

# Global Gospel

AN INTRODUCTION to CHRISTIANITY on  
FIVE CONTINENTS

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For Mack  
and the future he represents

# Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	xv
1. Global Christianity: <i>A Very Brief History</i>	1
2. Four Christian Traditions	14
3. Africa	40
4. Latin America	73
5. Europe	106
6. Asia	146
7. North America	188
Conclusion	225
Acknowledgments	231
Bibliography and Further Reading	235
Index	245

## Preface

**T**HIS IS A BOOK about all the different kinds of Christians who live everywhere in the world. Given that immense scope, it seems only fair to start by asking how anyone can presume to take on such a task. Who has the capacity to describe the full scope of Christian diversity around the world? The simple answer is no one. No single individual is sufficiently equipped to write a book about global Christianity. No one knows enough. No one has lived enough places. No one is so devoid of prejudice that he or she can treat each Christian community in the world with the fairness and sympathy it deserves. All these limitations apply to me.

But the need for some kind of overarching introduction to world Christianity has never been greater. During the last hundred years, Christianity has become global, and the experiences of Christians around the world vary immensely. If all of the world's Christians really are members of one body of Christ, then the realities of this global age require Christians to reach out to one another in new ways, to listen to each as they have never listened before, and to learn from one another what they could never learn by themselves. For that to happen some kind of guidebook is necessary, and this volume seeks to fill that gap. It is a broad introduction to Christianity as it has developed and as it is currently being lived on the five big continents of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America.

Every guidebook is inadequate. Real life is always more complex than any description of it, and this book will undoubtedly get some things wrong. The tone will be off in some places, the emphases may be misplaced elsewhere, and even some “facts” that are included in this volume may eventually be proven wrong. You as a reader may also think I have left out some topics that

I absolutely should have included, or that I have given too much attention to some subjects you consider peripheral. All I can do is ask for your indulgence in advance. This is my best attempt to describe the big story of how Christianity became global, and how the Christian movement is developing around the world today. It is an entry point for the study of global Christianity, not the final word.

Because I write about so many different kinds of Christians in this book, it seems only fair to let readers know something about who I am as a scholar and person of faith. What perspectives or blinders do I bring to this work? What predilections shape how I see and feel the world? What qualifies me to undertake this task?

Like every other Christian in the world, I became a follower of Jesus via one particular community of faith. Mine was a Norwegian immigrant community in Brooklyn, New York. When I was a child, our congregation (the 66th Street Evangelical Free Church) still held services in both Norwegian and English. We Scandinavians were only one of several ethnic groups in our neighborhood, however, and I always knew that I was just one particular kind of human being living among others. Our Christian customs and traditions were enormously important for us, but our neighbors' customs and traditions were equally important to them. Difference was a fact of life, and members of my childhood church never assumed that everyone was supposed to think and act just like us.

My parents were pietists. What mattered to them was personal faith, the individual's unique relationship with God. Doctrine had its place, and Sunday morning worship was dominated by doctrinal sermons that often lasted an hour. But my family's style of faith found fuller expression in the Sunday evening service, a time that was typically devoted to the sharing of testimonies—stories about one's personal journey of faith and experiences of God. My parents made sure I knew that each person's relationship with God is unique and that all of those differing experiences are to be respected. I remember being with my dad in New York City. We had just gotten off the bus in the Port Authority building and were making our way down the escalator to the first floor. A man at the bottom of the escalator was preaching his thirty-second version of the gospel as loudly and quickly as he could to all of us who were exiting the building. I told my father I thought he was crazy. My father's reply was less pejorative, "Don't judge anyone. He might be able to connect with someone you never could." Lesson learned.

While my family and my church emphasized personal faith, they were also surprisingly globally aware. The highest calling was to become a foreign missionary, and dozens of missionaries stopped by our church each year. Almost

all of them stayed overnight in our home, which meant I was constantly hearing stories about Christians in places such as China, Japan, the Congo, South Africa, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. My sister and I were mesmerized by the stories we heard, and it was no surprise that my sister became a missionary, spending twenty years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then called Zaire).

I was the first person in my immediate family to go to college. An uncle (by marriage) had attended Wheaton College in Illinois, so that is where I went, too. What I learned at Wheaton reinforced much of what I had imbibed in my pietistically Christian Norwegian American home: different people see and experience the world differently. My major was philosophy and my primary mentor was a professor named Arthur Holmes. He called his particular version of philosophy “perspectivalism,” stressing the fact that logical reasoning is only one component of human thought. People also bring *perspectives* to their thinking, visions of life that have been shaped and molded by their own experiences and by the categories of understanding they have inherited from cultures and communities in which they have lived. Philosophical study needs to take these human perspectives into account and not focus merely on the abstract logic of ideas. Holmes convinced me that seeing the world through other people’s eyes is an enormously important part of any scholarly endeavor.

During my junior year at Wheaton College, I was given the opportunity to spend a semester doing relief work in Bangladesh. Bangladesh had formerly been East Pakistan, and it was birthed as a new nation in 1971 after a contested Pakistani election and a subsequent civil war. About fifteen college students were recruited by a Baptist hospital in the region to help rebuild villages that had been decimated by the war and then hit by a huge typhoon. It was my first foray outside of North America, and it was an eye-opener. At the time, Bangladesh was routinely described as the poorest country on earth, and I expected to find a nation filled with depressed people. I discovered something very different. People seemed happy, and they rarely complained. They welcomed me into their homes and shared their meager rations with me. They were smart, and they tried to educate me about life. As a result I learned that Western learning has its limitations, that poverty is bad but not always debilitating, and that wisdom can be found in many places. Bangladesh is about 90 percent Muslim and 10 percent Hindu, and what I had learned about Islam and Hinduism from religious studies textbooks had not prepared me at all for understanding either the religious dynamics of the region or the gracious hospitality I received.

During my years in college, I was introduced to a broad range of Christian churches and communities. Like many of my peers, I was on a spiritual

journey. The Charismatic movement was at its peak, and I found myself deeply attracted to Pentecostalism. For a while I attended a Mennonite Church. I also discovered the writings of the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, and he almost persuaded me to become Catholic. Just as importantly, I stumbled across two books, Aziz Atiya's *History of Eastern Christianity* and David Barrett's *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*, and reading these volumes slammed home how utterly Western all of my previous knowledge of Christianity had been.

Intellectual and spiritual curiosity drove me to read everything I could find about Christianity around the globe—which at the time was not much—and I began constructing elaborate timelines, charting contemporaneous Christian developments in different regions of the world. Eventually my curiosity led me to graduate school at the University of Chicago, where I had the privilege of studying with people such as Jerald Brauer, Brian Gerrish, Bernard McGinn, Martin Marty, and David Tracy. Interacting with these scholars, and with my student peers, expanded my vision of the world and Christian faith dramatically. The Divinity School never tried to disabuse me of my evangelical and pietistic sensibilities, but it did make me aware of how many different ways one can faithfully follow Jesus in the contemporary world.

For the last thirty years, I have been part of the faculty at Messiah College in Pennsylvania. My teaching load includes courses on Christianity in all of its varied global forms, and my students—especially those from Africa, Asia, and Latin America—have been invaluable in helping me reflect on that diversity. Without their feedback, writing a book like this would have been impossible. During these past three decades, I have also had the opportunity to visit more than fifty different countries and to observe Christianity firsthand in each of them. These trips have not made me an expert on any of the nations I have visited—it takes years of living in a different culture to become an expert, and my own research and writing is enormously indebted to such experts—but it has been tremendously helpful to visit these locations, seeing Christianity in action, participating in worship, hearing its sounds, and smelling its aromas.

My own local congregation, St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, has also profoundly influenced me. My wife and I joined St. Paul's back in 1986 because it was one of the healthiest, most community-minded, and least contentious congregations we had ever encountered. It is a church that seeks to be extravagantly welcoming of everyone, and St. Paul's has pushed me again and again to be more embracing of others.

I hope that all of these experiences have predisposed me to be sensitive to and respectful of the many different kinds of Christians who now inhabit the world. Still, I remain painfully aware of how limited my own perceptions can

be. Theologically, I remain a Protestant. That is how I instinctively see the world and Christian faith. Thus, even though I have spent decades interacting with Catholic, Orthodox, and Pentecostal Christians, and I find all of these expressions of Christianity to be inspiring, I still know that I am speaking a second language when I discuss Catholic or Orthodox or Pentecostal developments. Perhaps more crucially, I know that I am a white, rich (by global standards), North American, male Christian writing about other Christians around the world, who are for the most part not white, not rich, not North American, and not male. There is a kind of arrogance built into writing a book about people so different from oneself—an arrogance that is part and parcel of being a Western, male scholar. If that kind of hubris appears anywhere in these pages, I apologize in advance. It is not my goal or intention to tell any follower of Jesus around the world who she or he is supposed to be.

The goal of this book is straightforward: to describe the big picture of global Christianity as fairly and accurately as possible. Personal stories play an important role in that task, but so do history and sociology; and in this book history and sociology will predominate. There is a reason for this: the big developments in which we participate as human beings are often almost impossible to see because the immediate experiences of daily life so dominate our consciousness. Ordinary life is like walking through a forest and seeing all the trees, but having no awareness of the shape of the forest as a whole. History and sociology help us discover the broad contours of the forests in which we live. This book focuses on the forest of global Christianity, describing the complex developments and transformation that have made this amazing movement what it is today.

The ultimate purpose of this book is not, however, merely to dispense information. It is to encourage a richer, deeper, and more constructive dialogue among Christians worldwide. The disjointed and segmented character of the Christian movement that prevailed throughout so much of Christian history is no longer viable. The globalization of the planet has linked all of the world's Christians together, and the reputation of the gospel now hinges on how Christians everywhere think and act. More than ever before, Christians around the world need to discover one another, befriend one another, and learn from one another. Otherwise, the Christian movement will likely continue to fragment into ever smaller Christianities (in the plural), with each little group reflecting only part of the full gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians around the world do not and never will experience the gospel in precisely the same way or speak about God using the same precise terms. God meets human beings where they are, and God speaks in and through many different cultures. Hoping that global Christians will become more

interconnected does not mean making Christianity more globally uniform or homogenous. The glory of creation is evident in the wonderful diversity, bordering on cacophony, that is present in the natural world. Similarly, the glory of Christianity is best displayed in its interconnected diversity, with different kinds of Christians praising God and caring for their neighbors in a complex, multihued, interwoven, and mutually enriching choreography of faith, hope, and love. That dance, in its entirety, is the global gospel in action.

# Introduction

**C**HRISTIANITY IS THE LARGEST RELIGION in the world. According to demographers, one out of every three people on the planet is a follower of Jesus. Christianity is also the most geographically dispersed and most culturally diverse religion the world has ever seen. When the twentieth century began, Christianity was still a predominantly European faith. Today, two-thirds of the world's Christians live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. No other religion has ever experienced so much change in such a short period of time.

Global Christianity today has no easily defined orthodoxy, no geographic center, and no one authoritative leader. Christians everywhere worship the same God, pledge their allegiance to the same Jesus Christ, and are inspired by the same Holy Spirit; but there is immense diversity across contemporary Christianity. The movement has expanded so fast that its growth and diversification have outpaced all attempts to track them. As a consequence, Christians have lost touch with one another, becoming strangers who just happen to confess the same faith.

Contemporary Christians are realizing that the Christian movement as a whole needs to rediscover itself. The inherited language of Christianity, steeped in the Western cultural tradition, is no longer adequate for describing the beliefs, values, practices, and affections of the global Christian community. New voices are waiting to be heard, and fresh formulations of Christian faith and life are ready to be uncovered. The gospel has become global, and Christians all around the world are just beginning to grapple with transformations that have taken everyone by surprise.

Christianity is now incarnated in the beliefs and behaviors of people from all the cultures of the world, and the result is an astonishingly varied palette of Christian experience. For those who are familiar with only a handful of Christian spiritual tints and hues, discovering the full spectrum of Christian expressions can be overwhelming. Encountering difference is often disorienting, at least at first. The Scriptures hint at awkwardness even when Jesus conversed with people from different cultures, individuals such as the Samaritan divorcee (John 4:1–42), the Canaanite woman seeking help for her sick daughter (Matt. 15:21–28), and a Roman soldier (Matt. 8:5–13). In the years following Christ’s death, cultural differences, and especially differences between Jews and Gentiles, frequently flared into conflict. This issue was never decisively settled during the early years of the movement, and many pages of the New Testament pay attention to intercultural tensions. Given such precedents, it seems only reasonable to expect that similarly knotty questions related to cultural differences will be part of global Christianity today.

In the past, Christians often settled their intra-religious disputes by geographically segregating themselves from one another. Catholics lived in certain parts of the world, Eastern Orthodox Christians in others, and Protestants of various kinds staked out other pieces of turf to call their own. That kind of segregation is no longer a viable option. Globalization has made everybody more interconnected. No individual or group exists in isolation from the rest of the world, and no local community is entirely independent. What happens in one place impacts what happens everywhere. How Christians act in one region of the globe or in one particular church or denomination shapes perceptions of Christianity elsewhere. When a Baptist preacher in Florida announces that he intends to burn a Qur’an to demonstrate his disdain for Islam, it is Christians in Africa and Asia and the Middle East who pay the price for his reckless rhetoric, not Christians in Florida. If Christians care about their brothers and sisters in faith, they now have to think about how their words and actions may affect the lives of Christians on the other side of the globe. The positive flipside of this situation is that good news also travels quickly around the globe. The image of Christianity in general was bolstered when the College of Cardinals elected Pope Francis—an Argentinian bishop known for his compassion and concern for the poor—as the leader of the Catholic Church. And it was not just Catholics who benefitted. The public image of Protestantism, Pentecostalism, and Eastern Orthodoxy was bolstered alongside Catholicism.

The variety of ideas and practices that exists within the world Christian movement today is enormous, and the gaps between different groups can be huge. What does a charismatic Christian in Africa, who believes

wholeheartedly in miracles, share in common with a Lutheran Christian in Sweden, who barely believes in the existence of God? How can a Catholic traditionalist, who thinks the Mass should still be said in Latin, connect with a “spiritual but not religious” Christian, who feels no need to ever attend worship services at all? Is there common ground between progressive Christians who embrace LGBTQ (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer) individuals as loved and accepted by God and fundamentalist Christians who believe that God abhors any divergence from heterosexuality? What binds together those Christians who face persecution and death in their current environments and Christians who have no reason to fear for their lives because they control the cultures in which they live?

Contemporary Christians find themselves caught up in what can only be described as a very messy global movement—something akin to a large extended family. *Family* is sometimes defined as the people you must endure even when you do not particularly like them. You are connected to them because they are organically related to you. You can disown them, but their stories remain part of your family history nonetheless. *Family* is a fact. The same basic principle applies to global Christianity. Being a Christian means being part of a huge family of faith that includes many strange people. *Strangeness* is, of course, a relative term. If some non-Western expressions of Christianity look odd to Christians from Europe and North America, be assured that some European and North American varieties of Christianity look equally peculiar to Christians from elsewhere.

However, there is increasing pressure for Christians to reach beyond their communities of comfort and to engage Christians who are different from themselves. This is not easy. For most people, walking into a room full of strangers is stressful. When strangers gather for a meeting, a good host typically breaks the ice with some kind of get-to-know-each-other activity. This book hopes to serve as something like an icebreaker for global Christianity: to introduce readers to the world Christian family so that when they visit other parts of the world, or when Christians from other regions of the globe move in next door, or when they connect online, they no longer seem like strangers.

This volume begins with a very brief history of the Christian movement, explaining how a Jewish breakaway religious sect in the Middle East became the largest and most diverse religion on earth. The second chapter describes the four major traditions of contemporary Christianity: Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestantism, and Pentecostalism. The book then moves on to chapters that describe Christian culture as it has developed and currently exists in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. These five continents do not cover the entire globe (leaving out places such as Australia

and the Pacific), but taken together they account for more than 98 percent of the world's Christians.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, cultural differences rooted in places of origin have become as crucial for understanding Christianity worldwide as older theological differences (represented by Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, and Pentecostalism) were in the past. Learning something about the world's many different kinds of Christians is important for all sorts of intellectual and practical and ecclesiological reasons. Encountering global diversity can also enrich individuals spiritually. The poet T. S. Eliot once said that the end of all life's travels is to return home and see the place as if for the first time. Encountering world Christianity is that kind of journey. Seeing how Christianity has been embodied elsewhere can enlarge a person's capacity to understand and incarnate the gospel at home.

1. Australia and the Pacific are discussed in Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who They Are, Where They Are, and How They Got There* (Oxford: Wiley/Blackwell, 2011).

# 1

## Global Christianity

### *A Very Brief History*

CHRISTIANS HAVE HAD GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS from the very beginning of the movement. In what has become known as the “great commission,” Jesus told his disciples that they would be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; see also Matt. 28:18–20). And indeed they became his witnesses. By the end of the first century, the gospel had been preached as far west as Spain and as far east as India. In the next four centuries, Christianity was embraced by millions of people living in the Roman and Persian empires and by many people who lived in other places: Ireland, Armenia, and Ethiopia. After just four centuries, Christianity was well on the way to becoming a global faith.

Then as now, Christians had their differences. The three most important leaders of the early Christian movement—Peter, Paul, and James—never did see fully eye to eye on everything. Rather than choosing among the views of these apostles, however, the early Christian community had the wisdom to embrace them all. Thus, the letters of Peter, Paul, and James were all preserved alongside one another in the New Testament, even though the views expressed (for example, in the books of James and Galatians) sometimes seem almost diametrically opposed. This same multiplicity of vision is evident in the four Gospels, each of which presents its own slightly different portrait of Jesus and his message. Leaders of the early church thought all four books were inspired and needed to be preserved, and they explicitly rejected the idea that

the four Gospels should be harmonized together into one merged text. Jesus himself spoke of the need to accept diversity within the movement. When the disciples told Jesus they had ordered a man they did not know to desist from casting out demons in Jesus's name, Jesus replied, "Do not stop him, . . . for whoever is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:49–50).

The most challenging expression of diversity in the early Christian movement concerned the distinction between Gentiles and Jews. The core issue was obedience to Jewish law. Did Gentile followers of Jesus need to obey the law in the same way that Jews did? This question was addressed at the first Christian council that met in Jerusalem around the year 50, less than a generation after Jesus's crucifixion. Gentiles, it was decided, were not required to follow all the regulations of the Jewish Torah, but they were requested to adhere to a handful of Jewish protocols that would make it easier for Jews and Gentiles to work and eat together, most notably to abstain from consuming blood or meat sacrificed to idols. It should be noted that this decision involved compromise. The debate was not framed as a choice between two totally different and mutually exclusive solutions. It was framed in terms of etiquette and mutual respect, and it was assumed that some differences between Jewish and Gentile practices would persist. The account in the book of Acts also says this agreement was reached because "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). This pairing of the guidance of the Holy Spirit with human reasoning reinforces the commonsensical character of the decision, and for the next two centuries piety and practicality were often blended together as Christianity struggled to accommodate cultural diversity.

## The First Globalization of Christianity, Beginnings to 1000

### *Christianity in the Roman Empire*

Christianity spread more quickly in the Roman Empire than anywhere else, due in large part to the ease of travel within the Roman domain. The Roman Empire circled the Mediterranean Sea, and water transportation was much easier than overland travel to Persia or Central Asia. Christian missionaries such as Paul traveled sea routes from city to city, and Christianity was soon present almost everywhere in the empire. Despite this rapid expansion of the movement, the total number of Christians remained relatively small, and, until the early 300s, Christianity remained a persecuted minority religion in the Roman Empire.

The situation changed dramatically when the Roman Empire stopped persecuting Christians and embraced Christianity as its own state religion in the

fourth century. Constantine, whose rule began in 306 and lasted until 337, was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Constantine believed the Christian God had intervened in history to place him on the throne, and he wanted to express his gratitude by supporting the Christian movement. However, there was a problem. Christianity in the Roman Empire was not a single, unified movement. It had fractured into several sub-movements that sometimes viciously disagreed. Constantine believed only one form of Christianity could be correct, and in the year 325, he convened a council of Christian bishops at the city of Nicaea to identify that one true form of Christian faith. When this council decided that the followers of a preacher named Arius were mistaken, Constantine no longer bestowed any favors on that particular Christian group.

Subsequent Roman emperors followed the same policy, showering support on those whose Christianity was deemed to be true and suppressing all others. The definition of “true Christianity” varied from emperor to emperor. Constantine’s son Constantius, for example, favored Arian Christianity rather than Christianity as it was formulated at the Council of Nicaea. Almost all the emperors were consistent, however, in upholding the principle that true Christianity must be expressed uniformly—and most bishops agreed. In contrast to the practices of the early Christian community, the official Christianity of the Roman Empire jettisoned the notion of Christian diversity. One was either an orthodox (right thinking and right acting) Christian or one was a heretic. There were no other legal options. With church and state increasingly fused, Roman Christianity’s ability to accommodate diversity became a thing of the past.

### *Early Christianity in Asia*

The Christian movement outside the Roman Empire followed a different path of development. This alternative trajectory is illustrated by the history of Christianity in Persia. Christianity was introduced to Persia (centered in contemporary Iraq and Iran) in the late first or early second century, and a substantial Christian community came into existence. The Zoroastrian rulers of the empire were offended by some Christian teachings, and persecution was not uncommon. In the 300s and 400s, thousands of Persian Christians were killed for their faith, far greater than the number who died because of persecution within the Roman Empire. Eventually a truce was negotiated, and Christians were allowed some degree of freedom to practice their faith, but Christianity always remained a minority religion in Persian lands.

Most Persian Christians were members of the Church of the East (sometimes called the Nestorian Church), but there were many Syrian Orthodox

Christians (also known as Jacobites) and Armenian Christians in the region as well. There was never a time when any particular church had a monopoly on Christianity in Persia. Unlike the imperially imposed uniformity of faith that prevailed in the Christian Roman Empire, Christianity in Persia (and in the rest of Asia) was always pluralistic.

The diversity of teachings and practices within Asian Christianity expanded as Persian missionaries moved eastward, preaching the gospel along the Silk Road, an ancient trade route that ran from the Middle East through Central Asia all the way to China. Communities along the Silk Road were religiously pluralistic, as are many modern cities, and people of different faiths crossed paths every day. In this cosmopolitan setting, Asian Christians enlarged their accommodation of diversity as they learned how to share the gospel winsomely in a pluralistic setting. One of the most widely traveled missionaries of the time was a monk named Alopen, who made it all the way to China in the year 635. Using a communication style borrowed from Buddhist monks he met along the Silk Road, Alopen composed *sutras* (didactic poems) explaining how the Cool Wind (the Holy Spirit) came upon Mo Yan (Mary), who gave birth to Ye Su (Jesus), who taught humanity how to live. It is not surprising that in China Christianity became known as “the religion of light,” a faith that every good-hearted person could embrace.

### *Early Christianity in Africa*

Christianity was introduced to Africans on the day of Pentecost, and by the second century, Christians could be found all across the northern coast of the continent. This territory was part of the Roman Empire, but soon Christianity began to spread southward, and Africans who had nothing to do with the Roman Empire embraced the gospel. Christianity was introduced to Axum (northern Ethiopia) in the mid-300s, and it soon became the official religion of the state. Ethiopian Christianity was strengthened in the 500s by the arrival of the “Nine Saints,” monks from Syria who erected church buildings and encouraged the creation of a network of monasteries that would later become the backbone of the Ethiopian church.

Nearby Nubia (modern Sudan) was Christianized during the mid-500s, but the dynamics there were more complex than in Ethiopia. Nubia comprised three cooperating kingdoms, and two competing groups of missionaries entered the region about the same time, one of them Chalcedonian (Eastern Orthodox) and the other Miaphysite (Coptic Orthodox). As a result, Nubians developed a more flexible and tolerant disposition toward Christian diversity

than was typical in Ethiopia, and Nubia later granted freedom of worship to Muslims as well.

### *Early Christianity in Europe*

European Christianity is as old as Christianity in Africa. The apostle Paul preached the gospel in Greece within two decades of Christ's death, and a Christian congregation was founded in Rome just a few years later. Up until the fifth century, however, European Christianity had no distinctive sense of identity. It was merely part of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The break point came in the 400s when the western half of the Roman Empire collapsed because Germanic tribes were flooding into the region. The European Christianity of today descends from the faith that was eventually embraced by those barbarian tribes.

From the time Saint Patrick (d. 460) first attempted to convert the Irish until the end of the first Christian millennium, the evangelization of Europe followed basically the same pattern. A charismatic monk or nun would come into a region preaching the gospel and performing miraculous acts that challenged pagan deities and demonstrated the power of the Christian God. The turning point usually came when the local king or queen embraced the gospel and forthwith required everyone else in his or her realm to do the same. The conversion process involved some degree of personal choice, but conversion was generally a group phenomenon, not individual. Bit by bit, tribe by tribe, the European continent slowly became Christian, with the gospel generally spreading from south to north. Scandinavia was the last region in Western Europe to convert, around the year 1000. Similar changes took place in Eastern Europe. Southern Russia was Christianized in the late 900s and the northern Baltic region followed shortly thereafter.

The years between 500 and 1000 were a time of widespread social unrest in Europe, and this context shaped European Christianity as it was being formed. Because there was no overarching government in the region, local decisions mattered. Christianity became a localized faith. The practices of European Christianity were very diverse during the initial era when evangelism was underway, but the old Roman ideal of uniformity soon reasserted itself. As Christianity became more fully established in the region, and as the continent became more politically stable, the pressures of uniformity increased. This was especially evident during periods such as the rule of Charlemagne (774–828) when the central government was strong and when church and state were closely aligned.

By the year 1000, Christianity had become the most geographically widespread religion on earth. It had millions of followers spread across Asia, Europe, and northern Africa. No one in this region knew that the Americas existed, so from their perspective Christianity had been introduced to almost all the known world. During most of this era, the center of gravity of the Christian movement was located in the East. Until 900, there were more Christians living in Asia than in Europe, and most of the movement's spiritual and intellectual centers were similarly located in Asia. Four major church traditions (Eastern Orthodox, Miaphysite, Church of the East, and Catholic) vied for followers, trying to prove that their own understandings of God, the gospel, and humankind were better than others. Vast cultural and theological differences shaped how Christians lived their faith around the world: different ways of envisioning Jesus, different understandings of salvation, different styles of worship, different rules about family and marriage, different uses of music and the arts, different attitudes about those who had died, and different practices of personal piety. Between the years 700 and 1000, Christianity was almost as diverse as it is today. But that was about to change.

### **The Great Contraction and a New European Focus: 1000–1900**

The geographic and theological diversity that characterized Christianity in the year 1000 narrowed dramatically over the next five centuries as Christianity contracted in Asia and blossomed in Europe. One of the major causes of Christianity's contraction in the East was the rise of Islam, which exploded into existence during the early seventh century and then spread rapidly across the Middle East and North Africa. Much like the Roman Empire, Islam merged religion and the state. Accordingly, Islamic military conquests in North Africa and the Middle East had religious ramifications. At first, Christians residing in conquered territory were allowed to follow their religious faith without restrictions. Later, more limitations were placed on Christians and pressures to convert to Islam were increased.

A tipping point occurred when Western Christian armies, in a series of military ventures called "crusades," attempted to reconquer the Middle East in the years lasting roughly from 1100 to 1250. One major consequence was that many Muslims came to view Christians as religious enemies rather than seeing them as part of a shared religious tradition going back to Abraham. Persecution intensified in general, spiking under a ruler named Timur Leng who controlled most of Central Asia and the Middle East during the years 1370–1405. Christians suffered tremendously, and the Christian population

plummeted. Churches, and even entire Christian towns, were destroyed. By 1405, it was hard to find a viable Christian community anywhere in the region. The Christian movement has never suffered a more devastating blow than the one delivered by Timur Leng. For all practical purposes, Asia was rendered a Christian wasteland.

Christians fared slightly better in Africa. Christianity had faded into oblivion in much of Islamic North Africa before the Crusades began, but it remained strong in Egypt, even in the face of sometimes serious persecution. Christianity also remained the dominant faith in Ethiopia, unlike neighboring Nubia, where Christianity had declined sharply and eventually disappeared around the year 1400. The fact that Christianity survived in Egypt and Ethiopia did not mean that Christianity was flourishing in these places. Churches in Egypt struggled just to retain their current members, so there was little enthusiasm for spreading the gospel elsewhere. Christianity was not eradicated in Africa as it was in Asia, but it became far less robust.

While Christianity in Asia and Africa was experiencing decline, the opposite was happening in Europe. European Christianity, and especially western European Christianity, was booming. The political order, which had been chaotic before 1000, stabilized, and the economy began to flourish. The European population, almost all of which was Christian, exploded. Although the Black Death ravaged Europe in the mid-1300s, causing a significant decline in the population, the region later rebounded and the European percentage of the world Christian population continued to rise. By 1500, the great majority of the world's Christians—more than 80 percent—were living in Europe, and Christianity itself was now perceived as a European rather than global religion.

European Christianity was growing not only in size but also in its sense of confidence and self-assurance. During the years between 1100 and 1350, the great Gothic cathedrals were built, the first genuinely systematic Christian theologies were written, and the first Christian universities were founded. Confidence taken to an extreme can become aggressive, and in the medieval period, European Christianity flexed its muscles, both figuratively and literally. This new European religious belligerence was expressed to outsiders via the Crusades to recapture the Holy Land, and it was expressed to insiders via the violent suppression of all heretics and religious dissenters.

The subsequent history of Christianity in Europe is complicated, but the longing for homogeneity remained strong. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century added new levels of tension to the region, but it did little to quench Europe's fixation on religious uniformity. Eventually, Europe split into three separate and distinct ecclesiastical subregions—Catholic, Eastern

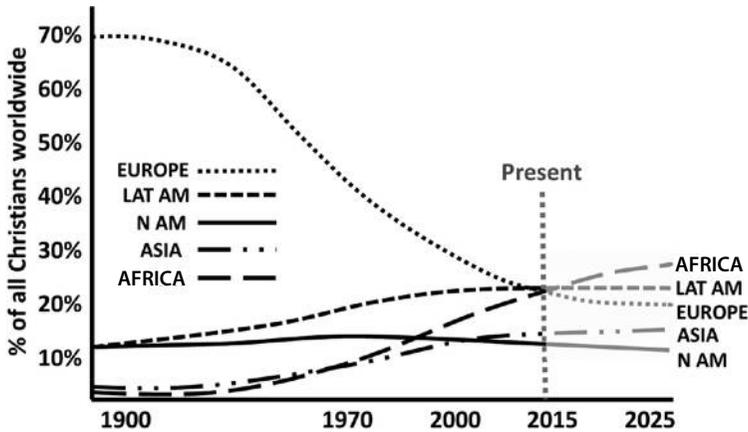
Orthodox, and Protestant—and each region allowed only one form of Christian practice to exist. Christians following other paths were tolerated at best and were often actively persecuted. The idea of religious freedom took root in Europe very slowly, and it did not really flourish until the twentieth century. As a result, many localities in contemporary Europe are still largely homogeneous in religious composition.

The size, wealth, and confidence of European Christianity deeply influenced the modern missionary movement. European Catholic missions had begun in the thirteenth century, but they dramatically expanded in the 1500s. European Protestant missions began later, around 1800, but grew quickly in size and soon rivaled the Catholic movement. Whether they were Catholic or Protestant, missionaries from Europe shared a common conviction that their own particular version of Christianity was the one and only true expression of Christian faith on earth. Most early European missionaries were blind to the cultural dimensions of their faith. They thought their faith had not been shaped by any particular culture at all; it was just pure Christianity. As a result—because they saw no daylight between the gospel and their own Christianized cultures—most European missionaries promoted the gospel and their own culture as if they were one and the same. It should come as no surprise that people elsewhere often believed them. By the late 1800s, people around the world had come to see Christianity as a Western religion that was trying to make everyone else simultaneously both Christian and Western. The proposition that Christianity could become a global, multicultural faith was almost unimaginable.

### **The New Globalization: 1900 to the Present**

In 1900, two-thirds of the world's Christians lived in Europe, and many of the Christians living in North America and Latin America were of European descent. Europeans and their new world descendants thus accounted for more than 90 percent of all the Christians in the world. Then the demographics of global Christianity began to change, and they changed with almost unbelievable rapidity. Over the last hundred years, Europe's share of the world's Christian population has collapsed from about 65 percent to 25 percent, and it is still falling. Meanwhile, the number of Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America has exploded. Today, roughly a quarter of the world's Christians are African, another quarter live in Latin America, and about 15 percent reside in Asia. North America, often seen religiously as an extension of Europe, accounts for only 10 percent of the world's Christians (see fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1  
**Changing Christian Population by Continent**



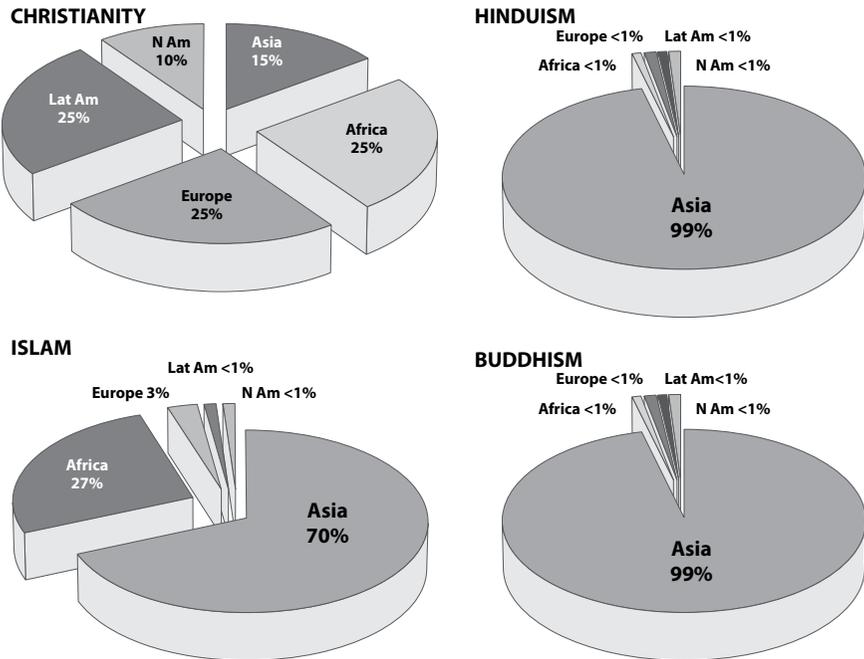
The message is clear: Christianity is no longer European. It has become the most thoroughly diverse, multicultural religion of all time. It is also the most globally dispersed. Islam, which is the world's second-largest religion, flourishes only in Asia and Africa, while Hinduism (the world's third-largest religion) and Buddhism (fourth largest) are almost entirely Asian (see fig. 1.2). Christianity, by contrast, is found everywhere.

### Describing Christianity Today

The speed with which Christianity spread around the world took everyone by surprise, including the world's Christians themselves. A hundred years ago it was common for Christians to describe the globe as divided into two regions: Christendom (Europe and the West in general) and various "foreign mission fields" where Christianity was just being introduced. This view aligned nicely with Europe's nineteenth-century colonization of the world. European Christianity was seen as the ideal to which the rest of the world should aspire. "Mission churches" were set up in the colonies to guide progress toward this goal.

When the era of European colonization came to an end in the mid-twentieth century, a new vocabulary had to be devised. Terminology adopted by many Western Christians now described the world Christian movement in terms of "older" versus "younger" churches. "Older churches" in this rhetorical framework referred to the old established churches of the West, while the phrase "younger churches" referred to the more recently formed Christian communities in Africa and Asia. On one level, this new way of describing Christianity

Figure 1.2  
Global Distribution of Four World Religions



worldwide seemed simply factual. Europe's churches were old, and the churches in Africa and Asia were not. But not all taint of Western Christian superiority had been removed. The term *older* could be heard as a synonym for *wiser*, and the adjective *younger* could imply that churches in Asia and Africa were still in need of instruction from their more mature fellow believers in the West.

In recent years, a new pairing of terms has emerged. The world Christian movement is now frequently described as consisting of a global Christian North and a global Christian South. North and South in this usage do not correspond to the equator but instead to a slanted line that runs from Central America to Siberia and separates Europe and North America from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (see fig.1.3). This new terminology is clearly an improvement over the past because it does not imply any superiority of the North. In fact, the opposite is sometimes the case with the vocabulary of Christian North versus South employed to suggest that churches in the global Christian South are vibrant, devout, and alive while churches in the Christian North are soft, flabby, and spiritually stagnant or dying.

All generalizations have strengths and weaknesses. The great strength of the North versus South model is that it underscores the dramatic shift that has

taken place during the last hundred years. In 1900, 80 percent of all Christians still lived in the global Christian North, and only 20 percent lived in the South. Today those numbers are nearly inverted. Now the South is home to almost two-thirds of the world’s Christians while only 35 percent live in the global North (see fig. 1.4). This kind of demographic shift is unprecedented in both size and rapidity, and the implications have not yet sunk in for many Christians. Many northern Christians still think that northern-style Christianity is the global norm, but that is no longer the case. If numbers matter, then Christians from the global South can make a strong case that their religious practices should be the global standard.

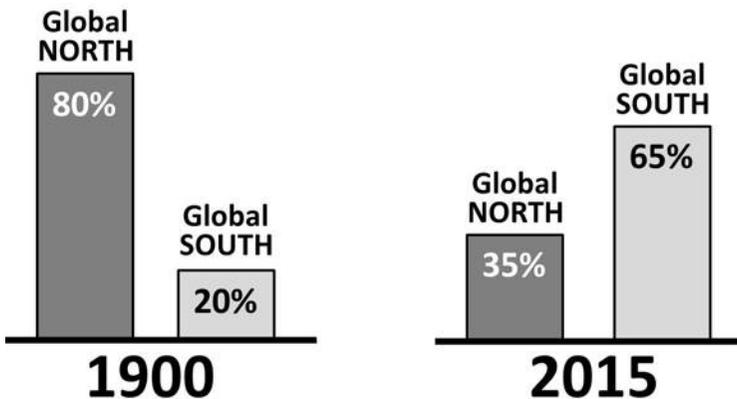
Figure 1.3

**The Global Christian North and South**



Figure 1.4

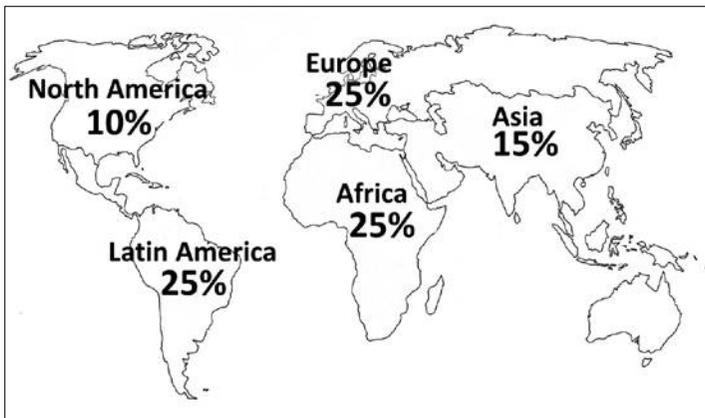
**Percentage of Global Christian Population Living in the North and South: 1900 and 2015 Compared**



A striking disadvantage of the North-South model is that it perpetuates the idea that all of the diversity that exists within the global Christian movement can somehow be shoehorned into just two big categories. Even when the names of those two categories, North and South, are no longer offensive, the mere act of dividing the Christian world in two, and only two, big regions preserves the old European dualism of “us” and “them.” A better description of world Christianity might employ the word *flat*, using that term in the same way as the award-winning journalist Thomas Friedman in the title of his book *The World Is Flat*. When Friedman says the world is “flat” he means that, because of the internet, everyone everywhere competes economically on level ground.<sup>1</sup> Christianity has entered a similarly flat era in its own history. Today, no single region of the Christian world can claim to be the dominant center. Christianity is globally dispersed, and Christians everywhere now have equal potential to shape and influence the movement as a whole (see fig. 1.5).

Figure 1.5

**The “Flat” World of Contemporary Christianity**  
*The Percentage of the World’s Christians Living in Each Region Today*



The worldwide Christian community has become multicentered, with each regional expression of Christianity having its own distinctive (and often internally contested) understanding of the gospel and its appropriate embodiment on earth. Christians in Africa accordingly have important insights to share with fellow Christians in Europe in much the same way that European Christians have insights to share with Africans. And the same observation

1. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

can be made about every other region of the world. Christianity has entered a new era and mutual edification has become the rule, a time when Christians from all the world's cultures and regions have much to learn from one another. Differences of wealth, power, social class, and education continue to shape this global conversation because richer Christians (mostly from Europe and North America) typically have more resources available for making their views heard. However, the global Christian movement is becoming irreversibly more egalitarian.

The Christian world is getting flatter, and Christians everywhere are facing a situation that parallels the early church. In its first years, Christianity had no ready lists of preferred beliefs and practices, and it had not yet devised any formulas for quickly assessing who was in and who was out of the movement. People who were trying to follow Jesus faithfully were likely to encounter significantly divergent perspectives among their fellow believers. In ancient times, the setting for this complex conversation was limited largely to the Middle East and the Mediterranean region. Today it encompasses the whole world.