ANDREW WALLS: THE SERIAL EXPANSION OF CHRISTIANITY

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Category: Church: UK

I've heard lots of talks and read a quite a few books which give a simplified picture of the history of the church that goes something like this. Christianity started in Jerusalem and from there it spread through Turkey and into Southern Europe as well as along the North African Coast. Over the next few hundred years the rise of Islam more or less wiped out the church in Africa, while the whole of Europe eventually became Christian. Sometime around 1500 (if you are Catholic) or 1700 (if you are Protestant), missionaries started taking the faith around the world and now there are Christians just about everywhere. It's a simple and familiar story; the Christian faith grows slowly spreading out across the world. The only problem is that it didn't happen like that.

One major problem with this picture (and with many introductory church history books) is that it ignores the church in Asia. For over half of it's history, Christianity has been essentially an Asian religion. If you want to know more, you should readÂ The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia--and How It DiedÂ by the excellent Philip Jenkins.

Another problem is that this scenario paints a picture of a serial expansion of Christianity that simply did not happen. The Scottish historian Andrew Walls gives a more accurate picture in an interview which is available online:

> *If you consider the expansion of Islam or Buddhism, the pattern is one of steady expansion. And in general, the lands that have been Islamic have stayed Islamic, and the lands that have been Buddhist have stayed Buddhist. Christian history is quite different. The original center, Jerusalem, is no longer a center of Christianity -- not the kind of center that Mecca is, for example. And if you consider other places that at different times have been centers of Christianity -- such as North Africa, Egypt, Serbia, Asia Minor, Great Britain -- itâ€™s evident that these are no longer centers of the faith. My own country, Scotland, is full of churches that have been turned into garages or nightclubs.*
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> *What happened in each case was decay in the heartland that appeared to be at the center of the faith. At the same time, through the missionary effort, Christianity moved to or beyond the periphery, and established a new center. When the Jerusalem church was scattered to the winds, Hellenistic Christianity arose as a result of the mission to the gentiles. And when Hellenistic society collapsed, the faith was seized by the barbarians of northern and western Europe. By the time Christianity was receding in Europe, the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America were coming into their own. The movement of Christianity is one of serial, not progressive, expansion.*

There are a number of implications that emerge from this, which Walls explores in a number of articles, in particular his paper Christianity in the non-western world: a study in the serial nature of Christian expansion which you can find in his bookÂ The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History.

A Vulnerable Faith

> *It is as though there is some inherent fragility, some built-in vulnerability in, Christianity, considered as a popular profession, that is not to the same extent a feature of Islam. This vulnerability is engraved into the Christian foundational documents themselves, with their recurrent theme of the impending rejection of apostate Israel, and their warnings to the early Christian churches of the possible removal of their candlestick. Neither of these eventualities are seen as jeopardising the saving activity of God for humanity (p.29).*

Elsewhere, Walls suggests that Christianity is inherently vulnerable because it is based on Christ offering himself on the cross for humanity rather than on a God compelling us to believe. The cross implies the possibility of rejection.

A Cross Cultural Faith

After reviewing the way in which Christianity was eclipsed in Jerusalem, the Hellenistic world and now in Europe, Walls writes:

> *There is a significant feature of each of these demographic and cultural shifts of the Christian centre of gravity. In each case a threatened eclipse of Christianity was averted by its cross-cultural diffusion. Crossing cultural boundaries has been the life blood of historic Christianity. It is also noteworthy that most of the energy for the frontier crossing has come from the periphery rather than from the centre. The book of Acts suggests that it was not the apostles who were responsible for the breakthrough of Antioch, whereby Greek-speaking pagans heard of the Jewish messiah as the Lord Jesus, but quite unknown Jewish believers from Cyprus and Greece (Acts 11:19-20) (p.32).*

However, despite the vital importance of the cross-cultural spread of Christianity to its survival, it is often marginalised and seen as far less important than keeping things going at the imagined centre. It was ever thus:

> *The whole Gentile mission of Paul and his colleagues must have seemed a sideline in comparison with the work in Zion, where the words of the prophets were daily fulfilled, where the Lord's own brother was in regular attendance at the temple of God among the Covenant people of God at the place where the Lord would return (p.32).*

TheÂ Church in Europe?

Wall's work suggests that the current recession of the Church in Europe and its growth in the majority world fit into a historical process. It is not the first time that the church has blossomed at the

periphery while declining at the centre. The question is, what do we make of it today? It bothers me that I rarely see people who are involved with the church in the UK interacting with Wall's thinking. Plenty of missionaries and mission scholars read and benefit from his work, but very few who are based in the UK.

For what it's worth, I don't think that the near extinction of Christianity in Europe is inevitable in the next hundred years or so - though I don't think it is impossible either. One factor which (as far as I am aware), Walls hasn't looked at is the impact of migration on the transmission of the faith back into areas which once were the centre. Today people travel and relocate to an extent that is unique in history. Geographical and cultural barriers are broken down by mass travel and migration and a whole new generation of Christians, with a different outlook are coming to Europe at a time when Europeans are rejecting the Gospel. From my perspective; the future of the church in Europe in the mid-to-long-term lies in their hands.

Meanwhile, I'd love to see some people who are more qualified than I am on the state of the church in Europe seriously engaging with Walls - if you know of any, please point me in the right direction.