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The Growing Tree of the Global Church: Review Article of Robert F. Rea and Steven D. Cone, *A Global Church History: The Great Tradition Through Cultures, Continents, and Centuries*

by Michael McClymond

**The Growing Tree of the Global Church:
Review Article of Robert F. Rea and Steven D.
Cone, *A Global Church History: The Great Tradition
Through Cultures, Continents, and Centuries*
(London: T. & T Clark Bloomsbury, 2019),
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When I attended a Protestant seminary in the 1980s, our assigned text for general church history was the venerable work by Williston Walker, D.D., L.H.D., Ph.D. (1860–1922), who had graduated from Amherst College in 1883, from the Hartford Theological Seminary in 1886, from Leipzig University (PhD) in 1888, and then taught at Hartford Seminary, before proceeding to Yale University, where he taught after 1901. By the time I first encountered it, Walker’s book had already been revised and updated by a team of three scholars from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, first in 1956 (2nd ed.), and then again in 1970 (3rd ed.).

A side-by-side comparison between the 1918 and third (1970) editions shows that the essential framework of the original 1918 book—published as soldiers battled in the trenches of World War I—had not appreciably altered, except within the final section of the six-hundred-page book. “English Unitarianism” was expanded to include both English and American developments, and there were new sub-sections on the “Great Awakening,” “The Revolutionary Epoch in the United States,” “The Eastern Churches in Modern Times,” and “The Ecumenical Movement.” The earlier sub-section on “Roman Catholicism” was now renamed as “Roman Catholicism in the Modern World,” and a new conclusion was added on “The Church in the World.”

In glancing through the 1970 version of the text, one is struck by what is not included in the story. The book omits discussion of Eastern Christian churches since the Great Schism of the eleventh century, except for a seven-page summary on *modern developments*. “Byzantium” is not in the index. “China” and “India” are mentioned only in detached references on four or five pages, and there only in connection with Euro-American missionary endeavors. Most remarkably, *one finds not a single section anywhere in the book devoted to African, Asian, Latin American, Australian, or Oceanian churches*. The words “Africa,” “Latin America,” and “Pentecostalism” do not appear in the index. The 1970 edition ends by depicting a church that is somehow newly engaged with “the world,” and reunifying by means

of the ecumenical movement. A detailed chart of church reunions across Europe and North America conveys a sense that ecumenism was largely succeeding in its aims.

It should go without saying that the half-century prior to 2020 has drastically altered the prevailing mindset regarding church history among even the most Eurocentric or Western-oriented scholars. First, there has been an *expansion* of the earlier Euro-American narrative that one finds in Walker's book; second, a new focus on the *agency* of, and the contributions by, non-Western, female, indigenous Christians; and, third, a modified concern for an interest in *ecumenism*, no longer focused on the World Council of Churches or on formal ecumenical dialogues, but rather with understanding the unity-in-diversity or diversity-in-unity that characterizes World Christianity today.

Recent scholarship exemplifies these three aspects of the newer church histories. As one example of the *expansion* of the church-historical narrative, one might point to Philip Jenkins's *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (HarperOne, 2009), which recounts the labors of Nestorian Christians in establishing churches across central Asia from the 6th to the 14th centuries, until the destruction of these churches by Chinese and Islamic Mongol rulers. A focus on indigenous *agency* is apparent in the online *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (<https://dacb.org/>), with its wonderfully detailed accounts of previously little-known African Christians and their contributions to the growth and development of African churches. Regarding the *ecumenical* theme of diversity-in-unity, one truly essential text is Todd Johnson's and Gina Zurlo's *World Christianity Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). No one has worked harder than the team of researchers and scholars associated with the *World Christian Encyclopedia* in crafting categories, typologies, and boundaries for understanding the contemporary global church. Over the last couple of decades, the rising interest in global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity partakes of all three aspects—an *expansion* of interest to African, Asian, Latin American, and Oceanian churches, a focus on the *agency* of female and male non-Westerners, including laypersons, in the development of the churches, and debates over how to interpret newly emerging religious groups within the *ecumenism* of a global church that is one and yet many.

Rea's and Cone's new text may be appraised in light of the three aspects just discussed. Speaking generally, *A Global Church History* succeeds on all three of these levels, in presenting an *expanded* narrative, in highlighting the *agency* of non-Westerners, laypersons, and women in the story, and in affirming an *ecumenism* that incorporates far-flung diversity as well as overarching unity in the Christian world. Below, I offer a few comments regarding the third theme of Christian unity and Christian diversity, especially in connecting with the authors' "tree" metaphor, involving a shared trunk of Christendom, with its attached and yet disparate branches. The "tree" serves as a powerful image, and yet it needs to be explained more fully, to

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account for the historical emergence of purported forms of Christianity (e.g., ancient gnosis, medieval sectarians, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, etc.) that the authors would most likely not regard as part of the “tree.”

The Daunting Enterprise of Writing a Church History Today

Rea’s and Cone’s new textbook does a phenomenal job at a formidable task, viz., narrating the entire history of global Christianity in only around five hundred pages of text. As a thought experiment, imagine being confronted with the current, gold-standard, academic treatment of the topic—the nine-volume *Cambridge History of Christianity* (2006-9), each volume of which contains around thirty or so essays by specialist scholars—and then being asked to summarize this content of almost seven thousand pages in the narrow confines of a textbook, written so as to be comprehensible to a beginning student of church history. How would one go about this?

The first issue to confront is the organization of material. There are at least four different options—chronological, geographical-cultural, traditional-denominational, or thematic. Since the *Cambridge History* was subdivided into more than two hundred and fifty essays, each contributor was able narrowly to delimit the scope of the essay in terms of all four parameters—i.e., the time period, the geography or cultural context, the Christian tradition or denomination in question, and the particular theme or issue under consideration. If one were interested in the impact of the French Revolution on Orthodox Christianity, for example, then one can turn to Paschalis Kitromilides’s essay (*Cambridge History*, Vol. 5, Ch. 10) to delve into this question. This sort of laser-focused essay can be very helpful to a specialist scholar, but is not so helpful to less advanced readers, and will be disorienting to beginning students. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity* (2016)—edited by Lamin Sanneh and Michael McClymond—employed a combination of all four organizational options mentioned above, making it a hybrid between a chronological narrative, and a set of specialized essays, like the *Cambridge History*.

From my own classroom experience in teaching church history, beginning students prefer textbooks that present a chronological narrative, rather than thematic treatment or some other approach to new and unfamiliar material. For first-time students in the history of Christianity, a *chronological approach* is almost certain to be the most *pedagogically effective* presentation of material. It is fitting then that *A Global Church History* has organized its material chronologically (xxvi), and departs from this only in cases in which contemporaneous developments are so disparate as to justify separate treatment. Thus one finds a helpful account of Christianity in Asia and Africa during the pre-modern era (pp. 104-38, including Persia, India, China, Ethiopia, etc.) bracketed off from the discussion of European Christianity. In this volume, the historical narrative runs through pp. 1-503, while pp. 507-764 contain a carefully curated collection of historical documents to which the main text is keyed.

Comments on Some Particulars in *A Global Church History*

A Global Church History embodies an unabashedly theological approach to Christian history, as is apparent in book's dedication "to the glory of God seen in the Church across cultures, continents, and centuries" (vii) and in the later reference to "a theological program of education" (xxv). The authors seek to uncover what is commendable and worthwhile in the varied strands of Christian experience, teaching, and practice, based on their conviction that "the Church is one community of believers, though diverse" (xxv), and that "believers from across cultures...and centuries can together see important teachings...that individuals can never see alone" (xxvi). The book breathes an ecumenical atmosphere, avoiding harsh language and sweeping judgments. Even in discussing the medieval Inquisition, for example, the language is matter-of-fact and non-condemnatory (p. 184). In this and other such passages, the authors do not presume to pass judgment—which I take to be one of the book's strengths, though I add a modest proviso to that below.

Because the book tilts toward theology, the authors often invoke intellectual history for explanatory background. Thus they pair a discussion of ancient gnosticism with Irenaeus's theology (pp. 13-17), the recovery of Aristotle with the emergence of medieval scholasticism (pp. 191-203), and Newtonian physics with the rise of Deism (pp. 327-31). Less frequently, Cone and Rea incorporate political history—as in the growing prestige of the papacy in connection with the decline of the Western emperors during the fifth century (p. 64), the complicated dynastic history of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English monarchs in relation to the English Reformation (pp. 268-85), and the political history of Latin American independence in relation to church history (pp. 400-4). Rea expounds nineteenth-century Protestant Christianity in reference to the high German intellectual tradition of Kant, Herder, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Baur, Strauss, Harnack, and Troeltsch—with Kuyper and Kierkegaard added for good measure (pp. 385-94). English-language thinkers surveyed include Coleridge, Newman, Irving, and Chalmers, and the narrative suddenly turns populist in reference to Salvation Army founders William and Catherine Booth (pp. 394-99).

Space here will not allow for in-depth discussion of the authors' interpretations of particular developments in church history. In this paragraph and the following two are a few points that might be worthy of note. Cone writes that Theodore of Mopsuestia was "unfairly accused of heresy" (p. 39), while at death of Cyril of Alexandria "many rejoiced" (p. 61). Perhaps there is here a tilt toward the School of Antioch rather than Alexandria? Cone says that Maximus Confessor "worked to overcome the misinterpretations of Origen" (p. 81), intimating that Origen was perhaps not theologically mistaken—as most earlier Christian scholars presumed—but misunderstood by his contemporaries and successors. The word "Byzantine" for Cone obscures the continuity between the earlier Western Roman Empire and the

later Eastern Roman Empire up to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 CE (pp. 74, 76-77). Barlaam of Calabria's opposition to the Hesychasts was based on his reading of Pseudo-Dionysius rather than his Aristotelianism (pp. 94-95). The doctrine of purgatory was "introduced" by Pope Gregory the Great, rather being a product of the high Middle Ages (pp. 148-49).

The *Filioque* clause is said to be anti-Arian in inspiration (p. 155), which might be true, but represents a Western opinion and not the Eastern view that the creeds simply cannot be rewritten. For a book concerned with theological orthodoxy, the approach to John Scotus Eriugena is remarkably gentle (pp. 158-59), given that Eriugena took a docetic view of the resurrection (Jesus merely appeared to have a human body), asserted universal salvation, and wrote a major work later condemned by Pope Honorius III as "swarming with worms of heretical perversity." On the vexatious issue of the Crusades, Cone seeks a middle way between the conflicting and perhaps irreconcilable Muslim and Christian narratives (p. 169). Regarding Scotus's doctrine of the "univocity of being," Cone judges that this theory caused a "conforming [of] our own understandings of God to our existence" (p. 214)—though medieval specialists debate this. Cone rightly notes that Meister Eckhart was "tried for heresy," while some "modern theologians have defended his work as orthodox" (p. 223).

Rea passes in the blink of an eye over the violent aspects of the Radical Reformation, such as the Peasants' War of 1525, and the Münster Rebellion of 1534 (p. 264), thus illustrating the general tendency in this volume to highlight positive aspects in each tradition and to downplay the negative. There is a Protestant tone in Rea's claim that "although the clergy in England [in the early 1500s] maintained the appearance of influence, they actually contributed little" (p. 268). Numerous Catholics of the past and present would not concur with Rea's assertion that "Martin Luther...has been described by Roman Catholics as the Roman Catholic Church's greatest Reformer" (p. 286). Even the ecumenically minded Catholic scholar Yves Congar, in *True and False Reform* (1950), did not go that far.

In recounting modern missionary history, Rea is to be commended for naming indigenous persons who labored alongside of—and sometimes apart from—Western missionaries. Xu Guangqi is cited as the Chinese Christian leader after Matteo Ricci's death (pp. 321-22; cf. 412-15, 426). It is heartening to see that Rea does not skip over Orthodox Church developments from the 1600s to the 1800s (pp. 341-45). Nor does his Catholic narrative leapfrog (as often happens) from the Council of Trent to Vatican I, but Rea includes substantial material on Catholic developments during this period (pp. 345-54). Likewise, there are later sections on twentieth-century Orthodoxy (pp. 435-40), and Catholicism (pp. 440-45), with Orthodoxy mentioned in the sequence of presentation prior to Catholicism once again.

Though both Cone and Rea teach in an institution affiliated with the Stone-Campbell tradition (and specifically the denomination called the Christian Church), I

could not discern a Stone-Campbell bias in this volume, including the brief paragraph mentioning both Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone (pp. 367-69).

The treatment of early Pentecostal history seems to be unduly centered on the USA (pp. 450-54), and does not reflect the more recent scholarship that challenges the long-prevailing notion that the USA was a privileged place of global diffusion. Allan Anderson's work on global Pentecostalism suggests not an American "Big Bang" in 1901 but something more like an interactive "string of firecrackers" from 1901 to 1910 (and perhaps earlier) at different places around the world, including Wales, India, Korea, Scandinavia, Britain, and Chile. More might have been said about the *massive global expansion* of Pentecostal-Charismatic forms of Christianity since the 1970s. Rea speaks of Pentecostalism's "shocking numbers of adherents" (pp. 470), which sounds pejorative.

Novelist Alice Walker is named and pictured in the text and treated as a Christian womanist theologian (pp. 463-64), although she has elsewhere called herself not a Christian but a "free spirit." "Womanist" for Walker seems not to be a self-designation as Christian. Rea's account of Japan's role in World War II seems unduly negative (pp. 477-79). The Pacific war witnessed horrors on both sides.

Critical Reflections on *A Global Church History*

By way of critique, *A Global Church History* might be said to have the defects of its merits. Its ecumenical and affirmative ethos—in seeking out what is best in each strand of the Christian tradition, and attempting to link this to what is best in all the other strands—succeeds in creating the sort of unitary narrative that will be helpful for students approaching the history of Christianity for the first time. Yet, by the same token, such a unitary narrative will tend to soften or eliminate some the sharp antitheses that are inescapable in interpreting church history.

For example we might ask: Was Constantine the best thing that happened to the ancient church? Orthodox Christians sometimes refer to him as *isoapostolos* or "equal to an apostle." Or was Constantine, as Anabaptists suggest, a disastrous lurch toward the later inquisitions, colonizations, and forced conversions? Opinions diverge. On church leadership, one wonders: Is a church under papal governance—or episcopal governance—comparable to one that is locally gathered and governed? Is there a both/and on this issue, or an either/or? The legacies of the Protestant Reformation continue to be contested, and one might compare Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Harvard University Press, 2012), with Diarmaid MacCulloch's *All Things Made New: The Reformation and Its Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2016), to see how differently two eminent historians approach the very same question.

A Global Church History begins its first chapter with the analogy of a "giant tree" (p. 3)—representing the normative or orthodox expressions of ancient

Christianity—from which Rea says that the later medieval and modern forms developed. In *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934, German; 1971, English trans., Fortress Press), Walter Bauer suggested that ancient “orthodoxy” was not always chronologically prior to “heresy,” and that, in many regions, versions of the faith later judged as “heretical” were the original and most ancient manifestations of Christianity. To illustrate Bauer’s idea visually, one might picture not a single tree, but multiple saplings, some of which perished (whether by natural death or by being cut down) to leave behind one “giant tree” of orthodox Christianity. Rea’s and Cone’s volume rests on an anti-Bauer premise, viz., that the earliest manifestations of Christianity can and should be interpreted through the lens of the “great tradition” embodied in the seven ecumenical councils from 325 to 787 CE—each of which councils is discussed in this volume.

“Gnosticism” of the second century, writes Cone, “competed with Christianity” (p. 13), suggesting that the former was not itself part of Christianity, and so that there existed some boundary between gnostic heresy and Christian orthodoxy even at an early stage. If a new edition of this book should appear, it might be helpful for the authors to expand their cursory four-page introduction (xxiv-xxvii) to say something about their underlying assumptions regarding the unity and diversity—and the cohesiveness or fragmentariness—of historical Christianity. If I were to adopt this textbook for instruction (as well I might), I would pair it with some shorter readings of an interpretive and opinionated character to raise critical questions—like those mentioned in the two paragraphs above. In classroom instruction, the neutral-to-positive stance that Rea and Cone adopt should be spiced up with some hard questioning and critical interrogation directed toward individual Christian traditions—and toward all of these traditions taken collectively.

The value of this volume for instructional purposes is enhanced by the concluding chapter summaries, discussion questions, and chapter bibliographies. Another engaging feature is the profusion of illustrations, maps, and charts—coming to more than 400 in total, or almost one image per page over the five narrative chapters. Information at a glance appears in numerous charts--of the Apostolic Fathers (p. 9), of the early Apologists (p. 12), of the phases of Roman persecution (p. 24), of Anabaptist leaders (p. 266), of the succession of English monarchs (p. 282), of the political context of the Council of Trent (p. 301), of nineteenth-century Christian expansion (p. 406), and of the assemblies of the World Council of Churches (p. 467).

The volume is almost entirely free of typographical errors. One date during the reign of King Henry VIII reads “1847” but should be “1547” (p. 274). An image of John Stuart Mill bears a caption that lacks the family name and reads simply “John Stuart” (p. 384). A map of Christianity in Asia has place names printed in Polish (p. 105). A Nestorian image of Jesus is so fragmentary that no figure is visible on the page (p. 121), and the Edict of Nantes is barely legible as shown (p. 307). In a few cases, the typeface used on maps, charts, or reproduced book pages is so

miniscule that even eyes that are much younger than my own might have difficulty in deciphering what is written (pp. 140, 236, 406). The captioned images of Clement of Alexandria and Origen (p. 36) are imaginative renderings by an artist rather than actual likenesses of these ancient figures, and so might be labeled as such for uninformed readers.

Something should be said regarding the illustrations in chapters three through five (Rea's section), in distinction from those in chapters one and two (Cone's section). Illustrations are more engaging for readers if they are *dynamic* in some fashion, i.e., if they show *something happening*—e.g., the image with the caption, "Harold Godwinson swears fealty to William the Conqueror" (p. 162). The images in the first two chapters are often dynamic in this sense, but throughout the last three chapters one finds an inordinate number of posed portraits or headshots of various historical personages. Over time this becomes numbing to the viewer. There is room for improvement in the images in the later chapters, if a second edition should appear.

Rea's and Cone's book will serve superbly as the backbone for a course on the global history of Christianity. Generally, I would regard *A Global Church History* as a seminary or graduate-level textbook, though it could be used for selected advanced undergraduate students. Despite my quibbles over this or that detail, as noted above, the fact is that no one could write a text that covers the entire history of global Christianity without encountering any number of interpretive ambiguities. It is to Cone's and Rea's credit that they have succeeded so notably in capturing both the large picture and the fine detail in the bi-millennial and globe-encompassing story that they tell. May their tribe of readers increase!