BOOKS I HAVE READ: CHRISTIANITY AS A WORLD RELIGION

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The challenge we wish to bring in this book is not merely that Christianity is a non-Western religion because historically its origins are in Asia; nor just that non-Western Christianities should be taken more seriously by theologians and scholars of Christianity because Christianityâ€™s numerical strength now lies in the global South. What we argue is that all aspects of Christian studies, including church history, theology, inter-religious and societal relations, must be reshaped and revised in light of the nature of Christianity as a world religion.

Category: Observations

If this title sounds familiar, it could be that this is because I mentioned it in yesterday's list of resources, which is an indication that I think that it is a very good book - which it is. The bottom line is that I would suggest that anyone who is interested in church history or world mission or who is a church leader should read this book. I know that I say that a lot, but it's still true!

Most books about church history or mission history that I have read present a story that goes something like this: Christianity spread out of the Eastern Mediterranean westwards into Europe and North Africa. The rise of Islam more or less destroyed the church in North Africa, but the church continued to grow in Europe from where, in the past few hundred years, it has spread around the world. The problem with this picture (even if it is expanded and details such as the Reformation are added) is that it is simply wrong. Christianity reached China about the same time as it got to the UK and its history in Asia is longer than in Europe. If we are truly to understand Christianity, then we need to grasp that it is, and always has been a religion that is spread across the planet, with multiple centres of influence. In Christianity as a World Religion Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim do a great job of communicating this.

I read the book on Kindle, but the paperback is a medium format book of around 360 pages which will set you back around Â£15. There are a number of illustrations, questions for reflection at the end of each chapter and enough references to keep anyone happy. The reading level is vaguely academic, but you certainly don't need a degree in theology to follow it.

The book has two main sections. An introduction covers questions such as the geography, history and theology of the church. However, these are viewed from a global standpoint, rather than considering them from a Eurocentric one. The second section examines takes us on a tour of the world examining Asian, African, European, Latin American and the Caribbean, North American and Oceanic Christianities. It then closes with a reflection on the significance of World Christianity.

The various summaries of local Christianities are detailed and comprehensive. For example the discussion on Europe looks at Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, the Enlightenment and modern secularism among other things.

I realise that some Evangelicals might feel uncomfortable with the idea of, say, Orthodoxy being given equal billing with Protestantism. However, if we are to understand our own slice of the Christian world we need to see it in its broader context. If we are to understand what God is doing around the world, we need to lift our eyes above the level of our own churchmanship - however tightly we adhere to it.

As always, a few quotes from the book to get you thinking.

> *Christianity justifies its description as a world religion because of its inherently missionary nature and universal claims and also because â€“ both historically and in the present â€“ it is spread worldwide and globally interconnected while being at the same time locally rooted in many different societies and cultures.*

> *Christianity is as African as it is European, as Asian as it is North American and so on.*

> *The succeeding century has shown that the work of the missionaries who originally carried the message is only the catalyst for the local activity of its reception, dissemination and transformation in a new cultural and social context.*

> *In political discussions about a solution to the crisis in Israel-Palestine, the presence of Christians is often ignored and all Arabs are (wrongly) assumed to be Muslim. Palestinian Christians often feel hurt that the Christian tourists who visit the holy places rarely encounter the local Christian communities, most of who are effectively imprisoned by Israeli occupation.*

> *Although Western missionaries are prominent in the story of the growth of Christianity in East Africa especially, the day-to-day evangelization was largely the work of black catechists and evangelists, whose stories are only now being told,*

> *Christianity in Europe has had a rather different history from elsewhere because, following the pattern of the Roman Empire, it was favoured by rulers and governments and grew alongside the ruling powers.*

> *Until recently most books in English on Christian history gave the impression that Christianity began in the Middle East and took a line westward. It was refined by the Greeks and came of*

age in Europe. Many maps of early Christian history continue to reinforce this by cutting off the early spread into Africa at the bottom and Asia at the right.

Our study suggests that the destinies of the Christianities of North and West and the South and East are linked in very many respects: through historical and institutional ties, through mission activity and migration and through common Christian interest,

However, the study of mission history tends to focus on the activities of Western missionaries in the colonial period rather than encompassing the varied processes of evangelization that stretch back to the early church and the missional initiatives from other continents today.

Although in one sense Christian theology in Europe has been done in a global context for several hundred years (Schwarz 2005), this is not the same as accepting that it is a local theology, which is the approach required by world Christianity (Schreiter 1985).

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