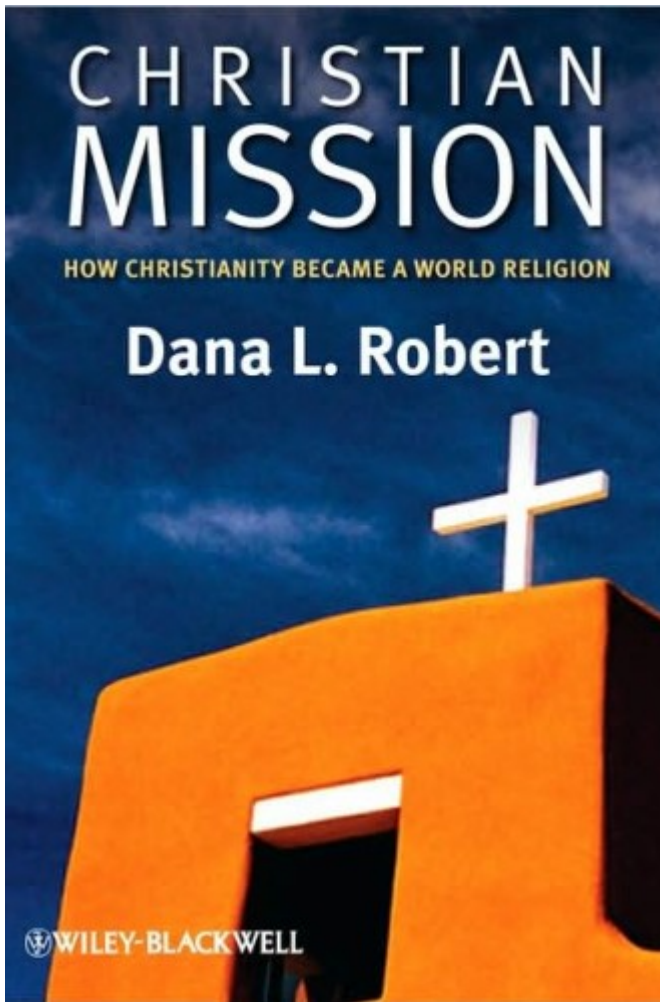


# Christian Mission, by Dana L. Robert

reviewed by [Dale T. Irvin](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue

## In Review



## Christian Mission

By Dana L. Robert  
Wiley-Blackwell

From its earliest days the Christian movement has manifested a powerful desire to cross cultural borders on a grand scale. The pages of the New Testament speak of

disciples going to "all nations" and to "the ends of the earth." In some times and places the cross-cultural impulse has been less pronounced or less realizable than in others. But never has it been entirely extinguished, and the result is a world religion that is diverse and seemingly capable of endless diversification.

One time and place in which the cross-cultural impulse was less pronounced than in others was in the time of the entity known as Christendom, which lasted from the tenth through the 15th centuries. But just a few centuries later, Christianity went from being a religion predominantly espoused by Europeans and their descendants to being a global religion with significant numbers of adherents of Asian, African and indigenous American descent. The settled, territorial notion of Christendom, with its imperial overtones associated with the European past, gave way to a much more diverse Christian reality.

Seen against the background of the cross-cultural impulses embedded in its founding narratives, Christianity at the beginning of the 21st century appears to have realized some of its fuller identity. Arguably, it has taken a long time for the inner logic of Christianity as a world religion to work itself out on a global scale. The resulting world Christian fellowship and movement are an expression of something intrinsic to the Christian faith.

How does Christianity cross borders to become a world religion? In a word, mission. "The history of Christian mission—and of the churches' particular missions—provides a useful framework for grasping the meaning of Christianity as a multicultural, global presence in the world today," Dana L. Robert writes. Her goal is to explain "how cross-cultural mission is a central historical process in the formation of Christianity."

In order to accomplish this task in relatively few pages, Robert takes a thematic approach. The first part of the book covers the entire history of Christianity from New Testament times through the end of the 20th century in three chapters. By focusing on the details of transmission, including shifts in communication methods and changing sociopolitical contexts, and largely bypassing the internal histories of the various churches and communions, she is able to sketch a brief history of Christianity as a world religion. The emphasis throughout this section is on change more than continuity. In her words, "Christianity becomes interesting as a catalyst for new identity formation rather than as a fixed institution."

In the second part, Robert takes up three themes in mission history: the relationship between Western colonialism and missions in the modern era, the role of women in missions and the role of missionaries in facilitating not only conversions but Christian community.

Western colonialism has haunted the study and practice of Christian missions for much of the past century. The modern missionary movement was predominantly a movement that went from the West to "the rest" as missionaries rode the waves of European colonial expansion and imperialism from the 16th through the 20th centuries. The result has been the close identification of missions with colonialism in many quarters. Robert does not deny a connection between them, but she shows that the relationship is more complex than both critics and defenders of modern missions have tended to portray it.

At times Western missionaries opposed colonial regimes, and they were often important agents in the preservation of local cultures. In some places missions provided converts with resources to oppose colonial systems. But missions also served colonial interests in ways that missionaries could not perceive.

Robert looks at these colonial ambiguities, then moves beyond them. From a postcolonial perspective she determines that the lasting legacy has been the manner in which missions transmitted Christian meaning across frontiers of time and space to create the global, multicultural matrix called world Christianity today.

Robert opens the chapter on women in missions with the story of Annalena Tonelli, an Italian Roman Catholic who worked in Somalia until she was killed in 2003. "Annalena Tonelli's life clarifies the meaning of mission as service, and the self-understanding of missionaries as those who serve in the name of Jesus Christ," she writes. Mission has been a means of empowerment for women in patriarchal societies, and women missionaries, who have been particularly concerned with issues of well-being, have been important catalysts for social transformation in various societies around the world.

Robert's case studies on missionaries' creation of Christian community are the ministries of St. Patrick, a fifth-century Briton who worked among the Irish, and Bernard Mizeki, a 19th-century Mozambican who worked among the Shona. In both stories she highlights ways in which missions foster community within a more global context, preserving aspects of local cultures while translating Christianity into those

cultures and introducing resources that bring greater global connections.

The Christianity that Robert sees in various places around the world is richly diverse in both its local and global expressions. She observes that Christianity is "a mosaic of local beliefs and practices in creative tension with a universal framework shaped by belief in the God of the Bible, as handed down through Jesus and his followers. As a world religion, Christianity thrives at the intersection between the global or universal, and the local or personal." What interests her are the various social, political, cultural and spiritual reasons that people of different cultures and religions accepted the Christian message.

Robert's book is not without its problems. She doesn't fully explain the relationship between missions and churches, or the manner in which mission is integral to the life and nature of the church. In the introduction she admits that she has largely omitted "the details of the beliefs and practices of Christians in each culture, and the history of the various churches," and in the pages that follow it becomes clear that it is impossible to understand the life of the church and the history of churches in any period of Christian history without understanding the process of missions. Robert notes Martin Kähler's statement that mission is the mother of theology, but she tends to ignore the fact that theology in turn influences mission. More attention to the forces at work in sending the Christian message across cultural boundaries would help fill out the richer understanding of world Christianity that Robert seeks to foster.

Robert also gives too little attention to the experience of those who received the Christian message and converted to Christian faith across the centuries. She is well aware that missionaries and converts are "like two sides of the bridge, the anchors for the span across which the faith travels." Nevertheless, throughout the book she mainly tells the stories of missionaries and not of converts. Mizeki, a convert who became a missionary, is one of the few converts whose story she tells.

Interfaith relations in relation to missions also gets short shrift. Several times Robert acknowledges that those who were converting to Christianity were often people who had previously been affiliated with other religions, but she does not note the implications for Christian identity formation of borrowing from other religious traditions. Nor does she attend to the fact that any gains that conversion brings to Christianity are accompanied to a certain degree by a loss to others in the wider community of world religious traditions. The question of whether the goal of

Christian missions is global extermination of other religious faiths needs at least to be considered, and certainly the implications of Christian mission for interfaith relations needs to be addressed.

Despite these concerns, *Christian Mission* is a valuable addition to the growing literature on world Christianity. The discussion of the contributions of women in mission history is particularly welcomed. Our overall understanding of Christianity as a world religion is significantly increased by Robert's work.