THINGS WESTERN CHRISTIANS NEED TO KNOW: THE CHURCH WAS ALWAYS INTERNATIONAL

Posted on September 17, 2021 by Eddie

Church history books tell us about the way that the faith moved from the Middle East, to Europe and then out to the rest of the world through the efforts of Western missionaries. It's a great story - but it didn't happen like that.
Category: Observations

For the most part, Christians in the West are getting used to the idea that the Church is growing around the world far faster than it is in Europe and North America. That being said, many Western church leaders will instantly caveat statements about the growth of the church around the world with statements like, "though much of this is linked to the prosperity gospel", or "we can't always be sure that this is authentic gospel growth". The impression that these people give is that there is something definitive and authentic about (our type of) Christianity in the Western world, but everything else is slightly suspect.

The thing is, we've been conditioned to believe that the Christian faith is essentially a Western phenomenon, Church history books tell us about the way that the faith moved from the Middle East, to Europe and then out to the rest of the world through the efforts of Western missionaries. It's a great story - but it didn't happen like that.

Far from heading Westwards into Europe, for a thousand years, the church expanded into Asia. There was a Christian presence in China before there was one in the UK. The first state sponsored Bible translation was in Armenian, not into a Western European language. In fact the Armenian translation predates the King James Version by 1300 years. Even today, it is still the case that the oldest Christian communities in the world are in the Middle East - well, of course they are!

Obviously, I'm not saying that there were no Christians in Europe during the first millennium, that would be ridiculous. However, for that thousand years, the majority of believers were in Asia. Then, for a variety of factors, the church in Asia declined and as a result, the church became a primarily European institution - a situation which was to last for a few hundred years. If we are to place what is happening in the world church in context, we first need to realise that the time when Europe was the centre of Christianity in the world was a blip - an aberration even - in the long history of Christianity. I'm not saying that it wasn't important, but it is far from the whole story. The natural state of the Christian church is multinational, multicultural and intercontinental.

In Kwame Bediako's words, we are living through "the revival of a non-Western religion". Our problem, all too often, is that we look at it as if we were living through the globalisation of a Western religion.

Let me close with a story that I read a while ago (I can't find the reference, so it may be apocryphal). Apparently, a young American missionary was surprised to meet a group of local Christians in Syria. When he asked them who planted their church, the reply was "St Paul".

If you are interested in church history and you haven't read The Lost History of Christianity by Philip Jenkins, then you really must.