History
of the
World Christian Movement

Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453

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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.

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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 pri-
mary 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 second-
ary source of information would overburden the book and readers alike. A num-
ber 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 them-
selves, 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 refer-
ences for each part of this volume. We have not attempted to provide a compre-
hensive 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 com-
ments 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 at-
ttempted 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 lan-
guages 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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