Beyond Unity and Diversity: A Conversation with Dana Robert on Mission, Ecumenism, and Global Christianities

By Dana Robert and Aaron Hollander

Aaron Hollander, for ***Ecumenical Trends*:** Professor Robert, thank you so much for speaking with me. It was a pleasure to see you again at the 2019 Global Christianities conference, and to hear your fascinating lecture on the historical entanglement between Global Christianities and Mission Studies. I'd like to begin with a question on this big picture level. "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 Protestants in ecumenical circles during the 1940s. They realized that worldwide economic, political and social problems needed a world church. The idea of World Christianity combined the philosophical assumptions of the "beloved community" (to use Josiah Royce's term), political internationalism, and recognition that the world was interdependent. 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. Then from the 1960s onward, postcolonial realities divided the ecumenical movement along cultural, political, and theological lines.

Although the term "World Christianity" reemerged 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 postcolonial 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 (Christianit*ies*), 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 as or 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

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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.

For my part, I use the terms "Global" and "World" basically interchangeably, taking the potential problems of nomenclature seriously in any case.

As to the plural, for some folks, "Global Christianities" can come across as sounding a little too precious or 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 doctrines, 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

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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: I really appreciate what you're saying here about using the terminology, and thinking about what's at stake in the terminology, as a contextual corrective. Ecumenism, at its best, offers exactly these kinds of benevolent disorientations of what we all take for granted, about ourselves and each other, out of our own particular traditions, out of those traditions' norms and habituated blind spots.

I want to come back to this question around unity and the ways that it might (in different traditions) be sidelined as an unwanted imposition or imposed in too heavy-handed a way. But as we're thinking about the possible benefits and shortcomings of the framework of Global Christianities, it seems to me that one of the real liabilities of "Global Christianities" and "World Christianity" discourses alike is the tendency (consciously or unconsciously) to treat "Global" or "World" as a synonym for "non-Western." We see the same thing, all too often, with "contextual theology," as if Latin American liberation theology were "contextual" and European enlightenment theology *weren't* contextual! Do you see this tendency as a threat to Global Christianities as a field of study, and if so, what might we do to redress it?

DR: The phenomenon to which you're referring is due to the historical development of the idea of "World Christianity." The term was originally a corrective to signal a shift away from the overly Western focus of the church history and theology curricula. Western theological curricula have been imposed worldwide, through textbooks, graded courses and the like. So the problem initially, in the 1980s and 1990s when the people responsible for these curricula started noticing the enormous and disproportionate growth of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, was to secure a place at the table for these contexts and for the non-Western Christians who still felt marginalized or largely invisible, by emphasizing that Christianity was in fact a *worldwide* reality and needed to be treated as such. The assumption in these institutions had been that "Christianity" *meant* or was at least coded to imply "Western Christianity," and the primary problems in the study of Christianity had been generated by and remained locked into norms of Western experience. So "World" was a corrective to the unspoken assumption that Christianity meant "Western" – not an *alternative* to be juxtaposed with "Western"!

Most of the World Christianity institutes and programs started, indeed, with this emphasis on "non-Western" representation. It's not that this is a new chauvinism that we have to confront, it's the legacy of how this discourse began as an effort to redress exclusions and blind spots in the field. But as time goes on, and once you've made that point, and once it's been accepted, that Christianity *means* not only Europe but Asia, Africa, and so forth, you no longer need to use the term "World Christianity" as code-language for "non-Western" (and, as you've suggested, new problems crop up). Especially as European scholars have gotten into this conversation, they've said, well, what about Europe? Isn't European Christianity just as "global," no less part of the "world," as Latin American Christianity is?

The assumption in these institutions had been that "Christianity" meant or was at least coded to imply "Western Christianity," and the primary problems in the study of Christianity had been generated by and remained locked into norms of Western experience.

AH: Or else they've remained perfectly comfortable thinking in terms of the West and the Rest, whether they're conscious of it or not. This remains such a sticky issue when we think at the level of institutions making choices about expanding their departments and directing limited funding in the most responsible way. On the one hand, institutions are absolutely right to expand their departments into underrepresented areas and to take the opportunity to diversify, using a Global Christianities position to expand beyond what a department is already doing, for instance, by searching for a scholar of African Christianities or Christianity in China. But at the same time, this risks reifying the sense of Christianity as center and periphery, that we have all these people doing "Christianity" (by which we mean Augustine and Aquinas) and then here's this lone scholar in "Global Christianities" professorship doing (or expected to do), often, everything else. Would departments hire that same African Christianities scholar for a Church History position?

DR: Part of the problem you're pointing to is the temptation of tokenization – that is, a department thinking to itself, well, we want to hire an Asian so let's open up a position in Asian Christianity, or here's an opportunity to get a Latin American onto our faculty so that's the reason to think about these issues. And then Global Christianities positions get stuck in the same kind of tokenization that Mission Studies positions used to involve in the old ecumenical schools, which is to say, as "non-Western" positions that were kept

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marginal to the main curriculum. So how to get around this? Well, one way is what you might be suggesting, which is to make sure that by "Global Christianity" we mean the study of the ways that local and global dynamics intersect *everywhere*. Departments can make sure to hire people who both have some sort of local, area-specific research focus but *also* a good sense of how the local is in the global and vice versa, and how neither African nor European Christianities operate in isolation. No matter what their specialty is, such folks see it as part of an integrated conversation of scholars and practitioners around the world, and then departments can expand the geographical scope of what they're doing without keeping these new areas on the periphery. But if, on the other hand, you are using a Global Christianities position to get rid of your Reformation position, or if you do away with an American Christianity position to secure funding for an African Christianity position, you're exchanging one silo for another. The positions that are being eliminated in the schools are Reformation and Modern Europe, in order to make room for World or Global positions – but this move, precisely, leaves in place the covert assumption that the two are opposed, that there's traditional Christianity over here and all this other stuff over there.

AH: In other words, if you're a scholar of, say, 18th-century British Christianity and you're not dealing with globalization through empire and in transnational economic flows, that's a huge oversight that may keep you from participating in a conversation on Global Christianity – but it's not the case that you're *unfit* for this intellectual framework solely because you happen to work on Britain! So this is the question: if it's *not* the case (and I agree with you that it's not) that only non-Western Christianity should be studied under the rubric of "Global," what might it mean, what might it look like, for Reformation scholars to pursue their work in the key of Global Christianity?

DR: Well, this is very interesting. In 2017, I spent a sabbatical in Mainz, Germany, where they were just starting to talk about these things. While I was there, a position at Humboldt University in Reformation had recently added "Global Christianity" to the description – what they found is that "World" or "Global" can productively be added to whichever period and place they're focusing on. This kind of move forces people at every different period of the history of Christianity to deal with the realities of local-global dynamics, and prevents them from keeping the local context that they're studying in a silo. So, a Reformation scholar who also frames her work in terms of Global Christianity might look at how the shaping of Protestantism reflected cross-cultural intersections, or might look at how the emergence of Pietism bumps up against interreligious conversations, for example. Or, instead of just looking at the 1700s in terms of missionaries going out from the "west" to the "rest," what about considering the African-American Moravians from the Caribbean who became missionaries in West Africa? What about using the Atlantic or the Pacific as your region or area, rather than just the continents they separate? There are many scholars who work on the Atlantic world, for example – if you put *that* together with Early Modern Studies, you get some very exciting scholarship – *and* uncover historical narratives relevant to African and Latin American Christians today.

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AH: That's really exciting. It seems like there's substantial, fresh work that can be done in these well-established fields simply by bringing new questions into the foreground through global frameworks. Mediterranean Studies has been doing this for a while—you have scholars making sense out of the Mediterranean world in primary terms of intercultural exchange, interreligious dynamics, transnational economic and political power relations, and so forth. That kind of work has been done in the Mediterranean from antiquity forward, but thinking about this in other areas of study, and on a global scale, seems extremely promising. For instance, the 2017 Ecclesiological Investigations conference in Jena, Germany, foregrounded the global scale and consequences of the Reformation in just this way.

DR: But what's happening, given limited academic resources, is that Reformation or Modern Europe positions are being eliminated and substituted with Global or World positions – rather than putting the insights of scholarship on every different branch of the history of Christianity, Western and non-Western alike, together under a common framework of global dynamics and global-local relationality.

AH: I suspect, or at least I hope, that these kind of substitutions that have the effect of reinforcing the synonymy of "Global" and "non-Western" have less to do with a rejection of the sense that Global Christianity should be an all-inclusive framework, and more to do with the hard decisions of underfunded departments and the desire to invest in scholars of underrepresented regions and from underrepresented demographics.

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DR: Correct. And North American academia desperately needs the insights and representation by scholars of color, by Spanish and Portuguese-speaking academics, by Asian-Americans, and by women. With Christianity being a worldwide religion, scholarship can only benefit by cultivating the insights of a wide range of scholars, especially those who are multi-lingual or who are willing to work collaboratively with scholars from other parts of the world. Speaking from the position of a research university, another problem concerns the perceived theological orientation of scholars of World Christianity, and prejudice against them by the religious studies establishment. World Christianity scholars are passionately interested in such things as emerging Christian movements, Pentecostalism, faith healing, multicultural worship, and missions, and usually have personal experience with these things. I know of cases in which the search for the World Christianity position failed because the academic establishment perceived the job candidates, especially scholars of color from nonwestern church backgrounds, as too theological. Racism and classism can intersect with academic secularism to disconnect the field from its practitioners on the ground. I realize I am getting a little off subject, but these issues need to be named when considering the state of the field and the creation of positions in World or Global Christianities.

AH: Your work has illuminated so well how we would not have any World Christianity or Global Christianities discourse without the 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: That's a big question, and a topic with multiple angles. Starting with the early 1960s, the ecumenical movement (by this point including the Orthodox as well as Protestants) and the Roman Catholic Church (which was becoming more ecumenically minded itself) were becoming self-aware that mission is *to and from everywhere*. If we fast-forward fifty or sixty years, this has become obvious, but at the time it was revolutionary. Mission is, we can say, a core part of being the church, and it is increasingly a postcolonial, post-Western reality. The people most active today in mission are, say, the 40-80 thousand Indians who are missionaries in India, or Nigerian immigrants in Europe, or Brazilians who have gone to South Africa, or Koreans who have moved all over the world. And let's not forget that this has been going on for a long time, even though it's much more substantially the case today. What about the Chinese Christians who wanted to reach Jerusalem through the silk road and evangelized all along the way? One of my doctoral students has just returned from rural Kyrgyzstan, where she intersected with missionaries from ten different countries working together. This kind of thing is amazing!

So Mission Studies, no less than World Christianity (or, for that matter, the history and sociology of Christianity), has had to reconfigure 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 whitewashed – 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 the world may believe.

AH: I get the sense that this alliance of mission with power is part of what's at stake in the worry about "World Christianity" being a discourse of unity superseding difference. To an extent, the ideal of unity itself has come under increasing suspicion – we see this in the problems confronted by the ecumenical movement in recent decades – on the grounds that it obscures deep-rooted asymmetries between Christians of different societies or cultures and leaves these asymmetries untroubled. In that light, do you think that unity as an ideal is still needed, and if it is, then what does it *look like* in the postcolonial, polycentric mode of relationship with difference that missionaries and ecumenists have increasingly come to see as needed?

DR: All you have to do is look at the laments you see in the paper every day about how divided Americans are, how lonely and atomized people are. All you have to do is look at the disunity afflicting our societies and our souls to realize

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that unity must be of central importance to what it means to be Christian. Jesus, especially in the Gospel of John, spent a lot of his time talking about building a unified community and being faithful to that community. So that's one part of the answer. But if unity is just a cover for somebody's concentration of power, it doesn't help, it's not healing – it's a false idol of unity. Given the plurality of the church, something like the Global Christian Forum can be commended for its series of conferences and meetings where Christians of all different persuasions can sit in a room together and say, "Let me share my experience of Jesus Christ." Unity here consists in a shared practice of honest listening and testifying, sharing stories with one another about what God has done in their lives. This makes room for a kind of bottom-up unity that builds human community so as to worship God together – like the vision in Revelation where people from all peoples and nations are together praising the Lamb upon the Throne. That's a vision of unity that motivates people today, I think, as we recognize how our historical association of unity with stable and centralized power structures can mask what has to be considered injustice from a Christian perspective.

AH: So would you say that this is a particularly important task of ecumenical thought and action today, cultivating ways of relating empathetically and hospitably with difference *without* absolutizing that difference and making that difference the last word, the end of the story of our interactions with one another?

DR: That's one piece of the puzzle, yes. But we do also need structures. There is real evil and injustice in the world, and without some kind of structure – spokespersons for churches, and ecumenical groups, and human rights groups, and so forth – you leave yourself powerless and completely victimized by better-organized forces of destruction. So there's more than one kind of unity that needs to be pursued today. One problem with the older ecumenical movement is that its participants tended to assume that the bottom-up, person-to-person unity was already there and could be taken for granted, and so they worked toward doctrinal conformity or structural accords in ways that often blew past people's ethnic and historical differences – which, unsurprisingly, people were unwilling to give up! Unfortunately, that's often what people think ecumenism *is*, and it's why the word "ecumenism" is not as widely usable as it used to be. People can assume it means a kind of lowest-common-denominator forced conformity, an expectation that diversity has to be downplayed in order to be "unified" at all costs. That's not what we're talking about today. We're starting from the assumption of plurality, indeed pluralism (a positive evaluation of plurality, not just the fact of plurality), and talking about what it means to build Christian community in this light. At the same time, we need shared structures in order to live in a real world that has pragmatic needs. So I think the unity of the world church has to come from multiple directions and mean multiple things, and depending on the context, very different things are needed for this unity to be sustainable or even legitimate. Refugees need to be resettled – you need organized church groups and partnerships for this, you can't just leave it up to individual friendship. Sometimes you need the Pope to speak into a situation and decry persecution with the moral force of centralized authority. Power and structure are not in and of themselves the enemy – so to reject unity as an ideal because we are resisting the concentration of power is throwing away the baby with the bathwater, even as we can't stop analyzing and working to avoid the *collapse* of unity into power.

AH: While we're on the topic of pluralism, let's expand the scope further still. At Edinburgh 1910, the emerging vision of a worldwide ecumenical order of Christian relationality was intimately bound up with questions of *interreligious* relations. Reports from the mission fields were sensitive to the presence and power of local traditions, and most if not all of the discussion of Christian unity was framed in terms of being persuasive, relevant, and coherent in the so-called "non-Christian world." And at the centenary celebrations of Edinburgh 2010, not only did the study process authors suggest that productive interreligious relations are *the* "most crucial missiological question" of the 21st century, but the final "Common Call" document identified Christian witness as such as existing only in the context of "authentic dialogue" and "respectful engagement" with (non-Christian) religious otherness. What do you make of this? How would you assess the relationship between "proclamation" and "dialogue," and between "ecumenical" and "interreligious" issues? Doesn't each of these always imply and include the other?

DR: Well, here again we have to attend to the issue of context. Kenneth Cracknell wrote a very fine piece on how mission is dialogue and dialogue is mission, suggesting that they cannot be separated. But in that sense, we're talking about dialogue more as an attitude or a spirituality of respectful human engagement, rather than as an ecclesiological agenda or doctrinal approach. As with "ecumenism," so too with "dialogue" – because we do have now many years of

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experience with formal interreligious dialogue, it can become very stereotyped. People think about men sitting in a room talking about their different theories of doctrine. Now, that picture of dialogue is singularly unhelpful. But if you think instead about the Woman at the Well, or you think about Muslim and Christian women talking to one another in the course of the day as they bring their children to school and shop at the same markets, this is a "dialogue of life" that, for the Christian participants anyway, entails an authentic way of following Jesus Christ into the world. In this respect, mission and dialogue are one. Mission means being sent into the world in the name of Jesus Christ, but also in the *way* of Jesus Christ, and Jesus' way of mission was dialogical. He spent his whole mission reaching out, loving, de-stereotyping himself and others by eating with the unclean and letting women wipe his feet with their hair, and the like, and he spoke in parables in order to get people talking with one another. You could argue that the whole way of Jesus' life was a way of dialogue.

AH: This is also a helpful reminder that we're whole people. Dialogue isn't just about trying to come to some kind of agreement on ideas, it also means being together in the world in an open-ended way, ready to act and think in new ways because of what we discover in the thick of our lives together. That's as much the case for mission as it is for interreligious dialogue, and both of them have the tendency to be over-abstracted into what kind of discursive agreement we can reach about what people *think*, when in fact there are already forms of unity – not just Christian unity but interreligious unity, human unity, ecological unity – that exist *now* and aren't exhausted by what we think or the ways we disagree about what others think.

DR: That's exactly where I was going to go with all this. On one level, dialogue becomes a spirituality of holistic life-together, a way of being a Christian in the world and in ethical relation to the world, if we are capable of listening empathetically and compassionately to those we meet. That's one way of suggesting that dialogue cannot be separated from any authentic proclamation – because only if we are living dialogically are we actually following Jesus Christ. But the other way of looking at interreligious dialogue is to attend to its pragmatic necessity for looking at and dealing with issues that are way bigger than any one religion's ways of thinking or acting toward them. The key example here is ecology. We need people and institutions of every religion to come to the table with large and small ways to use the resources of their faith to protect and cherish God's creation. Dialogue is another way of saying, let's get together and see what we each are doing, and offer appreciation for what others are doing, and put our heads together about how we can support one another and amplify our efforts that will be inadequate on their own. From a Christian perspective, such common goals as the integrity of creation are located not merely in our sense of self-preservation but in the very being of God, in God's love for the world. We have to cherish and take care of this world that God loves and we cannot do it alone.

AH: And this interreligious sensibility is itself fully "ecumenical," in thinking about engaging empathetically with the perspectives of others on common problems, and being able to identify sites and vectors of unity that don't neglect or downplay difference but at the same time are deeper than what separates us. Because the problems that Christians are committed to addressing are rarely, if ever, only problems for Christians. And historically, Christianity looks the way it looks and Christians care about the things they care about in ways that would be unthinkable without a worldwide history of interaction, exchange, and even interdependence with religious others. This is one of the reasons why Ecumenical Studies and Interreligious Studies, as intellectual projects, have so much to offer one another, and distance themselves from one another at their own peril.

DR: Well said. Nobody can be a Christian *alone*. A Christian alone is an oxymoron; it's not in the way of what Jesus worked for in his life. So there's an ethical and an interreligious dimension of the idea of Global Christianity, which does, I think, echo what the ecumenical movement was trying to get at in the 1940s when it was primarily using the language of "World Christianity." If you see the world as *one*, you need to see its problems and its people as interconnected. The resources of your faith can contribute to a broader conversation about dealing with those issues in a collaborative way.

AH: I'd like to conclude with a biographical question, if I may. You've spoken so eloquently about having been a much younger participant at gatherings of eminent missiologists, for example at meetings at the Overseas Ministry Study Center in the early 1990s. Would you share a little more about your experience being the youngest participant in those intergenerational collaborations? What most surprised you or inspired you?

DR: Well, I have to speak a little bit about my background for this to make sense. I come from Southern Louisiana,

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> ***Nobody can be a Christian alone. A Christian alone is an oxymoron; it's not in the way of what Jesus worked for in his life.***

and I went from Southern Louisiana to get a PhD at Yale, in Religious Studies, and that itself was a cross-cultural experience. Being a southerner, I was very interested in how evangelicalism relates to American power, how have black and white Americans related to each other in the course of our history, questions like this. When I took those questions with me and then expanded them to consider how they impacted the rest of the world, I became convinced that I was interested in something called "comparative Christianity" – which did not exist as a field. Because of my background, I was very interested in Afro-Caribbean and African-American relations with white evangelical southerners – I did an extra doctoral exam in African Christianity, and studied for it all by myself, not really knowing if I would ever get to compare Christianit*ies*, if you want to put it in the plural. But when I looked around for who else was interested in issues of the one and the many, who was interested in what it meant to be a Christian *and* an American, in light of all the complexities of our social history and race relations, and in how these issues related to Christian life in other parts of the world – the people interested in such questions were all at least twenty-five years older than I was. They were what remained of the ecumenical missionary professors who were hanging on to their positions at mainline schools, in the aftermath of the 1960s when Mission Studies had been blown apart as a colonialist, imperialist enterprise.

So here I am in the late 1970s, early 1980s, and my conversation partners became those older men who had mission backgrounds, like George Lindbeck. Lindbeck was of course the great postliberal theologian, and an observer at Vatican II – but before all that, he was a missionary kid growing up in China. And then there was Charles Forman, expert on Christianity in the South Pacific, who had grown up as a missionary kid in India. So I started working, on the side, in Mission Studies. I felt quite alone, but old missionary scholars were very kind and were thrilled to see someone from a younger generation come into the room and be interested in the wisdom that they had. It was a tremendous honor on my part, then, to join them in working out a delineation and scope of "World Christianity" in its new iteration in the 1990s. Gratitude was, without a doubt, a defining part of that experience – gratitude for their openness and their recognition that I could bring something new and meaningful to the work they had been doing for decades. One thing about third-culture people, people who work cross-culturally, they tend to be open and accepting across boundaries, they welcome being surprised. This is part of what it means to be in mission.

AH: Of course. It takes a certain disposition to live and thrive in a culture that is not your own, to be a stranger, to be a guest, and this disposition shapes who you are. That too is ecumenical spirituality.

So, with all this in mind, coming from that background, and moving forward to today and looking at the younger generation of your students – and not only your students directly but the now-emerging generation of people in Ecumenical Studies, Mission Studies, Global Christianity, and so forth – what might you now offer to them, by way of insight or guidance, as the last of this community of scholars of which you were the youngest in the early 90s?

DR: I'll tell you the insight that I share with students. If you intuitively want to make connections and put together objects and methods of study in a way that doesn't exist yet, don't let any institution stop you from doing it. What I'm teaching now *did not exist* when I went to graduate school. At the same time that Global Christianity was first emerging and growing into a field, people I knew who studied, say, Yugoslavia or Kremlinology were watching everything they knew become obsolete or at least utterly altered in 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell. You don't know what the state of your interests will be in 30 or 40 years, so you can't worry now about the job, or what the gatekeepers of any field declare to be important – worry about your vocation, and what you instinctively feel to be important. It may very well be the thing that over the next 30 years is going to grow and grow, and here you will be working quietly, and maybe unrecognized, to plant the seeds of something that will ultimately be much greater than yourself. It's not only about you – it's about what God is giving you to do, and *you* know what that is in a way that no one else can know. Of course, you've got to have some common sense in going about the career that you pursue, but you can't let the current shape of our institutions stop you from doing what you feel God is calling you to do and what your intellectual instincts are telling you is important.

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AH: That's such a valuable insight, especially for those of us who are involved in Ecumenical Studies or Ecumenics as a discipline, which has seen many mixed fortunes, and which certainly today in the United States is an even less widespread intellectual framework than it once was. And yet, as you've pointed out already, it hasn't exhausted itself. Thinking about how polarized our society is, we can see how in need we are of these kinds of ecumenical insights and ecumenical methods for disagreeing productively, for being able to interact with people whom we have every reason in the world to dislike, for all kinds of exoteric reasons, and yet with whom we must be able to identify ourselves as somehow united or in search of unification. Ecumenics may be our hope for this present moment.

DR: Absolutely. And another thing to remember is that a rose by any other name may smell as sweet. When I was a young person, "ecumenism" was a big word and a thriving concept, and it's less so now, but that's because what was once meant by ecumenism was far too limited for our needs today. As our language changes we have to draw on whatever language is available, whatever language animates people to work together. So if your institution uses the language of "global engagement," as we often do at the Boston University School of Theology, you may find that global engagement encompasses what sixty years ago was expressed by the term "missions"! So don't be afraid to let the language change. Mission is all about communication. Ecumenism is all about communication. And that means trying on whatever framework is comprehensible to the people with whom we are communicating, in the pursuit of larger, common goals, including Christian unity and interreligious understanding, love, and respect. I firmly believe we are in a new age of ecumenism. Whether the term "ecumenism" will fully summarize in people's minds what is needed, that's another question. But given the expansive growth of Christianity in multiple cultures over the last 50-60 years, those communities that are growing now have realized that they need to do it in dialogue with one another, and in relation to interreligious, ecological, global issues. That really is where we are, that is where the future is – in a sense it's a return to a *larger* ecumenism than what we had when it was seen as primarily theological or doctrinal unity in the 1940s and 50s.

AH: And regardless of the language that we use, we need to be able to navigate in new directions, engage new voices and new problems, without losing the insights from these earlier generations and from the whole history of the ecumenical movement and ecumenical studies, fields which still have a lot to say today – even if they have to rediscover or reinvent what to say in new kinds of language and with new kinds of leadership.

I firmly believe we are in a new age of ecumenism. Whether the term "ecumenism" will fully summarize in people's minds what is needed, that's another question.

DR: Yes. I teach the history of missiology, and my students are always struck by how out in front the people like Max Warren and Roland Allen and others were. Max Warren was the head of the Church Missionary Society right as the British Empire was collapsing and the mission fields were drying up, and his church was associated with imperialism like no other Protestant church out there. In his *Christian Presence* series in the 1950s, he initiated a book series that looked sympathetically at all different religious traditions, and in his introduction to that series he provided one of my favorite mission quotes, one that captivates my students and sounds utterly contemporary today. He said: "Our first task in approaching another people another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More seriously still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival." This was said by the head of the CMS, one of the most powerful mission agencies in the world! It was because he was reading the signs of the times; he saw that colonialism and triumphalism had to go, and that there had to be a new way of being in mission – a way defined above all by listening, respect, compassion, and dialogue.

AH: And in what desperate need we are today of these virtues. Thank you so much, Professor Robert, for joining me today and sharing your experiences and insights in these interconnected fields. We're looking forward to continuing the conversation.