Currents, Perspectives, and Methodologies:  

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From January 18 to 20, 2018, the World Christianity and History of Religions program within the department of History and Ecumenics at Princeton Theological Seminary hosted its first annual international, interdisciplinary conference, entitled “Currents, Perspectives and Methodologies in World Christianity.” The conference drew a diverse crowd of more than 130 attendees, including over 120 presenters, hailing from a total of 25 countries as far-flung as Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, North America, and South America.

With a jam-packed schedule of five plenary sessions, eight parallel paper sessions generally consisting of three to four presentations apiece, and one address each by keynote speakers New York Theological Seminary President Dale Irvin and Harvard University Professor Jacob Olupona, the conference constituted a fruitful environment for producing and sharing fresh concepts concerning the future of World Christianity. A brief overview of the main sessions provides just a glimpse of the richness of discussion that took place at the conference.

The conference began with a vibrant plenary panel drawing attention to pertinent theoretical and methodological questions concerning World Christianity. Charles Farhadian, via Skype, questioned the concept of polycentrism, central to the approach popularized by the Munich School of World Christianity. Tom Seat, Aminta Arrington, and Felipe Rodrigues explored the benefits of employing approaches originating in the fields of literary analysis and anthropology in the study of Christianity around the world.

In the first keynote address, Dale Irvin called attention to the seminal role of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement, along with the scholarship associated with it, in the formation of World Christianity, thereby challenging the view that the phrase merely constitutes new nomenclature for the field of mission studies. Irvin also advocated for a “subversive” understanding of World Christianity, in that its role entails reversing the “tribalism” that often has led to an almost exclusively European focus in the study of Christianity.

The first day of the conference closed with a graduate student panel in the late evening, organized by doctoral students at PTS and chaired by Afe Adogame and featuring the work of eleven students hailing from Australia, Brazil, Japan, Kenya, Korea, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, in addition to the United States. Student presenters representing Ph.D. programs in World Christianity and related fields expressed a dynamism in the direction of interdisciplinary methods and a significant leaning towards ethnographic work in particular.

The Friday morning plenary panel, featuring Gina Zurlo, Raimundo Barreto, Naomi Richman, and Damaris Parsitau (via Skype), underscored the importance of moving beyond the methodologies normally associated with historical and demographic research, highlighting the ways in which engaging different epistemologies can open up new avenues for the understanding of Christianity as it is practiced in different communities.
On Friday night, Jacob Olupona raised ethical questions in his keynote address of how to respond to move into a critical space within World Christianity. Rather than merely observing and theorizing Christian practice, he advocated speaking out against instances of injustice perpetrated by Christian individuals and communities.

Saturday morning opened with a brilliant presentation by Martha Frederiks and Dorottya Nagy who proposed the idea of viewing World Christianity first and foremost as an approach, rather than as a discipline or field. Specifically, they understand it as an approach that pays special attention to social, political, intellectual and epistemological points of connection between instantiations of Christianity in various geographical locations; acknowledges multiple centers of Christianity; and explores Christianity’s interactions with other religions.

In the final plenary session, key members of the Munich School of World Christianity, Klaus Koschorke, Peter Phan, Ciprian Burlaciu, and David Daniels, which stands apart from models that focus primarily on the demographic shift in World Christianity, treat each instantiation of Christianity as a local phenomenon unconnected to communities elsewhere, or randomly splice together the stories of Christian populations without regard to real-life connections. Instead, the Munich School emphasizes the importance of drawing connections between disparate centers of Christian influence within the Global South.

The conference ended on Saturday evening, with a brief session of reflection and consideration of future conferences toward the further exploration of theory and methodology within World Christianity. It remains to be seen what the results of the undeniable momentum generated at the conference will be, but as an immediate next step, conveners Afe Adogame, Raimundo Barreto, and Richard Young have scheduled Princeton’s second annual conference on World Christianity theory and methodology for March 15-18, 2019.