

Trinity College Cambridge

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CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER CULTURES

Genesis 11: 1–9 Galatians 3: 7–9, 16–end

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In the course of writing a study of the making of Roman Catholicism as a world religion I have inevitably come to reflect upon the historical relations of Christianity with other cultures. As the defensive, at times even ferocious tone of Paul's letter to the Galatians reminds us, Christianity's very DNA as an ethnically and socially inclusive religion defined not by obedience to the Law but in terms of a community of faith in Christ, was forged in the crucible of debate with those who believed that membership was defined by such physical marks as circumcision and the following of strict dietary customs. Was Christianity to remain identifiably a Jewish sect or were all of humankind, through baptism, inheritors and beneficiaries of the promise made by God to Abraham?

One does not need a doctorate in history to be aware of the danger which comes from remembering the future – the curse of hindsight. In other words, we know that Paul's more inclusive vision of Christianity won out over that of the so-called 'Christian Pharisees'; that the Christian faith, in its Roman Catholic form, was the first to become a world religion; and that Christianity remains today the faith with the greatest number of adherents, at roughly one in three of the world's population, (compared to there being just over one in five people on this planet who are Muslim).¹ However, to portray this eventual outcome as, in any way, a preordained or inevitable 'victory of the Cross' over its perceived adversaries is both to misrepresent the historical record and to impoverish our understanding of Christianity's relationship to other faiths.

This began with paganism itself, for as it has recently been argued, this very term is an historical construct rather than a fixed entity.² Moreover, it continued to haunt Christianity long after what Gibbon referred to as 'the Final Destruction of Paganism' over a fifty-year period in the fourth century AD between the accession of emperors Constantine and Theodosius. 'Paganism was indestructible in that it had never really existed except as an entity in the eyes of its beholders' (or rather its adversaries).³ The degree to which paganism and Christianity co-existed for longer than has been widely thought was also reflected

¹ 2,280,616,000 Christians versus 1,553,188,720 Muslims, which corresponds to 33% and 22.5%, respectively, of the world's population. All figures are for 2010 and were derived from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1731588/Religion-Year-In-Review-2010/298437/Worldwide-Adherents-of-All-Religions> (last accessed 25 May 2015).

² C.P. Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2014).

³ Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian*, p. 145.

in burial practices. Clearly demarcated Christian cemeteries did not develop until 700 AD at the earliest. Down to the eighth century, Mediterranean Christians buried their dead like the Romans – in family tombs – and the involvement of the Christian clergy was minimal.⁴

‘For the entire period 200-1000 [AD]’ writes Peter Brown, ‘Christianity remained predominantly a religion of Asia and of northern Africa... By the year 1000 what could be called ‘European’ Christianity had only recently been established... What we call Western Christendom was out on a limb. It was the Christianity of a peripheral zone’.⁵ Philip Jenkins, similarly, warns against a Eurocentric narrative of Christian history when he calculates that in the year 1000 AD Asia and Egypt probably boasted up to twenty-five million Christians against a European total that was certainly no more than that.⁶ More significant than numbers, he continues, is the undoubted fact that a fair number of the *European* Christians would have been first- or second-generation members – rather as are Africans today – whereas the Asians and Egyptians would have had up to twenty-five or even thirty generations of Christian heritage behind them. As he memorably writes: ‘On balance, I would argue that at the time of Magna Carta... if we imagine the typical Christian, we should still be thinking not of a French artisan, but of a Syrian peasant or Mesopotamian town-dweller, an Asian not a European’.⁷

This points to the conclusion that not only is the identification of Christianity with Christendom during the Middle Ages misleading, since it ignores non-European Christians (chiefly Copts and followers of the Syriac Rite) and non-Christian Europeans (mainly Moslems and Jews), as well as the long, gradual process of Christian conversion which only officially ‘ended’ with that of the hitherto pagan rulers of Lithuania in 1387, but that Christianity has thus been the majority faith in Europe for probably no more than half of the first two millennia of the Christian era. This, of course, complicates the self-congratulatory myth still pedalled by those who would argue for Western Europe’s special status by virtue of the fact that Christianity had primarily *European* roots. To quote Brown once again: ‘A Europe with only ‘Christian roots’ would be a very airless place, even for Christians.’⁸ The tragedy currently playing out in Syria and Iraq, where the oldest Christian communities in the world – which in the tenth century AD still outnumbered the Muslim population – are being destroyed by what is tantamount to systematic ethnic cleansing, makes it even more important that we don’t collude in airbrushing Middle Eastern Christianity out of history.

But what was it that has enabled Christianity, in time, to become the most successful religion with truly global reach? How did we get from the embattled Paul of Galatians to the present? And what does this tell us about Christianity’s relationship with other cultures?

⁴ É. Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 2009; original edn. Paris, 2003). Cfr. P. Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom: triumph and diversity, AD 200–1000*, 10th anniversary edition, (Oxford/Malden: Blackwell, 2013), p. xxxiii.

⁵ Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, p. xvi.

⁶ P. Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity. The thousand-year Golden Age of the history of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia – and how it died*, (Oxford: Lion, 2008), p. 70.

⁷ P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity*, 3rd edition, (Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 2011), p. 31.

⁸ Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, p. xvi.

This is where this evening's Old Testament reading about the Tower of Babel comes into play. As a story of how linguistic diversity was imposed by God as punishment for human arrogance it stands as the antithesis to the miracle of unity and mutual understanding enabled by the gift of tongues conferred by the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost whose occurrence we celebrated last Sunday. 'And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?' writes the author of the Acts of the Apostles, (Acts 2: 8). I will devote the last remaining minutes of my time this evening to sketch the more earthbound, but in its own way no less remarkable, answer than that subsequently given by Paul later in the same chapter.

Christianity today is a religion of over 3,000 language groups. What is more, more people pray and worship in more languages in Christianity than in any other religion and it has been the impulse behind the creation of more dictionaries and grammars of the world's languages than any other force in history. Behind this lies the fact that Christianity is a *translated* religion with no single, revealed language. Indeed, recent scholarship on the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament known as the Septuagint has gone even further in dethroning Hebrew from its traditional 'senior', (because historically prior), position next to Aramaic and Greek.⁹ So Christianity has lived on through this multiplicity and translation is its second nature: 'the Church's birthmark as well as its missionary benchmark' in the words of Lamin Sanneh.¹⁰ Accordingly, the transformation of Christianity into a world faith is the direct result of 'the triumph of its translatability'. The achievement of missionaries, grammarians and printers in creating a polyglot library of catechisms, dictionaries and grammars was unprecedented both in scale and scope. Just to take a single example: S. Roberto Bellarmino's small catechism of 1597, whose very title clearly shows it was designed to be memorised ('*A brief account of doctrine to learn by heart*'), enjoyed some 500 editions and was translated into no fewer than fifty-six languages, seventeen of which were non-European, including Arabic.¹¹

However, translation also took place in a metaphorical sense. Faced with the challenge of discovering how to describe the religions and customs of indigenous peoples from the New World whom soldiers, mariners and missionaries from Western Europe encountered during the so-called 'Age of Discovery', writers found themselves reflecting on their own Christian heritage. In one of the most influential missionary manuals of the period, *On procuring the salvation of the Indians* by the Jesuit missionary to Peru, José de Acosta, the author remarked disarmingly: 'Let anyone read about the customs of the Ancient English [in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*] and they will find they were much wilder than our Indians'.¹²

⁹ T.M. Law, *When God Spoke Greek: the Septuagint and the making of the Christian Bible*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2013).

¹⁰ L. Sanneh, *Whose religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, (Grand Rapids MI: Erdmanns, 2003), p. 97.

¹¹ S. Ditchfield, *Papacy and Peoples: the making of Roman Catholicism as a world religion c.1500–c.1700*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming), introduction.

¹² J. de Acosta, *De procuranda indorum salute*, [On gaining the salvation of the Indians], 2 vols., (Madrid, 1984-87) II, p. 40.

This awareness of what *they* – the New World peoples – now are, *we* in the Old World once were was accompanied by the rediscovery of the indigenous in Europe: whether it be native fauna and, in particular, flora to match in uniqueness that flooding in from the Americas; or as reflected in the widespread use of the term ‘the Other Indies’ to describe the barely Christianised rural hinterlands of Western Europe. An early example of this latter comparison may be found in a letter of 7 February 1553 from the Jesuit missionary Silvestro Landini to Ignatius Loyola. Landini related his shock and horror at the dreadful, idolatrous state of the inhabitants of the island of Corsica, where the priests themselves were indistinguishable from their parishioners not only in their lifestyle – working every day (even Sundays) to support their concubines and children – but also in their ignorance of the sacraments in general and of the Eucharist in particular.

I have never experienced lands which are more of the need of the Lord than this one... This island will be my India, just as worthy [of attention] as that of Prester John, since here there is a massive ignorance of God.¹³

Cumulatively, the tsunami of material objects and missionary reports – both oral and written – which flooded Europe from the end of the fifteenth century had the effect of causing those in the Old World to recalibrate what it meant to be a Christian. Indeed, one might even say that in this way the New World converted the Old: or to put it more provocatively: Other Cultures reformed Christianity.¹⁴

It was an axiomatic to the father of comparative philology, the nineteenth-century Sanskrit scholar, Friedrich Max Müller that: ‘in the history of the world, our religion, like our language, is but one out of many and that in order to understand fully the position of Christianity in the history of the world and its true place among the religions of mankind, we must compare it with the religious aspirations of the whole world.’¹⁵ In this way, it might perhaps be said that ‘comparative philology begat comparative religion.’¹⁶ To paraphrase what Goethe said of language, which Max Müller took as his motto: ‘He who knows one religion, knows none’.

¹³ A. Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), ch. 28 ‘Le nostre indie’, pp. 551–99 (quotation at 555). Cfr. Carlo Luongo, *Silvestro Landini e le ‘nostre Indie’*, (Florence: Atheneum, 2008), pp. 270–89.

¹⁴ S. Ditchfield, ‘Catholic reformation and renewal’ in P. Marshall ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), pp. 152–85 (at 163–64).

¹⁵ F. Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 1, (New York: C. Scribner & Sons, 1871), p. xxvii.

¹⁶ L. Clossey, ‘Belief, knowledge and language’ in D. Christian ed., *The Cambridge World History, vol. 1: Introducing world history to 10,000 BCE*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), pp. 132–64 (at 138).