# INTRODUCTION

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## Christianity and Culture

Since its inception in the first century CE, Christianity has been a crosscultural and a culturally pluralistic religion. Already in its earliest writings there is evidence that the first generation of adherents came from both Jewish and gentile backgrounds. The impetus to expand beyond one people and one geographical location dates back, according to the Christian scriptures, to the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. Modern historians may find the origins of Christianity's expansive nature in the first followers of Jesus, some of whom traveled rather extensively in the Roman Empire, and perhaps beyond, with a desire to spread their faith. In any case, within the first two centuries after its founding, various incarnations of the faith had quickly appeared in parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe. Most important, each cultural incarnation of the faith was not only allowed but expected—within certain intensely contested and negotiated boundaries-to express the faith in its own linguistic and cultural idiom. This principle had been established in the earliest council of the church, the Council of Jerusalem, during which the first leaders of what we may call the Jewish "Jesus is the Messiah" movement decided that Greek followers did not have to adopt Jewish religious and cultural norms in order to join the movement (Acts 15). In fact, according to the biblical witness, it

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was precisely when the faith passed beyond its Jewish cultural milieu into the cultural world of pagan adherents that the followers became known as "Christians" (Acts 11:26). Christianity, as a religious tradition, was marked by cross-cultural movement and cultural pluralism at its birth.

Christianity, however, has not only been cross-cultural and culturally pluralistic; it has also always been intercultural. So, while Christian communities have differed in significant ways from one another, they have also held that interaction and intercommunion with Christian communities from other cultures was a vital element of their own self-understanding. This has led to both severe disagreements and deep intercommunion between different incarnations of the Christian faith. Christians have argued (and too often fought) among themselves about the purportedly correct views on everything from theological understandings to liturgical practices to social behavior. Given the wide variety and innumerable disagreements within the religion, it is easy to forget that Christians across time, culture, and geography have also agreed on certain basic doctrines; shared common rituals and scriptures; borrowed various ideas, liturgies, and quotidian practices from one another; committed themselves to helping one another across human and natural boundaries; and made concerted efforts to be in touch with fellow believers in other parts of the world. This last characteristic is well exemplified in the ancient churches of Ethiopia and South India, both established by the fourth century CE, whose leaders until the modern age have insisted that the head of their churches come from Egypt (in the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) or Mesopotamia (in the case of the South Indian Syrian Orthodox Church). The cross-cultural expansion of Christianity, therefore, has yielded not only a culturally pluralistic but also an intercultural church.

Christianity is intercultural in yet another way. Behind the fact of Christian pluralism lies a sometimes unacknowledged but absolutely inescapable reality: Christian communities have always relied on other religious and theological traditions, on other conceptual worlds, on other rituals and social practices for their own identities and self-expressions. Repeatedly cast by church leaders as antagonists and grave dangers to the faith, proximate communities of other religious, social, and cultural backgrounds have been vital for Christian self-understanding. Sometimes these other communities have acted as foils and negative examples of what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ in a particular context. Yet more often than the acknowledged guardians of the faith have admitted, these neighbors have provided cultural and religious scripts and models to be adopted

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and adapted for Christian thought, action, and affections. The essays in this volume explore both types of intercultural interactions of various Christian traditions beginning in the sixteenth century.

#### Christian Expressions since 1500

The year 1500 marks a significant moment in the history of Christian cultural expansion and expression. From its inception until the eighth century CE, the religion had expanded from its origins in Palestine into Asia at least as far as China and India, into Africa as far as Ethiopia, into the whole Mediterranean basin, and into Europe as far as France and England. Dogmatic and institutional conflicts and controversies between different groups within the worldwide church, the destruction of the Western Roman Empire by pagan barbarians beginning in the fifth century, and the rise of Islam beginning in the eighth century checked the growth of Christianity in Europe, Asia, and Africa-although the interaction between the various religions was certainly neither simple nor straightforward. From the fifth to the fifteenth century there was a slow accession to the Christian faith of the tribal peoples who had settled down in what is known as Europe, and a slow recession of the faith among the populations of Asia and Africa, so that by the end of the fifteenth century, Christianity was more European than it had ever been before or would be again, and Europe was more Christian than it ever had been before or would be again.1

This geographical and cultural constriction of the faith to Europe with notable exceptions in Asia and Africa—had a highly deleterious effect on its cross-cultural and intercultural feature. While there was no doubt variety among them, over the course of approximately four centuries European Christians generally assumed—both implicitly and explicitly—that in comparison to any other possible incarnations of the tradition, theirs was the norm in terms of both theology and practice. To prove this rule, as it were, there were always exceptional minority voices, often connected with the church's missionary movements, that kept insisting to European Christians that the religion was culturally and ideologically heterogenous rather than uniform.

The general limitation of Christianity to Europe was broken by the military and commercial expansion of European nations into the world beginning in the fifteenth century. This development was accompanied by a new phase of Christian expansion, one in fact that was unprecedented due to the invasion and conquest of the Americas. As in the case of the relationship between Islam and Christianity in Africa and Asia, and between Christianity and the tribal religions and cultures of the people who settled down in the Western Roman Empire, the relationships between the political, economic, and religious dimensions of Europe's expansion into the world from the fifteenth century onward were complex.<sup>2</sup>

While the fact of Christian expansion, contraction, and communication over the course of two millennia is well known, far less understood are the processes by which the faith was appropriated in new cultural and religious domains, and thereby took on new expressions of itself in conversation with the existing cultures and religions. It is true that the historian can identify a number of different factors, ranging from individual personalities to global forces, that have affected the ways in which the Christian religion has expanded into cultures once alien to it. One of the important factors has been the relative political, military, and economic strength of the missionizing Christians vis-à-vis the receiving groups. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, while the Roman Catholic Church and the Iberian kingdoms were simultaneously Christianizing and conquering the Americas and the Philippines, the same church's missions to Japan and China were at the mercy of local Asian rulers and empires. Radical adaptation of Christianity to Japanese and Chinese cultures therefore was not simply an experiment in mission theory and practice: it was also a practical necessity if the Christian mission was to succeed.

However, on the whole, the cultural processes involved in the reception and incarnation of the religion have remained relatively obscure. What people apprehended when they came to know about Christianity in any particular historical context, why certain people did or did not identify themselves as Christians, how they understood that identity to apply to themselves, and how they viewed and related to people (whether Christian or not) outside their cultural and religious group has often been more a matter of historical speculation and supposition than actual historical examination. So, to return to the examples above, even though we know quite a bit about the missionary thinking and the political forces involved in the expansion of Christianity in sixteenth-century Mexico and Japan, how Mesoamerican and Japanese Christians understood their adoption and living out of a Christian identity has, until recently, been more assumed than investigated.

# Grappling with the Histories of Christians of Africa, Asia, and the Americas

It was to address the challenges of writing histories of Christians from non-Western cultures and contexts that in May of 2014 a conference was held at Emory University with the title "Can the Native Christian Speak? Discerning the Voices of Indigenous Christians in Missionary and Colonial Archives." The conference's title purposely evoked the title of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's well-known essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>3</sup> Like Spivak, the conference was grappling with issues of representation of non-Western people in Western academic writing. And in echoing Spivak, the conference organizer assumed that indigenous Christians, at least in colonial contexts, were in most cases among the subaltern of society.

The essays in this volume, with the exception of that by Esther Mombo, originated as papers delivered at that conference. They all deal with the history of Christians in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The historians contributing to this volume are seasoned scholars who have studied the religious traditions of non-European populations. They were asked to reflect on a problem that seems endemic to the study of the history of Christianity in non-Western contexts: namely, that so much of what we know of Christian persons and communities outside the West comes from materials produced and archived by Westerners. The "West" here, as in many other academic contexts, refers to people and cultures with their origins in Europe, as opposed to other parts of the world (Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania). The contributors were encouraged to include self-conscious, partly autobiographical reflections on how they have dealt with historiographical problems arising from the study of Christianity in non-Western cultures, in eras when European empires were either dominating or were attempting to dominate the globe.

Once the papers were assembled, it became clear that they called into question (though did not render completely irrelevant) two of the underlying assumptions that went into the organization of the conference. First, the idea that indigenous Christians have been unable to leave a historical record of their voices and activities is simply not true in many instances. The essays by Carney, Hermann, Yannakakis, Vecsey, and Ward, for example, deal with material that was produced or coproduced by indigenous Christians, and these materials are available to historians today. The important question for many contemporary historians, then, is not how to discover 5

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and uncover native Christian voices but whether one is willing to look at materials produced by indigenous Christians and other persons, and work with these materials. As Chris Vecsey's essay title aptly puts it, "They Talk. We Listen?"

A second assumption that was shown to be quite (although again, not completely) mistaken was that indigenous Christians have been, for the most part, in the position of dependence and relative weakness with respect to European power—both secular and religious. The essays in this volume describe the lives of persons from across the social spectrum: from humble low-class Bible Women in South India, to African Christian leaders mediating Christianity between converts and missionaries, to highly educated nationalist revolutionaries in the early twentieth-century Philippines. Natives, whether Christian or not, were by no means necessarily "subalterns," even in colonial situations.

Rather than addressing old complaints, the contributions to this volume take up new challenges of studying some of the cross-cultural and intercultural processes involved in the expansion of Christianity into non-Western cultural areas from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. They build on and further the historical project of understanding the enculturation of Christian traditions in contexts where expansive and aggressive Western Christian cultures had given rise to non-Western varieties of the faith. The essays accomplish this in two distinct yet interrelated ways.

First and foremost, the essays tackle the historiographical problems of reconstructing local religion, from the individual to the communal level, when such religion has emerged in the shadow of Western Christianity. The problems involved in historical reconstruction are many, and actually vary significantly according to context, as the essays demonstrate. In contexts where Christianity was adopted in oral rather than literary cultures, written and material evidence produced by local Christians is scarce, if it exists at all. A number of essays deal with this reality and chart some ways forward in cases where the existing evidence from oral cultures prove problematic for reconstructing their histories. For example, Paul Kollman's essay provides helpful principles for evaluating Western missionary sources describing the lives of East African Christians.

In some contexts (including those involving oral cultures), European Christian missionaries and other foreigners were highly privileged in relation to local people. Indigenes were often (but certainly not always) deemed inferior in one or more ways, and their lives either not worth commenting on much or viewed in a deprecating manner. Foreigners could then leave

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behind significantly distorted records and impressions of the native population. For example, Kenneth Mills explores the distorted representations of colonial American life by a traveling Spanish Dominican friar in the first years of the seventeenth century. Yet Mills demonstrates how such strongly biased Western accounts are not useless for reconstructing histories of the indigenous; when used with appropriate caution and care, they can reveal important aspects and dimensions of the lives of local persons.

In still other cases, local and foreign voices were inextricably intertwined and blended in existing sources produced by Western Christians. Haruko Ward deals with the case of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents produced by Jesuit missionaries and local Christian women in Japan. She warns us not to dismiss these joint productions as simply authored by Jesuit males, for in the writings she discerns a distinct Japanese Christian woman martyr's communal theology. Chris Vecsey confronts the problems of trying to guess from Western Christian accounts what Native American Christians thought, said, and did, even in the case of such a putatively authentic work such as *Black Elk Speaks*. He urges historians to take with utmost seriousness the voices of contemporary Native American Christians, with all their great variety and variability.

Finally, rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, sometimes it is contemporary Western scholarship that has too often failed to take an interest in local productions of Christian (and other religious) thought and activity. Jay Carney writes about the life of the Rwandan bishop Aloys Bigirumwami, who left behind a considerable record of writings that are generally neglected and unexplored in the histories of late colonial Rwanda. Adrian Hermann discusses newspapers published by local Christian elites such as the founders of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, an indigenous Catholic church that emerged in the Philippines around the turn of the twentieth century in the midst of the Filipino-Spanish-American War. Yanna Yannakakis uses extant but generally neglected archives that preserve records of local Zapotec Christian thought and action, while Mrinalini Sebastian reveals writings by indigenous Indian Christians that historians have ignored because they are found only in mission archives.

While the primary task of the essays in this volume is to engage problems related to the historiography of non-Western Christianity, a second feature is that, in the process of discussing these problems, they also produce history. In other words, they narrate the lives of Christians from cultures indigenous to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. And so we start to learn about the lives of obscure and unknown persons such as the silver merchant Pedro de Mondragón who lived in early seventeenth-century Potosi, Bolivia, and of Maria Maraga, a pillar of the East African Quaker communities in the first half of the twentieth century.

## Common Themes

The essays in this volume, then, focus on certain historiographical problems and issues when it comes to writing the history of Christians in non-European contexts, and they also narrate some of that history for us. Diverse as the essays are, certain themes keep reoccurring in them, which indicates the importance of these themes in the history and historiography of non-European Christianity and religion. One of the most prevalent motifs in this collection is the power of translation. As Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh have argued, translation is essential to Christianity, and of course, it both transmits and transmutes.<sup>4</sup> A number of essays demonstrate the necessity of paying close attention to the process of translation, as it obscures and reveals, acts as liberator and oppressor, and is manipulated by various segments of society, from the very weak to the very powerful, for their particular ends.

Tony Stewart has helpfully described translation in the realm of religion as a "search for equivalence," and he has enumerated four different ways it takes place.<sup>5</sup> The first is "formal literary equivalence," where the translator seeks an exactly equivalent idea or concept from the Source Language (SL) in the Receptor Language (RL). However, such translation is both misguided and frustrating, since "perfect one-to-one correspondences" of religious ideas and practices rarely-if ever-exist in two languages and cultures.6 A second mode of translation is mirroring and refraction. In this process, there is no attempt to translate terms exactly from one language into another. Rather, "a translation reflects the original idea but refracts it in the process; that is, it does not capture the identical semantic field but approximates it, often with distortions, the latter being key."7 Mirroring works well when a term has a rough equivalent in both languages. However, this technique reaches its limits when the two different communities using two different languages regard apparently equivalent religious practices or expressions quite differently. To deal with such cases, a third translation technique, that of dynamic equivalence, is employed: "Dynamic equivalence not only accounts for overlapping semantic domains but also gives priority to cultural context, which can begin to account for the different values

ascribed to equivalent terms."<sup>8</sup> So the translator shifts her concern for finding as similar a term as possible in the receptor language and instead gives priority to how the expression or concept is used in the target language and culture. The translation then is dynamic with respect to context.

There is one more level of translation that goes beyond simply translating particular words and ideas and practices from one language and culture to another. Such translation occurs in the realm of the "intersemiotic," where whole metaphoric worlds are involved. At this level of translation in the sphere of religion, there is "an interchange and interpolation of ideas" among mythologies, rituals, and even parts of theological systems: "At this stage, which is the most vexing type of translation—a cultural translation an entire conceptual world is understood in terms of another, not just in its single terms or phrases."9

To these four categories of translation, some of the essays allude to one other kind of translation that has taken place and continues to take place in the realm of religion—and that is willful mistranslation. Paul Vecsey recounts the life of George Copway, an Ojibwa Protestant, who ended up presenting himself to the public in patently false ways, while Paul Kollman reveals how a missionary passed off the fictional account of an East African woman named Suema as historical truth.

The essays in this volume deal with translation—and sometimes willful mistranslation—occurring at various levels, sometimes several levels simultaneously. For instance, while the essays of Haruko Ward and Yanna Yannakakis deal most explicitly with the complexities of translation, all the others also delve into the problems and possibilities of moving between languages, cultures, and worldviews.

A second theme that emerges in the essays collected in this volume is what I call polyvalent identities.<sup>10</sup> In colonial and postcolonial contexts, persons with origins in disparate communities (converts are a prime example) often found themselves grappling with the fact that their identities encompassed more than one religious tradition, more than one culture, and more than one social location. Jay Carney describes how Bishop Bigirumwami understood himself as both Hutu and Tutsi, as loyal to both the Catholicism introduced by French missionaries and to the Christian identity of Rwandans, while Chris Vecsey details the sometimes agonizing struggle for Native American Catholics to hold on to both their Native American and Christian identities.

The polyvalent identities of Christians and others worked themselves out in a number of different ways. There were complex negotiations within local

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religious communities, where Christians from different backgrounds— African and American, Brahmin and Billava—found themselves belonging to one religious community. Such experiments did not always end well. Adrian Hermann reminds us that the intracommunal negotiations were not restricted to one region or country but spanned continents, as rising classes of educated native Christian elites in Asian and African societies started using newspapers and other print media to communicate with one another and with the larger world. The polyvalent identities could also result in highly complex struggles and negotiations between locals and foreigners of the same faith community, as the cases from colonial Peru, the Philippines, and Rwanda demonstrate.

The multifaceted identities also could lead to unexpected allegiances and resistances, as well as to interesting confluences and divergences. In Japan, Jesuits whose constitution barred women from their order found themselves working closely with Japanese Christian women to produce reading materials that would support their community during severe persecution from the Japanese government. On the other hand, the East African Quaker leader Maria Maraga used her position to defy traditional dietary taboos for African women in her community of origin.

One important consequence of polyvalent identities is that Christians, again especially indigenous ones, took on or were thrust into the role of intermediaries in negotiations between various antagonistic parties. The same qualities that made for intermediaries could also make for misfits, another role that native Christians inherited, often unwittingly, as communities from different social, cultural, and religious backgrounds came into contact and conflict with one another. A number of negotiators and misfits—such as Carlos Chichimecateuctli and Juan Ramos in colonial Mexico—are described and examined in this volume.

Besides translation and polyvalent identities, a third theme that recurs in the collected essays is that it is of vital importance to understand European sources in order to discern non-European voices. While the knowledge of the distorting and suppressing effects of powerful alien perspectives and sources may lead historians to try and avoid the foreign in search of the "true" indigenous voice, it is only when the social and intellectual patterns and proclivities of European actors are well comprehended that historians can begin to interpret with some integrity the various sources on which we depend. Reductionist views of Europeans do not produce more accurate apprehensions of the autochthonous. This theme is well investigated in the contributions by Paul Kollman, Mrinalini Sebastian, and Yanna Yannakakis, where the authors carefully describe the mindset of Christians in and from Europe in order to shed light on the history of East African, South Indian, and Mexican Christians at various periods of time.

Finally, the essays implicitly or explicitly warn us always to keep in mind the existence of the great variety, in terms of race, gender, and social location, of the actors in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The authors focus on particular persons and strata in society: common and elite, women and men, ruler and ruled, clergy and laity, missionary and colonial official. The picture that emerges from the essays is kaleidoscopic rather than neatly composed. The similarly confident voices of upper-caste Indian Christian converts and *illustrado* Filipino Christian elites certainly do not convey similar messages. These disparate religious experts had their own particular concerns, their own particular challenges, their own particular fulfillments. In our eagerness and commitment to uncover and distinguish "the indigenous voice," historians are liable to forget that no such thing exists, as Paul Kollman reminds us. Instead, what we have are distinctive voices, with their own emphases and modulations, their own assertions of truth and falsehood, their own revelations and deceptions. This does not mean that there are no common concerns of Christian and other religious communities in various times, places, and cultures. Rather, it means that our moves between the particular and the general need to be made with careful deliberation, if we are to embrace the full plenitude of Christian and other voices in colonial and postcolonial worlds.

#### Organization of the Volume

The nine essays in this volume are grouped in three sections. The first three essays concern themselves largely with methodological issues. Paul Kollman discusses various strategies for weighing and dealing with historical evidence. Mrinalini Sebastian highlights the importance of knowing the frameworks that missionary authors used when they wrote of "native Christians." And Esther Mombo explores the difficulties and possibilities of writing African Christian women's histories, using the case of the Quakers in Kenya.

The second group of essays takes us back to the first generations of Roman Catholics in Latin America and Asia. Haruko Ward argues that Japanese translations of European Catholic source material give us insight into the communal mindset of Japanese Christian women working with Jesuit missionaries. Yanna Yannakakis tackles the issue of translation from a different perspective, demonstrating how it was manipulated by political contestants in Oaxaca, Mexico, as they struggled for power in their localities. Lastly, Kenneth Mills examines and cross-examines the often-unreliable accounts of a Spanish visitor to South America to understand some aspects of emerging indigenous Christianity in Peru.

The third set of essays brings us to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as formerly colonized Christians joined in their people's struggles to liberate themselves from European rule and control. Christopher Vecsey details the difficulties that native peoples in North America have faced in getting European Christians in both Europe and North America to take seriously their multiple articulations of Native American Christianity. The Philippines, on the other side of the globe, is the site of Adrian Hermann's investigations into the publishing activities of Catholics seeking independence from both Spain and Rome at the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, Jay Carney narrates the life of the Rwandan Roman Catholic bishop Aloys Bigirumwami, to reveal—among other things—how the late twentieth-century genocide was not an inevitable trajectory of the country's history.

All the essays suggest how official, or orthodox, lines of thought and action developed in the West have been challenged and shaped by non-Western actors whose claim to legitimacy rested on their identity as Christians. So, the great reversal between the colonial and postcolonial periods is not simply that the colonized began to claim power but that the very Christianity that so often authorized the colonizing movement was used to authorize decolonization.

Furthermore, all the essays suggest, in one way or another, that in writing the history of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, historians need to pay careful attention to the multiple cultures and religions that are interacting with one another in all sorts of ways: in other words, to understand how Christianity is intercultural. These interacting cultural and religious traditions may be easy to discern in historical sources, but they may also be obscured, hidden, and effaced. As Clifton Crais commented at the end of the Emory conference, "We work with silences, not simply the absence of evidence but the hard fact that all evidence—a record, a letter, some document—exists only by a simultaneous creation of silence. Something is there and something else isn't. Presence and absence, memory and forgetting, remain inextricably intertwined."<sup>11</sup> Part of the historian's task is to decide which cultural and religious silences, absences, and forgotten pasts need to be disturbed for new intercultural histories to emerge, and which voices need to be temporarily quieted to make this emergence a possibility.

## Notes

 Andrew F. Walls, "Eusebius Tries Again: Reconceiving the Study of Christian History," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 3 (July 2000): 105.

2. For example, see the essay of Yanna Yannakakis in this volume; Andrew N. Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700– 1914* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004); and Dana L. Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1940* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–315.

4. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Move*ment in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); Lamin O. Sanneh, *Trans*lating the Message: *The Missionary Impact* on Culture, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009). 5. Tony Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (February 2001): 278–86.

- 6. Ibid., 278–79.
- 7. Ibid., 279; italics added.
- 8. Ibid., 280.
- 9. Ibid., 282-83.

10. See Devaka Premawardhana, "Conversion and Convertibility in Northern Mozambique," in What Is Existential Anthropology?, ed. Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 30–57; Premawardhana, Faith in Flux: Pentecostalism and Mobility in Rural Mozambique (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), esp. chap. 4; and Alexander Chow and Emma Wild-Wood, eds., "Christianity and Multiple Identities," special issue, Studies in World Christianity 25, no. 1 (April 2019).

11. I am deeply indebted to Clifton Crais's response to the nine presentations at the conference for raising interesting questions and suggestions about them.

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