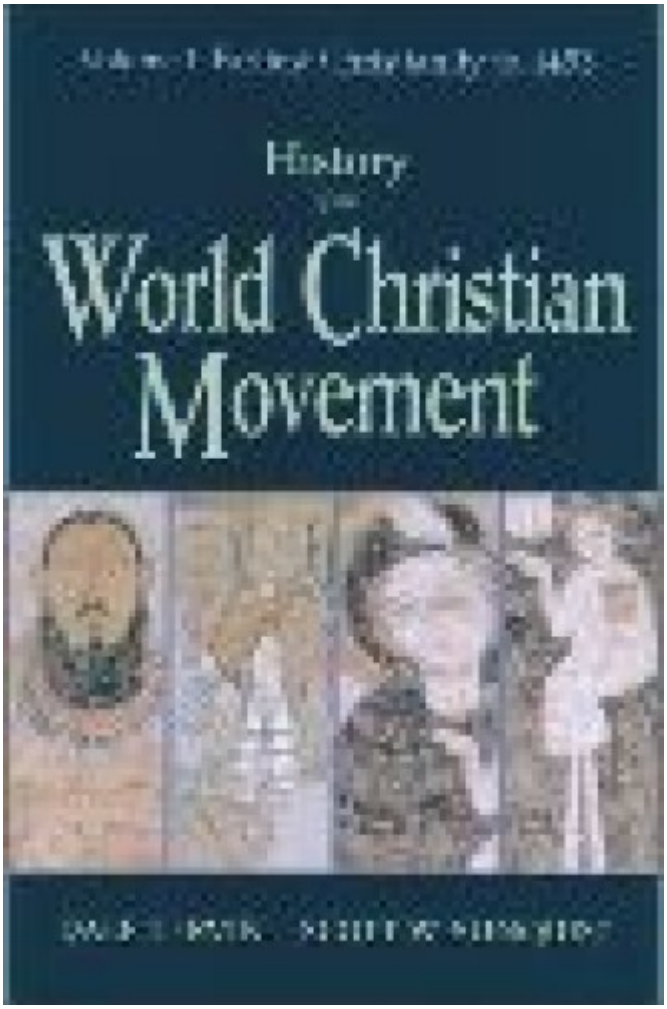
Telling the whole story

By Kathleen E. McVey in the July 17, 2002 issue

In Review



History of the World Christian Movement, Volume 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453

Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist
Orbis

As historians have become aware of Christianity as a worldwide phenomenon, the traditional division between “church history” and the “history of mission” has come to seem strange and inappropriate. The early Christian encounter with Greco-Roman religion and the 19th-century Christian encounter with Hinduism seem more similar and worthy of comparison. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the early church stands out in a new way. And the interactions of Christians with Indian, Chinese and Turkic peoples from the fifth to the 16th centuries appear more important than they did to most church historians 50 years ago.

The appearance of a new textbook with a global approach to Christian history, such as Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist’s first volume of a projected two-volume work, is cause for celebration. In its theme of unceasing evangelism and its worldwide scope this book clearly falls within the tradition of Kenneth Scott Latourette’s *A History of Christianity* (1953; revised 1975). This is not surprising since, like Latourette, Sunquist has lived in Asia, and both he and Irvin were trained and now hold seminary positions in the history of Christian mission or world Christianity.

Their account of the first 1,500 years of Christian history is a lively narrative which wends its way through the Greco-Roman world, Zoroastrian Persia, the Islamic empires and along the Silk Road to India and China. Nor is the development of European Christendom slighted. Most important, the writers keep the conversation among the diverse branches of the Christian church constantly before the reader’s mind. Though this approach is more challenging for both writer and reader, it is worth the effort, since we are not the first to perceive and to appreciate the diversity in the cultural expressions of our religion. During the first several centuries as well as from time to time since then, Christians with disparate cultural identities, patterns of worship and ways of formulating their religious beliefs have encountered one another and puzzled and argued over their differences, often while engaged in competition for converts.

Irvin and Sunquist also are determined to speak to the entire family of contemporary churches, as well as to address the concerns of liberation theologians (including feminist and womanist theologians). They rightly take pride in the ecumenical composition of the list of consultants to this project. Their advisers are drawn from various confessional and theological traditions, as well as from every continent and ethnic group; they include both men and women of scholarly distinction. Of course, the authors cannot hope to speak in all these voices, but they have tried to address

each group’s concerns and to avoid egregiously misstating the theological positions of church traditions other than their own.

The one conspicuous exception to Sunquist and Irvin’s success in speaking with ecumenical sensitivity is their treatment of the West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox) tradition, which they routinely label “Jacobite,” a term offensive to the adherents of this tradition. This lapse is especially striking in light of their careful avoidance of the label “Nestorian” for the Syrian tradition’s christological opponents. Sunquist and Irvin’s presentation of the doctrine itself and its related cultural traditions subtly manifests the same partiality.

Concern to address the role of women is evident both in the board of consultants and in the text itself. Notable women emerge consistently in the narrative. Fourth-century ascetic women such as Paula and Melania the Younger receive their due. Empresses Pulcheria, Theodora and Irene are recognized for their roles in the christological and iconoclastic controversies. Along with Catherine of Siena and Clare of Assisi appear newly appreciated figures such as Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen. Some attention is also given to the presence of feminine imagery for God in the early Syriac tradition and in Western medieval mysticism. Further feminist or womanist concerns are addressed along with other questions of social justice, especially in the early chapters.

Examining these issues and their role in the authors’ interpretative stance brings us to questions of historical method. In addressing the New Testament and other materials from the first centuries, Irvin and Sunquist have encountered a daunting and often irreconcilable array of approaches and assumptions. From these they appear to have chosen two as their own—but the relationship between those two is not clearly stated. At times, echoing Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, they imply that “going out into all the earth” results not in loss of the authentic gospel but in “theological inculturation” or “incarnational adaptation”; translation and mobility are the particular genius of Christianity. Christians such as Justin, Origen and Bardaisan “incarnate Christian belief in the idiom of their own particular location.”

On the other hand, the authors echo many contemporary liberation theologians when they explain the failure of Christians to confront institutions such as slavery and patriarchal marriage as the loss of the clearly egalitarian message of Jesus. The failure represents the “cooling” of the fervor of a movement that initially had held a clear and uncompromising doctrine of social justice.

As the authors are aware, the notion of an authentic core being cooled brings into question the value of “incarnational adaptation.” The diversity of cultural contexts into which Christians bring their message cannot contribute to the core of Christian religious truth, and it may endanger that core. Irvin and Sunquist apparently wish to keep these two views in dialogue, with the former taking a sort of prophetic role, correcting the incarnational tendency of the gospel.

The early chapters contain much about diversity: in apostolic claims, in worship, in linguistic and cultural traditions within and beyond the Roman Empire. The writers frequently affirm that there is unity within that diversity. But there is no persuasive discussion of the way in which the Christians of any time—including our own—may discern the significant forms of unity.

Happily, Irvin and Sunquist do not retreat, in the manner of some older histories of doctrine, to invoke the authority of the church councils later designated as ecumenical. Gnostics, Manicheans, Arians, Nestorians and Monophysites do not march through these pages to be cut off and cast into oblivion after the requisite council has determined that they are perversely mistaken. Nor do Greeks, Ethiopians and Indians fade to irrelevance when Western Christians have lost contact with them.

All this is to the good. But all of Irvin and Sunquist’s talk of cultural and doctrinal diversity and unity leads in the end only to tentative endorsement of traditional conclusions about orthodoxy and heresy. Although Walter Bauer’s radical critique of the very notion of orthodoxy hovers namelessly over the early chapters, the writers never directly address his challenging and very pertinent suggestion that doctrinal diversity is rooted in cultural diversity. In Bauer’s view, without socially repressive structures both inside and outside the church, there would be no orthodox or catholic consensus. Irvin and Sunquist sidestep these issues with vague allusions to a consensus of the majority of Christians. The authors have neither the time nor the space nor, perhaps, the will to sort out the complexities of doctrinal strife, especially as it relates to the multifaceted social and ethnic landscape.

As for the question of social equity and the views of Jesus, while New Testament scholars are strongly divided, many theologians are happy to affirm knowledge of the mind of Jesus and his first followers. For many liberation theologians, as for a host of earlier church historians, this certainty is the touchstone for a theology of hope: what existed in the apostolic age will come to fruition in the future. The role of

the poor and dispossessed in the earliest diffusion of Christian belief is itself an old theme in Christian historiography. As early as the second century Christian apologists touted the astonishing triumphal spread throughout the Roman Empire of the beliefs of a small, uneducated and powerless group.

In discussing the nature and structure of early Christianity, Irvin and Sunquist allude to the views of some feminist and liberation theologians. Despite the nod in their direction, however, radical advocates of a hermeneutic of suspicion, such as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, are not taken seriously. The sources suggesting a larger early role for women in ordained ministry receive attention, but are finally dismissed as insignificant aberrations. As with the related issue of heterodoxy, diversity has only a fleeting and inessential role. Yet some claims of the early Christian apologists are taken at face value—for example, that Christians brought to the common people doctrines otherwise reserved for the intellectual elite. As a historian, I think that both the New Testament and the apologetic writers of the early church must be subjected to critical scrutiny. It is not clear that Irvin and Sunquist have done so in a clear, consistent and transparent way.

It is not unusual for textbook authors to declare, as Irvin and Sunquist do, that it is simply impractical to cite all the works that have fed into their overview of the subject. But even the recommended readings at the end of each major section are an impressionistic assortment of primary and secondary sources interlaced with general comments. The critical and inquiring reader deserves a systematic listing of the primary and secondary works that have been used in each chapter. In sum, for more sophisticated historiographic or doctrinal discussion, or for guidance into these issues, readers will have to look elsewhere. Despite these methodological shortcomings, this book is an important step in the right direction as we search together for better ways to teach the history of Christianity in the 21st century.