Currents, Perspectives, and Methodologies for the Study of World Christianity and Its Interactions with Other Religions

A Cumulative Report by Ruth Amwe, Byung Ho Choi, and Sun Afia Kim on the 3rd World Christianity Virtual Conference (2021)

The 3rd international, interdisciplinary World Christianity Virtual Conference organized by The World Christianity and History of Religions Program of Princeton Theological Seminary convened from March 3–6, 2021.

This virtual conference was especially meaningful as the previous year’s in-person conference had to abruptly cancel just days before due to the COVID-19 outbreak. In light of the ongoing pandemic, the decision was made that this year’s conference would be held virtually and would also still retain its previous year’s theme “Currents, Perspectives, and Methodologies for the Study of World Christianity and Its Interactions with Other Religions.” Despite the virtual nature of the conference, there was a record number of 317 registrants from over twelve different time zones and over 30 countries that participated, with 147 people who presented their papers.

The conference commenced with introductory remarks given by the conveners (Afe Adogame, Raimundo Barreto, and Richard F. Young) followed by words of greetings from PTS President Craig Barnes and Thomas Hastings, who is the Executive Director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) at Princeton.

The first keynote address titled The Break-Up of Early World Christianity and the Great Ecumenical Failure was given by Andrew F. Walls, the pioneering figure in the academic field of World Christianity. Walls argued that world Christianity is not a new development, but “a return to normality, to the multicentric, multi-lingual, and multicultural early church” as it has been global in principle from its beginning. By retracing the expansive history of Christianity since the sixth century, Walls contended the reason for this “return” was due to the rupture of the church that took place along political, linguistic, and cultural lines over centuries, creating a permanent division between Christians of Europe and the Christians of Asia and Africa. Walls suggested that the true test for Christianity in the 21st century will be whether the sixth century legacy can be repaired and whether Christianity in all contexts can present “a convincing segment of Christian social reality, each forming a building block for the new temple of the Holy Spirit, sharing and cohering together as the body of Christ.”

The first day of the conference ended on a high note with rich, innovative, and groundbreaking presentations that occupied the first two paper sessions. Scholars from Nigeria, Germany, India, Philippines, USA, Taiwan, and Costa Rica joined in presenting their research. Topics ranged from the intercontinental explorations of the “other” in World Christianity, detailed research on
megachurches located in the Global South, investigating Christianity’s Encounters with Islam in various contexts, complexifying our understanding of World Christianity in light power, politics and violence, and imagining new approaches to the study of religious pluralism, globalization, and Christian encounters with the religious other.

The second day witnessed two paper sessions which featured presentations in many key areas including women and gender, religion and ritual as well as topical and regional issues such as African megachurches response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Christianity in China, the Middle East and Sino-Christian studies among others. Aside from these paper sessions, Thursday had three major highlights. The first was the second keynote address which was delivered by Shobana Shankar and entitled “A Missing Link: Unearthing Christianity’s Resonance in the Rise of Indian Muslim and Hindu Missions in Africa.” Shankar provided a new perspective on how Africa and India are entangled not only by comparison but by religious networks and visions. This interregional and interreligious presentation gave a new understanding of Christianity in Africa as an entanglement of African indigenous religion, Islam, and Hinduism.

The second highlight was a special panel held in honor of Prof. Andrew F. Walls tagged, “Andrew F. Walls and the Making of World Christianity.” Scholars in the field of World Christianity such as Thomas Hastings, Arun Jones, Phil Wingeier-Rayo, Mark Shaw, Virginia Garrard, Victor Ezigbo, and Janice A. McLean-Farrell shared about their personal engagement with Walls paying special attention to his works and its influence in the making of field of World Christianity. Their remarks were followed by a virtual presentation of a Lifetime achievement award of excellence to Walls in recognition of his contribution to the making of the field of World Christianity.

The third highlight and final event on the second day was the graduate panel. The panel was aptly themed, “The Future of World Christianity Scholarship: Perspectives from Graduate Researchers.” Seven doctoral students in World Christianity and other related fields presented their projects which collectively reflected the interdisciplinary and inter-continental approach advanced in the field. Their thematic scope and regional focus were drawn from and transverse across Asia, South and North America, Africa, and Europe.

On the third day of the conference, several other pertinent themes including conversion, pluralism, belonging, and hybridity, indigeneity, migration and glocalization were engaged during the four paper sessions. In addition to these themes, due attention was given to other pertinent areas involving issues of race, ethnicity, and the construction of religious identities. There were also two book panels which featured World Christianity Methodological Considerations edited by Martha Frederiks and Dorottya Nagy as well as The World Christian Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition edited by Gina Zurlo and Todd M. Johnson. James Ault’s “Machanic Manyeruke: Zimbabwe’s Gospel Music Legend” was also screened on Friday.
The last day of the conference began with a second special panel themed, “Ogbu U. Kalu and the Shaping of World Christianity.” Dale Irvin, David Daniels, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Daniel Ramirez, Damaris Parsitau and Jacob Olupona explicated on the scholarly legacy and contributions of Ogbu Kalu to the development of the field of World Christianity. Following their remarks was the virtual presentation of a posthumous lifetime achievement award to the late Ogbu U. Kalu. Receiving the award on his behalf, Wilhemina Kalu, the director of the Ogbu Kalu Center for Christianity and African Culture and widow of Ogbu Kalu, expressed words of appreciation affirming the gesture as a worthy and timely recognition of the scholarship and legacy of her deceased husband. Until his untimely demise on January 7, 2009, Ogbu U. Kalu was the Henry Winter Luce Professor of World Christianity and Missions at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and Director of the Center for Global Ministry, Chicago.

After two more paper sessions, the closing ceremony featured appreciatory remarks from the Conference Conveners. They revealed the giant strides in progress with respect to the publication of the World Christianity Conference peer-reviewed volume(s). At the end of the ceremony, participants were serenaded to a video highlighting behind-the-scenes activity of the conference secretariat throughout the conference to ensure the success of its virtual nature. With comments and words of appreciation for the immense success of the virtual conference pouring in through chat function of the online platform, the third World Christianity Virtual Conference came to a close at approximately 4pm on March 6, 2021.