Germany and the overthrow of Nazism, the need for Anglo-Soviet co-operation was no longer a top priority. At the same time, the climate of relations between the Soviet Union and its allies had grown noticeably cooler. In church circles, increasing concern, even alarm, was felt about the Soviet re-imposition of control over the Baltic countries and Poland, and to a lesser extent over Finland. The Russians had shown no willingness to join in the task of European reconstruction to which the Church of England was heavily committed. The warmth of sympathy expressed by the hosts could not obscure the fact that no substantial dogmatic or political issues were touched on. So the return visit proved to be even less of a success that Garbett’s two years before.

Dr Ketola’s careful appraisal of the extensive documentation on this matter shows how assiduously the British officials, both governmental and ecclesiastical, took up the complex issues involved. She does not however attempt to give an overall assessment of the events she so capably describes. In fact, the verdict must be a negative one. The outbursts of sympathy for the Russian people were short-lived; the optimistic hopes that the Russian Church would gain more scope for its activities and that the Soviet state would allow more freedom for religion, were soon enough disappointed. It was to be many more years before relations between the Church of England and the Russian Orthodox Church could improve. But we can be grateful that Dr Ketola has shed such a clear light on this short and transient period of apparent reconciliation and inter-church harmony.

Tags: Church of England, Hanna-Maija Ketola, John S. Conway, Russian Orthodox Church


By Heath A. Spencer, Seattle University

What were the most important developments in twentieth-century Christianity? If the focus is on Europe, we might emphasize secularization, declining church attendance,
Christian complicity in an era of war and genocide, or the challenges faced by churches under various dictatorships. If we are more global in scope, our attention might be drawn to the peculiarity of the United States in comparison to Europe, the dramatic expansion of Christianity in the global south, the global prominence of Pentecostal-charismatic varieties of Christianity, and relations between European and non-European Christianities during a transition from colonial empires to newly independent states. All of these themes are addressed in *European and Global Christianity*, a collection of papers presented in Denmark in 2008 at the conference “Taking Stock of Church History in the Twentieth Century from an International Perspective.” While the book does not propose a new master narrative for the history of world Christianity, individual contributors offer an indication of themes and questions that would have to be included in such a project.

In the first section, “Transformations and Historical Turning Points in the Twentieth Century,” Hartmut Lehmann and Hugh McLeod highlight broad trends in Europe and the wider world. Both see a weakening of confessional boundaries, greater religious pluralism and a dramatic decline in church attendance to be among the most important developments in European Christianity over the course of the twentieth century. McLeod identifies the 1960s as the tipping point for this ‘decline of Christendom’ but notes that the United States diverged from the European pattern in the latter part of the century. Lehmann is more attentive to trends beyond Europe and North America, drawing attention to the surge of Pentecostal-charismatic forms of Christianity and the complexity of Christian-Muslim relations. Within Europe, he also sees positive developments such as greater international understanding and a thorough discarding of Christian anti-Judaism.

Aud V. Tønnessen and Uffe Østergård are less interested in megatrends and international comparisons than in the reactionary or progressive tendencies in Scandinavian Christianity. Tønnessen notes the persistence of an ideology of ‘gender complementarity’, not only in early twentieth-century debates about birth control and sexual morality, but also in more recent controversies over the ordination of women and the blessing of same-sex unions. Østergård’s “Lutheranism, nationalism and the universal welfare state” challenges the conventional view that trade unions and social democratic parties deserve all the credit for the modern welfare state. Instead, he concludes that “the Danish welfare state is a result of secularized Lutheranism in national garment rather than international socialism” (93).

The second section of the book offers two articles on the world wars and their repercussions for the churches. Martin Greschat shows both change and diversity in the responses of Christians to the violence of the twentieth century. During the First World War, most churches enthusiastically endorsed the slaughter. However, in the interwar period, leaders in the ecumenical movement were promoting peace and reconciliation and challenging the absolute claims of nations and states. During the Second World War, many Christians supported their governments out of a sense of fatalism and obedience to authority, but religiously-motivated resistance was also a possibility. Unlike Greschat, Nicholas Hope tells a more uniform story of Christian capitulation to the claims of ‘the State.’ Unfortunately, he does little more than raise interesting talking points (for example, the role of the churches in what James Sheehan has called the rise of the ‘civilian state’) and then drop them without further development.
The third section of the book addresses the Protestant and Catholic churches in postwar Europe. In his comparison of East German and other Eastern European churches, Miklós Tomka demonstrates that labels like ‘conformity’ and ‘resistance’ fail to do justice to the complexity of situations faced by churches and churchgoers in east bloc countries, where it was not always easy to distinguish between hypocrisy and pragmatic survival strategies. If we imagine ‘church’ to mean the clerical hierarchy and ‘resistance’ to mean openly confronting dictatorship, then these churches were seriously compromised. On the other hand, if we focus on the congregational level and pay attention to more subtle forms of opposition, then churches appear to be among the most important sites of opposition to dictatorship in the twentieth century, particularly after 1945. Tomka’s sociological analysis is complemented by Dag Thorkildsen’s historical theology in “Unconditional Christian Loyalty towards the Rulers?” Although Luther and his early modern successors left little room for challenging the social or political status quo, Norwegian theologians of the twentieth century interpreted Romans 13 (“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities…”) in such a way as to justify popular sovereignty on the one hand and resistance to German occupiers and Norwegian collaborators on the other. In the study of scriptural religions, the history of interpretation is at least as important as the texts themselves, and “Norwegian history shows that Lutheranism does not necessarily have to lead to an unconditional Christian loyalty towards the rulers” (268).

Harry Oelke and Karl-Joseph Hummel offer narrower studies of the German Protestant and Catholic churches. Oelke highlights the ongoing relevance of national studies, noting that Germany’s recent past has given a particular twist to postwar debates among German Protestants over political engagement, collective guilt, and nationalism. Hummel surveys the research on the Catholic Church in Germany, much of which has focused on the Nazi era. Immediate postwar narratives of Catholic resistance and victimhood gave way in the 1960s to critical appraisals arguing that an illiberal and anti-modern Catholic hierarchy helped facilitate the Nazi ‘seizure of power.’ More recent scholarship strikes a balance, recognizing Catholic Resistenz to national socialist ideology and its totalitarian claims as well as broad areas of complicity. Hummel also explores cases where political, moral, and theological agendas have shaped and at times distorted postwar memories and representations of German Catholicism.

The articles in the final section of the book return to some of the global trends mentioned by Lehmann in the opening article. Klaus Koschorke stresses the need for a coherent narrative of World Christianity and points to promising areas for comparative study such as church independence movements in Asia and Africa, colonial-ethical discourses, and the year 1989 as a global caesura (rather than merely European). Kevin Ward and Ezra Gebremedhim follow up by highlighting the unique dynamics of African Christianities rather than presenting them as African adaptations of a ‘European’ religion. Ward argues that in Africa, religious pluralism has long been the norm, and “religion has been the midwife of modernity rather than its opponent” (303). As a result, African Christians do not feel compelled to fight the same kinds of culture wars as have Europeans and North Americans. Ezra Gebremedhim assesses progress toward independence and equality in the relationship between the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Church of Sweden. The nature of that equal partnership is revealed in the current dialogue between the two churches over the Church of Sweden’s decision to bless same-sex partnerships. The section ends with Viggo Mortensen’s reflections on the state of Christianity as a global religion in a pluralistic
world. Mortensen identifies fundamentalism, relativism, and syncretism as threats to the integrity of Christianity, arguing that Christians must hold on to their convictions while engaging in dialogue with others in a spirit of konvivenz. Unfortunately, Mortensen’s call for konvivenz is compromised by his references to ‘Eurabia’ and ‘dhimmitude’ as well as the dubious claim that ‘Islam’ has no history of multicultural sympathy with the ‘other.’ One is left wondering what he means when he poses questions like, “What will win out: Protestantisation of religion or the islamisation of Christianity?” (368).

Overall, this book delivers what the title promises, a useful constellation of articles on European and global Christianity, covering key moments, themes, and trends over the course of the twentieth century. Chapters are in English or German, and the authors represent a variety of countries (Germany, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Hungary) and disciplines (church history, theology, and sociology of religion). The middle sections privilege European church history, but the others offer a range of global perspectives that suggest new ways to imagine and contextualize European developments. The individual articles are uneven in terms of quality, significance, and originality, but the collection as a whole gives evidence of the richness and diversity of twentieth-century Christianities, within and outside of Europe.


By Steven Schroeder, University of the Fraser Valley

Proponents of the secularization thesis have long-asserted that religion has been sequestered to the private realm, but the authors of God’s Century claim this view is outdated. Drawing on a plethora of events spanning the last few decades, the authors argue that “major religious actors throughout the world enjoy greater capacity for political influence today than at any time in modern history – and perhaps ever” (49). The authors set out to explain the resurgence of religiously-fuelled political action on the world stage by examining what is behind the phenomenon: the religious actors; their beliefs; and, the ramifications of actions.