CONFERENCE REPORTS

INTERPRETING CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY: GLOBAL PROCESSES AND LOCAL IDENTITIES. REPORT ON A CONFERENCE ORGANIZED BY THE CURRENTS IN WORLD CHRISTIANITY PROJECT, HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA, 3-7 JULY 2001

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For the final conference of a six-year venture, which began as the North Atlantic Missiology Project, Currents in World Christianity took on the interaction of the global and the local in Christianity across the world today. An earlier meeting, as Brian Stanley has noted (\textit{JRA}, XXXI, 1, 2001, p. 116), had already highlighted the ambiguous and subtle combinations of the ‘local and the universal, the national and the international’ in modern mission history. This was an opportunity to look beyond the portrayal of globalization as primarily an economic phenomenon at work in destructive global capitalism, and consider its religious ramifications in culture and society. Some hundred participants gathered at the University of Pretoria’s Hammanskraal campus—itself an intriguing introduction to the new South Africa, as an erstwhile Afrikaner academic powerhouse is busy Africanizing the former site of a radical Catholic seminary. Funding by Pew Charitable Trusts facilitated a good turn-out from Africa, while East Asia was also relatively well represented in the international spectrum; all ten plenary speakers, however, regardless of origin, are based at present in universities in Britain or the United States—apart from Paul Freston in Brazil. This was also a very male gathering, mustering barely a dozen women—though women in fact gave two of the best plenaries, and a couple of the most interesting among 24 shorter communications.

Dana Robert opened the conference with a powerful reminder of an earlier era of globalizing Christianity, when optimistic western
students and missionaries in the years between the World Wars saw an international faith community as a kind of Christian League of Nations and the fulfilment of diverse local spiritual aspirations. They promoted outstanding leaders from the ‘younger churches’ as ambassadors of world friendship, yet wrestled with the contradictions and local contestations of indigenizing the gospel in culturally specific art and writing. Edith Blumhofer, in another strong historical analysis, ‘Consuming Fire: Pandita Ramabai and the Global Pentecostal Impulse’, showed how this remarkable Indian woman (a global mahatma before Gandhi via the world press, suggested Robert Frykenberg) drew from the whole gamut of western Christianity, from Anglican nuns to liberal Boston ‘Brahmins’ and Unitarians, then the Keswick holiness movement. Yet the west’s quenching powers of appropriation were depressingly evident in the way American Pentecostals snuffed out the autonomous female revival that had begun at Ramabai’s huge Mukti widow community in 1905. Another example of how unpredictable and unstoppable the interaction of local and global can be came in Silas Wu’s account of the remarkable recent growth of Watchman Nee’s ‘Recovery’ churches. Here was a ‘sect’ seemingly isolated from the rest of the world by repressive persecution in the 1950s and 1960s yet, as Andrew Walls reminded us in his closing evaluations, its Chinese founder was influenced by the devotional writings of a Scot (Andrew Murray) sent to South Africa at the request of leaders in Holland, and its members are now to be found not only in Taiwan, California and Brazil, but also in South Africa among non-Chinese locals—some of whom attended the talk! Another accessible and informative portrayal of the global reach of Christianity (and higher education’s international links) came in Joel Carpenter’s analysis of the 40 evangelical Protestant universities founded since 1980 in Latin America, Europe and the Soviet Union, Africa and Asia, as governments prove unable to cope with local demand. Three recent, fast-growing examples are Africa University in eastern Zimbabwe, Central University College, Accra, and Hangdong University, South Korea, with Daystar, now based in Nairobi, the pioneer prototype. These are not just Bible colleges, but award arts and science degrees as preparation for Christian professional employment in the new global and high-tech economy.

In situations of interreligious and communal conflict, how does one tease out factors which are global in origin—such as Islamic fundamentalism or US-influenced Pentecostalism—and those deriving much more from local histories of inter-ethnic rivalry? Examples were offered from Nigeria and north-east India. Akintunde Akinade, highlighting