

# CGCM News

Center for Global Christianity & Mission

Number 17, Fall 2014

www.bu.edu/cgcm

## Introducing the CGCM Annual Theme: What is World Christianity?

## Fall Semester Events:



images, top-left: Heinrich Bunting 1581 clover leaf map;  
top-right: African baptism by Travis Myers; bottom: used with  
permission from Laura James LauraJamesArt.com

Saturday September 20<sup>th</sup>  
"A Comparative Study of  
the Identity and Social  
Distinctions among Indian  
Christians, at Home and in  
the Diaspora" *An Indian  
Immigrant Christianity  
Workshop led by Jesudas  
Athyal and Joshua Kalapati*  
STH 325, 9:30am-4:00pm

*CGCM Lunch Series:*  
Thursday October 9<sup>th</sup>  
"God's Mission in West Africa"  
*A Lecture by Joel Gray*  
STH 325, 12:00-1:30pm

Thursday October 30<sup>th</sup>  
"Early 20th Century  
Networks and the Formation  
of Global Christianity" *A  
Lecture by Dr. Klaus Koschorke*  
Location TBA, 11:00am-1:00pm

The Center for Global Christianity & Mission has chosen a theme for the 2014-2015 academic year: *What is World Christianity?* It might seem obvious to you, but at the World Christianity Forum last year, co-hosted by the GGCM, it became clear that scholars approached world or global Christianity in very different ways . . . (Continued on page 2)

Essays in this issue:

Why is this even a question? page 2

Why "world" Christianity page 3

Understanding world Christianity page 4



## The Many Faces of World Christianity (Continued from page 1)

To explore the meaning of World Christianity, the CGCM has launched a discussion with a series of thought pieces that are meant to act as conversation openers. Written by scholars from a variety of backgrounds and commitments, all of them are giving their opinion on what, exactly, World Christianity might be. This issue showcases two of many fascinating takes on this emerging field. Don't just follow along, join in the conversation and read more essays at: [www.bu.edu/cgcm/annual-theme/](http://www.bu.edu/cgcm/annual-theme/)

### Why is this even a Question?

by Daryl R. Ireland  
Associate Director of the CGCM

Already with one eye on the job market, I was excited to see something recently posted in my specific discipline: World Christianity. In a new and therefore small field, this was a rare event. Immediately I raced through a reading of the job description until I tripped on one very troubling fact. No one agrees on what global Christianity is.

The job listing I looked at explained the institution was looking for someone who would be able to talk about Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and “diaspora communities of World Christianity in the global North.” If it was not clear already, the last phrase confirmed it. World Christianity, by this definition, referred to Christian communities in, or originating from, the global South. Christians to the north were, paradoxically, excluded from the all-inclusive title of “World Christianity.”

In other circles, the same fault line exists but the appellations are reversed. Some scholars have begun to probe the global and local dynamics of Christianity. In the studies I am most familiar with (China), the global side of the faith invariably refers to what has been exported from the global North. In descriptions of how local Chinese adopted and adapted the global faith, it becomes obvious that authors are not referring to the Christian faith as practiced by Papua New Guineans, Paraguayans, or Palestinians. The world Christianity referred to invariably comes from North America and Europe. In such cases, the seemingly all-encompassing idea of world Christianity once again excludes rather than includes.

A third definition of world Christianity circulates, though less widely than the first two. It thinks of world Christianity as a theological reality. The one body of Christ, these scholars argue, is ontologically prior to the various histories, theologies, geographies, and social distinctions that divide Christianity into what appears to be a myriad of Christianities. By God's act, all Christians at all times and in all places are united by one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

None of these definitions of global or world Christianity can be easily collapsed or combined with the others. The rest of the essays submitted on this topic attest to that fact, even as they try to move past it. For the moment, I have to live with at least three competing notions of what I am studying. Obviously, some serious and heavy work lies ahead for the discipline. In the meantime at least being aware of the various definitions is beneficial. If nothing else, that knowledge should help me communicate clearly if I ever make it to an interview.



image from [alaskaprosperty.org](http://alaskaprosperty.org)

## Why “World” Christianity

by Jonathan J. Bonk

CGCM Research Professor of Mission and Director, *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

Beneath its surface meaning, this beguilingly straight forward phrase—*world Christianity*—represents a vast, dynamic and bewildering complexity not easily accommodated by customary academic understandings of *Christianity*. Both “world” and “Christianity” are commonplace categories, of course, and that’s the problem. Both terms are so inclusive as to seemingly discredit their usefulness as defining or delimiting cognitive categories.

Despite this, I believe that the phrase has become a useful theoretical frame for many of us attempting to understand Christianity *as she is*. Let me try to explain. Since the publication of David B. Barrett’s monumental *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World A.D. 1900–2000* (1982), these two terms in conjunction have assumed a conceptual significance that has deeply influenced our capacity to notice, to some extent comprehend, and to talk about the demographic and sociological shifts that have transformed the Christian religion over the past century.

The Christianity that has been around for two millennia is a religious phenomenon associated initially with North Africa and the Mediterranean, then Europe and Northern Asia, and more recently, North and South America. But as my colleague Todd Johnson points out in his book *Christianity in its Global Context 1970-2020: Society, Religion and Mission* (2013), the last fifty years have witnessed a substantial shift of Christian numbers from the northern to the southern hemisphere of our planet. According to Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project numbers published online in December 2012, one out of every three persons worldwide self-

identifies as “*Christian*.” 50% of these are Catholic; 37% are Protestant; 12% are Orthodox; the rest are simply “other.”

More germane to the question is the *location* of these believers. Approximately 75% of the world’s Christian population is divided more or less equally between three regions: Europe (27%), Latin America and the Caribbean (24%), and Sub-Saharan Africa (24%). The other 25% is split between Asia and the Pacific (13%) and North America (12%). Less than 1% are now found in the Middle East and North Africa ([www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org)).



Myanmar Baptist Bicentenary, Yangon 2013  
Attended by 30,000 members from 18 regions

But this redistribution represents much more than a mere headcount of believers! For most of its existence, ecclesiastical entities in the northern hemisphere—Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and so on—have exercised de facto proprietary control over the religion’s theological content, liturgical practices and mission agendas. This is no longer the case. And the simple phrase, “*world Christianity*”, is an acknowledgment of that fact.

The phrase has become the umbrella term reminding church historians, theologians, and missiologists that Christianity is no longer an exclusive or even primarily Western phenomenon. While Christianity recedes in its old heartlands, it thrives apace in Africa and Asia. Eleven years ago Prof. Lamin Sanneh published *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (2003). The title of the evocative little book encapsulates, for me, what is meant by “*world Christianity*.”

World Christianity is notoriously difficult to define. In my understanding of World Christianity I draw upon my experience as an Anglican.

A decade ago, as a young priest I traveled to Kenya for a seminar on HIV/AIDS. On a Sunday morning I attended a worship service at St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Kampala. I was delighted to see so many people and a bishop in attendance. While most parts of the worship were familiar, I was shocked when the service ended without communion. Back home, such a thing would never have happened. One of the main duties of the bishop is to preside at communion and given this was a cathedral it was hard to make sense of what was going on. I was later told that they communion was once a month. Two years later, I was visiting Canterbury Cathedral in Kent, England. I felt like a pilgrim visiting a holy site. Here, at this most historic place in England and Anglican history, I witnessed for the first time in my life the work of ordained women. My church back home did not admit women to the ministry and so it was particularly refreshing as it was eye opening to see women and men working in shared ministry. Two months after my visit in England, I came to the United States for graduate school. Here I found that this branch of Anglicanism called the Episcopal Church, in addition to a decade's long history of admitting women to ministry, it was also admitting LGBTQ persons and working on blessing same sex marriages.

My experiences in Kenya, England and USA shattered the image I had about what a proper Anglican looked like. Moreover, I discovered that the Anglican family was not as peaceful as I once thought it to be. Disputes about admitting LGBTQ persons were especially dividing the church and part of the struggle was a deep desire to claim an authentic Anglican identity however elusive it proves to be. History and culture have ensured that profound complexities and differences exist within Anglicanism that do not readily render themselves to simple explanations.

Anglicanism is just one denomination. I often use my trans-continental, transcultural Anglican experience to understand World Christianity. Anglicanism is not World Christianity, but a part of it. From my perspective then, World Christianity is like Anglicanism on steroids: World Christianity eludes definition and its constituent parts are products of history, culture and local agency. Consequently, a temptation arises to determine who is included and who is excluded. To define World Christianity, we

## Understanding World Christianity

by Derrick Muwina  
PhD Student in Theology and Ethics

have to look into particular contexts and how Christians in those contexts live out their faith. What we find on the ground will define World Christianity.

Join the discussion  
and read more essays at  
[www.bu.edu/cgcm/annual-theme](http://www.bu.edu/cgcm/annual-theme)

## More Fall Events

November 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>

**"Christian Mission in Times of Persecution: Perspectives, Insights and Imperatives"**

*ASM-Eastern Fellowship*

Maryknoll Mission institute

Friday 2:00pm-Saturday 1:00pm

*CGCM Lunch Series:*

Friday November 14<sup>th</sup>

**"In the Midst: Autobiography, Ecumenism, and an American Missionary in India"** A Lecture

by Dr. Catherine Corman

STH B24 Oxnam, 12:00-1:30pm

Thursday December 4<sup>th</sup>

**"Living and Working with World Christianity: How My Mind Has Changed"**

A Farewell Address by Dr. M.

Thomas Thangaraj

STH 325, 12:00-1:30pm

## CGCM News

is edited by Eva M. Pascal

Visit us at Boston University  
School of Theology

Find more information on  
our website

Email us at [cgcm@bu.edu](mailto:cgcm@bu.edu)