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## The Church in the Long Eighteenth Century

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Jeremy Gregory

David Hempton's latest book is the best, most authoritative, and most imaginative overview of the history of the world-wide Christian Church in the period between the late 17th and early 19th centuries we have to date. As the author of a number of powerful and seminal studies of British and global Methodism, of religion and popular culture, of religion and politics in Britain after 1688, and of Evangelicalism and its discontents, Hempton now turns his formidable intellectual range, methodological sophistication, grasp of detail, and creative turn of phrase, to what amounts to nothing less than an overall history of Christianity in the long 18th century. Although intended as a survey and introduction, this does much more than that, and offers not only a wide-ranging synthesis of research, but a compelling interpretation of the changes within the Christian Church in the period, akin to John Bossy's *Christianity in the West, 1450 to 1700* ([1](#)) to which this is in many ways an admirable sequel. Moreover, Hempton is alive not only to the importance of developments in this period for the history of the Church in the long 18th century itself but also to their implications for determining the shape of world Christianity ever since. In this he does not fight shy, admittedly generally in asides, of drawing out some of the 21st-century significance of the 18th-century changes he examines. And while conventional East/ West polarities tend to equate Christianity with the West, Hempton reminds us that one of the most striking aspects of early modern Christianity was its global reach, and Africa, India, the Americas, and Asia are central parts of his story. As he concludes, perhaps the

most significant lesson to draw from his analysis is not to use European Christianity as shorthand for global Christianity, even if the former played a crucial role in shaping the latter. Christianity, as his study demonstrates, perhaps like other great world religions, has the ability to move beyond its particular environment and maybe the source of its strength is its capacity to mean something powerful, and to mean something very different, to people in diverse parts of the globe, while also being able to move beyond the specific local context to create a compelling and persuasive global force. While Hempton doesn't use the term himself, this book is in some ways an exploration of 'glocal' Christianity in the 18th century, exploring the interplay between global and local pushes and pulls in creating a world-wide religion. Throughout, and deftly moving the narrative on, Hempton keeps the large questions and the big picture to the fore, while shrewdly and imaginatively using regional, local and individual examples from around the world to illuminate and add focus to the wider issues at stake.

It is worth acknowledging at the outset the enormity of the task Hempton has set himself. As he notes, the most successful recent overview of Christianity in this period has been a collective task in the multi-authored *Cambridge History of Christianity: Enlightenment, Re-awakening and Revolution*.<sup>(2)</sup> How does this present volume measure up to that? Hempton himself almost seems to invite the comparison, and in the conclusion to his book he observes that better alternatives to the Cambridge subtitle, which he argues are Euro-centric in focus, might be 'imperial power, colonial encounters and native resistance'; or 'mission, hybridisation and indigenisation'. While the Cambridge book will certainly remain the essential reference point for specific topics and geographical regions, the advantage of Hempton's single-authored study is that it gives a coherent interpretation of the whole. Furthermore, while older histories of the Church tended to concentrate on organisations and institutional life, great men, and impersonal abstract forces such as 'the Enlightenment', Hempton goes deeper into social history and highlights the importance of theological ideas, human agency, and particularly the role of women (for example in the anti-slavery campaign), and the self-understanding of the Christian women and men who are at the core of this volume. Reading the book also reminds us of the enormous possibilities for the circulation and travel of both people and ideas in this century, and it is not without significance that the case studies Hempton uses are of individuals who themselves travelled vast distances across continents and cultures, and had their own religious odysseys, thereby undergoing both spiritual as well as geographical change. One might ask how far this impression of movement and travel is in fact typical of the period, and while the opportunities for travel were no doubt greater than in previous centuries, we must not forget those who hardly moved at all, and who stayed in the same parish and district for all their lives. In part, perhaps, the distinctive qualities of the book no doubt owe much to Hempton's own migratory transatlantic career. He has had posts at Belfast, Boston, and Harvard, and he generously cites colleagues at all these institutions and elsewhere who have helped form his thinking and shape his patterns of mind. Would he, one wonders, have written the same book if he had stayed in Belfast?

Hempton's brilliance is seen in the deceptively simple but exciting organisational structure of the volume, dividing it into two parts: the expansion of Christendom (covering its growth and extension beyond Europe, including a stunning survey of the state of Christianity in all parts of the world via the conceit of an interplanetary researcher studying global Christianity); and the transformation of Christendom (by which he means changes within Europe which themselves impacted upon and were altered by the extra-European focus). This organisational device enables him to cover a vast range of topics. The first part, among other issues, explores the ways in which European Christians viewed other civilisations and religions and the relationship between Christianity and empire; the second covers the Enlightenment and science; revivalism; and issues of church and state.

One of the distinctive features of Hempton's first part is his concentration on material culture and especially the art and architecture of global Christianity. The ways in which, for example, baroque churches in Latin America drew on indigenous as well as European styles and forms is a fascinating insight into the creation of a global religion, and more generally Hempton notes that the prevalence of religious art and architecture in the period certainly casts doubt on this as a period when secularisation was occurring. The first part also explores the ways in which, to Western eyes, travelling across the world was in large measure time-travel as non-Christian cultures were viewed by Westerners as pre-biblical. As part of this mind-set, other religions

were usually measured in comparison to Christianity, and Westerners looked for fixed doctrines and a separate priesthood comparable to those in Christianity in other faith traditions. Islam, for example, was frequently seen as a primitive heresy and Hempton notes how, because of Enlightenment criticism of superstition and Protestant evangelicalism, as well as a greater insistence on stricter orthodoxy among Roman Catholicism, Islam was increasingly observed in a negative light. Much the same could be said of other religions, altering a more flexible stance to other faiths which had sometimes existed in the 16th and 17th centuries and where Jesuits, for example, could have what became to be seen as a very tolerant (if not lax) attitude to other religions. While this trajectory of a hardening of attitudes during the 18th century to other faiths is no doubt true in broad terms, and has contemporary resonances for the ways in which Islam has been perceived today by some parts of Western Christian culture, Hempton could also have made more of the Western use of non-Christian religions to critique Christianity, as well as the fascination, as late as the 1790s and early 19th century, by Orientalists such as Sir William Jones, with Asiatic religions. This fascination would continue as a counterpoint to what might be the dominant harsher narrative throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. But, as Hempton argues, bound up with Western perceptions of other religions were western understandings of racial differences, and while the idea of a common humanity was frequently aired, the idea of polygenesis was also attractive to several influential and modernising thinkers, including Hume, which complicates our understanding of 'progress' in 18th-century thought.

The issue of the relationship between Christianity and empire has been much in vogue during the last couple of decades and Hempton contributes a well-focussed discussion, neatly summing up the issues at stake and adding his own sophisticated response to the problems. How far missionary endeavour was part and parcel of colonial expansion, or how far was it an independent force, is a complex question and Hempton navigates the matters involved clearly, pointing out not only the tensions between different religious groups but also the ways in which religious organisations and institutions could criticise colonial governors and ensuring that the relationship between Christianity and empire was never simple, nor the dominant partner easy to discern. How far missionaries were instruments of imperialism, how far they rooted out native ways of life, and how far this necessitated a head-on conflict with other world religions are subjects treated in a nuanced fashion.

As a crucial driver propelling the missionary endeavour Hempton places 'heart religion' centre stage. While the 'religion of the heart' has been well documented for various types of Protestant evangelical traditions, and indeed the phrase is usually reserved for developments within Protestant Evangelicalism and particularly Methodism, Hempton's important contribution is to highlight the parallels between Roman Catholic and Protestant developments in spirituality, and where 'heart religion' can be seen as much as a Catholic as a Protestant enterprise. In this, Hempton's argument can be seen to be building on John Bossy's crucial insight that Protestant and Catholic developments in the 16th and 17th centuries had distinct similarities, and were in fact part of the same movement in the history of Christianity. Hempton (acknowledging the influence on his thinking of Michelle Molina) sees crucial parallels between Protestant pietists and the Jesuits, exploring the connections between what he calls spiritual discipline, self-formation, and missionary service across the religious divide. This is an exciting and innovative argument and approach and promises to encourage further comparative work on this matter. Hempton's ability to see convergences and similarities across religious confessions is refreshing and adds new insights into the religious history of the long 18th century. Nevertheless, where it has long been acknowledged that Protestants read Roman Catholic sources, and drew on, while at the same time critiquing, innovations in Catholic religiosity, further work is needed on how far Catholics read Protestant texts, and there is little doubt that Hempton's discussion will excite future research into this immensely important topic.

How did the various forms of Christianity which existed in the 18th century engage with other religions, and how far were Christian denominations affected or changed by that encounter? In answering these crucial questions, Hempton notes the various models which have been used to describe and explain this relationship, from syncretism and hybridity to power relations and native agency and resistance, as well as showing his reservations with these models if too strictly defined and too narrowly applied. For instance, although he emphasises the importance of indigenous agency and resistance, Hempton also recognises that agency was

never pure and unidirectional and that it itself had been shaped by external factors and indeed could make Western Christian forces their own. One of the set-piece responses to these wider issues in earlier studies has often been a discussion of the Chinese rites controversy. However, Hempton notes that concentration on this matter may actually itself be a Eurocentric perspective since many Christians in China knew nothing, and presumably cared less, about it. Moreover, other Christians in Asia were little aware of Rome and its demands, such as the Thomas Christians in India who did not recognise Mary as the Mother of God. One of the subjects to which Hempton gives a relatively large amount of attention both in this section and in the book as a whole is the part played by black Africans in his argument. The topic is, of course, examined in his exploration of slavery and the rise of the anti-slavery movement, but he also reminds us that until about the 1730s most African Christians were Catholic and after then the majority were Protestant. To consider these developments, and their impact, he focuses on the extraordinary story of Rebecca Protten who became a Moravian deaconess and Hempton considers that she was likely to have been 'the first black woman to be ordained in western Christianity' and 'sowed the seeds of a black Protestant international movement' which he argues was one of the 'tectonic shifts' of the age.

The second section of the book examines topics which have more usually found themselves discussed in general accounts of the Church in this period but to which Hempton brings his own insights and concerns. His powerful chapter on the Enlightenment (during which he explores topics such as the relationship between science and religion, religious toleration, anti-slavery, and the vexed question of secularisation) deserves to be widely read as a summary of current thinking. But Hempton never sits on the fence. While he acknowledges the massive continuities which existed between the 18th century and earlier periods in religious thinking and action (such as the confessional divide), he emphasises the importance of the changes which put strains on older habits of mind and ways of behaving. Nevertheless, he notes that 'full-blown materialism' was 'rarely in view' and the practicalities and necessities of day-to-day living rather than high-flown ideology accounted for the growth of religious toleration. His consideration of how far the period witnessed the growth of secularisation is a useful corrective to some of the conventional thinking on the matter, and he observes that developments in America were for religious liberty rather than secularisation in any meaningful sense, and in general cautions against the modern understanding of a divide between Europe and the USA.

As might be expected from his previous publications, Hempton's account of the Protestant Evangelical Revival is a *tour de force*. He sums up swathes of scholarship in pithy and witty prose, seeing it, as he has done elsewhere as the most important development in the history of Christianity since the Reformation. The final chapter on issues of Church and State argues that it was not so much the failings of ecclesiastical institutions or the clergy (often the figures of attack in older histories) but the pressures put on them by massive population change and the rise of new denominations. But, as he reminds us, whatever the attacks on established forms of Christianity in the 18th century, established churches exist to this day in England and Scotland.

Hempton's study of the Christian Church in the long 18th century is, therefore, generally very different from the older studies of the Church in the *ancien regime*, which focused almost solely on tithe controversies, the state of the clergy and the episcopate, and popular antipathy to religious institutions, and which were almost solely concerned with Europe, and where, despite its geographical coverage, the heart of the relevant *Cambridge History of Christianity* volume could be said to have extended these considerations world-wide rather than reconceptualising the history of religion in the age per se. Thus in many ways Hempton can be said to have transformed both the subject matter and the genre of general histories of the Church in this period. Where conventional studies, focusing on Europe, and often under the shadow of the paradigm of the French Revolution, tended to write the history of the Church in the long 18th century as a narrative of decline and waning of influence, Hempton can conclude, with his world-wide focus, that 'by the early nineteenth century the Christian west had emerged as the economic powerhouse of the world?', although it would take a different book to explain how far, and why, it was the West's Christianity which could account for its dominant position globally at the end of the period covered by this volume. Nevertheless, at a time when publishers are trying to persuade newly minted PhDs to turn their theses into broader books, Hempton

shows that the writing of overviews and syntheses, perhaps even the writing of text books, should be reserved for senior scholars who, like him, are at the very top of their game.

## Notes

1. John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400?1700* (Oxford, 1985).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Cambridge History of Christianity: Vol 7, Enlightenment, Re-awakening and Revolution*, ed. Stewart Brown and Timothy Tackett (Cambridge, 2006).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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