

**History**  
*of the*  
**World Christian Movement**

**Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453**

DALE T. IRVIN  
SCOTT W. SUNQUIST

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# Foreword

## How this book was written

The Christian movement has always been greater than any individual or local church community has imagined it to be. Its history reflects an enormous diversity of beliefs and practices over the past two millennia. Few would agree with everything that has been said or done in the name of Christianity, and indeed the history of the movement itself teems with contentions. Narrating a faithful history of the movement requires an accounting of such diversity, of the differences that have often separated various parties from one another, without reducing their common story to the perspective of one. We are compelled to bring together in a common history individuals and communities who in life often struggled to distance themselves from each another, and whose ecclesiastical descendants often remain at odds with one another today. Many of these differences arose as a result of the Christian faith crossing historical borders of language, culture, and identity. Time itself has introduced further changes in meaning, expression, and practice. The Christian movement is one that has continuously diversified itself through its expansions, all the while claiming to remain the same.

All of these factors add up to convince us that representing the history of the world Christian movement through its first two millennia must be a collaborative affair. Writing the history of this movement from a global perspective requires the insights of more than any one individual or community. With that realization in mind, the authors set about to shape these two volumes from their inception in close collaboration with a wider body of consulting scholars. The members of the consultation are listed below. They have come from Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America, and Europe; belong to Protestant, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Orthodox communions; and represent the disciplines of history, missiology, theology, and sociology. Twice a year, beginning in October 1998, members of the consultation have gathered to shape the outline, review the text, and suggest revisions for the next stage. Our discussions have often moved page by page, examining the work for both its adequacy and its accuracy of representation. On points where we found disagreements in the history and in the text, the authors have endeavored to represent the various concerns and commitments voiced in the consultation process. A number of members of the consultation have provided critical resources and specific insights from their own areas of expertise and research. Several have even suggested specific wording for a paragraph or so that we have incorporated into the final text of the book. The consultation itself over the course of the past several years has taken on something of a

life of its own as members have worked together and have expanded on each others' areas of interest and concern. Throughout the process we have stated that we do not expect everyone to agree with everything that is said in the final text of these two volumes. We are nevertheless extraordinarily grateful to each individual for the work that this body has undertaken as we endeavor to tell in a new way the history of the world Christian movement.

In addition to those who attended meetings, several individuals who were unable to be a part of the consultation read portions of the text and provided critical comments that proved helpful. They are identified below with an asterisk by their name. We wish to thank the Luce Foundation for its financial support of the project, through a major grant to the World Mission Initiative at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. We also wish to thank Anne Hale Johnson and Robert B. Birge for the contributions they made to Orbis Books early in the project that made the first phase of the consultation possible. Susan Ramsey has served as the project coordinator at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and has earned our accolades for making things work well. Our editor at Orbis Books, William R. Burrows, has played a critical role from the project's inception. It was Bill who initially brought the two authors together and helped us conceptualize the consultation process. He has participated in each of the meetings, adding his insights to those of the group and helping find the way from consultation discussions to the written page. To Bill and the other members of this consultation, we extend the thanks of ourselves and the many readers who will benefit from your having made this a much better text than we could ever have accomplished on our own.

### Consultation participants

Akintunde E. Akinade  
Assistant Professor of World Religions  
High Point University  
High Point, NC USA

Charles Amjad-Ali  
The Martin Luther King Jr. Professor  
of Justice and Christian Community  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, MN USA

Ana María Bidegain  
Professor of Latin American Church History  
National University of Colombia  
Sante Fé de Bogotá, Colombia

David Bundy  
Librarian and Associate Professor  
of Church History  
Christian Theological Seminary  
Indianapolis, IN USA

William R. Burrows  
Managing Editor  
Orbis Books  
Maryknoll, NY USA

Gonzalo Castillo-Cárdenas  
Professor of Church and Society  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary  
Pittsburgh, PA USA

John Coakley  
L. Russell Feakes Memorial Professor  
of Church History  
New Brunswick Theological Seminary  
New Brunswick, NJ USA

David D. Daniels  
Associate Professor of Church  
History  
McCormick Theological Seminary  
Chicago, IL USA

Donald W. Dayton  
 Professor of Historical Theology and  
 Church History  
 Drew University  
 Madison, NJ USA

Pablo A. Deiros  
 Professor of History of Mission  
 Fuller Theological Seminary  
 Pasadena, CA USA  
 Professor of History of Christianity  
 International Baptist Seminary  
 Buenos Aires, Argentina

Frederick S. Downs  
 Professor of the History of Christianity  
 (retired)  
 United Theological College  
 Bangalore, India

Lilian Dube Chirairo  
 Lecturer of African and Political  
 Theology  
 Religious Studies, Classics and  
 Philosophy Department  
 University of Zimbabwe  
 Harare, Zimbabwe

John Erickson  
 Professor of Canon Law and Associate  
 Dean  
 St. Vladimirs Orthodox Seminary  
 Crestwood, NY USA

Victoria L. Erickson  
 Associate Professor of the Sociology of  
 Religion & University Chaplain  
 Drew University  
 Madison, NJ USA

Douglas Jacobsen  
 Professor of Church History and  
 Theology  
 Messiah College  
 Grantham, PA USA

Jeffrey Jones  
 Union Theological Seminary  
 New York, NY USA

Michelle Lim Jones  
 Drew University  
 Madison, NJ USA

Ogbu U. Kalu  
 Professor of Church History  
 University of Nigeria  
 Nsukka, Nigeria

John Kaserow, M.M.  
 Professor of Mission Studies  
 Catholic Theological Union  
 Chicago, IL USA

Karla Ann Koll  
 Professor of History, Missions and  
 Religions  
 Latin American Biblical University  
 San Jose, Costa Rica, and Quetzaltenango,  
 Guatemala

Klaus Koschorke  
 Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät  
 Institut für Kirchengeschichte  
 Universität München  
 München, Germany

Sunja Kwok  
 Drew University  
 Madison, NJ USA

\*Wing-hung Lam  
 Research Professor, Church History and  
 Chinese Studies  
 Tyndale College and Seminary  
 North York, Ontario Canada

Ka Lun Leung  
 Professor of Church History  
 Alliance Biblical Seminary  
 Hong Kong, China

Alderi Souza de Matos  
 Professor of Church History  
 Centro Presbiteriano de Pós-Graduação  
 Andrew Jumper  
 São Paulo, Brasil

William D. McCarthy, M.M.  
 Senior Researcher  
 Center for Mission Research and Study at  
 Maryknoll  
 Maryknoll, NY USA

\*John A. McGuckin  
 Professor of Early Church History  
 Union Theological Seminary  
 New York, NY USA

Melanie A. May  
Vice President for Academic Life and  
Dean of the Faculty  
Professor of Theology  
Colgate Rochester Divinity School  
Rochester, NY USA

Samuel Hugh Moffett  
Henry Luce Professor of Ecumenics and  
Missions, Emeritus  
Princeton Theological Seminary  
Princeton, NJ USA

A. Mathias Mundadan, CMI  
St. Antony's Monastery  
Aluva, Kerala, India

Lawrence Nemer, SVD  
President and Professor of Church  
History  
Missionary Institute London  
London, UK

Peter Tze Ming Ng  
Associate Professor, Department of  
Religion  
Chung Chi College, The Chinese  
University of Hong Kong  
Hong Kong, China

Frederick W. Norris  
Dean E. Walker Professor of Church  
History & Professor of World Mission  
and Evangelism  
Emmanuel School of Religion  
Johnson City, TN USA

J. Steven O'Malley  
John T. Seamands Professor of Methodist  
Holiness History  
Asbury Theological Seminary  
Wilmore, KY USA

Peter C. Phan  
The Warren-Blanding Professor of  
Religion and Culture  
Department of Religion and Religious  
Education  
The Catholic University of America  
Washington, DC USA

Susan Ramsey  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary  
Pittsburgh, PA USA

Luis N. Rivera-Pagán  
Professor of Humanities  
University of Puerto Rico  
Río Piedras, Puerto Rico

Roger Schroeder, SVD  
Assistant Professor of Cross-Cultural  
Ministry  
Catholic Theological Union  
Chicago, IL USA

Andrea Sterk  
Adjunct Assistant Professor of History  
University of Notre Dame  
Notre Dame, IN USA

David Kwang-sun Suh  
Professor of Theology, Emeritus  
Ewha Women's University  
Seoul, Korea

\*Maureen A. Tilley  
Associate Professor of Religious  
Studies  
University of Dayton  
Dayton, OH USA

Frans J. Verstraelen  
Professor of Religious Studies  
(retired)  
University of Zimbabwe  
Harare, Zimbabwe

Andrew F. Walls  
Honorary Professor and Curator of  
Collections  
Centre for the Study of Christianity in the  
Non-Western World  
University of Edinburgh,  
Edinburgh, Scotland

Jean-Paul Wiest  
Senior Researcher  
Center for Mission Research and Study at  
Maryknoll  
Maryknoll, NY USA



### A note on dating conventions

Throughout this text we will be using a system of dating that was first developed by a Christian author named Dionysius Exiguus around the year 530. Chroniclers of the Christian movement prior to his time had typically dated events according to the reign of various emperors and kings. Longer spans of time had been measured by adding up the reigns of these rulers sequentially, while accounts that crossed cultural or political boundaries required correlating regimes that were contemporary with one another. Dionysius suggested instead a universal system of dating that counted from the year he calculated to be the birth of Jesus Christ.

Dionysius's initial proposal was theological in nature, an assertion of the universal meaning of the incarnation in history. The idea was not quick to catch on among Christian historians. One of the first to use it was an English monk known as the Venerable Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was written in 731. In time, the system became common throughout western Europe, where events were dated "in the year of our Lord" (*anno Domini*, abbreviated AD in Latin). The years before Christ (BC) were dated in reverse order so that all human history appeared to lead toward the year Dionysius calculated as being the birth of Jesus Christ, or AD 1 (there was no year 0). Ironically, many modern scholars now believe that Dionysius was off by four years in his calculations, meaning that Jesus himself might have been born around 4 BC.

The influence of western culture and scholarship upon the rest of the world in turn led to this system of dating becoming the most widely used one across the globe today. Many scholars in historical and religious studies in the West in recent years have sought to lessen the explicitly Christian meaning of this system without abandoning the usefulness of a single, common, global form of dating. For this reason the terms *common era* and *before the common era*, abbreviated as CE and BCE, have grown in popularity as designations. The terms are meant, in deference to non-Christians, to soften the explicit theological claims made by the older Latin terminology, while at the same time providing continuity with earlier generations of mostly western Christian historical research. Others have noted, however, that it remains an implicitly Christian system for dating world history.

The text that follows is an explicitly Christian history. At the same time the authors acknowledge current scholarly practice. For this reason we will use where necessary in volume one the abbreviations "CE" and "BCE." We would like to suggest, however, that these abbreviations stand for "Christian era" and "before the Christian era."

### A note on references

Early in the consultation process, we made a decision to keep notes to a minimum. The reader will find them only to cite the sources of direct quotations. We

have sought in these cases to use standard published English translations of primary works, although we have resorted to our own translation from time to time when we found published translations inadequate.

Members of the consultation decided, given the enormous amount of material that was being covered, and the amount of secondary material being drawn upon by all who were involved, that attempting to document every primary or secondary source of information would overburden the book and readers alike. A number of participants read all or part of the text at various stages of its writing and production. They offered a phrase here, a sentence there, or a correction in detail in another place. They also noted that the ideas of one or another historian whom we had not used were more relevant on a particular page. It would be impossible to document everything in this dynamic process. The consultation members themselves, in the course of our three years of conversation together, became the critical apparatus for the book, checking facts, forging interpretive insights, and debating the positions of various schools of thought.

The process explains our procedure in listing only a few bibliographical references for each part of this volume. We have not attempted to provide a comprehensive listing of the secondary sources that were consulted in our research, or drawn upon in the course of the consultation meetings, or sent to us between consultations. This kind of bibliography would have to be annotated with comments on how and why our interpretations differ from or add to standard sources, and such a bibliographical listing would itself become volume length.

We do provide an introductory list of works at the end of each major part for further reference as an aid to the reader who would like to go on. We have attempted to list works that are readily available and in English. We look forward to the contributions others will make in their research and writing in other languages and from other parts of the globe. For now, we offer our resources and insights as a small contribution to the project of remembering the global past of the world Christian movement.

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