

I

Introduction**RELIGIOUS INTERACTION AND THE STUDY OF
GLOBAL HISTORY**

What can the study of cross-cultural interactions tell us about religions and how they operate in world history? The purpose of this book is to address that question. It does so by investigating a particular arena of such interaction, namely the strategies which a variety of peoples worldwide have employed in dealing with the presence of imported Christianity, often as conveyed by missionaries, in their midst. The terms “World Christianity” and “global history” have become widespread in recent decades, in part reflecting the state of the highly interconnected world we live in and in part attempting to move away from an exclusively Western interpretation of how that world works. For example, the study of World Christianity is in large part a response to the dramatic growth of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, so that there are now more Christians south of the equator than north of it.¹ And global history generally subscribes no longer to a single master narrative of “development” that applies to all regions (a notion that betrays a Western bias) but instead to a variety of interactions and “connections” that cross national, regional, and cultural divides.

Nevertheless, these ideas have genealogies that are important to understand. Global history as a field of study, for example, is practically synonymous with world history, a term that is also currently in use, and has roots that go back far in time.² The desire to understand the world as a whole, as was known at the time, can be traced to the ancient cultures of Greece and China. In the early modern West it took the form of

philosophy of history, as practiced by such thinkers as Vico, Voltaire, Herder, and Hegel, and in the twentieth century by such figures as Spengler and Toynbee.

A closely associated term was “universal history,” which usually had strong Christian connotations, as found in the chronicles of the Middle Ages, which began with the creation story from Genesis. And World Christianity may be viewed as but the latest expression of the aspiration of universal Christian outreach that goes back to Jesus’ injunction to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” in Matthew 28:19 – an aspiration that would become associated with the word “mission.” It is important to note that “mission” did not always have this association, but began to be used in this way only in the sixteenth century with Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits.³ This, of course, coincided with that great eruption of European power that led to the exploration and conquest of much of the globe. Missionaries were frequently, though not invariably, a part of such expansion, as in the Portuguese and Spanish empires. But the Jesuits also regarded as their “mission” winning back the Protestants in Europe, and ventured to places like Japan and China, where no Western conqueror had yet appeared. In other cases they acted independently of the colonizing power, as in French Canada. Still, missionaries became active agents of globalization and were generally seen as sharing a common purpose with colonizers even when they did not directly collaborate, namely to bring a “superior” way of life to those not yet exposed to it. Thus, however benevolent the intentions of individual missionaries were, they tended to view indigenous peoples as static, unchanging, “traditional” – in contrast to the dynamism of the Europeans.⁴

It is this conception that this book seeks to correct. Its aim is to investigate the strategies that a variety of indigenous peoples worldwide employed in dealing with the presence of imported Christianity in their midst during the colonial era. Thus, rather than view the global spread of Christianity through the eyes of missionaries, it seeks to reverse the telescope, so to speak. It takes as a given that, even in conditions of extreme subjugation, people have some degree of agency to control their own circumstances, creating a situation of interaction with agents from outside. Missionaries could not possibly have succeeded in converting numbers of people to Christianity without the help of such indigenous agents. And in many cases – often underestimated in the literature – the latter proved to be quite capable of spreading Christianity on their own (e.g., the “south-south” movement between Africa and South America).⁵

Religious Interaction and the Study of Global History 3

The focus of this study, however, is not so much the spread of Christianity per se but rather as an illustration of how people interact with novel stimuli from outside (including their rejection). Moreover, it should be remembered that such new connections across geographical or cultural divides, however exploitive or destructive they may have been (as in the cases of slavery or the spreading of diseases), could also offer opportunities. As the great world historian William H. MacNeill once put it, “It seemed obvious to me . . . that historical change was largely provoked by encounters with strangers, followed by efforts to borrow (or sometimes to reject or hold at bay) especially attractive novelties . . . encounters with strangers . . . [are] the main drive wheel of social change.”⁶

World Christianity, then, is obviously part of global history. Yet it is noteworthy that, along with religion in general, it has been relatively neglected by world historians of the modern era, at least when compared to other types of interactions. For example, in his 2003 survey of the field of world history, Patrick Manning writes, “It is remarkable, in contrast [to earlier periods], how little discussion of religion appears in the world history literature for recent centuries.”⁷ Manning attributes this to two causes: (1) the tendency to interpret modern religious phenomena in secular terms, and (2) the prevalence of local studies, which historians have been reluctant to place in the context of larger patterns.

The first point is perhaps less surprising if one looks at the genealogy of the field of world history itself as it has emerged as a recognized subdiscipline within the Western historical profession since the 1960s. The pioneers of the field tended to focus on the material sorts of cross-cultural interactions such as trade and commerce, technological transfer, and the spread of diseases. Cultural issues, perhaps by virtue of their relative intangibility, tended to lag behind. To argue for their inclusion is obviously not to deny the reality or importance of factors such as economic or political motives in determining the dynamics of religious interchange, but only to move the discussion toward a more complete picture.⁸

There is a more subtle factor at work as well, which applies more broadly to historical scholarship as a whole. However willing we Western historians may be to acknowledge the role of religion in principle, it can be difficult to translate this into practice because of biases that derive from a “disenchanted” worldview, which may persist at an unconscious level.⁹ Insofar as religion is concerned with the supernatural, there is an impulse not to deal with the latter directly, but to explain it away as attributable to other more “rational” factors (such as the function it serves in holding a society together), rather than accept at face value the explanations given

by the peoples under study. How many of us feel uncomfortable in taking animistic explanations – the active agency of spirits – at face value in accounting for historical change?¹⁰ What are we to make of the traders on the Mumbai stock exchange who chant the 108 names of the Hindu god Ganesha daily before the opening?¹¹

Ironically, similar biases can be found not only among secular scholars, but also among religious scholars as well. Here too, one finds traces of a bias in favor of disenchantment, operating indirectly. I am thinking of the distinction between “world” and “traditional” religions which still pervade textbooks in comparative religions as taught in American colleges and universities—however respectful their authors in fact are of religious diversity and cognizant of cross-cultural interactions.¹² The canon of “world” religions has in fact changed little since the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions.¹³ The criterion of membership in this canon is, for the most part, a set of written scriptures, as in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Janism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism (Shinto is an exception). Religions that lack a clear written scriptural tradition are still characterized as “traditional,” “primal,” “basic,” “tribal,” or “indigenous,” no matter how elaborate their cosmologies or how widespread their adherents may be (a case is currently being made that the *orisha* devotions stemming from the West African Yoruba deserve such a designation, as they are to be found among former slaves in Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America).¹⁴

Regarding Manning’s second point, one can attribute the preference for local studies – conducted in this case by anthropologists as well as historians and religious scholars – to the pressures of academic specialization. Add to this the influence of postmodernism and its distrust of grand narratives since the 1970s, which makes many historians leery of the whole notion of world history – however committed they may be to exploring “transnational” connections and influences that cross cultural or political borders.¹⁵ A parallel reaction has developed within missionary studies against the master narratives of the past, the very impetus that gave rise to World Christianity, which has been characterized as “partly the product of missionaries’ and missiologists’ postcolonial guilt.”¹⁶ In its place has emerged a plethora of local studies, frequently positioned to take advantage of the close contacts between missionaries and native peoples that missionary records reveal.¹⁷ Such local studies, combined with the work of anthropologists and secular historians, make a comparative study such as this one possible.

Yet the question remains: why have we found the transition from the local study to a broader framework – however defined – more difficult in the area of religion than in other topics that comprise world history? Certainly religion is no less “global” than commerce or disease – one could point to the outreach of missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to places as remote from the West as Melanesia, or the widespread acceptance of Buddhist practices in the West today.

To answer this question, I believe we must add a third factor to the two which Manning adduces: a relative paucity of vocabulary and hence of theoretical frameworks in order to make sense of a wide variety of these data. It is this deficit that this book seeks to remedy, at least in part, by presenting and testing a more variegated vocabulary of indigenous encounters with missionary Christianity, drawn from extended comparative research.¹⁸ Note that a vocabulary is not a typology. It does not automatically imply a scheme for classifying and pigeonholing such encounters. We will find many instances of multiple types of interactions operating concurrently. Still less does this framework imply a single master narrative. Rather it provides a matrix from which multiple narratives can be constructed. Whether any broader theoretical generalizations do in fact emerge from this comparative study is a question to be considered in the conclusion.

Before proceeding, however, it should be pointed out that there already is, ready-at-hand, a broad interpretive framework – which could be characterized as a grand narrative – to account for missionary encounters with non-Western peoples. This is the view that missionaries have been agents of Western cultural imperialism, imposing their values and practices on others in all corners of the globe. This view is mirrored in a certain popular image of missionaries as rigid and disrespectful of the people they seek to convert, which has found its way into novels such as James Michener’s *Hawaii* (1959) and Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998).¹⁹ Although this narrative contains some truth, it has increasingly come to be an overly simplistic take.²⁰ One can point to at least as many counterexamples of missionaries’ extraordinary self-sacrifice, heroism, and kindness, which surely made a positive impression on indigenes.²¹ To be sure, one finds many such stories in the hagiographical literature generated by the missionary movement itself, which was often written for the purpose of fundraising. In fact, the historical sources provide abundant evidence for both stereotypes. Missionaries spent much time issuing prohibitions, telling people what they could not do or what they must give up, while at the same time providing services

and assistance that were greatly beneficial, such as healing, tools, literacy, and love.

This is just one instance of the complexity and many-sidedness of the missionary-imperialism issue. In an obvious way, as already noted, the global outreach of missionaries in the modern era *coincided* with the expansion of European powers beyond the continent. It is also obviously true that missionaries often consciously and arrogantly carried Western mores and cultural values to other places on their own, independently of any colonial military or political backing. The connection between the three C's – "Christianity, commerce, and civilization" – was widely upheld in missionary circles in the nineteenth century, though rarely without debate.²² Yet during that same period, missionaries frequently worked at cross-purposes with colonial authorities. In parts of French West Africa, the colonial authorities preferred Muslim local rulers to Christian ones as better keepers of order. In the companion volume on missions to the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, Norman Etherington concludes, "All things considered, the trajectories of missions and empire hardly bear comparison."²³ This, however, may be more evident to those who have studied missionary sources and actions than to indigenous peoples, who were likely to view missionaries and colonial officials as part of the same wave.²⁴ Nevertheless, as Etherington stresses, the "cultural imperialism" argument ignores the fact that many of the most active proselytizers of Christianity outside of Europe were natives themselves. This points to a major weakness of the more simplistic versions of the "cultural imperialism" thesis: its tendency to deny agency to non-Western peoples. Critics have discerned in this argument a polarizing mindset that, by reifying the categories of "Western" and "non-Western," replicates the master narrative it seeks to overturn.

There is, however, a more sophisticated version of the "cultural imperialism" interpretation – found in the work of anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff – which seeks to complicate the picture. The Comaroffs' purpose is to show

"how modernity, rooted in the development of capitalism in Europe, took on its particular forms in Africa and elsewhere; how these forms emerged out of the interplay of religion and political economy, meaning and power, both 'back home' and abroad; how the metropole was itself affected in the process of its confrontation with 'others'; how this process gave rise to cultural struggles, accommodations, hybridities, and new hegemonies."²⁵

Their method is a massive study of a single case: the Anglican and Methodist missions to the southern Tswana in South Africa in the

Religious Interaction and the Study of Global History 7

nineteenth century. They emphasize that colonialism can take many forms, that political, economic, and cultural processes of domination are different, and that the indigenous peoples are active agents in the process, accepting at times, subverting at others. Thus, rather than “conversion,” they posit a “conversation,” albeit between unequal parties of colonizer and colonized, which they characterize as “that curious mix of consent and contestation, desire and disgust, appropriation and accommodation, refusal and refiguration, ethnicization and hybridization – subsumed in the term ‘the colonial encounter.’”²⁶ They call this process a “dialectic of domination and resistance” while rejecting the implication that dialectics involves some kind of linear formula or teleological assumption.²⁷ They devote separate chapters to the missionaries’ introduction of – and the Tswanas’ differentiated response to – agricultural techniques, money, Western-style clothing, architecture, and medicine. The richness of detail of the Comaroffs’ study has been acknowledged and praised even by those who are skeptical of its overall gist. Such skepticism takes several forms: (1) whether the authors actually succeed in freeing themselves from the teleological assumptions they so strenuously strain against (e.g., whether they impute to the missionaries a degree of power and control greater than they actually possessed), and (2) whether their general formulations, such as “cultural imperialism” or “colonization of consciousness,” are in the end accurate characterizations of the religious and cultural changes that the southern Tswana experienced.²⁸

Nevertheless, the more nuanced treatment of colonialism by the Comaroffs points in the direction of post-colonialism, as exemplified in the subaltern studies movement that originated in India, which likewise seeks to give voice and agency to non-Western peoples. The term “post-colonialism” itself is ambiguous: for some it expresses the antagonistic stance to Western hegemony and self-proclaimed cultural superiority noted in the previous section. But one can distinguish this “oppositional” version from “complicit” postcolonialism, as Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge have defined it.²⁹ The latter direction points to a variety of native responses, ranging from subversion to accommodation and imitation. By seeking to get to the native voices and outlooks, it offers a certain corrective to the cultural imperialist approach.³⁰ These postcolonialists tend to stress the various mixtures and combinations of native and foreign elements as the norm, encapsulated in such terms as “syncretism” and “hybridity.”³¹

The present study takes off from this point by adopting the postcolonial perspective of viewing missionary encounters from indigenous points

of view. Yet it also finds that terms such as “syncretism” and “hybridity” are still too general to provide the enrichment of theoretical insight that is needed to do justice to this perspective. It proposes a more variegated vocabulary of cultural encounter.

An ambitious work such as this one necessitates some self-imposed limitations. First, it makes no claim to completeness: the attempt to study all countries or all cases would have exhausted the reader’s patience. Second, I have avoided the temptation to delve deeply into primary sources, thus going against the grain of my training as an historian. To do so with any assurance would have required language skills that far exceed my capacity. It seemed more prudent to rely on the work of other scholars who have mastered the languages and sources and write from long familiarity with the cultures they study. The availability of such scholarships makes this work feasible. Third, and perhaps more damagingly, a study of cultural *interactions* implies that influence is a two-way street, in this case that missionaries and the societies that sent them were affected by the encounter as well as the people they sought to convert. The Comaroffs’ work, for example, underlines this. However, an attempt to do justice to the influences on both sides of the encounter would have stretched the project beyond the bounds of manageability. Fourth, and most damagingly – and least subject to the author’s control – this study is hampered by the asymmetrical distribution of resources among academic institutions in different continents, reflecting the current inequalities of wealth in the world at large. Ironically, some of the most creative centers of Christianity today are in places where those resources are the thinnest, such as Africa. Thus, a Sierra Leonean mission historian noted in 2006 that none of the five histories of African Christianity in the previous decade had been written by an African.³² The vast bulk of world history that is written today comes from the West, a fact ameliorated in part by the increasing presence of non-Western scholars in Western colleges and universities. Nevertheless, this is bound to produce limitations on insights that a greater number and prominence of native scholarly voices would provide. In that sense, this study is a product of the limitations of its time.

A further premise of the study is that no society is monolithic; thus any foreign religious encounter will generate a variety of native strategies to deal with it. In this connection, it is also my belief that colonialism is not monolithic either. Philip Curtin has provided a helpful typology to begin sorting out the differences. He distinguishes between three general types of foreign domination: (1) settler colonialism, in the sense of migrants

establishing a colony in a new place, numerically overwhelming the indigenous inhabitants, as in the United States and Canada, Australia and New Zealand; (2) territorial empire, in which a minority of foreigners dominates a large indigenous population, as in British India or Nigeria; and (3) plural societies in which foreign settlers live alongside native peoples, as in South Africa, Israel, parts of the former Soviet Union, and some Latin American countries.³³ Each of these types of situations presents indigenous peoples with a different range of choices and limitations.

The premise of complexity obviously also applies to Judeo-Christianity itself. The different approaches of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodox come immediately to mind, and within each of these, there had developed a great variety of components – mythical narratives, ethical precepts, rules for living, ceremonies, artistic expressions, and self-conducted rituals (such as prayer). The effect of this complexity has been to provide any number of *cultural hooks* that could serve as points of compatibility with an indigenous culture, no matter how alien their values and practices may at first appear. Thus missionary Christianity was rarely, if ever, met with total incomprehension, and native peoples were able to find something with which they could identify.

The premise of complexity also applies to two commonly used notions as applied to cross-cultural religious interactions, namely conversion and syncretism. A major reason for introducing a more elaborate set of terms is to move away from the imprecision that each of these terms carry with them.

The term “conversion” derives from Judeo-Christianity, where it is defined as “turning,” indicating a radical transformation of one’s beliefs or identity (there is no terminological equivalent to it in Islamic discourse).³⁴ But how this transformation occurs is subject to a great variety of conditions. Conversion is sometimes individual, sometimes collective, usually voluntary, but sometimes coerced. It can occur for a great variety of reasons, whether strictly religious, or social, economic, or political. For our purposes, it is worth noting that “conversion” may mean quite different things to the missionary and the indigene in any given cultural encounter.

Fortunately, several studies of conversion as a general phenomenon appeared in the 1990s which took account of these multiple dimensions.³⁵ This literature draws attention both to the fact that conversions are often not total, that is, they incorporate significant elements of the culture and religion that existed beforehand and also to the converse, namely that despite such continuities, people who see themselves as

converts often – though not invariably – express a sense of rupture with their past. Thus the “turning” expressed in the original definition is not just a fiction or a construct in many cases. This is true at an individual level, in that converts often find themselves breaking ties with their families or peers, and also at a social level, where, as this study will reveal, there are innumerable cases of collective idol-smashing and other forms of destruction of the artifacts of one’s past affiliation.³⁶

A valuable contribution of this literature is its drawing our attention to macrohistorical processes affecting religious change—even though such broad views are rarely without controversy. Thus Robert B. Hefner, in his introduction to *Conversion to Christianity*, points to the long-term success of some of the world religions. He writes, “they are the longest lasting of civilization’s primary institutions,” outliving empires and world economic systems.³⁷ Building on the theories of Max Weber, Hefner claims, “the doctrines of the world religions . . . *do* seem to be organized around a unified view of the world derived from a consciously systematized attitude toward life. . . . These religions regularize clerical roles, standardize ritual, formalize doctrine, and otherwise work to create an authoritative culture and cohesive religious structure.”³⁸ He further claims that the development of world religions tends to highlight “transcendence,” by which he means a shift in concern toward otherworldliness and salvation. Unity in this world seems to be achieved, in other words, by setting one’s sights on another world above and beyond it.³⁹ In so emphasizing uniformity, Hefner anticipated J. R. and William H. McNeill’s macrohistorical interpretation of world history in their work *The Human Web*, wherein interconnectedness over long stretches of time results in a disappearance of diversity – a trend empirically demonstrated in such phenomena as the disappearances of human languages and in animal and plant species.⁴⁰

The latter emphasis finds reinforcement in what is doubtlessly the most discussed theory of conversion in recent times, that of Robin Horton, whose ideas likewise continue to provoke discussion by virtue of their overarching generality. If Hefner, following Weber, invokes universality of religious change by a positing a “vertical” image of a transcendent otherworldly God, Horton achieves the same result with a “horizontal” image of a supreme being whose powers extend geographically, taking precedence over local gods as societies become more cosmopolitan. An African specialist, Horton noted that many African religions operated on a “two-tiered” system: a multitude of “lesser spirits,” which were concerned with more or less local affairs, and a “supreme being” or