MISSION HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

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Christianity lives - one might say it survives - by crossing the boundaries of ethnicity, language and culture. Without that process, it can wither and die.
Category: Observations

When the histories of contemporary Christianity come to be written, I have no doubt that Andrew Walls will be recognised as one of the most important historians and theologians of our generation. Today, I came across one of his papers that I had not previously read, but which summarises some of the key themes in his writing, so I thought that I would give a precis of it here. I found the paper on the African Theology Facebook group, but you can also find it in the original journal here (you have to scroll down a long way). Don't be concerned, it is not written in overly academic or complex language.

In the paper, snappily titled Mission History as the Substructure of Mission Theology, Walls makes a number of generalisations. I'd like to highlight each one and then illustrate it with quotes from the paper.

Christian Advance is Not Progressive But Serial

This is a common theme in Walls' work and one which I have highlighted before.

> *There is no especially Christian territory in the sense that Muslims claim Arabia, nowhere where the faith belongs by right of ownership. There is no Christian equivalent of Mecca, no cosmic centre of the faith. Christian advance is serial, rooted first in one place and then in another, decaying in one area, appearing anew in another.*

> *Between the beginning of the twentieth century and the present day, Western Europe has moved from Christian heartland to Christian wasteland, and there has been a degree of withering in the West as a whole. On the other hand there has been a massive movement towards the Christian faith in areas that a century ago had a very small Christian presence. In 1900 there were some ten million professing Christians in the whole of the African continent; when the World Missionary Conference met in Edinburgh in 1910, its world survey, while optimistic about China and Japan and India, concluded that the evangelization of the African interior had hardly begun. Yet estimates of Christian numbers in Africa at the beginning of the twenty- first century exceeded 300 million, and most Africans have heard the Gospel from other Africans. Over the intervening century Korean Protestantism, a very small factor in 1900, was transformed into the missionary phenomenon it has become today. Over the same period a whole band of Christian communities has come into being in a line that stretches from the Himalayas through the Arakan into the South East Asian peninsula. Sixty years ago*

> *Nepal was accounted a land closed to the Gospel; today it has a vigorous church, to which the Nepali diaspora in India and elsewhere has been a major contributor.*

> *Over the past century, Christian advance and Christian recession have proceeded simultaneously; recession in the West, advance in other parts of the world. Once more the pattern of Christian advance appears as serial rather than progressive, withering at the centre, blossoming at the edges. The great event in the religious history of the twentieth century was the transformation of the demographic and cultural composition of Christianity brought about by the simultaneous processes of advance and recession. It means that the representative Christians, the Christian mainstream, now belong to Africa, and Asia and Latin America, with intellectual and theological consequences still to be comprehended.Â*

Christianity Lives by Crossing Frontiers

> *That Greek form of Christianity spread across the Hellenistic world, and gained a dominant place in the Roman Empire with its urban civilization and its developed literature and technology. But a time was to come when the Arabs, with their new found faith of Islam, assumed the rule in the eastern provinces of the Empire, and Christianity there moved slowly into eclipse; and when devastating wars decimated the church in the western provinces. What enabled Christianity not only to survive but to grow was the crossing of another cultural frontier. This time it passed to the people that the Romans feared would destroy their civilization, the tribal peoples they called barbarians, unlettered and with the simplest technology. More recent times have seen another crisis and another crossing of cultural boundaries. The people descended from those that the Romans called barbarians became the core Christian community, and then, as we have seen, the faith began to wither among them.Â*

> *Christianity lives - one might say it survives - by crossing the boundaries of ethnicity, language and culture. Without that process, it can wither and die. In the time to come, the now representative Christians of Africa and Asia will need to cross cultural boundaries to share their faith.*

Transmission of the Faith Involves Translation and Translation Leads to Theological Expansion.

> *The two faiths, (Christianity and Islam) sharing so much in their origins, differ sharply in their understanding of the relationship of revelation to language. For Muslims, revelation is rooted in a particular language. The eternal Qur'an is the very word of God in the language in which it was revealed. Christians often use the expression "Word of God" in relation to their Scriptures, but with an entirely different understanding of its relation to language. The teaching of Jesus, the foundation of Christian living, and described in one of the Gospels as "Spirit and life", is not - give or take a dozen or so scattered words - preserved in the language in which Jesus gave it. While he clearly used the mother tongue of the Palestine of his day, Aramaic, we have most of his words only in translation. Furthermore, for ordinary purposes the great majority of Christians read and listen to that teaching in a translation made from that translation.*

> *The message about Christ has to penetrate beyond language, in the sense of the translation of words; it has to pass into the local systems of thinking and choosing, the networks of relationship, that make up identity.*

Theology Arises as a Fruit of Vernacular Translation in the Process of the Conversion of the Past.

> *The doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation came into being through the need to think about Christ in a Christian way. And the need was a direct result of the crossing of the first cultural frontier from the Judaic to the Greek world. When believers who saw Jesus essentially in terms of Jewish life and destiny first shared their faith with Greek-speaking Gentile pagans, they faced a difficulty. The word that best summed up the truth about Jesus was surely Messiah - the whole of the Scriptures was wrapped up in it. But the word could mean little to Greeks without a great deal of explanation that went far beyond translation. A new term was needed that would immediately speak to pagans with no background in Jewish thinking. The word they adopted, Kurios, Lord, was used among pagans for their cult divinities. To preach Jesus in these terms, knowing what the connotations would be rather than with the riches of the term Messiah, must have seemed to many an impoverishment, if not a distortion of the Gospel. Was it not dangerous to adopt the vocabulary of pagan cults - and, in any case, should not learn about the Messiah and Israel's national salvation?*

> *Every time the Gospel crosses a cultural frontier there is a new call for theological creativity. Crossing the frontier from the Greco-Roman to the barbarian world where law turned on compensation for offences, and the responsibility of kin for the offences of their family, opened the way to doctrines of the Atonement. In our own day, the crossing of yet another cultural frontier means a new call for theological creativity as the Biblical tradition interacts with the ancient cultures of Asia and Africa.Â*

> *The process will be carried forward by new questions that arise about Christ and Christ's work in the particular circumstances ofAfrica and Asia. There are already signs of this activity, starting in the demands of pastoral practice and opening theological questions in the process. The Gospel came to much of Africa and Asia, not only in a Western framework but one bent to fit the requirements of the chapter of Western intellectual history usually referred to as the Enlightenment. For the most part Western theology, whether conservative or liberal in its orientation, is Enlightenment theology, designed for an Enlightenment universe. But the Enlightenment model of the universe was a small, pared down one. Most of humanity live with larger models of the world, populated by a range of entities with no equivalent in the Enlightenment model; though many of them have their equivalents in the Bible record. As a result of its restricted view ofthe universe, Enlightenment theology is not big enough to cope with many issues raised by African and Asian experience. An enlargement of theological discourse is one likely fruit of thinking in a way that is both Christian and African, or Indian, or Chinese.Â*

I believe that this paper (and Walls' work as a whole) is something that Christian leaders in the UK need to grasp with. If Walls is correct, then the current decline in Christianity in the West is not just a blip, it is a part of a long-term historic trend. It will not simply be remedied by trying harder, we need to think in new terms. The cross-cultural transmission of the faith is key to this. If the church in the West is to grow and thrive, it needs a degree of humility vis-a-vis the church in the rest of the world. We need to realise that we are not normative and that we don't set the standards for what is *real* Christianity and *real* theology.