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Citation for published version:

Wild-Wood, E 2024, 'Now what? Religious Studies whither and why? Part #2: Studying World Christianity', *Religious Studies Review*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 273-278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.17250>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/rsr.17250](https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.17250)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Religious Studies Review

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Now What? Religious Studies Whither and Why? Part #2

Studying World Christianity

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Key words

World Christianity, Global Christianity

Fifty years ago, when the *Religious Studies Review* launched its first edition, “World Christianity” would have seemed an odd phrase, not immediately recognizable to scholars of religion. Yet its roots lie in the development of Religious Studies, as well as in area studies and applied theologies. In the last 40 years, there has been a steady rise in interest in a particular interdisciplinary and ethical approach that has become known as “World Christianity” (Robert 2020). The interest has been accompanied by a proliferation of master’s programs, undergraduate courses, research centers, conferences, and academic positions with this title (or similar titles like “Global Christianities”) in tertiary institutions, particularly in Europe and North America. The approach “investigates and seeks to understand Christian communities, faith, and practice as they are found on six continents, expressed in diverse ecclesial traditions, and informed by the multitude of historical and cultural experiences in [the] world” (Irvin 2008, 1). By charting significant elements in the development of this approach, this short article shows how studies in World Christianity have promoted diversity, equality and inclusion and interrogation of colonialism for some time, and how this ethical stance requires continued re-examination.

The Challenge of a New Approach

The study of World Christianity emerged in the 1980s as a “revitalisation movement” (Robert 2021) to challenge theological and religious studies in the Western academy and to critique mid-twentieth-century mission studies and ecumenics. It bridged Religious Studies and Theology when many scholars claimed distinct disciplinary paths (see Weibe 2005) and questioned the perception that Christian beliefs and practices in the Western world were necessarily to be viewed as universal criteria by which Christianity elsewhere, as well as other religious traditions, should be judged. It critiqued unified, global expressions of Christianity that had emerged from European thought and institutional organization and examined new movements and

practices unfamiliar in the Western world, as well promoting contextual theologies. It developed an approach that was multi- and interdisciplinary at a time when interdisciplinarity was still relatively novel and now engages with the fields of area studies, cultural anthropology, ecumenics and intercultural theology, mission history, development, and postcolonial and decolonial studies (Kim 2021, 47). It focussed on the knowledge and faith perspective of insiders when the value of scholarly objectivity and secularity had begun to be scrutinized by postmodernists. It recognized the dangers of marginalizing scholars because they were activist in intent and committed to the outcomes they proposed as a response to problems facing their own religious traditions and societies. In seeking to include movements and scholars from the Majority World, it raised issues of global inequities and a lack of diverse thinking within Theology and Religious Studies, challenging Western-centric approaches and models that pervade academic discourse. As Jehu Hanciles articulates it, scholars of World Christianity “take seriously the dynamic interconnections between seemingly dominant global flows and frequently subversive local forces” (2021a). They are attentive to marginality and often work with analysis that starts from the bottom up.

The approach of World Christianity goes beyond the familiar assertion that the demographics of Christian adherence have shifted from the global north to the global south, although this is undoubtedly the case. The world’s population had the same percentage of Christians in 1910 as in 2010, although those Christians were more likely to be found in Latin America and Africa in 2010 than in the Western world (Zurlo 2022, 3–18). More importantly, Christians in the Majority World are forming new religious movements and creating new theologies in response to their contexts. Often in daily dialogue with other religious tradition, they bring those patterns of belief and practice into Christianity, or offer explicit and implicit rejections of them. Such movements had been overlooked in the Western academy. Furthermore, Western presuppositions about religious freedom, appropriate public/private discourse, political systems, and so on are not universally shared, resulting in different priorities for Christians in other contexts. The study of World Christianity was intended to educate the West about the implications of the demographic shift in Christian affiliation and emphasize the experience of those marginalized in the academy and international Christian organizations.

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Historic Development of World Christianity

Academic subfields and interdisciplinary approaches arise from particular circumstances. World Christianity is no exception. In the United Kingdom, the approach emerged at the University of Aberdeen in 1983 when a Research Centre was established by Andrew Walls (It moved to Edinburgh in 1987) (Stanley 2011). Walls' biography shows the intersection of Religious Studies, Missiology, and studies of religious movements in Africa that influenced early development. Walls (1928–2021) was a church historian who had taught in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. In 1967, he founded the *Journal of Religion in Africa*. In 1970, he set up the second Religious Studies department in Britain. From its inception in 1972, he promoted a focus on documents, archives, and bibliography within the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) (Anderson 2012, 7–9). The Research Centre also supported students from the Majority World to take Masters degrees and PhDs and thus enrich the growing field with their scholarship and subsequent teaching across the globe. In this way, insiders to Majority World Christian movements and organizations also contributed to research and teaching.

There were similar movements in continental Europe and the United States. Early staff positions in World Christianity usually appeared in institutions that had developed mission studies programs since 1910 (Strasburg 2016). To give one example, at Lund University, a lectureship in mission studies established in 1919 became, in 1994, a professorial post in “Mission Studies and Ecumenics,” a name retained in Swedish. In English, the chair's title became “Global Christianity and Interreligious Relations” by 2004. The change in title from “mission” through “ecumenics,” “intercultural studies,” or “intercultural theology” (Ustorf 2008) to “World” or “Global” Christianity was prompted by the recognition of the vitality of Christianity in the Majority World and the growing number of scholars from the Majority World in European and United States in theological and religious academic institutions, as well as an acknowledgment of the numerical decline of Christianity in the West. This shift in titles represented a commitment to uphold Christian mission as one of the marks of the church (Roberts 2020) while critiquing the colonial legacy of Western missionary endeavors. It permitted a new collaborative inquiry that sought to examine lived theologies and practices of different Christian movements rather than respond directly to the fissures between large networks like the Ecumenical Movement, the Lausanne Movement, and Pentecostalism (Strasburg 2016). From these changes, there developed the familiar indicators of a rise in interest in a new academic area in the form of conferences, journals, book series, projects, and networks.

Early Approaches to World Christianity

A seminal text for the study of World Christianity is *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (1989) by

historian Lamin Sanneh (1942–2019). Sanneh argued that examining the history of biblical translation, catechisms, and other print materials demonstrated that the process of language learning and translation created an inculturated form of Christianity and propelled desirable social change. Far from having their consciousness colonized, as has been argued by V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) and others, Sanneh said that Christians in Africa converted on their own terms, using their own idioms and forging new forms of Christianity in the process. The “translatability” of Christianity into vernacular idioms through local agents who domesticated Christian practices emerged as a key theme. The theological cross-fertilization between Christian religion and indigenous religions and the vibrancy and innovation of new religious movements, and mission-initiated churches also featured in early studies. Theologian Kwame Bediako (1945–2008) was attentive to the use of vernacular language and indigenous patterns of knowledge within African Christianity. In *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Bediako argues that indigenous beliefs and practices rightly shape contemporary Christianity in Africa (1995, 210–229). Independent prophet movements were regarded as reflecting indigenous religious practice that mission-initiated churches might follow. This approach inspired teaching in many tertiary institutions in Africa. For example, the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, which Bediako founded in 1987, continues to research Christian history, practice, and theology in Ghana and Africa. This line of thought has influenced the philosopher Olufemi Taiwo in his argument that a contextual appropriation of modernity by African intellectuals was antithetical to colonial rule, which intruded upon the process of autonomous engagement with international ideas (2010).

In 2002, the scholarship of World Christianity came to wider attention with the publication of Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, while Jenkins' analysis was critiqued by missiologists associated with World Christianity for its generalizing assumptions (Ustorf 2005) and Orientalist tendencies (Ramachandra 2005). In the following decade, a significant number of introductions to Christianity were published, and these were organized by geographic region or confessional tradition and suitable for undergraduate courses being developed on the subject (e.g., Farhadian 2008; Jacobsen 2011; Kim and Kim 2012).

Studies in World Christianity were influenced from the 2000s by anthropologists' turn toward Christianity (Bialecki et al. 2008), particularly but not exclusively, to Pentecostal forms of Christianity. Often these popular forms of Christianity have made transnational connections and propounded a spirituality of rupture with the past. Therefore, Pentecostals can be hostile to the cultural theology approach of Bediako and others while unintentionally patterning their practice on longstanding religious behavior (Kalu 2008, 170). The attention to

Pentecostalism and the growing appreciation of social sciences produced a greater focus on ethnographic methods of research and a stronger critique of the textual sources and mission histories that were the staple of historians.

Alongside this stream of inquiry, there has been a rise in interest in World Christianity by some Catholic and ecumenical theologians (Tan and Tran 2016). It has three broad intersecting elements. First, there is a deliberate attempt to disrupt classic systematic theologies using liberation, inculturation, and inter-religious theologies that are explicit about the contexts from which they emerge. This work built upon earlier work from the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (est. 1974) and theologians who mounted a feminist critique of male-centric contextual theologies (Fabella and Oduyoye 1988). Second, it challenges Roman Catholic ecclesologies of the church as universal and asks how a theology of a united, worldwide church is enriched by different parts of that church with distinct histories and experiences. Third, it challenged the implicit anglophone and Protestant biases in previous studies and made the theological contribution more explicit. One prominent proponent is Peter Phan, who has articulated the cultural, liberative, and inter-religious theology of the Asian Bishops Conference and reflected upon the impact of migration on Christianity as a global phenomenon (Phan 2018).

Migration and diasporic communities were becoming increasingly important topics of research (e.g., Cruz 2010; Adogame 2013). The study of Christians from the Majority world moving to the Western world, sometimes with a strong sense of “reverse mission” toward their new society, directly brought into question the local and cultural foci of much of the early research. This transnational or polycentric view of Christianity has been encouraged by a series of conferences at Munich University from 1997 led by Klaus Korchoke. The conferences highlighted the problems of a “West” to “non-West” focus in Christian history, which can reinforce colonial tropes even where it seeks to undermine them. They examined the transnational south-to-south connections and the many hubs of influence across the globe and recognized the importance of print media in these links (Korchoke 2016). Migration and cross-cultural connections have been identified as significant in the geographical spread of Christianity throughout its history (Hanciles 2021b), challenging histories of institutional power and colonial incursion.

Retrospective, Critique, and Methods

World Christianity became a widely accepted term for a loosely connected set of interests and methods. Starting in 2015, a process of retrospective and critique emerged, which challenged some of the ways in which studies in World Christianity had developed and reconsidered methodological approaches in an attempt to provide greater conceptual clarity (Fredricks and

Nagy 2021a, 3). The task was challenging because of the necessity of attending to the complexity of context, of scrutinizing the validity of analytical terms and of acknowledging the limitations of historical sources. Care is required to identify the unit of analysis—the geographical scope, periodization, and fluidity of religious identities—that avoids Western-centric assumptions. Any World Christianity approach needs to be “sensitive to the multiple perspective, manifestations, contexts, and actors of Christianity/ies as well as the translocal connectivities and integrative forces that conjoin these local Christianities” (Fredricks and Nagy 2021b, 305).

The “area studies” approach to World Christianity, in which scholars focused primarily on diversity and distinctions, was questioned. Scholars noted conceptual problems in the unbalanced focus on Africa and the comparative neglect of certain areas of the world (Barreto 2021; Nagy 2017; Womack 2021). They investigated ways in which regional differences in Christianity provide new horizons for study. For example, Chandra Mallampalli (2017) questioned the limits of translatability in an Indian context, where Christians are seen to desert the linguistic culture of their context, and pointed to histories of rupture rather than continuity. There was a recognition that the very term “World Christianity” is an Anglophone concept that does not translate easily into other languages and reduces its linguistic and confessional reach. Other terms, like “Christianity worldwide,” were not widely adopted.

A more connected, comparative approach that attended to links within Christian movements and a consciousness of homogenization of global organizational structures by examining global connections or ecumenical fellowship was proposed, which would examine how far “local appropriation” was an integral element in processes of globalization and indispensable for multidirectional impact (Cabrita and Maxwell 2017). For example, Christian literature not only influenced local or national social reform, as Sanneh proposed, but the transnational circulation among emerging reading publics helped to develop a globalized sense of Christian community (Feitoza 2017). This angle was taken up by assessing spectrums of “ecumenism-independency” in modern church history (Chow and Wild-Wood 2020). By situating new inquiries in the Majority world, outside or alongside familiar inquiries regarding doctrine or mission emanating from central ecclesial networks, the connections and disconnections of comparative lived religious experience tested familiar understandings of “ecumenism” and “independence.” Shobana Shankar (2021) and Dorottya Nagy (2021) proposed attending to the “world-mindedness” in the study of Christianity as a way of responding to the boundary-defying nature of lived religion. In doing so, they proposed to address religious phenomena that occur in “in-between” spaces, for instance, where Christian and non-Christian intersect, thus further interrogating familiar comprehensions of confessional particularity. Scholars of World Christianity were also called to

examine the implicit theological assumptions in their work and be self-conscious about their positionality and activism (Wild-Wood 2017, 333–7).

New Enquiries

Recent inquiries have raised important questions for the study of World Christianity by reassessing the role of social justice in its approach and examining contemporary themes using a World Christianity approach. *Alterity and the Evasion of Justice* acknowledges that studies in World Christianity emerged as “a way of pushing for justice in response to the Euro-normative and colonizing mentality of studies on Christianity” (Womack and Barreto 2023, 5). Yet it calls for an expansion of its inquiry where it has failed to investigate the power asymmetries *within* Christian communities, which further marginalize particular groups, like women or those with limited educational opportunities. To achieve this, the contributors place social, cultural, and epistemic justice at the forefront of the inquiry by examining the “othering” within Christian communities. *Global Visions of Violence* presents further investigation into intra-Christian violence, inter-religious violence, or persecution. These themes have often been significant for theologians. In this volume, however, historical and social scientific methods are deployed to question the extent of agency and examine the nature of diverse, indigenized forms of Christianity in order to analyze conflicts in which Christians are perpetrators and victims. The contributors examine “the pluriform ways in which violence has become a dynamic agent, exerting multidirectional change on diverse global Christian communities” (Bruner and Kirkpatrick 2023, 9). Some themes are seeing increased attention. Ecological issues are being raised by a new generation of theologians (Chow 2024), many of whom theologize from Indigenous epistemologies in response to the impact of climate change on marginalized and often impoverished communities. The historical influence of translation through the use of print media was a significant early theme. Now, the impact of digital media on churches and Christian movements is under investigation—to examine the diffuse ways that Christians act in community, and the modes, methods, and implications of digital interconnectedness and digital disconnectedness and poverty (Chow and Kurlsburg 2020).

Perhaps the most important developments in World Christianity studies, however, are those that continue to provide opportunities for intellectual and practical exchange across the globe. The awareness of global inequalities was significant in the emergence of World Christianity. Over the years, various projects have attempted to share scholarly resources more equitably. Until recently, they were often working against the grain of Western academic institutions. One such current endeavor is the support and amplification

of research conducted in African Universities by the Nagel Institute at Calvin College through a Templeton grant. The World Christianity approach emerged to challenge the Western academy and to include the perspectives of scholars and Christians marginalized in and by traditional discourses. It is required to continually assess how far it succeeds in that objective when global political and financial inequalities remain stark. Time and resources for research and publishing are still unequally located in the Western world. This means that the riches of insider knowledge of Christian movements and theologies remain only partially accessible. The search for marginality and the desire to cross boundaries is not sufficient by itself. It could easily become extractive. Rather, for the continued development of studies in World Christianity, it is necessary to return constantly to the ethical impetus to include and to challenge the systems that exclude.

Jehu Hanciles observes that “the world Christianity approach is *not one thing* but a plurality of emphases, models, and interpretative assumptions; all wrapped in a peculiar propensity for boundary-crossing and for exploring intersections in a way that calls master narratives and universalizing constructs into question” (2021a xx) The deliberately capacious nature of studies in World Christianity means that the approaches it has developed will adapt and change further. It will continue to ask which people and what movements are overlooked, how they inform an understanding of Christianity worldwide, and what suppositions or power structures are at play.

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