It has been several decades since Karl Rahner and Walbert Bühlmann first indicated that an epochal change in the shape of Christianity was taking place. Vatican II, Rahner said, pointed to the fact that, for the first time in history, we can speak of a truly “world church.” This is a church, he argued, which more and more will find its center (in the words of Bühlmann) in the “third church” of the South and East. The work of David Barrett has—despite a good deal of criticism about the accuracy of his statistics—basically confirmed this, and Philip Jenkins’s *The Next Christendom* has predicted that by 2025, fully two thirds of Christians will live in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Peter Phan has pointed out some of the flaws in Jenkins’s interpretation of the theology of the “third church,” but reviewers are nonetheless fairly unanimous in acknowledging the accuracy of his demographic facts.

Lamin Sanneh of Yale University has drawn a close connection between these new Christian demographics and the emergence of a new way of conceiving and writing the history of Christianity itself. Sanneh writes that “those of us who stand today with a breathtaking view of the headwaters of the new world Christian movement must demand fresh navigational aids. We must simply reject old assurances; reject attempts at projecting the old ideas, organization, control, and direction into the future. . . .” (Sanneh, 113). These words appear in a volume entitled *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*. The book includes other important essays by mostly Third World scholars, all of whom call for a “new” church history, conceived as a narrative told from many perspectives, not just from the perspective of the West; as a narrative of ordinary people, of worship and worshiping communities, . . . and not . . . of mainly synods and doctrinal development” (Pillay, 83); as a narrative of a many-faced Christian movement and not as the triumph

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The “New” Church History

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of an institution; and as one that is connected closely with Christianity’s missionary efforts.

Noted Cuban-American church historian Justo L. González has recently published *The Changing Shape of Church History* in which—using the metaphors of geography—he calls for a new cartography, a new topography and a new evaluation of continental shifts. In the old church history, González says, the center of the historical map was Europe. Although Christianity began in the East, it soon moved to Europe and basically developed there. In the new church history, the map is the entire world, with Christianity expanding and growing not only in Europe, but in Persia, India, Ethiopia, Nubia, Russia, Latin America, Asia and Africa.

The topography of the old church history was basically orography, the study of mountains and mountain chains. It was about the important, the influential and the powerful. The new church history, however, will attempt to listen to the voices of all people in the church, especially to those on the margins: women, people of color, people involved in ordinary life. More often than not, in fact, the ordinary people were the true evangelizers and keepers of faith.

Finally, more attention will be paid to hitherto neglected “continental shifts.” In the past, church history was built around the conversion of Constantine, the patristic and medieval church, the Reformation and the nineteenth century. González believes that the second century will grow in importance because the minority status of Christianity then is similar to that of our own time. He finds new importance in the seventh and eighth centuries with the rise of Islam, and he believes that the Reformation “will eventually take second place” to the evangelization of Latin America (González, 44).

The scholar who may well be considered the dean of the new church history, Andrew F. Walls of the University of Edinburgh, has written eloquently of the fact that Christianity has developed through the ages not in a triumphant procession of progress and expansion, but through a “serial process of recession and advance” (Walls 2002a, 31). It was not until relatively recent times, Walls writes—around 1500—with the conquista in Spain and the end of Christianity in Central Asia and Nubia that, on the one hand Europe became “essentially Christian,” and Christianity became “essentially European” (Walls 2002b, 2). But now Christianity is receding in the West, with the future belonging to the non-western world. The full story of Christianity needs to be told, not just the relatively short story of western dominance.

Two prime examples of this new approach have been published within the last two years: the first volume of Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist’s *History of the World Christian Movement* and Frederick W. Norris’s *Christianity: A Short Global History*. Irvin and Sunquist’s first volume ends with the fall of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Rather than begin with the westward expansion of Christianity, they begin with the Church’s growth in Syria and Mesopotamia, and highlight the Church’s early existence in India and Africa. Islam and the life of Christians under Islamic rule is treated extensively, along with more familiar themes of Christianity in the Roman West. Their second volume will describe Christianity in Africa, the Americas, India and Russia before treating the Reformation. Norris’s book brilliantly treats every period of church history through the lens of Christians’ relationships to people of other faiths, of their dealings with the cultures in which they found themselves, and of their embodiment of core Christian values.
and doctrines. For Norris there is no distinction between “church history” and “mission history.” Christianity thrives as a religion that witnesses God’s good news to the world; it shrivels in significance when it does not.

In 2004 Orbis Books will publish *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* by the authors of this essay. The book is a historical theology and theological history of the church’s mission, and has taken much inspiration in its historical parts from the work the historians cited above. Our concerted effort in writing the book was to be inclusive of women, to uplift neglected actors in the Church’s history, to be ecumenically sensitive, and to point to little-known areas in the world where Christianity has flourished since ancient times. What we discovered is that Christianity is really a non-western religion. As Norris puts it: “Christians should know and students of Christianity should be taught that the religion’s dominant phase in the West, as impressive as it was, was never more than part of the story” (Norris, 282).

Christianity today can at last claim that it is fully *catholic*. It now needs an equally catholic church history, and some small but significant steps are being taken to reach that goal.

**References**


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