



Peregrinatio *Migrants and Migration in Christian History*

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Hanciles, Jehu J. *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*.
Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans, 2021. Pp. xvii + 361.
US\$47.99, £36.99.

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*For [Christians], any foreign country is a motherland,
and any motherland is a foreign country.*
— “Epistle to Diognetus” (qtd, 141)

To put it plainly, the mission of God starts on the margins.
— Jehu J. Hanciles (126)

Jehu Hanciles has produced a magisterial text which should be widely read. The book belongs “to the growing list of monographs that provide a historical study of global Christianity” which provides a selective and “illustrative rather than comprehensive” treatment of its subject (6). Hanciles’s

central aim is to assess key episodes and major historical transitions in the history of Christianity that demonstrate the pivotal impact and profound implications of human mobility for the cross-cultural and translational expansion of the Christian faith. Foremost attention is given to the initial Christian encounter with non-Christian peoples or the spread of Christian ideas and practices into non-Christian contexts, and also to missionary encounters that reflect or illustrate expanding global linkages and escalating movement. (6–7)

While he necessarily limits his scope, this text is more comprehensive than

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standard treatments of Christian history.¹

Hanciles convinces this reader that no biblical theology can be complete without a theology of migration. “Migration and displacement” are, of course, “firmly at the heart of Israel’s origins as a nation” (106), the Sinai covenant “lays a theological foundation for thinking about migration as inextricably connected to a life of faith or being a people of God” (107), and a “view of Yahweh as a God of the migrant-foreigner framed Israel’s religion” (109). We should not be surprised, then, to find that understanding migration is central to understanding Christian history as well. Hanciles demonstrates that “recurrent migrant movement of individuals and groups ... provided central impetus for the spread of the Christian message and the establishment of Christian communities,” both within and far beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire. He emphasizes that “*every Christian migrant is a potential missionary!*” (1, 418) and repeats “all migrants are potential missionaries” (29).

Conceptual Overview

Following his Introduction, Hanciles begins with a “Conceptual Overview” composed of three chapters:

1. Migration in Human History: A Conceptual Overview
2. Migration and the Globalization of Religion: Understanding Conversion
3. Theologizing Migration: From Eden to Exile

In the first chapter he provides the historical context of the biblical narratives and of early Christian history. He also identifies four types of migration — “home-community migration”, “colonization”, “whole-community migration”, and “cross-community migration” (21–23). Similarly he describes four types of migrants (note well that these categories do not overlap with the previous ones) — settlers, sojourners, itinerants, and invaders (26) — and introduces the roles which each type of migrant has played in Christian history. It would be interesting to evaluate various groups of contemporary missionaries within this framework. Historically, Paul arguably alternated between sojourner and itinerant. Most missionaries today are sojourners, although a few are settlers and a few are itinerants. Some, of course, have had the colonizing mindset of invaders, seeking to control. But migrants were often the unsung missionaries, as frequently “Christian *witness* was a matter of *with-ness*” (149).

¹ Hopefully books written from World Christianity perspectives like this one, Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist’s *History of the World Christian Movement* (Orbis Books; vol. 1, 2001; vol. 2, 2012), and David W. Kling’s *A History of Christian Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) will set a new standard.

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Historical Assessment

The second part of the book, chapters four through ten, offers a historical assessment of Christian history in different regions and eras through the interpretive lens developed in the first three chapters:

4. Christianization of the Roman Empire: The Immigrant Factor
5. Frontier Flows: The Faith of Captives and the Fruit of Captivity
6. Minority Report: From the Church in Persia to the Persian Church
7. Christ and Odin: Migration and Mission in an Age of Violence
8. To the Ends of the East: The Faith of Merchants
9. Gaining the World: The Interlocking Strands of Migration, Imperial Expansion, and Christian Mission
10. Beyond Empire

In the early generations of Christianity within the Roman Empire, growth of the faith within “the higher social classes” took place “mainly through the efforts of women” (146). While we are not wrong to laud the work of famous missionaries and writing theologians, it was ordinary “face-to-face encounters” of people on the move throughout their days which “were essential for evangelism” (147).

Hanciles demonstrates that “migration played a key role not only in Christianity’s expansion but also, and by implication, in its theological development” (179). Today there are many Christians, perhaps primarily in North America, who are trapped in a bubble of monocultural myopia, unaware of that Christian experience, thought, and theological expression form rich multicultural and multilingual tapestry. Until recently, Western scholarship has been guilty of a “willful amnesia about the unparalleled missionary expansion of Christianity” across Asia (402). That expansion was so great that the Mongol catholicos of the Church of the East in the 1200s and 1300s “exercised ecclesiastical sovereignty” over a far greater territory than did the Roman pope in the same period (403). Christianity has never been merely an affair of the Roman Empire or of Europe.

In medieval Europe, “Christian missions were chiefly initiated by [migratory] monks and monarchs” (291). Yet frequently “the spread of Christianity” into new areas has “rested on the actions of migrant actors and owed nothing to imperial ties or formal missionary enterprise” (193). Christian history outside of realms where Christianity was granted imprimatur by the state, and especially across Asia, clearly demonstrates that “state sponsorship of political power is by no means a requirement for the successful spread of religion

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across cultural frontiers” as “the spread of Christianity in Asia was wholly dependent on migration and the missionary capacity of Christian migrants” (321).

Conversion in Christian History

There is little which could be improved in this book without increasing either its scope or its length. The discussion on conversion in the second chapter could perhaps be strengthened by engagement with Hanciles’s late mentor Andrew Walls’s distinction between conversion and proselytization² and with David Kling’s recent monograph, *A History of Christian Conversion*.³ Lacking that, in other chapters of the book “proselytization” and “conversion” seem to be used interchangeably.⁴ Strikingly, however, while “proselytization” is frequently used with reference to movement into the Christian faith, when movement into Islam is discussed only “conversion” and “convert” is used. This is significant because while someone may truly convert to Islam, entry into Islam is *inherently* a form of proselytization, due its absolutization of Arabic culture and language: Islam lacks the translatability principle that is crucial to Christianity. Hanciles correctly notes that “conversion is central to Christianity, and the concept is laden with notions of radical change” and that consequently “the Christian faith, in sharp contrast to the various primal or ancestral religious systems it encountered throughout the world, demanded” — and still demands,

² See Andrew F. Walls, “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28/1 (2004): 2–6; Walls, “Worldviews and Christian Conversion,” chapter 11 in *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by J. Andrew Kirk*, edited by John Corrie and Cathy Ross, 155–166 (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2012); and Walls, “Proselytes or Converts: Gospel and Culture in the New Testament,” in *World Mission in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Kwang Soon Lee, 81–90 (Seoul: Center for World Mission, Presbyterian College and Theological Seminary, 2005). I have built on Walls’s theme in my “Conversion or Proselytization? Being Maasai, Becoming Christian,” *Global Missiology* 18, no. 2 (April 2021): 12 pages. <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/2428>

³ David W. Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). To be fair to Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* would have been already under production before Kling’s volume was released. Hanciles does engage with many of Walls’s other contributions as well as with Kling’s ideas on conversion in his earlier “Conversion to Christianity,” Chapter 27 in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, edited by Rambo R. Lewis and Charles E. Farhadian, 598–631 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴ To be fair to Hanciles, the confusion between conversion and proselytization is as common as it is problematic, both in the literature and (perhaps consequently) in popular understandings.

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we should note — “exclusive allegiance” (60).⁵ But this allegiance is to Christ, not to the Jewish culture and Aramaic and Greek languages of the Apostles. Hanciles cogently engages with “the ‘translation principle’ propounded by ... Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls” (67). Over several pages (67–73) he discusses this translatability and in that context explicitly states Wallsian understandings of conversion and culture:

- “Gentile converts to faith did not have to adopt the norms and traditions of Judaism to become followers of Christ. Rather, their conversion required the Christian message to be expressed in the ideas and concepts of the Hellenistic cultural and religious environment they belonged to” (69);
- “crossing cultural frontiers is not only a requisite for the spread of the Christian movement; it is also the means whereby the worldwide community of faith increasingly experiences the fullness of the gospel” (70).

He later explores at length translatability in terms of migration and mobility (128–137). While admitting it unlikely that the early church was free from the ethnocultural prejudices of the its hosting cultures, Hanciles observes that ancient Christianity affirmed all cultures and thereby “minimized the indignities of immigrant existence” (166). Similarly his observation that “there is no indication that the Goths who became Christian ceased to be Goths” clearly points to a conversionary model involving “successful cross-cultural transmission of the Christian message” (204) rather than a proselytizing model. Consequently his apparent conflation, elsewhere in the book, between conservation and proselytization is both surprising and disappointing. But in over 400 pages, that is my only complaint.

Conclusions

Hanciles has convincingly argued his missiological thesis that throughout Christian history “migration was inseparable from mission” (329). This book has convinced me that any Christian theology or missiology which lacks a robust theology of migration is incomplete. *En route*, Hanciles’s engagement with the sources is masterful yet he maintains epistemic humility throughout the text. He successfully “debunks the centuries-old view that the global spread of the Christian faith is largely the work of institutional entities (ecclesiastical or political) and their trained agents” (8). No one who reads this book can

⁵ Matthew W. Bates develops the importance of allegiance as the center of New Testament πίστις (*pistis*, ‘faith’) in his *Salvation By Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017).

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continue to think that Christianity is a ‘European religion’ or ‘the white man’s religion.’ Noting that “within the Jesus movement no faithful individual or group should be mistreated simply because they were stranger-outsiders” (127), Hanciles implicitly calls the church today — which often ignores biblical calls to welcome and protect migrants — to repentance.

This book cogently makes the case that “successful cross-cultural missionary outreach requires translation and cultural adaptation to facilitate transmission and appropriation” (251). The more effectively that the Christians practice such translation and adaptation, the more deeply rooted the local church is able to become. Hanciles shows that “human migration has played an indispensable role in the cross-cultural spread of the Christian faith principally because migrants who are Christian inevitably fulfill a missionary function in their encounters with non-Christian peoples and societies” (269). In so doing, he implicitly challenges contemporary Christians to similarly fulfil their own missionary function. There is a sense in which all Christians are strangers and aliens in the world (cf. Heb 11:13, 1 Pet 2:11). Hanciles reminds us that “the rise of Christianity as a world movement has been through the agency and activity of” migrant Christians, individuals and communities, who are “living as strangers and outsiders in foreign lands” (420).

Tolle lege.