***Migration and the Making of Global Christianity***

**Daniel Jeyaraj**

Andrew Walls Centre for the Study of African and Asian Christianity, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

**Abstract**

This book documents how Christian migrants from the origins of Christianity until 1500 helped establish Christianity as a world religion. Its sociohistorical methodology identifies and celebrates the contributions of ordinary Christian migrants in cross-cultural and transnational contexts. It argues that Christian missionary engagements are often incorrectly associated with empire and institutional authorities; in reality, however, most of the cross-cultural missionary work was done by ordinary Christian women and men, who migrated for various purposes. This book thus embodies a new historiography based on migration, providing ample evidence of the reality, complexity, and relevance of migration for World Christianity.

**Keywords**

migrants; sociohistorical approach; Christianity in Asia and Africa; World Christianity; royal mothers, queens, and princesses

**Corresponding author:**

Daniel Jeyaraj, Andrew Walls Centre for the Study of African and Asian Christianity, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK.

Email: jeyarad@hope.ac.uk

*Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*, by Jehu J. Hanciles, is a book that has already begun shaping afresh the understanding and study of World Christianity from the perspectives of sociohistorical analysis. Without neglecting or denigrating the contributions of social and cultural elites to collective Christian thought and expression, this book emphasizes the humble beginnings of Christianity, as it was initiated, nurtured, and spread until 1500 CE by ordinary Christians. Most of these Christians played no significant role within structures of political power and control, and they had little social prestige or economic privilege from either empires or nation-states. This book discusses in greater depth the contextual contributions to Christian practices in word and deed from migrants, women, informally educated people, and oppressed tribes and castes. In particular, it focuses on the significant role of migrants in the unfolding of new forms of Christian thinking, living, and witness in diaspora settings.

# The author

This book reflects the thoughts, research, and teaching experiences of Professor Jehu Hanciles in three continents. He was born, raised, and educated in Sierra Leone, West Africa. He wrote his doctoral dissertation under the guidance of the eminent professors Andrew Walls (1918–2021) and Christopher Fyfe (1920–2008) at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Both professors were experts in the history of Sierra Leone. Hanciles admired their breadth of knowledge, which he brought to bear on his own teaching of church history and missiology at Africa University, in Mutare, Zimbabwe (1995–98). From there he moved to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, where he held the chair of mission history and globalization and directed the Centre for Missiological Research. In July 2012 he moved to the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, where, since 2018, he has directed the World Christianity program.

Hanciles acknowledges the influence of his teachers at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone: Edward Fasholé-Luke, Leslie E. T. Shylion, Emile K. Jones, and Festus Cole. He fondly remembers Bishop Prince Thomson, who in the 1980s asked him to classify uncatalogued papers at the Bishop’s Court in Freetown, Sierra Leone. In addition, Hanciles acknowledges the insights that he received from Professors Walls and Fyfe, Wilbert Shenk (1935–2021), Ogbu U. Kalu (1942–2009), Lamin Sanneh (1942–2019), Brian Stanley, Klaus Koschorke, Philip Jenkins, and many others. These scholars taught and wrote on the centrality of non-Western Christianity; for them, World Christianity is contextually conditioned and necessarily polycentric. Non-Western Christianity is not a valueless appendix to the history of Western Christianity, for its forms of Christianity have their respective contextual identities and individual personalities. Hanciles’s sociohistorical method analyzes the various forms of World Christianity and evaluates them through the lens of migration.

Hanciles has been a passionate speaker and writer about World Christianity from his African perspective. For example, Black Atlantic and its impact on African Christianity in and outside of the continent of Africa have been themes of his essays. Likewise, he has been advocating the understanding of migrants as missionaries, and the missionaries as migrants. Both migrants and missionaries cross geographic, theological, and sociocultural borders. In 2008 Hanciles published his well-recognized work *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migrations, and the Transformation of the West*, which, in the words of Philip Jenkins, “established him as a key scholar in field” (xi) of migration and World Christianity. This book advanced the idea that the mobility of migrant Christians across geographic and cultural boarders enabled them to sow the seeds of renewal among their host communities. Most of these Christian migrants, filled with self-esteem despite facing various hardships caused by sociocultural dislocation and discrimination, came from the countries that were not dominated by Western European or North American ways of thinking, living, and doing things. Hanciles retrieved the voices and stories of these Christians and highlighted their distinct contributions to World Christianity. This current work expands similar trajectories of approaches, arguments, and examples from the beginning of Christianity to 1500 CE.

Throughout his career as a researcher and teacher, Hanciles has been advocating the central role of migrant Christians in disseminating the message of the Lord Jesus Christ as they understood and practiced it in their diaspora contexts. *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* gives examples of how Christian diaspora communities—often socially dislocated and marginalized, economically weak and exploited, politically vulnerable and yet resilient in their faith commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ—maintained their Christian witness and service in unfavorable places and circumstances. Eventually, their attitude to life, their ways of dealing with local needs, their overcoming existential problems, and their positive hope about the future impressed their host communities to such an extent that at least a few people chose to embrace the faith of these migrant Christians.

# Sociohistorical methodology

The laudable insights of this book do not derive from the actions of power-based, politics-oriented ecclesiastical, theological, or institutional personalities or groups. For example, influential emperors and bishops of the Latin-speaking, western European regions convened councils and released creeds and edicts, with their apologetics and polemics mirroring the priorities of the elites. All their attempts to resolve religious controversies, whose roots lay in various discriminatory socioeconomic and political realities, remained at best partial and tentative. In contrast, Hanciles has chosen to interpret Christian migrant experiences through a sociohistorical methodology. It does not deny, for example, the favorable conditions that empires created for their own needs and purposes, which primarily revolved around safe and fast transport of military personnel with their weapons, provisions, captives, and war booty, as well as movement of traders without the fear of piracy along the routes that connected various commercial hubs and communication networks.

Simultaneously, this approach questions the incorrect assumptions about top-down, empire-orchestrated conversions of peoples and the indispensability of European missionaries in the conversion of non-Western peoples to Christian faith. It asserts that “state sponsorship or the projection of empire” or their institutional “author and agents” played a “minimal role” in the “cross-cultural expansion of the Christian faith” (420). Rather, it repeatedly reveals how ordinary Christian migrants served as primary cross-community agents; their thoughts, choices, priorities, and actions illustrated the significance and relevance of their Christian faith for their everyday life and worship. Even as they remained “strangers and outsiders in foreign lands,” they contributed to the “rise of Christianity as a world movement” (420). This approach is more social and cultural than political and ecclesiastical; it therefore fittingly represents the pluralistic nature of Christianity by bringing out the “voices, experiences, and expressions of Christians worldwide in all their social, ethnic, and generational diversity” (3). Hanciles readily recognizes the limitations of a sociohistorical approach, including an anti-institutional bias, limitations on hermeneutic coherence, and the subjective nature of historical inquiry (5–6). Yet, its scholarly depth and analysis of details of the chosen individuals and groups are evident throughout.

# Structure and contents

This book contains an introduction and ten chapters. The introduction invites the readers to free their study of Christianity from the old top-down, empire-based, colonialism-oriented, and institutions-centered historiography. With numerous examples, it helps readers to appreciate the contributions made by ordinary Christians such as migrants and women to the rise, growth, and expansion of Christianity as a world religion. Christian migrants often remained vulnerable strangers among their host communities; most of them had nothing to do with local politics, economics, or other power structures. Yet, they invigorated existing forms of local Christianity and expanded its outreach.

The first three chapters discuss the book’s conceptual overview. Chapter 1 considers existing scholarship on migration, explaining its interpretive tools and models for understanding human migration. Migrants have included nomadic pastoralists, military personnel, war captives, slaves, active or disfavored employees of empires or governments, merchants, religious specialists and devotees, and wandering entertainers and professionals. They carry with them their heritage, including religious beliefs and practices.

Chapter 2 focuses on migrant contributions to globalizing religions and understanding religious conversions. Migrants must reckon with basic needs and uncertainties; they use their practical skills to meet these challenges. As they interact with the customs of their host communities, they rearrange their priorities and adjust their ways of life. Their presence and lifestyle often attract others and lead to their conversion. In this context, Hanciles discusses and applies Lewis Rambo’s understanding of religious conversion, which emphasizes the role of converts as agents of their own destiny. Likewise, he utilizes the teachings of primal religions by Harold Turner (1911–2002), the translation principle of Sanneh and Walls, the theory of social conversion of Jerry H. Bentley (1949–2012), and the ideas of religious syncretism by John David Yeadon Peel (1941–2015) to portray the multidimensional experiences of the migrants.

Chapter 3, “Theologizing Migration: From Eden to Exile,” covers the key stages of salvation history from Genesis to Revelation. Its exposition of the narrative of the Tower of Babel is illustrative. It discusses at length and insightfully the biblical categories of migrants as strangers/aliens, foreigners, and sojourners. For example, migrations have redemptive purpose. The Hebrew patriarchs were migrants; they experienced “grave dangers, tensions, indignities, and conflicts” (96), yet they played key roles in the salvation history of their people. God’s calling of Abraham included Abraham’s entire household, and the experiences of the Israelites in Egypt, during their exodus and at Mount Sinai, had missionary dimensions as well, for they witnessed to YHWH among the non-Israelites (118). Later, when the Israelites were exiled into Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah exhorted them to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jer 29:7), which, according to Hanciles, amounted to a “theological bombshell” (124).

The rest of this chapter examines the importance of migration in the New Testament. It begins with the migration experiences of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles. Jesus understood himself as a stranger, and his apostles were itinerant preachers. Migrant Christians of Jewish and Hellenist backgrounds established the bicultural Christian congregation in Antioch. They realized the significance of inviting both Jews and Hellenist Greeks to embrace Christian faith. For this purpose, they ordained Paul and his companions. Paul became a migrant preacher; Priscilla, Aquila, and countless unnamed Christian migrants played their part in the establishment of Christian communities in Caesarea and Rome. Hanciles’s penetrative insights thus illuminate the migration-related passages of the biblical texts.

Chapter 4, “Christianization of the Roman Empire: The Immigrant Factor,” begins with a quotation from Diognetus (2nd cent. CE) that illustrates the social life of Christians in the Roman Empire. These Christians viewed themselves as strangers and aliens; they considered any foreign country as their homeland, and their homeland as a foreign country. Their social and religious lifestyle attracted the attention of their neighbors, who appreciated or denounced or simply ignored them. Some Christians served as official apostles, evangelists, prophets, or teachers; by contrast, most other Christians spread their faith by simply interacting with their non-Christian neighbors. The Christians in the empire used the Roman roads for transporting their forms of Christianity to other places. Greek-speaking Christian merchants, for example, moved from the eastern to the western parts of the empire. Christianity appealed more pronouncedly to the displaced foreigners and resident aliens in the Roman cities and towns; overall, “Christianity in the Roman Empire was a predominantly immigrant phenomenon” (167).

Chapter 5, “Frontier Flows: The Faith of Captives and the Fruit of Captivity,” traces how the disfavored officers of the Roman Empire and the church were exiled to the border areas of the empire, where they founded Christian communities. For example, Bishop Ulfilas ministered to the Goths at the borders of the Roman Empire, where many Gothic groups embraced Ulfilas’s Arian Christianity.

The long chapter 6, “Minority Report: From the Church in Persia to the Persian Church,” examines the multilayered social, theological, and ecclesiastical history of Christians in Persia. Christians there suffered persecutions because Persian rulers and Zoroastrian elites viewed Christians as agents of the Roman emperor, whom they hated. Christians in Persia also suffered under various internal doctrinal controversies; they interpreted and expressed their Christian faith according to their contemporaneous “cultural factors, ecclesiastical power structures, political dynamics, and social tensions” (234). Yet, Persian Christians did not forget their missionary mandate. Their theologians such as Mar Narsai have given us timeless insights into the divine and human natures of Jesus.

Chapter 7, “Christ and Odin: Migration and Mission in an Age of Violence,” explores the conversion of western European tribes through various types of migrations The royal marriages of Clotilda to King Clovis I of the Franks, Bertha to Prince Æthelbert of Kent, and Æthelburth to King Edwin of Northumbria symbolized a powerful type of migration. Missionary journeys of monks such as Columba, Columbanus, Willibrord, and Boniface represented another kind of migration. Pope Gregory I authorized St. Augustine of Canterbury to work among the Anglo-Saxons. Most of the Vikings astonishingly embraced Christianity. Iceland’s lawmaker Thorgeir decided in favor of the Christian conversion of his people, promoting the concept of one law and one religion. These and other “tales of dramatic religious change among European kings and chieftains, . . . wholesale conversions, and miraculous occurrences” validate “the triumph of Christ over Odin” (312) primarily for historical, social, and cultural reasons, also (as popularly assumed) as an end to violence.

Chapter 8, “To the Ends of the East: The Faith of Merchants,” continues the history of Persian Christians from chapter 6 and highlights how Persian Christian merchants moving along the Silk Road network established their Christianity along the way and settled in Chang’an, then the capital of China. The Xi’an Stele documents the history of T’ang Christianity, which began suddenly and disappeared just as quickly. Lack of indigenous leaders, resources, and liturgical practice kept Christianity as a religion of foreigners that was no longer needed in China.

Chapter 9, “Gaining the World: The Interlocking Strands of Migration, Imperial Expansion, and Christian Mission” covers a vast period. It explains the origins and spread of Islam across Asia, and it engages with the growth and decline of the Mongolian Empire. Christians in Asia and Europe maintained their identity amid changing political and religious alliances. The proportion of Asian Christians always remained small but active, especially as queens and princesses of polygamous Khans.

Chapter 10, “Beyond Empire,” stresses the migration factor as the decisive contributor to the spread of Christianity until 1500. During this period, neither the institutional representatives of this empire nor Western missionaries had little success in promoting Christianity among the non-Western peoples in Asia. Christian migrants facilitated “the rise of Christianity as a world movement” (420). A detailed bibliography and useful index conclude this book.

# An assessment

*Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* investigates the major turning points in the history of European, African, and Asian Christianity. Its sociohistorical approach highlights the bottom-up efforts of ordinary Christian women and men, merchants, captives, monks, and others in spreading their Christianity. This book will enrich the study of Christianity as a global phenomenon by theologians, historians, and other social scientists; they can profitably engage with the questions and debates of various Christian groups. From the beginning, Christians developed a mind-set that was both contextual and universal; their congregations were likewise contextually diverse. Ordinary Christians functioned as agents and architects of their own destiny, and some of their non-Christian neighbors received, evaluated, and embraced the Christianity they encountered in these outsiders. They found Christianity more relevant than other religious systems in addressing the human need for joy and fulfillment; gradually, they learned to manage their life and witness. Theological students and scholars of humanities will find this compelling book enriching, rewarding, and reorienting.

**Note**

**Author biography**

Daniel Jeyaraj, an Indian Christian, teaches World Christianity and directs the Andrew Walls Centre for the Study of African and Asian Christianity at Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK. He publishes on the works of German Lutheran Pietist missionaries in eighteenth-century southern India and their reciprocal impact on Europe.