experiences. Clearly, we cannot escape the task, identified by Andrew Walls in chapter I, of reconceptualizing our view of the globe and to engage with the process of theorizing about globalization that is going on outside the walls of most theological institutions. To treat globalization as a replacement for the capitalist concepts of progress is to substitute once more a human nostrum for the providence of God, while to regard it as the great Satan is to misunderstand the nature of historical forces. As Lamin Sanneh noted, globalization is not a salvific process. It is simply the new context in which we seek to do justice and live the life of Christ.

Research Methodology

Our second question is: "What is the Christian approach to a global historiography?" Reflecting on the kind of historiography practiced by North American church historians at present, Henry Warner Bowden observed that the guild is still occupied with an insular view of history, one that focuses on the West in the narrow meaning of that term.¹ To move toward a global historiography we need new paradigms, but we will not get them by following the traditional paths. A point made repeatedly was that those who are searching for new paradigms must do so in isolation. Lacking precedents and colleagues who share their quest, these scholars are developing their methodologies through a process of trial and error and questioning of personal identity. Professor Mundadan reported that "his experience has confirmed his approach." In his moving statement, Professor Leung noted that in the face of the vastness of China, not to mention the globe, he proceeded by explicating his personal interaction with his subject field. Professor Pillay lifted the lid a little on his life in South Africa in an Indian community on the wrong side of the legal color bar of the white minority, and yet on the wrong side of the ethnic color bar of the black majority. Globalization radically questions personal identity, and each of these personal stories is a testimony to the situation in which both Christian people and Christian historians find themselves as cultural boundaries shift. Likewise, the "personal" emerged constantly in the professional fears that the local would get lost in the regional would get lost in the global. Such statements were not merely the expression of a fear about some paper product, but about the erasing of *place* before the bulldozers of American property developers, be that property physical, intellectual, emotional, or a figment held in memory and so crucial to personal and group identity.

There are many examples of the rather nasty reciprocal effects of globalization. Further, it is an overlooked corollary of Professor Mundadan's statement that decolonization is now almost complete. An urgent priority is to envision local histories that do not erase the local or the regional, but which emphasize glocality, the local presented against the background of the global. A further goal, as Phillip Leung reminds us, is to rise above the standard categories developed in the post-Bandung era to describe Western imperialism and to seek

1. Henry Warner Bowden. 1998. A Situation Report on North American Historiography in the Twentieth Century. Paper presented at Consultation Toward a Global Christian Historiography. Unpublished.

to describe what is happening in dynamic categories that take account of the Other. As he discovered, he was in fact becoming the Other.

A corollary of this is the question: At the start of the third millennium is there a new concept of how we actually write history? Are we using more ecumenical and global categories as the center moves toward the South and East? What is the relationship between the broader context and the specificity of national contexts? What happens when the edges shift if the center is defined by the edges? The answer we have already seen is that we lose identity. Globalization means we perceive something that has a horizon but no edges. Pentecostal churches in regions such as Latin America are growing not only among humble pagans who are passive receivers, but they are part of a process of cultural exchange. The result is that the very idea of the missionary-sending relationship has changed. Mission is taking place in a global perspective. Among many Pentecostals, for example, the South-South relationship is stronger than the North-South relationship. Ogbu Kalu has shown that missions are turning into NGOs (non-governmental organizations), rather than sending missions, *per se*, and networking has replaced independent action.² Instead of doing mission, we sponsor “projects.” A sense of the global explains this change in relationship and methodology. In “projects” the edges are increasingly defined as being internal to the effort rather than being implicit in the group to whom the mission is directed.

In the new situation we have a multiplicity of centers, not just one. How then do we reorganize history? Following the example of Andrew Walls, we need to retrieve accounts of polycentricity in the past. This has direct implications, for example, for the writing of denominational histories where the power of the original North Atlantic center over the “edges” is rapidly fading. The decaying of peripheries is a major theme of our new history.

The old heartlands find it difficult to surrender ideas of periphery. This increases rather than decreases hostility as the old center refuses to recognize the emergence of new ones. As the uniqueness of the local is accentuated, we are driven toward the sort of history written by medieval historians — detailing the history of private and public, the effects that confessing Christianity has had on crucial elements such as the family and lifestyle across time in different cultures. If this is to be more than just another fad, we must ask Kalu’s hard question: What is the purpose of this history and for whom am I writing? If

2. Ogbu Kalu. 1998. “Jesus Christ, Where Are You?” Themes in West African Church Historiography at the Edge of the Twenty-first Century. Paper presented at Consultation Toward a Global Christian Historiography. Unpublished.

we accept this model and apply this question, the result stretches beyond the production of text to the incarnation of the results. It becomes incumbent on Christian historians — as opposed to church historians, for instance, to help change the perceptions of Christians throughout the world with regard to the fact that the centers of Christianity have shifted from the North to the South and East. This has huge ramifications for such things as the “struggle for Christian America,” which seems to have filled the bookshelves of that country several times over. The corollary to this is that if by struggling for “Christian America” — or Britain, or Germany, or whatever — is meant that America is a continuation of Christendom, it will never be found. It got up and moved south some years ago.

Redefinition

As suggested above, a number of methodological issues arise when we shift our attention from the periphery to the horizon, from the old centers, viewed seriatim, to a multi-centered world. This points to a series of new definitions.

1. *Christian history.* When we approach Christian history globally, an initial decision must be made: What is meant by Christian history? If the *history of Christianity* is intended, we must consider not merely the Christian community but the impact of Christianity on culture. No particular extra-professional requirements for action flow from this; one can approach the subject as a Christian or not. It is essentially religious history with Christianity as the subject. If the focus is on church history, in the sense of the institutional history of the church, again, I may adopt whatever categories may be applied to human institutions that fit the thesis. If I adopt the approach that my Christian history is the history of any selected field seen through Christian eyes, then theology, but not just theology, is required. The church becomes the subject, just as it could be Disneyland or cattle farming in Argentina. The inquiry is not a priori in predicting ends, but seeks knowledge, wisdom — in the biblical sense of the word — and life applications.

2. *The global.* A second initial choice relates to my attitude toward the globe. If I attempt to tackle the whole, it will crush me and no history will be written. If I ignore it, no global history can be written. But if I choose, as Gerald Pillay suggests, to use it as the background for my thought, then I can equally write about the said hypothetical Latin American *vacas*, and yet refer them to the international trade in beef, transportation routes, the impact of freezer technology, competition from lean-eyed Crocodile Dundees in Australia, and

the like. I can write my local church history and retain its locality. The difference is that I will write about that locality not as an existential thing in itself, an island in the stream of existence, but as a point through which various forces, people, and influences pass, and then emerge and reconnect to the global background. Locality does not disappear, individuality does not disappear, but locality and individuality are contextualized in the widest possible sense.

3. *Space and time.* In terms of end product, writing global history pushes us to privilege the elements of space and time. The first result is to anchor, as Professor Pillay has suggested, the historical boat in the long view. This allows providence to play a free role in any work's theological underpinnings. One must do more than this, however. "Time" must not be treated simply as chronology. Perceptions of time shift from one culture to another. As globalization theorist Roland Robertson has pointed out, globalization is the compression of time and space. The past to which we anchor ourselves is never static but flows away from us faster and faster as the pace of globalization accelerates.

The Christian historian is under mandate to remember the works of God, and so we need to reclaim those Christian gifts for modern historiography, teleology, and organic perception. Seeking to avoid disempowering local history by emphasizing cultural continuities as well as discontinuities, we point the hand of time forward as well as to the past. We reaffirm the nature of community by giving it an essential place in the world. Taking a global view need not destroy the faith community. It also must be noted that space and time are not the only horizons for the Christian historian. (a) We have the horizon of scripture, which provides edges for the sort of moral conundrums Kalu described (1998) based on African experience. (b) There are time horizons, such as Pillay hypothesizes with the onrushing of millennia. (c) There are spiritual horizons, as with the revivals of New England in 1730, Parramatta in 1830, and Tanzania in 1930, times when the spiritual reality overlays the globe so that it replaces other horizons. Christians are well equipped for this task.

We need not be trapped in the tendency of global histories to mandate space and time, for we have a long tradition of universal history — a perception of the great cloud of witnesses that look upon our efforts from the sidelines. Globalization relativizes the universal history of the church, because the compression of time and the rise of crises beyond the control of single nation-states mean that only the present is important and there is no ability to speak of transcendental realities. Part of the task of Christian history, therefore, is to hold the line, and not avoid the issue by ceding the hermeneutical task to the historical profession rather than the people of God.

4. *Inclusive history*. In terms of both method and content, this new history is inclusive. It describes the local by looking closely at the details; but then the local is held up against the horizon.

Agenda

To work at the historiographical task outlined above will require a range of new resources — conceptual and practical. This agenda lists a series of steps that ought to be taken in order to facilitate this work.

1. Develop cooperative histories between regions, comparing, say, Indonesia and Muslim states in West Africa; or, comparative histories looking at the parallels of, say, independent churches in Africa, India, and Australasia, all of which arise around the same time but which to this point have been explained by radically different means.
2. A register of sources on Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and Latin America in English (e.g., a Web-based database or on CD-ROM).
3. Facilitate collections of local histories in a coordinated manner so that their fields overlap and build over time toward regional libraries.
4. Intensify promotion of and new initiatives in such important bridging works as Donald Lewis, ed., *International Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, and Scott Sunquist, ed., *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*. Based on his experience, Sunquist suggested the need to build up regional focus centers in places like Singapore, Bangalore, and Pretoria, etc., both to solve the serious problems of preserving source materials and for replicating the sorts of training programs for Christian historians that Trinity College (Singapore) has sponsored.
5. “Discipling” centers that can act to encourage younger historians to enter the field, already aware of the challenge of globally oriented scholarship. For example, most Australian history written by Christians has been shaped either by the paradigm of the secular university or that of the pulpit. One has to assume that most of these people will continue to be trained in the conventional ways, thus ensuring that Christian history will largely be driven by the requirements of particular social and historical entities. We must take steps to stretch the boundaries. This should be done in each of the regions as well as at major academic centers such

as Edinburgh, New Haven, London, and Kingston with rich library and archival resources as well as visionary mentors.

6. Development of studies that look at global experiences that are common across various localities and cultures. The new historiography needs to be multi-centered, just as is global Christianity. Examples of such studies include the localization of science and technology; the Bible as a common element in all Christian cultures; the idea of a common apostolic tradition; education and its interaction with localities; problems of postmodernity and how it interacts with Christianity; the problems of regional identity: how people perceive themselves and their perceptions of community. There are also important questions of terminology and categorization to be solved. What, after all, is Africa? What is the West? What is Asia? What does it mean to be “multi-centered”? And how have these concepts changed over time as conceptualization of the globe has changed?
7. In addition to the content of studies, modes of dissemination for new projects must be given due attention. Language is a real issue. For instance, there is a massive and growing literature on evangelicalism in Portuguese and Spanish that is generally inaccessible to monolingual English speakers. The “consciousness of place” element that flows from old Christendom ideas of South America as a Catholic domain, and modern American ideas of Latin America as its hegemonic backyard are subtexts that remain in the English world’s conceptualization of history. Both linguistic and cultural issues have to be overcome in order to reinstate Latin America to its place in global Christian historiography.
8. Gender historians have long been working toward issues of the “other,” of multi-centeredness, and of history from below. A global history has many lessons to learn and connections to make with the work of historians of gender.
9. The theme of “global historiography” is widely discussed today. Various initiatives are under way to reconceptualize historiography and sponsor projects in which new kinds of history can be undertaken. It is important to be aware of these programs and, where possible, collaborate.