



10-19-2022

**Turning Points in the Expansion of Christianity: From Pentecost to the Present, Alice T. Ott, Baker Academic, 2021 (ISBN 978-0-8010-9996-0), Xxii + 298 Pp., Pb \$29.99."**

Olegs Andrejevs  
*Loyola University Chicago*, [oandrej@luc.edu](mailto:oandrej@luc.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/theology\\_facpubs](https://ecommons.luc.edu/theology_facpubs)

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

**Recommended Citation**

Andrejevs, Olegs. Turning Points in the Expansion of Christianity: From Pentecost to the Present, Alice T. Ott, Baker Academic, 2021 (ISBN 978-0-8010-9996-0), Xxii + 298 Pp., Pb \$29.99.". Reviews in Religion & Theology, 29, 4: 278-281, 2022. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/irt.14175>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#)  
© 2022 The Authors

cite papal or conciliar pronouncements as givens, and, still more, his tendency to gloss over historical or exegetical problems or perhaps to smooth out differences among texts—see, for example, the discussion of the divine conservation of the universe in biblical texts (p. 215), or the odd conflation of Anabaptists and Manicheans (p. 304). The book contains a few howlers, as when the Hebrew *adam* is derived from the Aramaic (!) *adamah* and glossed as ‘what is drawn from the earth’ (p. 349). On the other hand, in a book as ambitious and far-ranging as this one, such minor problems inevitably occur. Many theologically inclined readers will find the treatment of human evolution and history to be an area for further discussion, as O’Callaghan himself acknowledges.

In sum, this volume will serve readers as a thoughtful guide to Roman Catholic (and to some extent, more broadly Christian) understandings of the universe as a created order and humanity’s place within it. Even those whose commitments differ from O’Callaghan in small or large ways will find his work to display the sheer beauty of such understandings in a world that cries out for meaning and love.

Mark W. Hamilton  
Abilene Christian University



**Turning Points in the Expansion of Christianity: From Pentecost to the Present**, Alice T. Ott, Baker Academic, 2021 (ISBN 978-0-8010-9996-0), xxii + 298 pp., pb \$29.99

The title of this informative book conveys its mission quite accurately. In her focused cross-section of important events and developments in Christianity’s history, Alice T. Ott traces the milestones in the spread of the Christian faith.

Arranged chronologically, the discussion moves across the following landmarks: (1) the Jerusalem Council of 49 CE; (2) St. Patrick’s mission to Ireland (fifth century); (3) the East Syrian mission to China (seventh century); (4) St. Boniface’s mission to Germany (early eighth century); (5) the Chinese Rites controversy (late seventeenth–early eighteenth century); (6) Zinzendorf’s Moravian missions (eighteenth century); (7) William Carey’s mission to India (1793–1834); (8) British abolitionism and mission to Africa (nineteenth century); (9) Henry Venn’s Three-Self theory and its implementation in late nineteenth century; (10) the scramble for Africa in the era of imperialism; (11) the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910; and (12) the Lausanne Congress on World

Evangelization of 1974. The author takes care to situate these events in their historical context; as a result, each chapter covers much more than is suggested by its title. The reader will notice the gap of about a thousand years between St. Boniface and the Rites controversy. The majority of the book is dedicated to the developments that took place in the last three centuries.

In the Introduction, Ott defines the concept of turning points and explains her decision regarding 'which turning points are the most crucial' (p. xix). The author notes that other milestones could have been chosen. For example, the Second Vatican Council and 'the impact of liberation theology on Roman Catholic missiology' are said to be 'worthy of attention' but ultimately have been excluded because, on the author's definition, 'they are not directly turning points in the expansion of Christianity' (p. xix; see more on Vatican II in the penultimate paragraph of this review). The turning points identified by Ott are connected by their participation in Christianity's expansion 'across cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious frontiers into territories where there was little or no Christian presence' (p. xix). Ott notes programmatically that the 'expansion of Christianity occurred through the combined efforts of Western and non-Western missionaries' (p. xvi). This theme is illustrated prominently throughout the book.

The first chapter offers a fairly close summary of Acts of the Apostles. The next three chapters analyze a triad of great missionary endeavors in the first millennium of the common era. Chapter 2 ('Pushing beyond the Boundaries of the Empire') covers St. Patrick's conversion of Ireland and Pope Gregory the Great's subsequent mission to England. Chapter 3 analyzes the Eastward expansion of the Syrian Church, including to India (the plausibility of St Thomas's legendary mission is affirmed—pp. 51–52). Chapter 4 focuses on St Boniface's endeavors, while also paying attention to previous missions to the continent (see, similarly, Chapter 2 on Palladius). Ott does not over-romanticize the apparent reality of the events that took place during this early time period: 'coerced conversion ... was common in the post-Constantinian world' (pp. 35–36); '[t]he hostility between Christianity and paganism ... almost exclusively took the form of destroying pagan sites' (p. 55); St Boniface deliberately attempted to demonstrate 'the powerlessness of Thor to strike [him] down' by defiling Thor's shrine (p. 66). In a brilliant turn reflective of the book's masterful storytelling, Ott promptly alerts the reader that 'Boniface was never in grave danger ... the felling of the Oak of Thor took place but a stone's throw from a Frankish military installation' (p. 68).

Chapter 5, with its leap to the year 1707 and the culmination of the Rites controversy, essentially marks the beginning of the book's second half. Ott praises the early Jesuits such as St Ignatius Loyola, Matteo Ricci, and Roberto de Nobili for practicing cultural accommodation a.k.

a. contextualization (p. 90) in missionary work, contrasting it with the 'blank slate approach to culture' (p. 92). However, Ott has some critique for Ricci's presentation of Christianity and other strategic decisions (pp. 94–107). This notwithstanding, she assesses the 'Jesuit cultural accommodation' policy overall as 'groundbreaking, innovative, and a turning point' (p. 105). The book's remaining chapters make it clear that 'the best missionaries sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the local culture and religion' (p. 273), 't[aking] societal and political norms into account' (p. 274). The Jesuits who were trying to translate European rites into Chinese terms therefore provide an appropriate starting point for the ensuing portion of Ott's discussion. While their reputation may have been briefly 'blackened' (p. 105) as a result of the Rites controversy, it was surely only in the eyes of contemporary European conservatives.

Chapters 6 through 11 focus on the rapid expansion of Christianity in the last three centuries. Special attention is given to the Moravian missions, 'a giant leap forward for the global witness of Protestants' (p. 130) that 'soon eclipsed all predecessors' (p. 131); William Carey's Baptist mission to India; the American Baptist Missionary Union's mission to Burma; the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions' mission to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii); the Church Missionary Society's mission to Sierra Leone; the Ministry of the Universities' mission to Central Africa; the early work of the China Inland Mission (now OMF International), with special focus on its founder J. Hudson Taylor; the intervention by missionary activists that helped shed light on Leopold II's atrocities in Congo and ultimately led to Congo's transfer to the Belgian government; and the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. The above list offers but a selection of themes and subsections from these highly informative chapters.

Ott's closing chapter analyzes the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (LCWE), 'the brainchild of Billy Graham' (p. 246), and looks into the missions in and from Nigeria, Brazil, and Korea before and after Lausanne. The Lausanne Covenant regarded the fact that 'more than two-thirds of mankind ... have yet to be evangelized [as] a standing rebuke to us and to the whole church' (p. 248). The reader will recall Ott mention in her Introduction that the Second Vatican Council could have been included among this book's turning points (p. xix). The Lausanne Congress may not have been as balanced in its views on salvation as Vatican II. Still, granted a number of significant differences, closer study of the Second Vatican Council should reveal a lot of analogs. Crucially, this would include Vatican II's insistence on the responsibility of all Christians to partake in the mission of the Church and spreading the Gospel. One wonders, moreover, if LCWE, at least at this point in time, can be viewed as a turning point on par with the others discussed in the book. In fact, this closing chapter, with its emphasis on 'the worldwide

mission of the church' (p. 252) and 'cross-cultural evangelism' (p. 267) 'beyond national boundaries' (p. 268), reads somewhat like a wish list of what might have been. It offers a good reminder that half a century ago evangelical Christianity may have had a very different set of objectives from those it appears to have in the post-Trump world where Christian nationalism seems to set the terms. Perhaps, the legacy of LCWE can still overcome the present moment.

The book's primary audience includes everyone interested in Christian mission work and its history. It should be required reading for anyone considering becoming a missionary (the author has extensive experience in the field, on prominent display in her assessment of the historic events). It will also be of interest to every serious student of Christianity's history. Ott's discussion has much to offer to specialists but is accessible to laypersons and even readers not familiar with Christianity. Each chapter begins with a fragment from a thematically relevant (and historically appropriate) hymn or a poem and concludes with a prayer. This book is clearly structured, masterfully written, and offers informative analysis of the 'turning points' under consideration. It can be highly recommended.

Olegs Andrejevs  
Loyola University Chicago



**The Oxford Handbook of Humanism**, Anthony Pinn (ed.), Oxford University Press, 2021 (ISBN 978-0-19-092153-8), xxviii + 796 pp., hb £115

Humanism is of no small interest in today's modern world. Anthony Pinn, Professor of Humanities and Religion at Rice University, has helpfully compiled the *Oxford Handbook of Humanism* to situate, explore, and orient readers around this continually developing movement.

Part I explores humanist movements in different areas of the world (East Asia, Africa, Middle East, Americas, and Europe). Part II summarizes intellectual histories from the Medieval World to the 'Modern Age'. Part III contains three chapters on the organization of humanism, and Part IV six chapters on humanism's various manifestations in literature, film, music, humor, visual arts, and sports. Part V looks at the intersection of humanism with politics and higher education, while Part VI provides a survey of humanism's contributions to various social issues like human dignity, environmentalism, gender, race, sexuality, and class/economics. Part VII looks at 'Private Life' practices, and the last Part