BOOKS I HAVE READ: A MULTITUDE OF ALL PEOPLES

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If you plan to read a church history book this year; make sure it's this one.
Category: Observations

> *Many contemporary missiologists and church historians would have us believe that Christianity came into Africa and Asia from Europe when the reality is quite the opposite in several significant respects. Christianity is not becoming a global religion; it has always been a global religion.*

This is the central theme of Vince Bantu's excellent book A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity. The book takes us on a tour of the development of the ancient church in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and shows that the Eurocentric version of church history that most of us have been taught is simply not true. There are two key reasons why I see this book as being important:

- It gives a much fuller picture of what God has been doing in and through the church than most (all?) standard text books of church history.
- You can't understand the church today without understanding where we have come from. Our missiological engagement with society needs to be built on an understanding of our history.

The book is 256 pages long, with fairly extensive footnotes and good indices. The style is academic-light; regular readers of history and theology will not struggle (though see my comment below), but it probably isn't a book for everyone. It will currently set you back about Â£18 for the paperback but less that Â£7 for the Kindle version.

The book basically has six sections each of which does what you would expect from the title.

- Introduction: The Global Religion
- 1. The Roots of Western Christianity
- 2. The First Christians of Africa
- 3. The Early Church in the Middle East
- 4. The Beginning of Missions Along the Silk Road
- Conclusion: Following Jesus the Way He Made Us

You can see from the chapter headings that the geographical scope of the book is huge, though the material is limited to the first millennium. To be honest, I found reading this book hard work. This is not because it is badly written or too dense, but simply because of my own lack of familiarity with the people and places involved. It was hard to keep track. When I read traditional church history

books, I inevitably come across people and places that I've heard of before and that provides a scaffolding to my reading. In this case, there was very little familiar material, so I had to pause to catch up from time to time.

To this reader a number of consistent themes emerged from the book.

The Sheer Geographical Spread of the Early Church

One quote from the chapter on Africa captures this for me.

> *Perhaps the most intriguing example of contextualization in early Nubian Christianity is a painting in the monastery at the capital of Dongola from the late tenth century. This nativity painting contained typical images including Mary and child, shepherds, and angels. However, to the right of Mary and the baby Jesus is a unique painting of Africans worshiping the birth of the Savior wearing animal crest masks and loin cloths and holding percussive instruments. It is believed that these Africans may have belonged to the Bambara tribe which later occupied much of modern Mali, Burkina Faso, and Senegal.*

I am used to the concept that the church has ancient roots in North Africa and down the Nile. However, I had never realised that this church had a missionary movement which may have reached as far as the Bambara, people that I regularly encountered when we lived in Ivory Coast. This is mind blowing!

The Importance of Translation and Contextualisation

Again, let me illustrate this with some quotes.

> *Medieval Nubian culture was essentially Christian in nature. Even the documentary papyri that highlight the social, legal, and economic nature of medieval Nubia provide examples of contracts and receipts that consistently begin with an invocation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

> *Some of the earliest biblical manuscripts in Geâ€™ez (Ethiopia) were the Garima Gospelsâ€"Garima being one of the names associated with the Nine Saints. Recent radiocarbon studies have dated these Geâ€™ez Bible manuscripts between the fourth and thirteenth centuries. However, an earlier date for these Bible translations is likely given their linguistic similarities with early Geâ€™ez literature.*

> *the Syriac version of the Bible may have been translated in the first century but no later than the second.*

> *After the Christianization of Georgia under Mirian, the Georgian alphabet came into existence in a similar fashion as the Armenian. The impetus for creating a written script for Old Georgian was for the purpose of translating the Bible and composing original theological literature.*

> *Interestingly, racialized concepts from Roman culture were much more prevalent in Greek and Latin literature but are not present in Christian texts composed in African languages (i.e., Coptic, Old Nubian, Geâ€™ez). This is but one reason why the historical significance of early, non-Western Christianity complicates much of contemporary historiography and vernacular discourse on the origins of Christianity.*

The Distortions of Imperial Power

Following on from Constantine, Roman emperors used Christianity as a force to bind the Empire together. Part of this process was to sponsor councils to unite the church theologically, while at the same time, condemning Christians outside of the Empire as being unorthodox - although this was often far from the truth.

> *With the major ecclesiastical centers of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia now condemned as heretical, the church of the Roman Empire would increasingly come to see itself as the sole heir and guardian of orthodox Christianity. Non-Western Christian groups were then ignored, oppressed, and colonized by the dominant Roman church until an unprecedented world superpower emerged that dramatically altered the fate of the non-Western Christian world.*

> *Much of the breakdown between the mainstream Roman Empire and its East African and Middle Eastern provinces was the result of refusing to accept contextualized theology at variance with the dominant church and undermining the validity of local leadership.*

The consequences of this condemnation are serious.

> *If the Western church had not condemned, oppressed, and isolated the early African church, leaving it open to Islamic domination, the gospel may have continued to spread to the extremities of the African continent at an early period.*

> *As was traced in chapter one of this book, the steady assimilation of Western Christendom to Greco-Roman norms coupled with the marginalization of non-Western expressions of Christianity gave rise to the concept of Christianity as an inherently Western religion.*

The thing is, the assumption of orthodoxy and power, which drove Christianity in the Roman Empire, continues to be a feature of Western Christianity today.

> *The tendency for Western culture to act as the barometer of Christian orthodoxy is a trend that reaches back to the Romanization of Christianity.*

Our Current Missiological Challenge

Whether we like it or not (or whether we are willing to admit it or not) our history shapes who we are.

> *Billions of people around the world perceive Christianity as a Western, white religion that is fundamentally at odds with their ethnic and cultural identity. Regardless of the reality that Scripture proclaims the equal acceptability of all cultural groups (Acts 10:34-35), the historical reality of the Western churchâ€™s complicity in white supremacy has cemented this cultural association with the gospel in the minds of much of humanity.*

Some may wish to dismiss this, but the following quotes illustrate some of the issues which arise from the identification of Christianity with Western society.

> *The problematic identity politics that resulted for Persian Christians from the Christianization of Rome have deep implications for contemporary matters of race, ethnicity, and Christian identity. Perhaps the greatest challenge for non-Western/non-white people in coming to faith in Christ today is the association of Christianity as a â€œwhite/Western religion.â€*

> *I recently taught a course on church history at a Native American seminary where one of the students in the class told me about how his Christian friend, who was also from the Zuni Pueblo, was ostracized from his family and excommunicated from his tribe for becoming a Christian. According to this student, many Zuni people perceive Christianity as the religion of the Manifest Destiny, Indian Removal, mission schools, and other forms of oppression.*

> *Christianity was expelled from China twice primarily for cultural rather than theological reasons, and the perception of Christianity as a foreign, imported movement remains a dominant perception across contemporary China despite vast numbers of recent converts.*

> *In the non-Western world, non-Christians perceive Christianity as a white, Western, or American religion while seeing the gospel as antithetical to their cultural identity. Therefore, fellow members of a non-Western people group who convert to Christianity are often seen as becoming white, Western, or American.*

Bantu sums up the challenge facing the church in two themes:

> *The church has two interrelated and indispensable tasks going forward: (1) the deconstruction of the Western, white cultural captivity of the Christian tradition and (2) the elevation of non-Western expressions of Christianity. Inherent in these tasks is the rejection of the incomplete history that has been transmitted in Western Christian context as well as a post-colonial, â€œbottom-upâ€ view of Christian tradition.*

I suspect that some readers will react against the language he uses, especially in his first point. However, having lived in Christian communities outside of the West, I see this as an essential task, whatever language is used.

The Church is and always has been a multiethnic, multicultural body. The problem is that those in power have tried to squeeze it into their own mould - and it's time that we stopped doing that. One last quote:

> *As each group works out our cultural sanctification with fear and trembling, the purpose of crosscultural partnership is not for us to become part of a different people group but to become better versions of ourselves. Vibrant missional partnership encourages us to more fully transform our cultural systems into the image of God, for which he has destined every nation, tribe, and tongue.*

This is an important book and I've almost certainly not done it justice. So who should read it? Firstly, those who are involved with cross-cultural mission must get to grips with it - at least those who lead and shape agencies must. Equally, those who are interested in church history, but who have never looked beyond the traditional Eurocentric model must get hold of a copy. The bottom line is that many of us (myself included) have been living with a conception of the church which simply does not fit the facts. It's time to take our blinkers off and to deal with reality.