

Sunquist, Scott W., *The Shape of Christian History: Continuity and Diversity in the Global Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022. pp. xiii, 177. \$22.00 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5140-0222-3.

In this impressively compact book, Scott W. Sunquist, President of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, weaves together missiology, theology, and ethics to present readers with a way to understand Christian history.

The book has five chapters. The first chapter addresses the nature of and past trends in historiography. Sunquist discusses three aspects: 1) history as storytelling, 2) evidence that can be used for the writing of history, and 3) “various ideologies and philosophies that have guided (and at times repressed) the study of history in the past,” i.e., “progressivism, positivism, cultural studies, postmodernism, and postcolonial studies” (34).

The second chapter is about the Christian understanding of time: how Christian views of the beginning (creation), center (Incarnation), and end (eschaton) of time have influenced and can be reflected in history and historiography. According to Sunquist, Christianity introduces a linear concept of time which, unlike cyclical understandings, opens up the possibility of improving the world (82). There is, however, the risk of holding to false endings of history—what Sunquist calls “over-realized eschatology” (79) and what political philosopher Eric Voeglin would have called the “immanentization of the eschaton.”

The third chapter is about suffering and mission in the history of Christianity, especially how these two categories can be normative criteria for making value judgments on past figures and events. Taken together, what Sunquist calls “cruciform apostolicity” becomes the standard through which one can “see and evaluate Christian movements as well as our own local church” (94). Judging by this standard, spreading Christianity “through domination, power, coercion, or deceit” is to be condemned (97).

The fourth chapter deals with the counterpart to suffering and mission—glory. Sunquist is not referring here to the state of bliss that the saints enjoy in Heaven, but to the “little glories” that are “seen in the life and work of Christians and their churches throughout history” (123). Circling back to the theme of eschatology, Sunquist warns against placing hope in false glories that “are not grounded in the life and work of

God in this world”—i.e., progressivism, Marxism, and Darbyite dispensationalism (143–45).

In the fifth and final chapter, Sunquist sums up the previous chapters and gives some “historiographical guidance” (150). He suggests that the reader should read history looking for: 1) “little glories,” 2) biographies, 3) “influence of ideas (theology),” 4) lessons for local churches, 5) “ambiguities of history,” 6) missionary involvement, 7) persistence of evil, 8) “the relationship between the kingdom of God and earthly kingdoms,” and 9) “unity and love” (150–65).

This book’s target audience seems to be professors and students working in Protestant theological seminaries. A Google Scholar search for *The History of the World Christian Movement*, co-authored by Sunquist and Dale Irvin (cited numerous times in the volume under review), shows that it is cited mainly by missiologists and theologians, rather than historians working in research universities. I mention this not to impugn the credibility of the author, but rather to explain the fact that some features of the book might seem odd to those outside of the target audience. For example, theologians pop up constantly in the footnotes. By contrast, some classic works on the historical relationship between Christianity and imperialism-colonialism, such as Jean and John Comaroff’s *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991–1997), or Andrew Porter’s *Religion versus Empire?* (2004) are not cited or discussed a single time. In the same vein, the discussion of historiographical trends in chapter 1 would seem rather dated or misleading to many trained in history departments.

Despite arguing that “[s]o many of the assumptions that drove the greatest of Western historians and theologians in the past have to be revised” (22), Sunquist neither specifies what some of these assumptions are, nor names these historians and theologians. Sunquist writes, for instance, that “we had assumed that Christianity always flourished only with political support or favor” (3). This idea is certainly not a consensus among academic historians of Christianity that I have read. The only explicitly cited antagonists are Karen L. King and Bart Ehrman (3), who do not represent historians of Christianity as a whole. It thus seems like certain strawmen are set up in order to exaggerate the contributions of the book.

There is likewise a frustrating ambiguity in Sunquist’s use of the term “church.” At many points it seems to include all professed Christians,

comprehending all communions (5). Indeed, Sunquist admirably calls for Christian unity, urging the reader “to de-emphasize differences between Christian families and within Christian families” (155). At other points, however, “the church” seems to include only Protestants (8–9). This is likely a subconscious yet telling mistake. A large section of Protestants across the globe believes that Catholics and Orthodox are not Christian, and therefore treat majority Catholic- or Orthodox-populated areas as legitimate mission territory. This tension not only lurks behind the whole book, but will likely haunt the future of global Christianity as well.

One benefit of studying history is being forced to become more cautious in diagnosing the causes and prospects of present-day phenomena. Sunquist rightly points out that Christians of the early twentieth century were too caught up with progressivism and imperialism to see that these would both have a limited shelf-life (27–32). This can provide a helpful lesson for evaluating “global Christianity,” which Sunquist is quite optimistic about. We cannot presume that the numerical growth of “Christianity” in any part of the globe will continue in the future. Taking my native Korea as an example, both Protestant and Catholic Christianity experienced a boom for about the first half-century of national independence (1945–2000) but both have been in numerical decline since the 2000s. This should be a cautionary tale about making predictions about the future direction and composition of global Christianity based on recent, possibly short-term, trends.

On a different note, one wonders how much can be done by “studying Christianity on its own terms or according to its own faith commitment” (15). There is, of course, much value in doing so. It is nevertheless questionable how far one can integrate the categories of time, cross, and glory into the study and writing of Christian history. More often than not, the primary sources will contain little to no information that illuminates any of these three points. Yet this should not deter historians from pursuing research topics that are not immediately edifying or transformative. Otherwise, Christian history would be reduced to a collection of morality tales or hagiographies.

It is both disturbing and instructive to note the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder’s influence on Sunquist. Like the former, the latter rejects Christendom (155–6)—which often seems to be defined

126 as spreading Christianity “through domination, power, coercion, or deceit” (97). That Yoder did exercise some influence on Sunquist is clear, as Sunquist cites him positively (126). There is more than a little irony here. As Rachel Waltner Goossen painstakingly shows, Yoder sexually abused more than a hundred women, and used his position of authority both to justify and cover up his misdeeds.¹ In short, the Mennonite theologian exhibited exactly the kind of violent domination which Sunquist deplors. Ironically, Yoder is totally missing from Sunquist’s discussion of the “sexual sins” of church figures (160).

Lastly, I will note that the book could have used better proofreading. The name of the founder of the Unification Church is Sun Myung Moon, not Sun Yung Moon (14, 81). Toward the end, Sunquist uses the phrase “fifth-century Turkey” (166), which is an anachronism—it should be fifth-century Anatolia or Asia Minor.

Sunquist’s is a welcome but unsuccessful attempt at finding a Christian mode of historiography. For success in this endeavor, theoretical or theological reflection is necessary but insufficient. Attention to the “craft” side of history-writing is a must. Much more helpful for the prospective historian of Christianity would be *The Past as Pilgrimage: Narrative, Tradition, and the Renewal of Catholic History* (2014), co-authored by historians Christopher Shannon (Christendom College) and Christopher O. Blum (Augustine Institute). Not only do they address many of the issues touched upon by Sunquist, Shannon and Blum anticipate many of the objections raised in this review. Furthermore, they point to specific models and authors of historiography, past and present, from which we can draw insights. While Shannon and Blum discuss only Catholic history in their book, many of the points will be applicable to the history of global Christianity.

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1 Rachel Waltner Goossen, ““Defanging the Beast”: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (2015), 7-80.