Undoubtedly one of the most exciting books I have read in the last six months has been Andrew F. Walls’s *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996). Walls is professor emeritus of the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at University of Edinburgh and writes out of years of experience as a missionary-teacher in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. The book consists of nineteen essays, most of which have appeared in print before, but since (I would wager) that most Catholics do not know of Walls’s work they appear with an amazing freshness in this collection. Most of the essays revolve around three interlocking theses.

The first thesis is that Christianity is essentially, inevitably, and “infinitely” (25) translatable, and that as missionaries preached the gospel—at Antioch, at Athens, in Ireland, in China and Africa—translation took place, not necessarily by the missionaries but by the people who received the message in the context of their own cultural understanding. In this sense, the great missionary era that began at the end of the fifteenth century has been eminently successful, but is now over.

This leads to a second thesis: that Christianity does not grow cumulatively, but “serially.” It began as a Jewish sect, but beginning with Antioch (Acts 11:19-26) it rooted itself in Hellenistic culture, only to be transformed again as Antiquity crumbled under the vigor of Germanic culture in the Middle Ages. In our day Christianity is being transformed again as Christianity’s center of gravity has shifted to the East and the South. Walls firmly believes that the future of Christianity lies in Africa, and that African theologians of the next century and millennium will translate and transform Christianity in ways as radical as Origen did at Alexandria and Anselm did in the context of feudal Europe.

All this results in a third thesis: full understanding of Christ requires the insights and riches of all peoples, all cultures and all genera-
tions, and missionary activity—the commitment to communicate Christ across cultures—is the catalyst for this knowledge: “... what began as a specific act of translation became part of a discovery of Christ. Once again the attempt to transmit faith in Christ across linguistic and cultural frontiers revealed that Christ had meanings and significance never guessed before, and revealed another glimpse of the glory of the completed, redeemed humanity” (xviii). Reading Walls’s elegant prose is an absolute treat, and often an inspiration. Most highly recommended are the first two chapters, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture” and “Culture and Coherence in Christian History.”

Walls has also published a stunning essay in the October 1997 issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (21.4: 146–53) entitled “Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies.” His thesis, present in his book but more explicit here, is that Christianity is about making converts, not proselytes. As he explains it, this is quite a radical notion: “It is not a matter of substituting something new for something old” (148); that is proselytism. It is “not a change of substance but a change of direction;” it means “to turn what is already there in a new direction” (Ibid.).

Walls may use the tamer (and I believe inadequate) terminology of “translation,” but I get the sense nevertheless that he would be rather sympathetic to contemporary efforts which speak more positively about the process of “syncretism.” If I might turn to this discussion, let me point out that one of the most thought-provoking chapters in Robert Schreiter’s *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997) provides an eloquent summary of the issues surrounding the use of the “S word” in efforts of inculturation. While the message of the gospel remains the same as it moves across cultures, says Schreiter, that message “has an indeterminate character to it” (79). Since each culture contains basic “codes” embedded in it, the gospel message will be transmitted through such codes, each of which will highlight or downplay certain aspects of the one gospel message.

Ramsay MacMullen’s 1997 study, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press) provides a further example of what Schreiter talks about. Christianity, argues MacMullen, did not replace Roman religion. “The triumph of the church was one not of obliteration but of widening embrace and assimilation” (159). Walls, MacMullen, and Schreiter all are saying, it seems to me, that we have just only begun to understand the dangerous, “wineskin-breaking” implications of inculturation.

William R. Burrows (“A Seventh Paradigm? Catholics and Radical Inculturation”) makes a similar argument in an excellent collection
honoring the late South African missiologist David J. Bosch in Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritzinger, eds., *Mission In Bold Humility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996: 121–38). “The Christian future,” writes Burrows, “will be like the past, we can be sure, in at least one way if in no other. It will surprise us” (138). In the final analysis, these authors imply, the Holy Spirit is not only the “principal agent of mission” (see *Redemptoris missio*, chap. III); the Spirit is also the “principal agent of inculturation,” injecting “an uncontrollable, effervescent element into the structure of Christian existence” (Burrows, 128).

More needs to be said about Schreiter’s *The New Catholicity*. Basic to his reflections is the conviction that, ultimately, culture alone is a too narrow—and sometimes a too misleading—context for theology in today’s world. While culture is certainly one aspect of context, much more significant is the wider context of globalization. Unlike many approaches to globalization today which dismiss the phenomenon as only a new form of western colonialism, or demonize it as something totally evil, Schreiter sees globalization, through the eyes of sociology, as much more complex. While globalization definitely has its “shadow side,” it also holds out promises—of progress, inclusion, and equality—that need to be fostered, even if this means living out Christianity in resistance to globalization’s betrayal of the ideals it holds out. Theological responses that espouse liberation, ecology, feminism, and human rights are more adequate in the global context than reactions of fundamentalism, revanchism, and an exclusive ethnicity.

Theology, Schreiter says, needs to be done between the global and the local, and so the notion of catholicity, which he defines with Siegfried Wiedenhofer as “wholeness and fullness through exchange and communication” (128), takes on particular importance as a hallmark of adequate and authentic theologizing. This is a seminal, ground-breaking book, and a “must read” for ministers today, particularly those who work in cross-cultural situations.

I mention with some hesitation a work which I myself have co-edited, *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997). This work was originally published in German in 1987 and co-edited by German missiologists Karl Müller and Theo Sundermeier, and has been re-edited, revised, and updated by Richard H. Bliese and me. The reader will find articles (110 in all) on practically every important issue of mission and cross-cultural studies, and each article is followed by an extensive bibliography. Some articles worth mentioning here might be: “African Theology” (James Okoye), “Anthropology” (Anthony Gittins), “Black Theology” (Simon Maimela), “Culture” (Eugen Nunnenmacher), “EATWOT” (Virginia Fabella), “Ecology and Mission” (Heidi Hadsell), “Inculturation” (Karl Müller), and “Symbol” (Anscar Chupungco).
Let me mention in closing two books of biography which provide valuable entries into cross-cultural studies: Gerald H. Anderson’s (edited) *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1997) and Robert Ellsberg’s *All Saints* (New York: Crossroad, 1997). Anderson’s massive work (845 folio pages) contains short biographies and bibliographies of some 2,400 women and men who have been involved in the Church’s missionary movement since New Testament times. These have been written by a huge assembly of scholars from all over the world—e.g., Kwame Bediako (Ghana), John de Gruchy (South Africa), Joseph Donders (U.S.A.), Angelyn Dries (U.S.A.), Samuel Escobar (Peru). Articles on “standard” heroes of inculturation are included—like Ricci, de Rhodes, and las Casas—but the reader will discover others less well-known like Ferdinand Verbiest and Candida Xu. Ellsberg’s book might seem neither missionary nor cross-cultural on the surface, but this is a collection of the lives of women and men whom people today would call saints, one for each day of the year, among whom are found the likes of Katherine Drexel, Sor Juana, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, and Harriet Tubman. Often, I believe, the best way to understand the dynamics of cross-cultural ministry and inculturation is to be drawn into the stories of those who actually did what we aspire to today, at times with less support than we have, and with a lot more opposition. As God’s Spirit beckons us forward into a new century and a new millennium, we can perhaps do no better than to seek the guidance of these holy ancestors as we understand Christ and his mission in ways that even they might not have imagined.

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