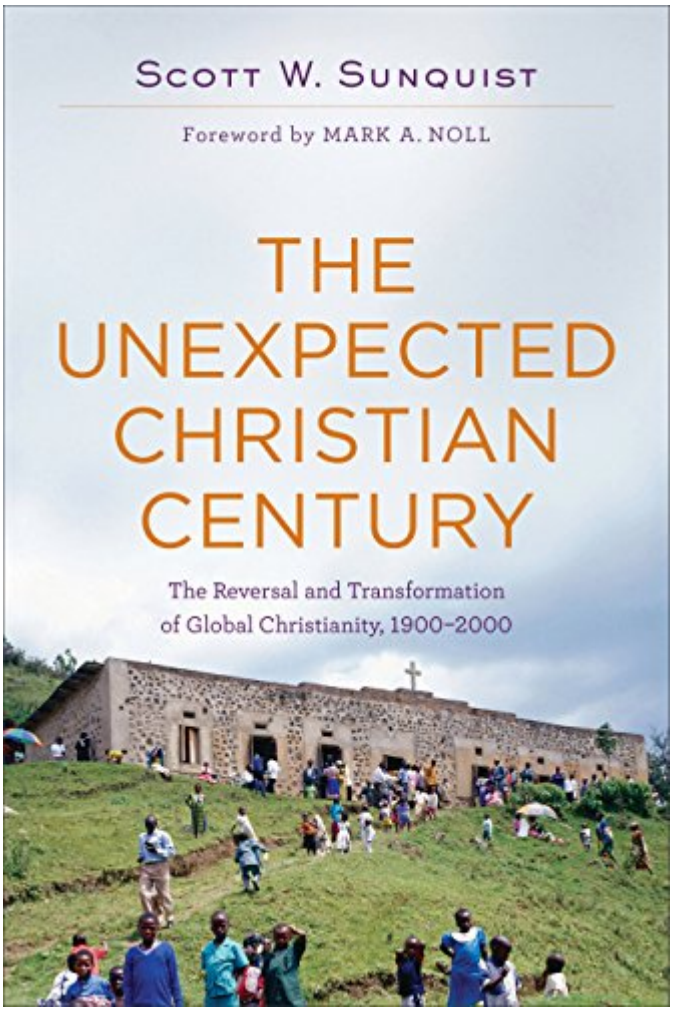
THE UNEXPECTED CHRISTIAN CENTURY

Posted on August 24, 2016 by Eddie

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Category: Reviews

Christianity was supposed to die in the 20th century, swept away by the tides of rationalism and scientific atheism. However, exactly the opposite happened and the Christian faith flourished as never before; growing right across the world. Scott Sunquist's excellent bookÂ The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900-2000Â does an greatÂ job of highlighting why Christianity didn't just roll over and die.

This is a large format paperback of just over 200 pages and will set you back about Â£15 (or Â£11 on Kindle). You don't need to be a specialist in church history to read it; the text is well written and accessible and you can ignore the footnotes, index and bibliography if you want to.



The book has a lengthy introduction and six chapters (I'd just have called them seven chapters, if I'd been editing it, but what do I know?).

Introduction: From Jesus to the End of Christendom. This is the best short (14 page) introduction to Christian history that I have ever read. I wish it was published online as a separate article as I would be linking to it on a regular basis.

1. World Christianity: The Gilded Age through the Great War.Â In this chapter, Sunquist highlights the way that Christianity became a truly global faith, despite the challenges caused by colonialism and the first world war.

2. Christian Lives: Practices and Piety. We are give brief insights into the lives of Christians (from all traditions) who helped shape the Christian faith over the C20. Some of these are well known, such as Billy Graham, Desmond Tutu and Mother Teresa, but there are many others who you may not have heard of (but should).

3. Politics and Persecution: How Global Politics Shaped Christianity.Â This one does what it says on the tin; with particular focus being placed on the rise of Naziism andÂ Communism and their impact on the church.

4. Confessional Families: Diverse Fates.Â For those who are used to reading their church history through a purely evangelical lens, this is an enlightening and helpful chapter. It takes the three great historic Christian traditions; Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant, addingÂ a fourth family, the Spiritual (Pentecostal and charismatic), and charts their progress through the C20. There was a lot I did not know here.

5. On the Move: Christianity and Migration. The Christian faith has always spread in two ways, through missionary action and by migration. The last hundred years have seen unparalleled levels of migration around the world and this is having a huge impact on the church - it may be much more significant than intentional missionary work.

6. One Way Among Others: Christianity and World Religions. Those of us who live in the West are having to come to grips with the implicationsÂ of living in a multi-faith society, however this has been the reality for Christians in other parts of the world for a long time.

This is a good book and one that I think that any well-read Christian leader should consider getting hold of. For the serious student of Church history, there is enough by way of references to keep them happy and for the non-specialist, the book is pitched at an accessible level.

I do, however have on minor complaint. Writers about the world church have struggled to find a way of describing the parts of the world where Christianity is growing. Some say 'The Global South', while I prefer the longer formula of 'Africa, Asia and Latin America'. I've yet to find an satisfactory way of easily capturing this reality. Sunquist's use of the termÂ 'Lafrasia' set my teeth on edge!

To finish with a quote from the last page:

> *It is not common today to honour missionaries for their work, but it would be inaccurate if we did not point out that the development of Christianity in the twentieth century resulted from the synergy of Western Missions and non-Western appropriation. Both were needed, and this is where we end with hope. Much of the missionary work was done with inadequate understanding of local languages and cultures. Much missionary work was simplistic or filled with more zeal than wisdom. And yet, missionary work, with great sacrifice and suffering, established some small, local Christian presence. Then, in each of the many contexts, local people adopted the teachings of Jesus and made them their own. Often they suffered the loss*

> *of family or of life to remain loyal to Jesus who spoke to their hearts in their heart language. What this century should tell us is that the message of the gospel is more powerful than human motives and more gentle than human powers. Today, most missionary work is being done by Koreans, Chinese, Brazilians, Nigerians, Indians, Ghanaians, and even Egyptians, Lebanese and Costa Ricans. They move across cultural, language and faith barriers in ways not that different from the Europeans and Americans of the past, but with little of the worldly power. They are inadequate, often improperly trained, and often they go with mixed or unclear motives. This unexpected history of Christianity in the twentieth century should give us some hope. A gentle and suffering Saviour will be Lord of all these efforts in the future as in the past.*

Can I hear an amen, to that?