

*The shape of Christian history. Continuity and diversity in the global Church.* By Scott W. Sunquist. Pp. xiv + 178. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022. \$22 (paper). 978 1 5140 0222 3  
*JEH* (74) 2023; doi:10.1017/S0022046923001185

Scott W. Sunquist's monograph grounds Christian history in normative theological claims of what constitutes the essence of Christianity. It is primarily a book for Christians who want to think about Christian history with attention to the history of Christian theology and its unique truth claims.

Sunquist is well positioned to offer such a sweeping guide. He is the author of eight books on Christian history and missions, including (with Dale Irvin) the magisterial *History of the World Christian movement*, volumes i and ii. In the text under review here, Sunquist seems to address an emerging scholar of Christian history, perhaps one in a faith-based undergraduate institution or seminary, or someone who is seeking a way to think about the relation of faith claims and practices alongside historiographical questions and methods. As such, the book does not give a condensed overview of Christian history, nor does it dwell on any particular historiographical question or era. Rather, Sunquist intends the text to be more normative and fundamental. The book is premised upon an insistence on Christianity's singularity and uniqueness – the fact that there is something true and common about Christian faith (which might be glossed as 'belief'), and that such commitments can and should be fully part of the Christian historian's analysis of Christianity throughout history.

The shape of Christian history, in Sunquist's view, is primarily devotional and in service of living a Christian life; and he articulates here a Christian way of thinking about and using history. This approach could be welcome to those who would not want the history of Christianity defined solely in response to analytical themes in the broader historical academy. 'Christianity must be something and not everything', Sunquist claims, and he wrote the book 'in part to challenge this academic trend' (that is, of allowing 'Christianity' to be nearly anything). Instead, it is important for the Christian historian to know that 'Christianity has a life of its own'.

For Sunquist, Christianity is 'God's redemptive work in history'. He describes the nature of that work with the phrase 'cruciform apostolicity'. Cruciform apostolicity centres violence and suffering as inherent to an authentic Christian life, which is understood to be fundamentally about suffering on behalf of others. Sunquist primarily illustrates this dynamic through references to the history of Christian missions.

How would one write about Christian history from this basis? For Sunquist, there is seemingly less room for bracketing historically contextual claims, views and assumptions from past eras. He appears comfortable with using heresy as a normative analytical category, and there is little guidance for what a historian ought to do with radically different historical understandings of biblical passages, Christian practices, ethics or beliefs. These analytical moves might feel less complicated if they are employed against the German Christian movement of the Third Reich. But there are glimpses in the book of other apparently necessary normative stances that fall outside of Christianity as Sunquist delineates it: Dispensationalism seems up for question, as are 'health and wealth' Churches. What would it mean to write a history of Christianity that does not take such Churches into account in the present?

*The shape of Christian history* raises the appropriate issue of just how secular the study of Christian history ought to be. Should the historical study of Christianity move in the direction of the larger history academy, or is it more a branch of theology and spiritual formation, in the spirit of Luke or Eusebius? ‘Cruciform apostolicity’ shares more in common with the latter, as Sunquist uses it to suggest that it can be used to trace a pure line of true Christianity through the warp and woof of history.

Employed at its most egregious, Sunquist’s model for doing Christian history could be a mechanism by which one would never need to account for historical injustices that were committed by Christians or which were connected to Christian institutions, texts, beliefs and practices. Sunquist seems to come very close to claiming that cruciform apostolicity means Christians never have to say they are sorry, for why would a Christian need to apologise for someone else’s heresy? Cruciform apostolicity could read as a Protestant version of the Church not being able to err.

Sunquist positions his work in relation to the late Andrew Walls, whose observation that ‘Western theology is too small for global Christianity today’ frames the book. While Sunquist takes a number of anecdotes from the Global South, this book does not read as a revolutionary re-thinking of Christian history with the recent developments of the Churches in the Global South primarily in mind. Like Sunquist, Walls based his theological analysis on the incarnation, though Walls found in the idea of the incarnation the possibility of Christianity’s nearly infinite capacity to ‘incarnate’ in new cultural ‘bodies’.

There is a generosity in Walls’s claim, but also an implicit intellectual conundrum: the tension between the plurality of Christian expression past and present, and one’s ability to call any of them ‘Christian’ at all. Within the subfield of World or Global Christianity, Western scholars have typically exercised caution in making critiques of non-Western expressions of Christianity, given the field’s emergence from colonial-era mission history. If Western theology is too small, the approach articulated in *The shape of Christian history* does not appear to be more capacious, and it is not ultimately clear to me how the book helps one think through the diversity of Christianity, either past or present.

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