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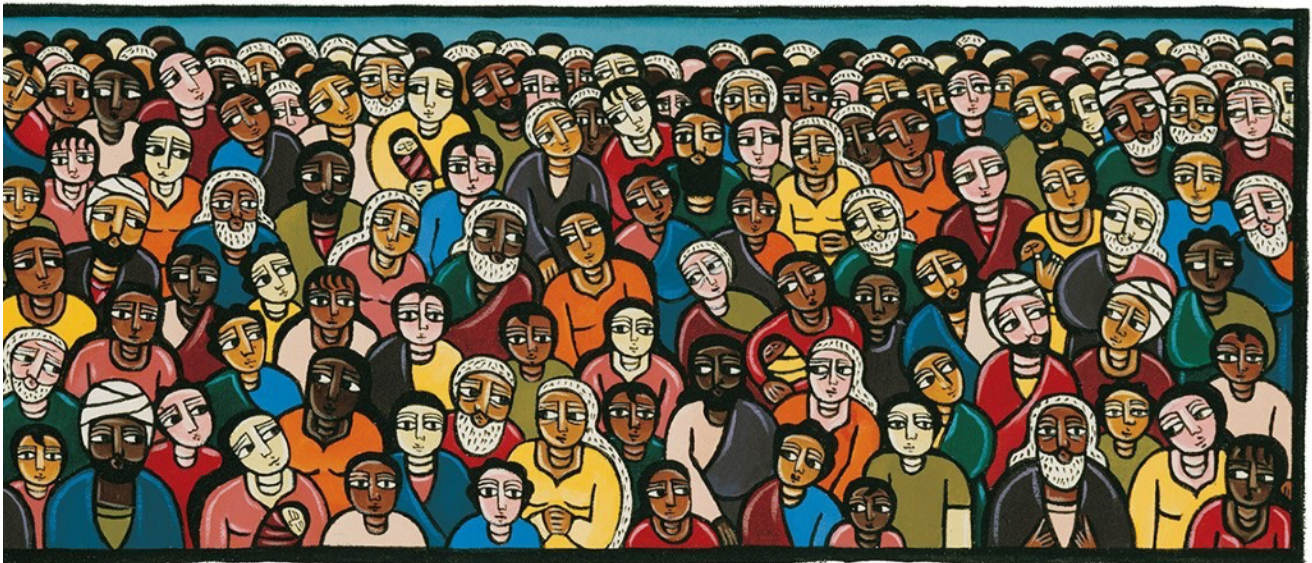
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Beyond Unity and Diversity:

A Conversation with Dana Robert on Mission, Ecumenism, and Global Christianity

Aaron Hollander, for *Ecumenical Trends*: Professor Robert, thank you so much for speaking with me. “Global Christianities” is a discourse and intellectual framework that is generating a great deal of excitement across the academy of religion, but it’s a comparatively new framework, relative to “World Christianity,” and each of these terms has its own distinctive connotations. Would you speak a little to the difference between these two frameworks: “World” vs. “Global,” “Christianity” vs. “Christianities.” What’s at stake here?

Dana Robert: The term “World Christianity” gained traction among Protest-

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ants in ecumenical circles during the 1940s. They realized that worldwide economic, political and social problems needed a world church. Ecumenists like Henry P. Van Dusen argued that Christianity needed to be an interconnected, and at some level unified entity, in order to face problems on a global scale. But that nomenclature collapsed during the Cold War.

Although the term “World Christianity” re-emerged in the mid-1990s, instead of connoting world unity, it focused attention on the specific multicultural realities of a church that today is found across all the major continents in roughly equal percentages. A century ago, Christianity was overwhelmingly European. Today, we realize, Christianity exists in numerous cultural forms. So when we use the term “World Christianity” - or “Christianities” - today, a post-colonial multiculturalism is the starting point rather than a kind of liberal Protestant unity.

At the same time, many people have been loath to give up the *singular* of “World Christianity.” Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh were some of the fathers of the field’s rebirth who wanted to continue using the singular term, because of the operating assumption that Christianity does in fact remain one religion with a two thousand year tradition. There are many ways to frame it, and different phenomena within it, but it is still one religion, *inclusive* of its diversity. Unity-in-diversity or diverse-unity, we might say. If we start using the plural (*Christianities*), Sanneh and Walls worried, it would cause newer forms of Christianity to be seen as secondary, sectarian manifestations of the “great tradition”; it would imply that some “Christianities” should be treated as better or as more authentic than others. They believed that the term “World Christianity,” by contrast allows for every different cultural manifestation in Christianity to be equal with every other manifestation, within one whole.

Not everyone would agree. Others have worried about “World Christianity” implying a single, stable, hegemonic tradition, whereas thinking about “Christianities” in a global context reflects a more dynamic, networked reality, the integration and intersection of many hybridities within a multifaceted context. Another option is to use the term “Global Christianity.” Sanneh and Walls rejected this option because they felt the term “Global” implied a western imperialistic mindset of top-down control, and formulations of a western center with nonwestern peripheries. The whole idea behind the 1990s use of the term “World Christianity” was to recognize that yesterday’s margins can be today’s center of the faith, and that presumed peripheries should be conceptualized as polycentric centers worthy of equal respect and scholarly analysis. For my part, I use the terms “Global” and “World” basically interchangeably, taking the potential problems of nomenclature seriously in any case. Can we really say that the term “World” is potentially less hegemonic in usage than the term “Global”? A study by Todd Johnson and Sandra Kim showed that there was no difference between these frameworks insofar as one could use both terms, “World” or “Global,” in a hegemonic fashion. What matters, then, is *how* they’re being used, rather than *which* is being used. But, one thing to be said for the terms “Global Christianity” or “Global Christianities” is that they work more seamlessly with academia. Many universities and academic settings have “Global” programs.

AH: Interdisciplinary programs that invite religious studies to fit into and contribute to these larger conversations.

DR: Yes, and the term “Global” can signify a participation in these conversations. In contrast, the word “World” is sometimes assumed, for example in the academic study of religion, to have a more localist meaning—referring, that is, to the specific, regional manifestations of Christianity.

AH: In that sense, would “World Christianity” suggest more of a connection with area studies in the university? We see this with university programs that allow for or incentivize isolated study of Christian thought and life in this or that region rather than prioritizing the interconnected, global dynamics that shape each of these local forms and connect them to one another. It seems like the choice between these terms reflects more about what is in the foreground of a given analysis, and less about the actual phenomena of Christian life in the world.

DR: Right: both frameworks refer to a local-global dynamic, but they imply a different way of connecting the two. The choice may depend on the focus in the particular academic discipline or context. The term “World,” as it’s used in this field, often reveals an intellectual *prioritization* of local forms, whereas the term “Global” often suggests a prioritization of the networks of relation between forms of Christianity and between the disciplines we use to study them. Again, I think the terms can be used interchangeably, but this depends on the context. When I founded the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University in 2001, I decided to use “Global” to fit in better with university nomenclature. At any rate, whichever term is used, the important point is to flag that all forms of Christianity are products of their own contexts, in networked conversation with other interpretations and the self-awareness of Christianity as a world religion.

As to the plural, for some folks, “Global Christianities” can come across as sounding a little too precious and clever, a little too academic. Some academics want to use the plural to show how sophisticated they are, to show that they’re aware that there are many different and sometimes incompatible realities that can be described by the language of Christianity. They’re not concerned with doc-

trines, a theological core or historical continuity across the many phenomena of Christianity. In short, there is a tendency in religious studies circles to want to ignore the self-awareness of Christians that they are part of a single religion. Such self-awareness can represent, after all, a prioritization of the theological convictions of Christians.

And yet, the word “Christianities” can be very useful within certain *theological* conversations as well, to keep reminding people of a profound diversity that too easily gets obscured. For instance, a theologian like Peter Phan, at Georgetown, likes the plural of “Global Christianities” because he writes from within Roman Catholicism, where he is dedicated to conceptualizing the cultural, theological diversity that is always at risk of being crushed by an overarching institutional unity. Fr. Phan was himself silenced by the Vatican at one point for writing about interreligious theology.

AH: It seems like what’s at stake, here, are questions of power relations particular to whichever tradition is doing the investigation of local-global dynamics, and therefore, what needs to be in the foreground in a particular institutional or denominational context.

DR: Correct. There’s a reason I think that ecumenically-minded Protestants should perhaps prioritize the use of the singular, of “Christianity,” because rampant sectarianism is our reality in Protestantism (in other words, we have the opposite priority from that of ecumenically-minded Catholics like Peter Phan). We *know* that we are very different and have all kinds of groups defined by their distinctiveness from one another, and not always living easily with one another. But if we’re reminded that there’s a “World Christianity,” we’re reminded that, in fact, there is a historical tradition of scripture and its interpretation, of being rooted in the history of Israel down through Jesus Christ and the two

thousand years that follow, and that we share in a common baptism, eucharist, ministry, and so forth. Most Protestants have a tendency, or at least a temptation, to be sectarian—so using the term “World Christianity,” in the singular, is a good reminder of a unity that is too easily obscured in our relations with one another.

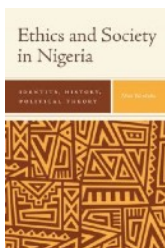
AH: Your work has illuminated so well how we would not have any World Christianity or Global Christianities discourse without roles played by missionaries and Mission Studies. You’ve spoken about World Christianity having its roots in the field reports of missionaries from all over the world, and about missionaries being the first witnesses to perceive the dramatic booming of Christianity in the global south, in total violation of the secularization thesis. And, of course, you yourself have been one of the preeminent figures in Mission Studies for decades. You must not only have seen but in some ways have overseen significant changes in how mission is viewed in the ecumenical movement and in the academy. Which of these changes might you describe as most significant?

DR: Mission Studies, no less than World Christianity (or, or that matter, the history and sociology of Christianity), has had to refigure its thought in a postcolonial fashion. It’s

completely misguided to think of Chinese Christians as the running dogs of Western imperialism, no matter how significant is the colonial history of Westerners in China. This, in a sense, decenters the Chinese from their own history and makes Western imperialists the focus — whether as protagonists or antagonists! At the same time, mission *does* have an inherent danger of allying itself with the Powers, and becoming a hegemonic, paternalistic way of being. That history can’t be ignored or white-washed — but it also shouldn’t be consigned to the colonial past. You can find the same militaristic language in Nigerian evangelism today. You can find Korean missionaries making the exact same mistakes that American missionaries made 50 years ago. So one reason we have to keep colonialism in the foreground of our conversation is that it’s an ever-present danger for mission, because mission is *human*: flawed people seeking to reach out into the world and attaching themselves, as we are always tempted to do, to whatever form of power is available to us (military, economic, cultural, and so forth). Colonialism is always a danger — but if we *define* mission in relation to colonialism then we have gutted what is a major part of Jesus’ command that we may all be one so that they world may believe.

New Books by Center Faculty

Nicolette Manglos-Weber, *Joining the Choir: Religious Membership and Social Trust Among Ghanaians*. Available through Oxford University Press at global.oup.com/academic



Nimi Wariboko, *Ethics and Society in Nigeria: Identity, History, and Political Theory*. Available through Boydell and Brewer at boydellandbrewer.com

Dana L. Robert, *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community*. Available through Eerdmans at www.eerdmans.com

