ONE

The Christian Revolution

Europe is the Faith.
—Hilaire Belloc

We are currently living through one of the transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide. Over the last five centuries, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and European-derived civilizations overseas, above all in North America. Until recently, the overwhelming majority of Christians have lived in white nations, allowing some thinkers to speak of “European Christian” civilization. Conversely, radical writers have seen Christianity as an ideological arm of Western imperialism. Many of us share the stereotype of Christianity as the religion of the West or, to use another popular metaphor, the global North. It is self-evidently the religion of the haves. To adapt the phrase once applied to the increasingly conservative U.S. electorate of the 1970s, the stereotype holds that Christians are un-black, un-poor, and un-young. If that is true, then the growing secularization of the West can mean only that Christianity is in its dying days. Globally, perhaps, the faith of the future will be Islam.

Over the last century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa and Latin America. Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in those regions. If we want to visualize a “typical” contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria, or in a Brazilian
favela. In parts of Asia too, churches are growing rapidly, in numbers and self-confidence. As Kenyan scholar John Mbiti has observed, “the centers of the church’s universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila.”¹ Whatever Europeans or North Americans may believe, Christianity is doing very well indeed in the global South—not just surviving but expanding.

This trend will continue apace in coming years. Many of the fastest growing countries in the world are either predominantly Christian or else have very sizable Christian minorities. Even if Christians just maintain their present share of the population in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya, Mexico and Ethiopia, Brazil and the Philippines, there are soon going to be several hundred million more Christians from those nations alone. Moreover, conversions will swell the Christian share of world population. Meanwhile, historically low birth rates in the traditionally Christian states of Europe mean that these populations are declining or stagnant. In 1950 a list of the world’s leading Christian countries would have included Britain, France, Spain, and Italy, but none of these names will be represented in a corresponding list for 2050. In 1900 Europe was home to two-thirds of the world’s Christian population; today, the figure is less than a quarter, and by 2025 it will fall below 20 percent.

Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American. According to the statistical tables produced by the respected Center for the Study of Global Christianity, some 2.1 billion Christians were alive in 2005, about one-third of the planetary population. The largest single bloc, some 531 million people, is still to be found in Europe. Latin America, though, is already close behind with 511 million, Africa has 389 million, and 344 million Asians profess Christianity. North America claims about 226 million believers. Now, we need not accept these figures in precise detail, and I believe the Asian figures, present and future, are too high; but even so, we can accept these estimates in broad outline. Already, then, a large share of the Christian world is located in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Just as striking are the long-term trends. The number of African Christians is growing at around 2.36 percent annually, which would lead us to project a doubling of the continent’s Christian population in less than thirty years.²

If we extrapolate these figures to the year 2025, the Southern predominance becomes still more marked. Assuming no great gains or losses through conversion, then there would be around 2.6 billion Christians, of whom
595 million would live in Africa, 623 million in Latin America, and 498 million in Asia. Europe, with 513 million, would have slipped to third place. Africa and Latin America would thus be in competition for the title of most Christian continent. About this date, too, another significant milestone should occur, namely that these two continents will together account for half the Christians on the planet. By 2050 only about one-fifth of the world’s three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites. Soon, the phrase “a white Christian” may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as “a Swedish Buddhist.” Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied.

This global perspective should make us think carefully before asserting “what Christians believe” or “how the church is changing.” All too often, statements about what “modern Christians accept” or what “Catholics today believe,” refer only to what that ever-shrinking remnant of Western Christians and Catholics believe. Such assertions are outrageous today, and as time goes by they will become ever further removed from reality. Europe is demonstrably not the Faith. The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning. The fact of change itself is undeniable: it has happened, and will continue to happen.

LOOKING SOUTH

The concept of a rising global South is fairly recent in historical terms. In the 1950s, emerging African and Asian nations tried to distinguish themselves from what then seemed the rigid separation of the globe between capitalist West and communist East, proclaiming their membership in a nonaligned Third World. Tragically, that term soon became synonymous not with prosperous neutrality but with grinding poverty and uncontrollable population growth, and that fact led some observers to see the critical global division as one of economics, rather than political ideology. In 1980, at the height of a renewed Cold War, the Brandt Commission portrayed the world enmired in a Common Crisis that involved both global North (Europe, North America, Japan) and global South, a term that comprised the remaining societies—by no means all of which are located in the Southern Hemisphere. In this context, the term “South” is characterized less by geographical location than by relative access to wealth and resources.

Since the 1950s Christian leaders and religious studies scholars have grown accustomed to the vision of Christianity literally “going South,” in
the sense of an ever-larger share of Christians being found in the teeming poverty of Africa, Asia, and Latin America—the Tricontinental world. The theme is well known in Europe, where African affairs are more noticed to than they customarily have been in the United States. As long ago as the 1970s, this global change was discussed in well-known works by European scholars such as Andrew Walls, Edward Norman, and Walbert Buhlmann. Meanwhile, African and Asian thinkers explored the intellectual implications in works such as Kosuke Koyama’s Water-Buffalo Theology and John S. Pobee’s Toward an African Theology. By 1976 African and Latin American scholars joined to form an Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. Walbert Buhlmann’s term “the Third Church” drew the obvious comparison with the Third World and further suggested that the South represents a new tradition comparable in importance to the Eastern and Western churches of historical times. Walls likewise sees the faith in Africa as a distinctive new tradition of Christianity comparable to Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy; it is “the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration model of its character . . . anyone who wishes to undertake serious study of Christianity these days needs to know something about Africa.”

Yet outside the ranks of scholars and church bureaucrats, commentators were slow to recognize these trends, to what I have described as the creation of a new Christendom, which for better or worse may play a critical role in world affairs. Until quite recently, materials either from or about global South churches were rarely in evidence in the catalogues of North American religious publishers, with a couple of conspicuous exceptions such as Orbis Books. This relative absence did not mean that publishers willfully suppressed the information for sinister motives, but they knew from experience that Third World topics rarely attracted enough of a general audience to make a new title profitable. For whatever reason, Southern churches remained almost invisible to Northern observers. When the popular evangelical magazine Christian History listed the “hundred most important events in Church history,” the only mention of Africa, Asia, or Latin America occurred in reference to the British abolition of the slave trade. Missing from this top hundred was church growth in modern Africa, where the number of Christians increased, staggeringly, from 10 million in 1900 to 360 million by 2000. If that growth does not represent the largest quantitative change in the whole of religious history, I am at a loss to think of a rival. (In fairness, a subsequent Christian History in 2003 provided ample coverage of Africa’s amazing Christian expansion).
For all too long, the imbalance was just as evident in the Western academic world, in which published studies of Third World religion represented only a tiny fraction of scholarship on Christianity. At the same time, the volume of academic studies coming out of Africa and Latin America actually shrank as universities in those regions were crippled by lack of resources. To quote John Mbiti once more, “It is utterly scandalous for so many Christian scholars in [the] old Christendom to know so much about heretical movements in the second and third centuries, when so few of them know anything about Christian movements in areas of the younger churches.”

Happily, matters have changed greatly since Mbiti wrote in the 1970s. We can now turn to major publications by scholars such as Harvey Cox, Paul Freston, Paul Gifford, Lamin Sanneh, R. S. Sugirtharajah, and many others. While scholarly works are appearing too quickly to be listed comprehensively, some demand attention, especially the volumes of the recent *Cambridge History of Christianity*, with their strongly global focus, and their pervasive theme of “World Christianities.” The collaborative *Global Bible Commentary*, published by Abingdon Press, offers a fine sampling of the innovative biblical scholarship being undertaken across the global South.

Yet while the available scholarship expands so impressively, it may still take a few years for the underlying facts to make their full impact on Euro-American observers. And if many writers are neglecting the present-day realities of Christianity, they are still worse on projecting the future. In North America at least, many visions of the coming century are based firmly on extrapolating familiar domestic conditions. The imagined future looks a lot like the American present, only with Western liberalism ever more in the ascendant.

Among secular commentators too, the global shift of Christianity is only gradually gaining recognition, although the underlying questions raised are profound. Just what does Western civilization mean when what were once its critical religious aspects are now primarily upheld outside the “West”? One of the first works to explore these issues was Samuel P. Huntington’s book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, a widely read analysis of current global trends, and it does pay serious attention to changing religious patterns. Even Huntington, though, underestimates the rising force of Christianity. He believes that the relative Christian share of global population will fall steeply in the new century, and that this religion will be supplanted by Islam: “In the long run . . . Muhammad wins out.” But far from Islam being the world’s largest religion by 2020 or so,
as Huntington suggests, Christianity should still have a substantial lead, and will maintain its position into the foreseeable future. By 2050 there will still be about three Christians for every two Muslims worldwide. Some 34 percent of the world’s people will then be Christian, roughly what the figure was at the height of European world hegemony in 1900.11

In one crucial matter, I question Huntington’s analysis of the evidence. While Muslim countries are indeed experiencing rapid rates of population growth, similar or even higher rates are also found in already populous Christian countries, above all in Africa. Alongside the Muslim efflorescence he rightly foresees, there will also be a Christian population explosion, often in the same or adjacent countries. If we look at the nations with the fastest demographic growth and the youngest populations, they are evenly distributed between Christian- and Muslim-dominated societies. I therefore challenge the assertion that “Christianity spreads primarily by conversion, Islam by conversion and reproduction.” Even today, in numerical terms, the preponderant religion of the world’s poorest is Christianity, rather than Islam or Hinduism. Huntington’s lack of interest in the epoch-making Christian growth in Africa is odd because elsewhere he has written so knowledgeably about the role of the Catholic church in promoting democratic movements across the continent. Throughout his *Clash of Civilizations*, though, he refers to “Western Christianity” as if there could be no other species.12

**BACK TO THE FUTURE**

The numerical changes in Christianity are striking enough, but beyond the simple demographic transition, there are countless implications for theology and religious practice. To take a historical parallel, Christianity changed thoroughly when a movement founded in a Jewish and Hellenistic context moved into the Germanic lands of Western Europe during the early Middle Ages. Although it is only a symbolic example, we can learn something from the way in which the English language imported its large Christian vocabulary. Such familiar words as “church” or “bishop” are borrowed from Greek originals, though in radically mutated forms. “Church” derives from *kyriakos oikos* (house of the Lord), “bishop” from *episkopos*, “supervisor,” or one who watches over the community. We can imagine the Roman and Greek missionaries to the Anglo-Saxons confronting the notorious English incapacity to deal with foreign tongues and hearing their elegant terms butchered into the words we have today.
In this instance, the substance of the words survived the cultural transition intact, but in other vital ways, a largely urban Mediterranean Christianity was profoundly changed by the move to the northern forests. In art and popular thought, Jesus became a blond Aryan, often with the appropriate warrior attributes, and Christian theology was reshaped by West European notions of legality and feudalism. To take one critical example, modern Western interpretations of the Atonement (both Catholic and Protestant) can be traced to the writings of Saint Anselm around 1100. For Anselm, human sins were like grievous offenses committed against a great lord, debts that required a ransom or restitution of great price, which, in Christianity took the form of the death of God’s Son. Although Eastern Orthodox theologians rejected this theory as overly legalistic, it made excellent sense to a Western society deeply sensitive to questions of honor, fealty, seigniorial rights, and acknowledging the proper claims of lordship. The Lord became a feudal lord. European Christians reinterpreted the faith through their own concepts of social and gender relations, and then imagined that their culturally specific synthesis was the only correct version of Christian truth. In fact, it was sometimes as far removed from its origins as the word “church” is from kyriakos oikos. As Christianity moves southward, the religion will be comparably changed by immersion in the prevailing cultures of those host societies.

But what would this new Christian synthesis look like? At least for the foreseeable future, members of a Southern-dominated church are likely to be among the poorer people on the planet, in marked contrast to the older Western-dominated world. For this reason, some Western Christians have since the 1960s expected that the religion of their Third World brethren would be fervently liberal, activist, and even revolutionary, the model represented by liberation theology. In this view, the new Christianity would chiefly be concerned with putting down the mighty from their seats, through political action or even armed struggle. All too often, though, these hopes have proved illusory. Frequently, the liberationist voices emanating from the Third World proved to derive from clerics trained in Europe and North America, and their ideas won only limited local appeal. Southern World Christians would not avoid political activism, but they would become involved strictly on their own terms. While many espoused political liberation, they made it inseparable from deliverance from supernatural evil. The two terms are indeed related linguistically and often appear together in biblical texts, but the juxtaposition of the two thought-worlds of liberation and deliverance seems as baffling for many Euro-Americans as it is natural for global South Christians.
Of course, we must be careful about generalizations concerning the vast and diverse world of Southern Christianities, and I stress the plural. There is no single Southern Christianity, any more than there is such a thing as European or North American Christianity: each of these terms involves numerous components, some strongly at odds with the others. Yet we can reasonably say that many global South Christians are more conservative in terms of both beliefs and moral teaching than are the mainstream churches of the global North, and this is especially true in Africa. The denominations that are triumphing all across the global South are stalwartly traditional or even reactionary by the standards of the economically advanced nations. The churches that have made most dramatic progress in the global South have either been Roman Catholic, of a traditionalist and fideistic kind, or radical Protestant sects, evangelical or Pentecostal. Indeed, this conservatism may go far toward explaining the common neglect of Southern Christianities in North America and Europe. Western experts rarely find the ideological tone of the new churches much to their taste.

Global South Christians retain a very strong supernatural orientation and are by and large far more interested in personal salvation than in radical politics. As Harvey Cox showed in *Fire from Heaven*, Pentecostal expansion across the Southern Continents has been so astonishing as to justify claims of a new Reformation. In addition, rapid growth is occurring in nontraditional denominations that adapt Christian belief to local tradition, groups that are categorized by titles such as “African indigenous churches.” Their exact numbers are none too clear, since they are too busy baptizing newcomers to be counting them very precisely. By most accounts, membership in Pentecostal and independent churches already runs into the hundreds of millions, and congregations are located in precisely the regions of fastest population growth. Within a few decades, such denominations will represent a far larger segment of global Christianity, and just conceivably a majority. These newer churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism, and puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority. They preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary, and apocalyptic. In this thought-world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith-healing, exorcism, and dream-visions are all fundamental parts of religious sensibility. For better or worse, the dominant churches of the future could have much in common with those of medieval or early modern European times.

The theological coloring of the most successful new churches reminds us once more of the massive gap in most Western listings of the major
trends of the last century, which rightly devoted much space to political movements such as fascism and communism but ignored such vital religious currents as Pentecostalism. Yet today, fascists or Nazis are not easy to find, and communists are becoming an endangered species, while Pentecostals are flourishing around the globe. Since there were only a handful of Pentecostals in 1900, and several hundred million today, is it not reasonable to identify this as perhaps the most successful social movement of the past century? According to current projections, the number of Pentecostal believers should cross the one billion mark before 2050. In terms of the global religions, there will be by that point roughly as many Pentecostals as Hindus, and twice as many as there are Buddhists. And that is just taking one of the diverse currents of rising Christianity: there will be even more Catholics than Pentecostals.\textsuperscript{15}

These trends must make us think carefully about the character of what we consider normative or typical Christianity. Not just is the “normal” Christian in the modern world no longer Euro-American, she is unlikely to bear much resemblance to American mainline Protestantism. The media, however, may be slow to recognize that fact. In 2005, the New York Times published an obituary of the Rev. Paul Abrecht, a brilliant and committed thinker who served the World Council of Churches for many years. The Times remarked that he “took a leading role in formulating mainstream Christianity’s response to modern ethical challenges,” especially the nuclear threat. While no one would quarrel with the praise heaped upon Dr. Abrecht, the word “mainstream” must startle. In numerical terms alone, liberal Protestantism has never represented a mainstream of Christianity, or even a majority, and as time goes on, the relative significance of that tradition will decline ever further.\textsuperscript{16}

**THE DEATH OF CHRISTIANITY?**

As Southern Christianities continue to expand and mature, they will assuredly develop a wider theological spectrum than at present, and stronger liberal or secularizing tendencies may well emerge. For the foreseeable future, though, the dominant theological tone of emerging world Christianity is traditionalist, orthodox, and supernatural. This would be an ironic reversal of most Western perceptions about the future of religion. When I was working on the first edition of this book, I described its general theme to friends and colleagues, many of whom are well educated and widely traveled. When I said, though, that my theme was
“the future of Christianity,” a common follow-up question was, in effect “So, how long do you think it will last?” or specifically “How long can the Catholic Church survive?” In their own way, secular, liberal Americans have a distinctly apocalyptic view of the future, with a millenarian expectation of the uprooting of organized religion. At the least, there is a widespread conviction that Christianity cannot survive in anything like its present form.

For more than a century, the coming decline or disappearance of religion has been a commonplace assumption of Western thought, and church leaders have sometimes shared this pessimistic view. Every so often, some American or European writer urges the church to adjust itself to present-day realities, to become relevant by abandoning outmoded supernatural doctrines and moral assumptions. Some years ago, the Episcopal Bishop John Spong of Newark advocated just such a skeptical and secularist New Reformation in his book *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. In his 2002 book, *A New Christianity for a New World*, Spong again attempts to explain *Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born*. Templeton Prize–winning scholar Arthur Peacocke urged that the church abandon the “incomprehensible and unbelievable” teachings of supernaturalism, and present the faith in a “credible” manner.

Such opinions were widely reflected in the mass media. In 2000, for instance, *New York Times* editorial writer Brent Staples suggested, “Visit a church at random next Sunday and you will probably encounter a few dozen people sprinkled thinly over a sanctuary that was built to accommodate hundreds or even thousands. The empty pews and white-haired congregants lend credence to those who argue that traditional religious worship is dying out. . . . threadbare congregations limp along with mounting bills, in leaky sanctuaries until they can no longer afford to remain open.” Staples argued that Christianity had failed and was collapsing, and would continue to do so unless and until the religion came to terms with liberal orthodoxies on matters of sex and gender. Such calls continue to be heard—although obituaries for conservative faith sound ever more quaint following the vigorous mobilization of religious activists in subsequent U.S. elections.17

Viewed from Cambridge or Amsterdam, such pleas for accommodation may make excellent sense, but in the context of global Christianity this kind of liberalism looks distinctly dated. While some American churches have declined, it is the most liberal and accommodating that have suffered the sharpest contractions. In the Episcopal Church, the worst casualty has been Bishop Spong’s own diocese of Newark, which has lost almost
half its membership since 1972, a rate three times worse than the normal diocese in that denomination. Conversely, it would not be easy to convince a congregation in Seoul or Nairobi that Christianity or “traditional faith” is dying, when their main concern is building a worship facility big enough for the ten or twenty thousand members they have gained over the last few years. And these new converts are mostly teenagers and young adults, by no means the graying reactionaries of media legend. Nor can these churches be easily told that, in order to reach a mass audience, they must bring their message more into accord with (Western) secular orthodoxies.

In contemplating this shift to traditionalism, a historical analogy comes to mind. In eighteenth-century Europe and America, secular Enlightenment ideas made enormous progress among social elites. Few traditional bastions of Christian belief escaped attack. The Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the existence of hell, all fell into disfavor, while critical Bible scholarship undermined the familiar bases of faith. Thomas Jefferson was confident that rational Unitarianism was destined to be the dominant creed of the New United States, and he generously offered his version of the New Testament shorn of miracles or supernatural intervention. Under heavy assault from the European kingdoms, the Roman Catholic Church was forced to dissolve the Jesuit order, which represented the aggressive confidence of bygone days. In 1798 anti-religious French revolutionaries captured the pope himself. So alarming were the signs of the approaching end that orthodox Protestants were galvanized to undertake new missionary endeavors to try and compensate for the approaching collapse of Christian Europe. Indeed, the missionary fervor of the early nineteenth century owed much to that crisis atmosphere.\textsuperscript{18}

Any knowledgeable observer in the 1790s would have concluded that orthodox Christianity had reached its last days, and of course, this sensible opinion would have been absolutely wrong. In the early nineteenth century, orthodoxy and tradition made a comeback, as did the papacy and, indeed, the Jesuits. The rationalism prevailing in many Protestant churches was overwhelmed by a new evangelical revivalism, which received an enormous boost from the revivals that began in 1798. Far from dominating the American scene, Unitarian-Universalists today comprise around 0.2 percent of the U.S. population. So thoroughly was eighteenth-century liberalism obliterated that many modern writers tend to assume that its ideas were invented anew by Victorian skeptics and rationalists, or perhaps grew out of the controversies over Darwinian evolution. Then as now, the triumph of secular liberalism proved to be anything but inevitable.
THE RISE OF CHRISTENDOM

The phrase “new Christendom” evokes a medieval European age of faith, of passionate spirituality, and a pervasive Christian culture. Medieval people spoke readily of “Christendom,” the Res Publica Christiana, as a true overarching unity and a focus of loyalty transcending mere kingdoms or empires. Kingdoms such as Burgundy, Wessex, or Saxony might last for only a century or two before they were replaced by new states and dynasties, but any rational person knew that Christendom simply endured. This perception had political consequences. While the laws of individual nations lasted only as long as the nations themselves, Christendom offered a higher set of standards and mores, which alone could claim to be universal. Though it rarely possessed any potential for common political action, Christendom was a primary form of cultural reference.\(^{19}\)

Ultimately, Christendom collapsed in the face of the overwhelming power of secular nationalism. Later Christian scholars struggled to live in this new age of post-Christendom, when one could no longer assume any connection between religion and political order. By the start of the twenty-first century, however, the whole concept of the nation-state was itself under challenge. Partly, the changes reflected new technologies. According to a report by the U.S. intelligence community, in the coming decades “governments will have less and less control over flows of information, technology, diseases, migrants, arms, and financial transactions, whether legal or illegal, across their borders. . . . The very concept of ‘belonging’ to a particular state will probably erode.” To use Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase, nation-states are imagined communities of relatively recent date, rather than eternal or inevitable realities. In recent years, many of these communities have begun to reimagine themselves substantially, even to unimagine themselves out of existence. In Europe, loyalties to the nation as such are being replaced by newer forms of adherence, whether to larger entities (Europe itself) or to smaller (regions or ethnic groups).\(^{20}\) If even such once-unquestioned constructs as Great Britain are under threat, it is not surprising that people are questioning the existence of newer and still more artificial entities in Africa or Asia, with their flimsy national frontiers dreamed up so recently by imperial bureaucrats. As Paul Gifford notes, many Africans live in mere quasi states: “though they are recognized legal entities, they are not, in a functional sense, states.”\(^{21}\)

For a quarter of a century, social scientists have been analyzing the decline of states in the face of globalization, and have noted parallels with the cosmopolitan world of the Middle Ages. Some scholars have even
postulated the future emergence of some movement or ideology that could in a sense create something like a new Christendom. This would be what political scientist Hedley Bull called “a modern and secular equivalent of the kind of universal political organization that existed in Western Christendom in the Middle Ages.” Might the new ideological force be environmentalism, with a mystical New Age twist? Yet the more we look at the global South in particular, the more we see that while universal and supranational ideas are flourishing, they are not secular in the least. The centers of gravest state weakness are often the regions in which political loyalties are secondary to religious beliefs, either Muslim or Christian, and these are the terms in which people define their identities. The new Christian world of the South could find unity in common religious beliefs.

That many Southern societies will develop a powerful Christian identity in culture and politics is beyond doubt. Less obvious is whether, and when, they will aspire to any kind of global unity. In this matter, the Atlantic Ocean initially seems to offer a barrier quite as overwhelming as it was before Columbus. Very soon, the two main centers of Christianity will be Africa and Latin America, and within each region there is at least some sense of unity. Latin American ecclesiastics meet periodically, scholars treat the region as a whole (albeit a diverse one), and a similar canon of authors is read widely. The same can be said of Africa in its own way. However, next to no common sense of identity currently unites the churches and believers of the two continents. Even in terms of worldwide Christian networks, the two continents belong almost to different planets, and Asian nations represent a still different reality. For many Protestant Africans, the World Council of Churches offers a major institutional focus of unity, but because the Roman Catholic Church abstains from membership in the Council, this forum is closed to the majority of Latin Americans. When African and Latin American church leaders and scholars do meet, all too often it is at gatherings in Europe or the United States, pursuing agendas conceived in the global North.

The resulting segregation of interests and ideas is remarkable, since the churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America share so many common experiences. They are passing through such similar phases of growth, and are, independently, developing such very similar social and theological worldviews. All, also, face similar issues, of race, of inculturation, and, still, of how to deal with their respective colonial heritages. All these are common hemispheric issues that fundamentally separate the experiences of Northern and Southern churches. Moreover, churches on all three
continents share a passionate enthusiasm for mission and evangelism that is often “South-South,” organized from one of the emerging churches, and directed toward some other region of Africa, Asia, or Latin America—we think of Brazilian missionaries in Africa, Ugandans in India, Koreans in the Middle East. Although poorly studied, South-South evangelism represents one of the most impressive phenomena in contemporary Christianity: the topic cries out for a major book-length survey.

Given the lively scholarly activity and the flourishing spirituality in the global South, a period of mutual discovery is inevitable. When it begins—when, not if—the interaction should launch a revolutionary new era in world religion. Even though many see the process of globalization as yet another form of American imperialism, it would be ironic if an early consequence was a growing sense of identity between Southern Christians. And once that axis is established, we really would be speaking of a new Christendom, based in the Southern Hemisphere.

The archaic term “Christendom” conjures some potential nightmares about the future we are imagining. The last Christendom, in the Middle Ages, was anything but an unmix blessing for either Church or society. While it offered a common culture and thought-world, the era was also characterized by widespread intolerance, symbolized at its very worst by aggressive crusades, heresy hunts, and religious pogroms. Critically, Christendom was defined in terms of what it was not, since the Christian world existed in unhappy conjunction with neighboring Muslim states.23

This Christian-Muslim conflict may in fact prove one of the closest analogies between the Christian world that was, and the one coming into being. No less than Christians, the Muslim world will be transformed by the epochal demographic events of the coming decades, the shift of gravity of population to the Two-Thirds World. Muslim and Christian nations will expand adjacent to each other, and often Muslim and Christian communities will both grow within the same country. Based on recent experiences around the world—in Nigeria and Indonesia, the Sudan and the Philippines—we face the likelihood that population growth will be accompanied by intensified rivalry, by struggles for converts, by competing attempts to enforce moral codes by means of secular law. Whether Muslim or Christian, religious zeal can easily turn into fanaticism.

Such struggles might well provoke civil wars, which could in turn become international conflicts. This development is quite likely when one of the competing ideologies is shared passionately by a neighboring country, or by an international religious-oriented alliance. Across the Muslim world, many believers have shown themselves willing to fight for the cause of
International Islam with far more enthusiasm than they demonstrate for any individual nation. Putting these different trends together, we have a volatile mixture that could well provoke appalling wars and confrontations.

Worldwide, religious trends have the potential to reshape political assumptions in a way that has not been seen since the rise of modern nationalism. While we can imagine any number of possible futures, a worst-case scenario would include a wave of religious conflicts reminiscent of the Middle Ages, a new age of Christian crusades and Muslim jihads. In responding to this prospect, we need at a minimum to make sure that our political leaders and diplomats pay quite as much attention to religions and to sectarian frontiers as they ever have to the distribution of oilfields.

USING THE FUTURE

This scenario may well be too pessimistic, but there can be no doubt about the underlying realities, demographic and religious, which ensure that Christianity will flourish in the new century. The question is just how to respond to that fact. While political leaders must make their own agendas, current changes also pose questions for anyone interested in the state of religion.

The greatest temptation—and maybe the worst danger—is to use future projections as a club in present-day arguments. Northerners rarely give the South anything like the attention it deserves, but when they do notice it, they tend to project onto it their own familiar realities and desires. If in fact the global South represents the future, then it is tempting to claim that one’s own ideas are more valid, more important, because they coincide with those of the rising Third World.

Over the past half-century or so, whenever global South Christianity has gained attention in North America or Europe, it has been through the form of what might be termed two dreams, two competing visions, each trying to deploy that new religious movement for its own purposes. For the Left, attracted by visions of liberation, the rise of the South suggests that Northern Christians must commit themselves to social and political activism at home, to ensuring economic justice and combating racism, to promoting cultural diversity. Conservatives, in contrast, emphasize the moral and sexual conservatism of the emerging churches, and seek to enlist them as natural allies. From their point of view, growing churches are those that stand farthest from Western liberal orthodoxies, and we should learn from their success. A Liberation Dream confronts a Conservative Dream. For
both sides, though, the new South is useful, politically and rhetorically. Even if activists hold an unusual or unpopular position, it can be justified on the basis that it represents the future: if they wait long enough, they will be vindicated by the churches of Africa (or Asia, or Latin America). Like any true-believing Marxist, one is claiming to be on the side of history, which will absolve its faithful disciples.

Both expectations, liberal and conservative, are wrong, or at least, fail to see the whole picture. Each in its different way expects the Southern churches to reproduce Western obsessions and approaches, rather than evolving their own distinctive solutions to their own particular problems. One difficulty is deciding just what that vast and multifaceted entity described as the Third World, or the Two-Thirds World, actually does want or believe. The South is massively diverse, and conservatism and liberalism are defined quite differently from the customary usages of North American or European churches. Conservative theological or moral stances often accompany quite progressive or radical economic views. And the North-South divergence will probably grow as time goes on. As Southern churches grow and mature, they will increasingly define their own interests in ways that have little to do with the preferences and parties of Americans and Europeans.

We must be cautious about seeing such new movements through the lens of our own conflicts. As an analogy, we might imagine the situation in the seventh or eighth centuries in what was still, numerically and culturally, the Near Eastern heart of Christianity, in Syria or Mesopotamia. We picture a meeting of church leaders who have gathered to hear a report from a traveler from a not so antique land, from the remote barbarian world of Western Europe. The traveler delights his listeners by telling them of the many new conversions among the strange peoples of England or Germany, and the creation of whole new dioceses in the midst of the northern forests. Impatiently, the assembled hierarchs press him to answer the key question: this new Christianity coming into being, is it the Christianity of Edessa or of Damascus? Where do the new converts stand on the crucial issues of the day, on the Monothelete heresy, on Iconoclasm? When the traveler tells them, regretfully, that these issues really do not register in those parts of the world, where religious life has utterly different concerns and emphases, the Syrians are alarmed. Is this really a new Christianity, they ask, or is it some new syncretistic horror? How can any Christian not be centrally concerned with these issues? And while Syrian Christianity carried on debating these questions to exhaustion, the new churches of Europe entered a great age of spiritual growth and intellectual endeavor.
And as in those times, it is extremely difficult to envisage the future trajectory of the faith. Who in that age could have foreseen the global expansion of that poor hatchling, Western Christianity? Today, similarly, we see promising signs of growth, as Southern Christians begin evangelizing the North, in the process changing many familiar aspects of belief and practice, and exporting cultural traits presently found only in Africa or Latin America. We can only speculate what this future synthesis might look like. But underlying all these possibilities is one solid reality. However partisan the interpretations of the new Christianity, however paternalistic, there can be no doubt that the emerging Christian world will be anchored in the Southern continents.