

Preface

The idea for this book began at an American Society of Church History conference in New Orleans in 2013. I convened a session entitled “To Whom Does Christianity Belong? Christianity and National Identity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.”¹ The papers dealt with various aspects of Christianity in India, Nigeria, and Brazil, competently introduced and responded to by Scott Sunquist.

Following the presentations, questions and comments were delightfully spirited, and proved a little provocative. One audience member asked a series of questions that unleashed a fascinating exchange: “What *is* Christianity? Is it a European export? Should it still even be considered a Western faith? To whom does it belong? Where is at its most authentic? And who gets to decide?”

In other words, is Christianity in India, Nigeria, and Brazil as genuine—or as orthodox—as the older, European manifestations of the faith? In the case of India, is Christianity there simply a cultural leftover from the days of Portuguese colonialism or British imperialism? Are Indian Christians somehow less Indian when they embrace Christianity? Is Christianity *actually* a Western European religion?

1. Other participants in the session were Scott Sunquist, Todd Hartsch, and Corey Williams.

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If a Nigerian becomes a Christian, does that mean she is essentially adopting a British faith since the missionaries were largely from Britain? Most Brazilians are Christian; but is their faith *actually* European? For how long will Christianity be associated with missionaries and colonial leaders?

And that brings up a deeper, older question: who brought Christian faith to the Europeans? For how long must Christianity be associated with the cultural milieu of the person who brought it to another culture? When does the cord get cut? When do societies reach a point where they can consider their religion properly *their own* rather than associating it with the people who brought it to them or forced it upon them?

Myriad questions were precipitated by the wonderfully insightful comments of our audience that day. As a panel, we were pleasantly surprised, but caught off guard when we realized how deep these critical questions were going, and how they were striking at the very core of Christian faith.

There was one important question that day that I could not get out of my mind, and it motivated the writing of this book: “What *is* Christianity, anyway?” It seemed like a perfectly sensible question with a fairly straightforward answer. But when I tried to answer the question I began to understand what was in plain sight: Christianity is extremely complicated. Who gets to define it? Who is in the circle? Where does Christianity originate? With God? With Judaism? With Christ? With Paul? Where is the “center” of Christianity? Is it best conceptualized as a Western European religion that has shaped Western culture, laws, and values for two millennia?

Has the “center” of Christianity actually moved to the Global South in recent decades? Perhaps the *center* is in Brazil—which has the largest population of Catholics *and* Pentecostals in the world? Or is

the *center* best understood as being in the United States with all of its power, prosperity, and influence? Or is the *center* of Christianity in Jerusalem, where it began, but where very few Christians reside? Perhaps the quintessential Christian is an Italian Catholic, living in Rome—worshiping near the seat of the largest Christian denomination. And authentic Christianity radiates out from there, losing a bit of its authenticity and prestige the farther one gets from the core.

Or, perhaps, we are missing the point by thinking of Christianity as being *based* here or there. Indeed, there are implications to basing the Christian faith in one place and not in another. When the holiness of a *place* is emphasized, there is a sense that certain cities bear a higher measure of holiness, and thus uniquely *belong* to Christianity. Throughout Christian history, many thousands fought and died in order to reclaim Jerusalem—the city of Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Or perhaps since Christianity now languishes in Western Europe and thrives elsewhere, the argument can be made that Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, Kinshasa, Lagos, Nairobi, or Seoul are the *new* centers?

There are other implications in christening this or that city, nation, or denomination as being the *center* of Christianity. And unfailingly these implications have to do with ownership. Who owns Christianity? Who gets to define its doctrine and praxis? When and if we decide where Christianity is *based*, then we must listen very carefully to the voices coming from that crucial point, that *axis mundi* for Christians.

An example here would be the Christians of Armenia, the world’s first national church. The Armenian Church has been considered heretical throughout the history of Christianity, due to its opposition to the Christology endorsed at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451).

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They have maintained their faith throughout the centuries in spite of terrible odds and many rounds of persecution. Are they *in*? Are they Christians or not? Even the question is preposterous. These people have held on to Christianity through trouble and war on a scale few nations will ever see.

Perhaps we consider a *person* to be the center of Christianity. Of course Jesus Christ is, fundamentally, the reason for Christian faith, but who is the correct interpreter of his life and its meaning? In the West, that honor probably goes to Augustine. However, in the sixteenth century, Luther became the chief interpreter of Augustine for Protestants. And so who becomes the chief interpreter of Luther? What did Luther *really* mean? And what about the churches of the East who scarcely know of Martin Luther? To them, he is merely an Augustinian monk in the sixteenth century who happened to cause turbulence in the Western church, but had little impact on the Eastern churches.

Does any of this even matter to a Pentecostal Christian in, say, Rio de Janeiro who believes that the power of the Holy Spirit is available for all who believe, just as it was to the earliest followers of Jesus? Jesus said in John 14:12, “Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.” Did Jesus really mean that? Can disciples today raise the dead and heal the blind?

Who gets to interpret whom? And whose interpretation is best? Are the professional social scientists and historians the chief interpreters today since they seem to understand this complicated academic discourse best? They know where Christianity is strong and growing, and where it is declining. They understand that theology changes according to culture. Historians track all of these developments, and theologians interpret what this all says about God.

Thus, are we to turn to academicians for an answer to the question, “To whom does Christianity belong?”

Typically, practicing Christians will choose to locate the authority of Christian faith in the individual or in the institution. Protestants often argue that Christianity is within you and you must be the judge of your own actions. There are exceptions to this stereotype, but it is certainly representative of many Protestants, who make up 40 percent of the world’s Christian population. However, for Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, authority is located in the institution: the church, the body of Christ on earth, led by a properly sanctioned clergy.

So to whom does Christianity *really* belong? To the institution or to the individual? It is a puzzle. And one’s answer will probably be determined by the church one attends, if one attends a church.

Perhaps, however, we scrap the question altogether. Perhaps we *should* scrap it, but not until we have at least considered it. This volume is an attempt to deal with that vital question with all of its implications. And when we at least ask the question, we begin to see the complexity and beauty of that vast religion to which many of us cling with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.