

Editorial

Christian Recessions and Declines: What Might We Learn from Them?

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Why did we on the *Global Missiology – English* editorial team decide to take up the theme of “Recessions and Declines: Noteworthy Decreases of Christianity and Its Influence”? Is doing so at all helpful, appropriate, or instructive? On one hand, considering revivals and growth provides both encouragement and examples to emulate. What good, though, could come from describing and analyzing Christian losses and shrinkages?

Not surprisingly, there was a tepid response to our call for papers for this issue on Christian recessions and declines. By comparison, there were several more submissions to the previous, companion issue on “Awakenings, Advances, and Revivals: Noteworthy Outpourings of God’s Spirit” (*Global Missiology – English*, 2024). The dictum “Everybody loves a winner” held true, and feel-good stories once again won out over their counterparts.

Another possible factor for more submitted studies about periods of Christian growth than about decline, and conceivably the single most significant reason, could be the fact that advances and revivals have characterized Christian history more so than recessions. Has that actually been the case?

The title of U.S.-American historian Kenneth Scott Latourette’s seven-volume *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Latourette, 1937-1945) suggests an inexorable advance of the gospel throughout history. Indeed, Latourette paints an overall picture of net growth from the first Christian generation up until his mid-twentieth-century time of writing. He uses the image of an “incoming tide” that pulses onto a shore, then retreats. Based on the three criteria of geography, vitality, and influence, Latourette summarizes that “In each major advance [Christianity has become] more widely potent in human life than in the one before it, and each recession [has been] marked by less dwindling of the impact of Christianity than the one which immediately preceded it” (Latourette, 1945, 417-418).

The Christian recessions that Latourette traces occurred in roughly the years 500-950 and 1350-1500. Later, the 1700-1815 period was more of a pause in growth rather than a decline per se, and during Latourette’s lifetime 1914-1944 had seen both “severe losses” and “significant gains” (Latourette, 1945, 418-419). Latourette highlights both external and internal factors that contributed to the recessions, including, with respect to the final period during the first recession, invasions and “the poor quality of the Popes” (Latourette, 1945, 425).

In sum, Latourette’s outline of Christianity’s expansion is seemingly upbeat. He notes that as of 1944,

More than any other religion in human history it was becoming universal. Its history had demonstrated that it appealed to individuals in all races, nations, and stages of culture and that among those who accepted it specific fruits appeared which were clearly recognizable. Each major forward wave had carried the faith into additional portions of the earth’s surface. Each recession had been less marked than its predecessor. In the advances of the

post-A.D. 1500 periods Christianity had become world-wide to an extent attained by no other religion. Especially after A.D. 1815 it had been planted among practically all peoples and tribes and after A.D. 1914 was becoming firmly rooted in the texture of their cultures (Latourette, 1945, 465).

One is left with the impression that Christianity's incoming waves will soon overwhelm all the world's beaches such that neither low tides nor receding waves could lower the faith's waters away from the underlying shorelines. The ultimate triumph of Christian expansion seems sure.

Scottish historian Andrew Walls appreciatively explores the theological depth of Latourette's three-fold analysis (that uses geography, vitality, and influence) of Christian expansion (Walls, 1996). In so doing, however, Walls suggests a "built-in fragility" in each facet: churches have grown and shrunk (or disappeared altogether); Christian communities as kingdom outposts have consistently calcified into kingdom "counter-signs"; Christianity's influence has been mixed, multi-causal, and "not complete and final." Per Walls's analysis, Latourette's insight into Christianity's advance and recession was the genuinely Christian understanding, and accurately outlined a historical pattern, of Christian expansion—rather than an essentially secular optimistic view of inexorable "gains on the map of the world, or ... progress toward the final goal" (Walls, 1996, 29).

Readers who know Walls's work will likely recognize the connection with his macro-historical understanding of Christianity's periodic, "serial" cross-cultural transmissions (Walls, 1995). The receptions in new contexts of the Christian gospel that have occurred throughout history have coincided with Christian recessions in the contexts from which the gospel witnesses had come and within which the faith had taken root in earlier generations. The serial pattern begins with early Christianity taking root in all directions outside of Jerusalem and Judea simultaneously with the scattering of Christian communities following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. More recently, the explosive Christian growth in numerous non-Western settings has been mirrored by breathtaking declines in Europe and in North America—with the pockets of revitalization that have been occurring in the West largely coming from the influx of non-Western Christian immigrants.

The very nature of the Christian faith necessitates fresh translations into its various cultural contexts, including across generational changes. Without such translations, inevitably calcification, self-preservation, and failure to interact with each context at its lived, vernacular level will leave Christian communities vulnerable to decline and even disappearance. The threat of churches' candlesticks being removed is real. To imagine an automatic, ongoing, and progressive growth of Christianity not only reflects a "secular optimism" but resembles, rather than a Christian understanding, an Islamic expectation of the ongoing expansion of seventh-century Arabic language and cultural expressions, a growth pattern in Islam's case that historically is clearly evident.

Even so, Christian fragility and vulnerability do not negate the covenant faithfulness of God. Indeed, the ongoing necessity for Christian communities to interact afresh with their contemporary settings accentuates the fundamental and central role that the triune God plays in redeeming his world—in his time and in his way. God lives among and uses the "humble and contrite in spirit" (Isaiah 66:2), his people who are brittle "jars of clay" (II Corinthians 4:7). God's people have always been tempted toward ungodly self-confidence, self-preservation, and self-promotion. To help resist such temptations, the realization of being like "dust" and withering "grass" points God's

people to “the steadfast love of the LORD [that] is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13-17).

Christian recessions, declines, and (in similar fashion) widespread situations of minority status can serve to magnify God’s love and faithfulness rather than to question him. As Greg Whyte’s featured article in this issue demonstrates, Christian communities in the increasingly nationalistic latter half of Meiji Japan—who not only had experienced significant growth in the preceding generation but were also being assured by Western missionaries of the impending Christianization of their modernizing nation—were driven to fresh weakness, to grappling with their loyalty-demanding imperial nation, and to crying out to God for his wisdom and faithfulness. The Gospel of Matthew and I Peter are just two of many biblical examples of inspired documents written to encourage minority and scattered Christian communities to look to Jesus, their Savior who had been given “All authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18) and was coming again (I Peter 1:7, 13). Moreover, Welsh historian Philip Jenkins offers the double reminder that God’s timeframe is not limited and that remembering earlier churches, for example the now disappeared but once vibrant and substantial churches throughout Asia in earlier times, gives hope and strength to Christian communities of succeeding generations (Jenkins, 2008, 260-262).

Remembering the full, historical scope of Christianity’s contextual shifts and translations—indeed, remembering the full scope of the expansions and recessions of God’s Old and New Covenant people throughout all of history—points to God’s providence and the full range of his redemptive mission for his world. God’s mission has always been about “making all things new” (Revelation 21:5). Hence Christian missions, which are Christians’ efforts to participate in God’s all-encompassing mission, are to be comprehensive as well. Through divinely orchestrated missions efforts, God grants saving faith in Jesus Christ, maturing of the Church, and foretastes of the coming kingdom (Jennings, 2007, 194). Losing sight of any of these three features tilts missions initiatives out of balance. Similarly, historical short-sightedness and selective memory can fail to acknowledge the full redemptive mission of the LORD of hosts.

One strength of the Protestant Modern Missions Movement since the late-nineteenth-century Student Volunteer Movement has been its focus on the urgency of the task of world evangelization. That focus unavoidably bears the contextual highwater marks of Western confidence during the pre-World War I expansion of the Industrial Revolution and of Western colonial influence. It was apparent to Western Christian leaders that the world was becoming modernized and Christianized. With transoceanic ship travel plus European-North American collaboration, mission leaders could therefore envision “the evangelization of the world in this generation,” as John Mott published in 1900 (Mott, 1900). Post-World War II Evangelicals, buttressed in large part by future-oriented U.S. influence, have carried forward the urgent anticipation of completing the missions task.

At the same time, Evangelicals tend to suffer from historical amnesia that habitually sees only as far back as the days of William Carey and, with a few exceptional hiccups along the way, inexorable progress in conversions ever since (and until Jesus’s imminent return). A strength of contemporary evangelical missions can thus become a weakness insofar as the wider aspects of mission, along with the ebb and flow of Christian expansion and recession throughout the breadth of overall redemptive history, get overshadowed.

Moreover, if the realities of Christian declines and widespread situations of minority status are overlooked—particularly by influential mission participants in situations of relative affluence and self-inflated socio-political status—the urgency to “complete the task of world evangelization,”

even with sincere lip-service to God's mission being his mission, can unwittingly slip into self-reliance. Today's technological advances and collaborative efforts can feed secular optimism just as much as they did in Mott's generation.

Realizing the fuller scope of recessions and contextual transitions throughout Christian mission history can cultivate a more complete, more accurate, and arguably more biblical understanding of God's redemptive mission. Each decline, and each cultural reception of the gospel, has had unique characteristics needing appreciation on their own terms. The recent recession of Christianity among Western contexts is not the same as what took place in North Africa with the advance of Islam. Nor were the pre-modern declines of Christian presence throughout Asia the same as the early scattering of Christian communities from Jerusalem and its environs. All of them, however, are part of the wider Christian story and somehow within God's providential dealings with his world. No recession or decline was caused or controlled by Jesus's followers. Neither were any awakenings, advances, or revivals: God alone causes the growth. He is the LORD of hosts, and there is no other. God's mission is his mission. *Kyrie eleison*, and *Maranatha*.

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