

Introduction

“Fire upon the Earth”

*I*n the twelfth chapter of the writing that Christians refer to as the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is recorded as saying, “I came to cast fire upon the earth.” It is an uncomfortable image. Fire is usually associated with destruction. Commentators believe that the fire spoken of in this text was the fire of judgment through which a new world would be brought about. But fire is a multivalent metaphor. It both destroys and refines; its light illuminates while its smoke conceals.

The same multivalence can be seen in the story of Christianity in world history. For those within the Christian community, the image of fire has another connotation. For them it symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit. When the day of Pentecost (often viewed as the birth of the Christian church) is pictured, tongues of fire represent the Spirit. Thus do Christians view their history. Whatever its failures and limitations, they persist in believing that God is doing something in that history: the Christian story is not a series of random events; it has a great purpose.

In taking “fire upon the earth” as the guiding metaphor for the story of Christianity in world history, this book attempts to do justice to the image’s multifaceted implications. Friends, enemies, and neutral observers have judged the story of Christianity to be one of amazing creativity and terrible destruction, of fearless accomplishments and grim failures, of highs and lows. Whatever else there is to be said, Christianity has left its mark on the world as surely as any fire. And the story and the mark form the subject of this book.

Indeed, telling this story has become an urgent task in the present age. As the world has grown smaller and as the influence of religion in human affairs has increased (replacing, together with other social forces, the great ideological movements of the past century), a knowledge of Christianity in world history takes on new importance. But these sociological shifts also make telling

Christian history more complex and nuanced. Paradoxically, as more and more details of the story are filled in, people are increasingly without a grasp of its basic outline. Knowledge of the history of Christianity is probably slighter today than ever before. The present volume addresses this lacuna. In this sense it attempts to do for the twenty-first century what the religious historian Martin Marty accomplished in

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his *Short History of Christianity* fifty-five years ago—to provide a workable overview for both students and general readers that scholars and teachers might also find helpful.

Such a volume must look very different today, however. Marty’s *Short History* was written at a time when the Western preeminence in the story of Christianity could still be assumed. Trajectories such as from Paul through Augustine to Luther could still be confidently made in order to link the various stages of Christian history. For the contemporary chronicler, both the world and the Christian community have become far more complex. Older histories gloss over the non-Western world as well as factions within the church that were deemed unworthy of note. To counteract these blind spots, several volumes published in the past decade have billed themselves as “global histories,” attempting to recast the story of Christianity in worldwide perspective.

For better or worse, this volume does not claim to be a global history, though I hope it is sensitive to the issues raised by that genre. Rather, it argues that “global Christianity” is one phase (albeit a crucial one) in the evolving history of Christianity. The thesis of the book can be stated simply: Christianity has passed through a series of interconnected phases. Christianity was born in “globalization.” It took root in various environments, each of which left its mark on local Christian life and practice. These distinct regional Christianities were the norm for the first thousand years of the Christian era. But starting in the eleventh century, the dynamic of the Christian world began to change. One regional Christianity, that of the Latin West, began to grow more and more vital while the other geographic centers, for a variety of reasons, weakened. If the first thousand years of the story of Christianity is a tale of competing regional Christianities, the next nine hundred years must be understood as the “Latin era,” during which the churches of western Europe uniquely shaped the course of the Christian world. But what has made the past fifty years so turbulent and confusing is the ending of Christianity’s Latin era and the

return to globalism and competing regional Christianities. This volume is not so much a global history as a study of why globalism has emerged and triumphed in the story of Christianity, and of the impact this has had on both Christianity and the world. Students of history may recognize this book's indebtedness to the structure of the late Sydney Ahlstrom's *Religious History of the American People*, where it was argued that a "Puritan era" shaped the central period of American religious history. When that era collapsed in the 1960s, we entered a new age of pluralism. The idea of a "Latin era" implies that we can speak of history as having a center. Yet centers are both artificial and real at the same time. They are artificial because they are merely constructs of a given time and place; they have no ultimate reality. They are real because when they do function, they help to define a community in a given time and place. Western dominance during the Latin era was accidental—and critics may rightfully say that it was an unfortunate accident—but it was real and must be acknowledged.

The goal of this volume is fourfold. The first goal is to offer a new narrative that will make the two thousand years of Christianity comprehensible and interesting to the general reader. There are many ways to shape a historical study, but to cast it as a story is perhaps the oldest. Despite the complications, a common story still holds together the infinite particularity of Christian experience. The second goal is to bring back into the narrative many of the churches that were rejected by the dominant tradition and that consequently have not found a place in general histories. Thus, for example, Nestorians all too often drop out of sight after the Council of Ephesus, and Monophysites (or Copts) disappear after the Council of Chalcedon, yet, as will be seen in these pages, both continued for centuries to play a significant part in Christian history. The third goal is to incorporate into the narrative the great flowering of recent scholarship that has restored women, the laity, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and many others to Christian history. A short history can only touch on these concerns, but they account for the tripartite shape of the Christian narrative as understood by this book. Finally, the book attempts to balance internal issues, such as prayer and sacrament, with larger questions of Christianity's relationship to its changing political and intellectual world. It looks at Christian history from both inside and outside.

A narrative history allows readers to experience history as a story, but as a genre it suffers from key limitations. To write history as a story is to be an author in search of one plot. Stories are not encyclopedias. Rather, details are rigorously selected to move the narrative forward. So it is with this volume. Important figures from the Christian past have been ruthlessly excluded in the interest of producing a true "short history." If readers finish this book

hungering for more in-depth knowledge, it will be the author's dream come true. There are many fine encyclopedic histories they can consult.

The writing of history is a moral act. The lives and reputations of thousands of persons are in the author's hands. This book strives to be as fair and charitable as possible to all. Judgment is at times necessary, but so, too, is humility.