

World Christianity: Upside-Down Ecumenism

Presentation to the Annual Meeting of the
Wisconsin Council of Churches at Green Lake, Wisconsin
December 10, 2007

Good afternoon, friends and neighbors; what a delight it is for this Michigander to have some fellowship with the Wisconsin Council of Churches. I have to tell you that I was really excited the day I received an e-mail from Scott Anderson, with a subject line reading: "speak at the WCC." Wow! The World Council of Churches! With visions of a lovely weekend in Switzerland, and an intriguing encounter with churchly officials from around the world, I already had my bags packed. But then I opened the e-mail, and found that the W stood for Wisconsin, and the setting was Green Lake, not Lake Geneva. But being a Midwesterner who was taught, as Garrison Keillor put it, to appreciate all the potatoes, and be humble enough to take the smaller ones, I decided that the Lord must be calling me to come on over for a fraternal visit.

Before I start in earnest, I need to confess that I have not been a close student of old-line Protestantism and its ecumenical adventures. My research has put me more in touch with the less respectable Protestants, my own ancestors, who created some upstart, alternative ventures, such as the National Association of Evangelicals. So I don't come here with any pretension of analyzing the ecumenical movement or prescribing measures for reform and renewal. What I want to talk about is the greatest religious development of our time, and I hope it will stimulate you to think about its implications for your work. The greatest religious change of our time is this: Christianity is now a world religion. The faith that worships Jesus Christ as divine Lord and Savior and seeks to do God's will in the world is now being expressed in more languages and is being rooted in more cultural settings than ever before in history, and it is far more universal in its reach than any other faith on the planet. We hear plenty about the resurgence and expansion

of Islam in our time. We have heard relatively little, however, about this new and greater phenomenon, what the Yale historian Lamin Sanneh calls world Christianity.

For the past thousand years, Christianity and Christian consciousness have been tied to Europe, and our understanding here in the global North of what it means to be Christian bears the deep stamp of European culture. But today Christianity is in deep decline in Europe, and it is rising elsewhere. What does this great fact mean to us assembled here today? I submit to you that this change is huge; it rocks our world, but it does so in surprising ways, not the ways we might expect. Before I offer some suggestions about what this big surprise might mean for us here, let me briefly outline the contours of this great change.

From Christendom to World Christianity

Perhaps the best way to start is to look at some worldwide religious developments over time. In 1900, 80 percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. A century later, nearly 70 percent of the world's Christians now live in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Christian adherence and vitality are waning in the North, and they are rising in the South and East. In Great Britain, for example, only about 1 million of the 26 million members of the Church of England attend on Sundays. In Nigeria, there are now 18 million Anglicans, and their churches are packed on Sunday. Half of the world's Anglicans now live in Africa.

The rise of nonwestern Christianity has come as a huge surprise. Christianity outside of the West was thought to be a product of European imperialism, and it was expected to wither and die in the post-colonial era. Just the opposite happened. Christianity has grown much more rapidly since the end of the colonial empires than during them. Consider the huge change in Africa. In 1900, there were only about 9 million Christians in all of Africa. By 1950, with Africa still mostly under colonial rule, this number had tripled, to about 30 million. By 1970,

however, in post-independence Africa, this number nearly quadrupled, to over 117 million.

Today, the number has more than tripled again, to an estimated 397 million Christians in Africa.

Says historian Philip Jenkins, the Christianization of sub-Saharan Africa is probably "the largest religious change in human history."

Even so, the notion that Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America is a Western import remains strong. When Americans think of Christianity in those lands, we think of it as a missionary product. Western missionaries, religious ideas and media products are indeed flowing freely around the globe, more so than ever before. But so is the new Christianity. It too is a missionary sending faith. The United States still leads the world in mission sending, but the U.S. also receives the largest number of foreign missionaries. A missionary lives down the block from me in Grand Rapids. Antonio Rosario, an Adventist minister from the Dominican Republic, planted six new Latino congregations in our city.

We Americans think that Christianity elsewhere is a derivative of our own brand of it. But as it takes root in the global south and east, Christianity is being transformed. Never before has the world seen the faith of the Cross expressed in so many languages and cultural forms. Increasingly these facts contradict the assumption that Christianity is a European faith. African Christian scholars, for example, see Christianity as an African religion, not an import. That is the main point of the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako's stirring and provocative book, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (University of Edinburgh/Orbis, 1995). Yale historian Lamin Sanneh, a Christian from the Gambia, has an eloquent little book, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003), which portrays a stunning contrast between today's post-Christian West and non-Western Christianity.

Christianity is in fact becoming predominantly non-Western. What ought that fact to imply to us? It ought to say, among other things, that what happens in Africa, Asia and Latin America will have a growing influence on what Christianity will be like worldwide. Conversely, what happens in Europe and in North America will matter less. Tite Tienou, the West African theologian who now heads Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago, insists that “the future of Christianity no longer depends on developments in the North.” Missions historian Andrew Walls concludes that “it is Africans and Asians and Latin Americans who will be the representative Christians, those who represent the Christian norm, the Christian mainstream, of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries.”

Only a few years ago, such assertions would have seemed vastly overblown, but the tragic events of September 11 and the subsequent wars have begun to awaken us to the “globality” of contemporary life. What happens halfway around the globe matters here almost immediately. And one of the surprises is how religious this radically interactive world truly is. The eminent sociologist Peter Berger, formerly a high priest of secularization theory, now insists that “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false.” Berger now believes that the assumption that “modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion” has proven to be mistaken. Globally interactive modernity has proven to be a powerful vehicle for religious interaction and competitive expansion, as traditional religious and communal boundaries have broken down. The rising Christianity of the south and east is no longer distant or exotic. It is right next door, and it is starting to change the whole church, even up here in the North.

Time does not permit me to point out all the ways in which the Christian churches in the global North and worldwide are being changed by the new Christianity, but let me suggest a few of them, briefly. First, one worldwide Christian fellowship after another now has a leader from

the global South. The head of the World Council of Churches is Samuel Kobia, a Kenyan Methodist. The executive director of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches is Setri Nyomi, a Ghanaian Presbyterian. The general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation is Ishmael Noko, from Zimbabwe.

Second, the most compelling public leaders and thinkers for the Christian church are beginning to come from the global south and east. If you asked who is the leading Christian public theologian or intellectual 50 years ago, people might say Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian, or Reinhold Niebuhr, in New York. Today, you might think first of Desmond Tutu, a South African.

Third, Christians from Africa, Asia and Latin America are enlivening Christian witness and fellowship in the global North. The largest congregation in London is headed by a Nigerian Pentecostal. The same is true in Kiev. Across Great Britain, there are now three thousand African Christian congregations.

It is not difficult to predict, then, that in our North Atlantic world, Christians will more and more take their cues from the parts of the world where Christianity is on the rise, where the churches are becoming movers and shapers in society rather than declining, and where critical and compelling, life-and-death struggles abound. My friends, this is where the main stage for Christianity is today, where the average Christians live and give witness. We stand here on the far northern reaches of a global religious network whose heartlands are to the South and East. There are more Christians in Africa than in North America. Brazil is now the second-largest Protestant nation. China may soon overtake it.

So we need to ask ourselves, what are the most widely practiced forms of Christianity in the world today? Who are the world's average Christians, and what is their life like today? The

average Christian in the world today, historian Dana Robert reminds us, is a lady from Africa or Latin America. Her family doesn't have money. Her husband farms and he scrounges up short-term cash jobs when he can. She tries to sell a few things at the market. The kids don't have their shots and they get sick. She struggles to keep them in school, where there are no textbooks. The political situation is fragile, and the national government doesn't get much done, while local officials demand bribes. Our sister reads her Bible, and its accounts of famine, plagues, poverty, displacement and exile, tyranny, cronyism and corruption, which seem distant to most of us in the North, are immediately relevant to her. Biblical stories of robbers on the roads, streets full of the crippled and sick, the struggle to pay gouging tax and debt collectors and demanding landlords are foreign to most of us here, but they are familiar to people in the global South. The Bible is their book.

So who is Jesus to our average Christian lady and her family? Certainly he is their personal savior, as North American evangelicals put it. But the defining text for southern Christians in understanding Jesus' ministry is not so much the quiet personal conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 about being born again. It is Jesus' public inauguration of his ministry in Luke 4, where in the synagogue he boldly claims, in the words of Isaiah, that he has come "to preach good news to the poor," that God has sent him "to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). As the center of Christian adherence and vitality continues to shift southward, it will be only natural for this outlook from the South to gain weight. Voices and perspectives from Europe, Christianity's declining northern margin, will seem less authoritative. This new world Christianity is with us to stay and it will shape who we are as Christians.

New Global Interactivity

How important is this phenomenon for us here, in the North? How much should it matter? We are finding out that many things we once thought were distant, exotic, and of peripheral importance matter a great deal. We are discovering, as the American business journalist Tom Friedman put it in a recent book, that "The World Is Flat." We North Americans can have no distance from the rest of the world. Its passions, troubles, and dynamic prospects are immediately our business too.

These trends in Christianity worldwide are no mere matters of exotic interest, but are very close at hand. What appears as a change in the patterns of Christian witness in the northern regions of Nigeria or India today is in your city tomorrow. Our world is shrinking; it is becoming more interactive than ever before. This state of affairs we are coming to call globalization. That is a social science term for saying that there has been a major increase in the volume and rapidity of international exchanges--of material goods, services, and money--but also of people, information, ideas and artistry in the contemporary world. These exchanges are leading to greater interdependence and mutual awareness among people and institutions across greater distances than ever before.

Globalization has been identified as one of the great forces of our time. Some have deemed globalization to be the great, demonic, cultural and economic tsunami of our day, bringing disaster everywhere in its wake, while others have painted it in nearly millennial colors, as the source of new prosperity and cultural creativity everywhere. More sober assessments now exist, among them those of the Princeton theologian and ethicist Max Stackhouse, who sees globalization to be one of the elemental forces of our time, one of what the Bible calls the "principalities and powers" of this world. Neither purely demonic nor millennial,

these powers nevertheless reflect the world's fallenness and need to be tamed and reined in. Jesus Christ is lord over all such powers, the Apostle Paul tells us, and as the Lord's agents in the world, we do indeed wrestle with them.

This rapid and worldwide interchange we call globalization is an undergirding feature of world Christianity. We think immediately of Christianity's being exported from the U.S. and Europe, but much of the rise of new and locally rooted forms of Christianity around the world is "globalization from below," as my colleague, Paul Freston, puts it. These movements are more the products of local imagination and action than of foreign influence, and they travel rapidly to new places along with the people who give witness to them.

World Christianity Is Here

Because of globalization, we see features of the new world Christianity with increasing frequency here in North America. Even here in the Upper Midwest, the most Euro white region of the nation, we see rapid change. The small farming towns of Iowa, for example, have fresh infusions of Latino and Southeast Asian immigrants, many of whom work in the agribusiness food processing plants. In the county where I live in West Michigan, we have seen the Latino population swell from three percent to eleven percent in only 15 years. It now rivals the African-American population in size.

With new people come new churches, meeting in a variety of buildings and bearing intriguing titles, often with "international" or "global" as part of them. Others share the facilities of older congregations. My home church accommodated a Latino Adventist congregation for a time, and now is hosting an Ethiopian evangelical group. My home town of Grand Rapids now has four congregations of Sudanese people, mostly resettled refugees, who worship in the Dinka language at three Lutheran churches and in an Episcopalian one also. In addition to the

burgeoning Latino presence in Catholic and evangelical churches in Grand Rapids, we also have Korean, Cambodian, and Kenyan congregations.

Looking at these trends across North America, the cumulative results are stunning. In the United States, the Catholic Church is being transformed, once again, by immigrants. Three thousand U.S. Catholic parishes now have Spanish-language masses each week. Twelve hundred Chinese evangelical congregations now grace the U.S. and Canada. Some of these new American churches are the church-planting missionary efforts of overseas denominations. One of these is the Nigerian Pentecostal denomination, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, founded in 1952 but already claiming more than three million members. It has been planting new scores of new churches in the United States. In 2005 the denomination revealed that it had 250 congregations around the nation. Religious demographers tell us that one of the main reasons why Christianity continues to grow in the U.S. is because of immigration.

Within our older congregations, too, changes are appearing that suggest that we are assimilating aspects of the new worldwide church. E-mail correspondence, affordable and reliable jet travel, and quickly interactive popular cultures of print, music and preaching are globalizing our common expressions of faith here in North America. Are there any of you whose home congregation has never sung a new song that was created in Africa, Latin America or Asia? Our youth groups and oldsters too travel on service and witnessing trips to El Salvador, Kenya and the Philippines. Twenty-nine percent of college students in a recent national survey reported that they had been on such a trip. One analyst estimates that church service trips are a more than \$1 billion enterprise. We used to hear about the gospel's progress in Africa or Asia from our foreign missionaries. Today we are as likely to hear the news from African or Asian church leaders themselves. The same globalization that has made our world more radically

interactive in business and popular culture is bringing Christianity from the global south and east into increasing interaction with its North Atlantic counterparts.

This new interactivity is changing our understanding of world Christianity. We used to think of the faith in the southern and eastern continents as the product of our foreign missionaries' labors, and the churches there as the beneficiaries of our Christian generosity. Yet in some cases, the actual flow of giving and receiving may now be going the other way. It is possible, Paul Freston speculates, that with all of the new Latino churches in the U.S. Assemblies of God, and these churches' growing contributions of members and cash, the Assemblies of God in the United States may benefit more from the immigrant pastors and parishioners that their Latin American sister denominations have sent to them than what resources U.S.-sent Assemblies missionaries bring down to the churches in Latin America. It would be interesting to run such balance sheets on a number of U.S. denominations, for example the Presbyterian Church of the USA and its growing Korean contingent, or the Evangelical Covenant Church, which I hear is now about 30 percent non-Anglo in its total membership.

In many cases, however, the new Christianity that comes to our shores is not directly benefiting the older American denominations so much as competing with them. A recent study of the extended worldwide community of Christians among the "overseas Chinese," including those who live in the United States, found that unlike the Chinese immigrant Christians of earlier generations, who tended to affiliate with the older, mainline Protestant denominations, the new Chinese Christian congregations here tend to be ardently evangelical and charismatic, suspicious of theological liberalism in mainline Protestantism, and much more likely to form independent, nondenominational churches.

In other cases, the new Christians in our midst are transforming older ministries. Asian students, for example, are changing the face of campus ministry. Their numbers within the Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship have increased nearly 300 percent in the past 15 years. At Yale, the local chapter of Campus Crusade for Christ was almost 100 percent white in the 1980s; today it is 90 percent Asian American. At UC Berkeley and UCLA, where 40 percent of the students are Asian American, 80 percent of the students in the evangelical campus ministries are Asian American. One of the ironies of recent attempts to bring more diverse student bodies to the nation's elite universities is that this move has resulted in a growth of born-again, spirit-filled Christianity on these campuses. African-American gospel choirs praise the Lord at Princeton, while Chinese and Korean musical ensembles lift His name on high at Johns Hopkins.

These are but a few of the examples that show how new Christian movements from Africa, Asia and Latin America, and among their descendents now living here, are changing the face of American religion today. They are much more important, by contrast, than is Islam in America.

I know that Scott had hoped to talk today about evangelical Protestants and ecumenism, and what I have been saying, in effect, is that there is a growing third force, a third party, if you will, to add to what Martin Marty called the 'two-party system' of American Protestantism. The 'world Christian' party does not match up neatly with the more liberal mainline Protestants, as we have seen in the growing controversy over sexual morality and biblical authority in the Anglican communion.

What may be less obvious is that it does not match up neatly with the more conservative evangelical Protestant establishment, either. Asian, African and Latin American Christians often embrace a gospel of deliverance for the oppressed and judgment for the mighty, far beyond what

most American evangelicals can accept. Southern and eastern Christians are also deeply suspicious of the world's great powers, notably Washington and Wall Street. So conservative evangelicals in the north will have their issues with southern Christians, and estrangement may result. The Southern Baptist Convention's decision to leave the Baptist World Alliance may well be the harbinger of more tensions to come. With so many Asian, African, Caribbean and Latin American Christians coming to the United States and Canada, these tensions are closer to home than we may be aware of just now. What sort of new alignments may be in store for American Christianity? I don't know the answer, but whatever emerges will be increasingly shaped by the new world Christian presence.

Our Response?

So what are northern Protestants to make of our new "world Christian" neighbors? Andrew Walls, one of the wisest of this generation's Christian scholars, observes that northern Christians have "long grown used to the idea that they were guardians of a 'standard' Christianity; ... [but now] they find themselves in the presence of new expressions of Christianity, and new Christian lifestyles that have developed... under the conditions of African, Indian, Chinese, Korean, and Latin American life..."

There are two temptations to avoid in responding to southern Christianity, Walls advises. "One lies in an instinctive desire to protect our own version of Christian faith, or even to seek to establish it as the standard, normative one. The other, and perhaps the more seductive in the present condition of Western Christianity, is the postmodern option: to decide that each of the expressions and versions is equally valid and authentic, and that we are therefore each at a liberty to enjoy our own in isolation from all the others."

Neither approach, Walls, insists, is the gospel way. As the Epistle to the Ephesians points out, we make up the Body of Christ only when we are brought together, for "each of the culture-specific segments [is] necessary to the body but ... incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ's completion, as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world's cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ."

The implications of incorporating southern Christianity are immense. They range across matters of personal piety and worldview, communal worship and witness, mission aims and outlook, and all the realms of theology. For those who pursue united Christian fellowship and partnership in witness, this great religious fact of our time changes everything.

The "world Christian" way of faith is going to seem strange and distant in some respects to our spare northern consciousness. Yet it has come near, as close by as the neighbors down the street, for "these people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6). May we have the wisdom and the courage to open our spirits and our work to their witness. Such reorientation involves sacrifice, but the joy of discovery and the delight of new fellowship will more than repay us.