



The Second 2004–2005 Word & World Lecture

The Cost of Discipleship: The Witness of the African Church

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The Acts of the Apostles is a very carefully constructed book. Its subject is the progress of the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem, where Jesus died and rose again, to Rome, center of the great empire and civilization of the day. The author marks milestones on the journey: Samaria, Antioch, Cyprus, across Anatolia and Greece, until at the end of the book we are presented with Paul preaching in Rome. There is just one exception, one event where the book points in another direction. In chapter 8, the narrative is interrupted by the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. The story takes place on an international highway; but instead of describing, like the rest of the book, the westward spread of the gospel, we hear of its movement southwards, into the heart of Africa. We are not told what happened when the “Ethiopian” got back; we are told rather that the Spirit took Philip away while the Ethiopian went joyfully home. It is as though the author is telling us: “My own story is about how the gospel traveled the highway to the West; but there are other stories of the gospel’s progress besides the one I am telling. One day we will see that the stories join up and the gospel is preached to the whole world.”

The story of the gospel in Africa has so far lasted nearly two thousand years, but it has achieved particular importance in the course of the past century. In 1900

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there were perhaps some ten million professing Christians in the whole of the African continent. No one knows how many there are today, but an educated guess might put the number at around 350 million. This explosive growth has made Africa one of the major Christian centers of the world. With the rapid dechristianization of Europe over the same period, Africa has been steadily moving into the place once occupied by Europe in the Christian world. The implications of this change, not least for the intellectual and theological leadership of the church, have not yet been fully realized, either by the church in Africa or by the church in the West.

For the present, let us consider an issue that is foundational to any question of leadership: the quality of discipleship. The test of discipleship is suffering; and Africa, which has known so much suffering, has often been a furnace for the testing of Christian quality. Nor has this been only a development of recent years; the fires of testing have burned constantly over the many centuries that Christianity has been in Africa. We will follow a series of episodes in African Christian history where Christian discipleship was tested by fire—chapters in the history of Christian witness in Africa. The word “martyr” has come to mean one who dies for the sake of Christ, but the basic meaning is simply “witness.” Our stories all concern African witness to Christ that has been tested by fire. They come from different centuries and from different parts of the continent; they show us some of the different ways in which the quality of Christian witness has been revealed in Africa’s past.

CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND STATE WORSHIP: THE MARTYRS OF SCILLI

We begin in the second century, with one of the earliest pieces of African Christian literature to have survived from that time. It is an account of the trial of a group of Christians from the small town of Scilli in what is now Tunisia, held in Carthage, the provincial capital, on July 17, AD 180, before the provincial governor Saturninus. At that period Christians were subject to countless misrepresentations, including the charge that they regularly practiced ritual murder. One of the most common complaints made against Christians was that they were disloyal to their community, the imperial state of which the emperor was the head and symbol. That state took little interest in religion as such; people were free to choose from a huge range of religious options, and were equally free to ignore them; but there was an underlying civil religion concerning the state itself, symbolized by the spirit of the Caesars who had ruled and were ruling the state. And so a sort of patriot test was devised and applied to Christians. It involved sprinkling a few grains of incense into an altar fire as a sacrifice to the imperial *genius* or spirit. The act could be quite perfunctory, it need take only a few minutes, and the great majority of people would undertake it without hesitation. But Christians refused; they would make an offering only to God. As a result, they could be adjudged disloyal to the state, whereas their greatest fear was being disloyal to Christ.

The account of the trial makes clear that the governor, while wishing to deny Christians a platform for propaganda, is not anxious to put them to death. He does

all he can to persuade them from what seems to him obstinate self-destruction; he makes it as easy as possible for them to conform and thus escape death; he is even willing to adjourn the trial to give them time to think. But he allows no escape from the patriot test, and there is no hesitation on the part of the Christians that worship should be reserved to God alone.

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There are three men and three women in the Christian group, and one Speratus is the chief spokesman. The governor opens by making clear that they can be freed if they come back to “good sense.” Speratus replies that they are not criminals, have done no evil, cursed no one, and accepted ill treatment thankfully out of respect to their emperor, Christ. The governor clearly takes this as a religious, not a political, statement. “We are religious too,” he says, and describes its simple essence: an oath (which would involve sacrifice) to the emperor’s spirit. Speratus asks for a hearing so that he can explain the Christian position, but the governor refuses, fearing a denunciation of state religion. Speratus insists that Christians serve God alone and in obedience to him live righteously and pay their taxes, and that their prosecution makes use of false witness and murder. Giving up on Speratus, the governor appeals to the others not to share this folly, but in vain. “We have nothing to fear but God in heaven,” says one of the men. “Honor to Caesar as Caesar, but fear to God,” says one of the women. The governor proposes they take time to think it over, but Speratus replies that in so straightforward a matter there is nothing to think over. The governor, perhaps remembering some of the horror stories circulating about Christians, then asks suspiciously what is in the box they carry; it turns out to be only their scriptures, including letters of Paul, “a righteous man,” as the Christians assert against the implied accusation of using evil books. The governor makes one last attempt to persuade them, offering them a month to consider. He then announces, “Whereas Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the rest have confessed that they live in accordance with the religious rites of the Christians and, when an opportunity was given them of returning to the usage of the Romans, persevered in their obstinacy, the sentence is that they should be put to the sword.” The response of the Christians was, “Thanks be to God—today we are martyrs in heaven.” The writer of the account adds, “And so they were all crowned with martyrdom together, and they reign with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit throughout all ages.” It is significant that one of our earliest accounts of African Christianity should describe a martyrdom.¹

¹The account of the trial of the martyrs of Scilli occurs in many anthologies of early church texts. A convenient edition is E. C. E. Owen, *Some Authentic Acts of the Early Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927). In this essay, Owen’s translation has been slightly revised. On the persecutions generally, and especially in North Africa, see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (New York: New York University Press, 1977).

CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND THE POWERS OF EVIL: ANTONY OF EGYPT

Our second episode comes from the Nile Valley a century later—a pre-Arab Egypt where rural people, speaking a language related to ancient Egyptian, lived as other African villagers did and do, tilling the soil, dependent for their livelihood on the bountiful but capricious waters of the Nile. The earliest surviving literature in the Coptic language indicates something of their worldview; it consists of magical formulae intended to supply power and protection to people facing constant danger from forces seen and unseen. At an early date, and by means that are still unclear, the Christian faith began to spread among these Coptic-speaking cultivators. Most of what we know about early Christianity comes from urban settings; the Nile Valley offers a sight of rural people steadily coming to the faith. The early magical literature gives place to the Sahidic translation of the New Testament; evidently Coptic people had found a new source of power and protection in Christian faith.

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An early Christian biography from this region gives the clear impression that the local community it describes was, by around AD 270, largely Christian. At that time the nearest large city, Alexandria, was still subject to the sort of state persecution that brought the martyrs of Scilli to their deaths. The biography in question is that of Antony, born in the village of Coma around AD 251. His family was prosperous in local terms, but Antony refused the Greek education that his family wealth could have bought him and that could have taken him into the urban cosmopolitan class. The biography speaks of his zealous attendance at church and careful attention to the scripture reading. It is a reminder that in an oral society, where few would have access to written scriptures of their own, the key aspect of the church service was neither sermon nor liturgy, but the reading of scripture. From the scriptures read publicly, Antony heard the call to be a disciple of Christ and was increasingly convicted of how shallow his own discipleship was. His parents died—he was not yet twenty—and he inherited the small estate. It was the readings—the story of the rich young ruler and the Lord’s charge to take no thought for the morrow—that caused him to give up his inheritance and leave his village in order to seek the life of a true disciple.

He was not the first to do this; there were already holy people living outside some Christian villages, but still in touch with their communities, so that villagers could consult them or seek their prayers. Antony visited these in turn to learn the special virtues or spiritual skills of each; learning gentleness from one, wakefulness in prayer from another, how to live with little food and little sleep, and above all learning to pray. He was preparing for a great spiritual encounter.

It is here that we can see how African was Antony's view of the world. As an African villager, he sees a universe packed with power—power that had potential for evil. As a Christian he identifies the evil powers known to all rural people with the devil. Satan himself leads the malign forces that obstruct his path to discipleship. And the natural habitat of such forces was the desert, the places where most people did not go, and above all in tombs and graveyards.

While Antony was visiting older disciples living beyond their villages, he was constantly assailed with what one might call ordinary temptations. He believed that Satan sought to discourage him by the difficulty of the disciple's life, to distract him with thoughts of his family, to seduce him by thoughts of the pleasures and especially the sexual delights that he was missing. In his accounts of these temptations, the demonic forces often take visible form, sometimes male, sometimes female. At length came a climactic experience in which he was assured that Christ had won the victory; he could say to Satan himself, "From now on I shall have no anxiety about you. The Lord is my helper, and I shall look upon my enemies."

Spiritual warfare had marked his whole life from the time he had embarked on the path of discipleship, but from now on the spiritual combat intensified. That experience of Christ's victory prepared him for the innovation he now undertook. He moved from the village environs into desert country—where the demons lived. He made his home in the graveyard of a village now abandoned to the desert, a natural haunt of evil forces. In the name of Christ, this disciple was about to challenge the demons on their own ground. Local people understood what he was undertaking, for, taking food and water for several days, he arranged for more to be brought to him later. In the tombs, evil resorted to frontal attack. A host of demons beat him and tortured him. The water carrier, concerned for him and hearing strange loud noises, came back before the time that had been arranged and found Antony mercilessly beaten and apparently dead. He carried him to the nearest village and laid him in the church, where the villagers came and stayed with him until nightfall, when one by one they fell asleep. Antony, regaining consciousness, insisted on being carried back to the tombs. The result was dramatic. In Antony's account, wild beasts—lions, wolves, scorpions—attacked him, but he refused to leave. The ferocity of the attack was due to Satan's well-founded fear that, were Antony to stay in territory acknowledged to be in the domain of evil forces, others would join him and demonic rule in the desert would be at an end. When Satan finally acknowledged defeat and conceded the tombs to Christian prayer, the good effects of the victory over evil were felt in the local community. Sick people received healing, bereaved people were comforted, long-standing feuds were settled. Antony's victory had blessed the neighborhood.

In Western histories of spirituality, Antony's importance is associated with the beginnings of monasticism, and his withdrawal to the desert is often portrayed as retreat from the world. If we read the story in its African context, it looks rather different. Antony sees the move to the desert not in terms of escape, but of conflict.

Antony cannot be understood apart from his African Christian view of a power-packed spiritual universe where Christ's victory must be displayed.

This was no emaciated ascetic; observers remarked on Antony's magnificent physique. His regimen as a disciple of Christ had brought him to that perfect balance and harmony with the environment for which humanity was created.

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He was not long left on his own. Just as he had visited other experienced disciples, so people visited him, often, as his fame spread. They came from far away, seeking his counsel, his prayers, his example. Many stayed; the Enemy's fears were realized, for the desert, once left to the demons, became, as some said, a city where the praises of Christ were perpetually sung. The spiritual wisdom of Antony and the Desert Fathers who succeeded him was treasured up in collections. They are perhaps the first written collections of African proverb literature, the first literary voice of the African peasant.

How shall we sum up Antony's witness to Christ? Antony represents perhaps the first revival movement that we know of in the early church. His conversion is not from paganism, but from ordinary Christianity. He lived when persecution still afflicted the church, and two of the only three visits he made to the great city were made to encourage its martyrs. The long arm of the state does not seem to have reached his rural area, but his call to radical discipleship and his witness to Christ were no less costly than those that led to death in the arena. The Christian life could not be an easygoing one; discipleship could not be combined with self-indulgence. Christian discipleship involves conflict with principalities and powers. The first stream of African Christian witness, as represented in the martyrs of Scilli, met the principalities and powers in the structures of society and paid with their blood. The second stream, represented in Antony, met them as spiritual forces deep in the constitution of the universe. They realized that those forces were impregnable to easygoing discipleship. Only when disciples took up the cross in order to be indeed Christ's disciples were they broken.²

THE WITNESS THAT TRANSFORMS: TAKLA HAYMANOT OF ETHIOPIA

Antony lived to be 104. Somewhere around the time of his death in the middle of the fourth century, a peculiar chain of circumstances involving some ship-

²The early life of Antony referred to here is almost certainly by Athanasius; it occurs in most collections of that father's works, including that in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. A. Robertson); see also Tim Vivian, ed., *The Coptic Life of Anthony* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1994). Of many studies of the outcome of Antony's movement, Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), may be found especially useful.

wrecked Christians led to the foundation of a Christian church in the East African kingdom of Aksum, and eventually its ruler and elders were converted. This was the nucleus of the church of Ethiopia. In the seventh century, as the whole world knows, a monotheistic prophet arose in Arabia whose uncompromising preaching made him unpopular in his idolatrous home city of Mecca. His followers were persecuted, and some of them fled across the water to Aksum, where they received shelter. It may be the kindness of African Christians to these first Muslims that lies behind these words of the Qur'an: "You will find those nearest in affection to you among those who are called Christians." The affection was, alas, to cool in later times.

Aksum and its Christian faith spread inland, on to the high plateau of Ethiopia. Christian migrants moved too, from Tigre, the old Aksumite heartland, into the interior. But would they carry their faith with them or retain it at all in their new surroundings? They were a minority, in unfamiliar surroundings, living among people who had never been Christians and with very little pastoral care. Their indigenous neighbors worshiped the gods of the land, the local territorial spirits. One might well judge that, rather than becoming missionaries to their indigenous neighbors, it would be more likely that the Christian migrants would become assimilated to them and the recognition of the territorial spirits. What prevented this outcome was a series of revival movements in the Ethiopian church that reflected the sort of discipleship that Antony had sought and that produced some outstanding witnesses to the power of Christ. The most famous of these is Takla Haymanot (ca. 1215–1313). It is difficult to separate the historical from the legendary in his remarkable career, but it is clear that, like Antony, he spent years developing a prayer life that would enable him both to confront evil powers and to sustain immense physical hardship and deprivation. Following this preparation he addressed himself first to the old Christians, the immigrants from Tigre, encouraging them, invigorating them, dragging them from compromise with the gods of the land. Then he turned to the indigenous communities, where the Christian presence was very weak, preaching Christ, confronting the territorial spirits in often dramatic power encounters, cutting down sacred trees. People said that the "satans," as the old sources call the territorial spirits who lived in those trees, fled in panic.

Takla Haymanot's next step was to collect young men from the Christian community and train them in the life of prayer that he knew. He chose as his training ground an area with very few Christians. The environment was harsh; his first disciples had to live on berries. They learned Christian scholarship the hard way; copying a gospel while seated on a narrow ledge above a precipice must have concentrated the mind wonderfully. People who had undergone this sort of spiritual training, learning to pray with Takla Haymanot, were not afraid of the low-grade territorial spirits at a local shrine. Nor did they fear the wrath of the most powerful chiefs or kings, pagan or Christian, but would rebuke them for their transgressions.

The Ethiopian Church has had a troubled history. Many times it has seemed likely that it would disappear; amazingly, it has survived. For centuries it was cut off from most of the Christian world. In the fifteenth century it was the target of a great jihad intended to wipe it out. Thousands of Ethiopian Christians were killed or forced to convert, hundreds of churches and monasteries were destroyed, multitudes of scriptures and Christian books were burned in a period of cultural geno-

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cide. Christianity is not like Islam in the power to retain the allegiance of peoples century after century; Christianity often seems to wither in areas where it seems historically strong, and then find new life and strength elsewhere. In this respect the church of Ethiopia, with all its many problems, is unusual. There are not many places in the world where a church has a continuous history of nearly 1700 years. East Africa is one of them, and the witness of Takla Haymanot and his like is part of the reason. Once more the future was shaped by Christian disciples who refused the easy option and took up the Master’s cross.³

TESTING TIME FOR YOUNG CHRISTIANS: THE UGANDA MARTYRS

In 1875 the explorer Henry Morton Stanley described to the Western world a populous, well-governed state in the heart of Africa, called Buganda. It was, he declared, open to Western influence and had already been penetrated by Muslim Arab influence. An almost instant response came from British Protestants and French Catholics, and their respective parties arrived at almost the same time.

Buganda was a sacred monarchy. When the Arabs had spoken to the Kabaka of Buganda about Allah, his first reply had been, “Where is there a God greater than I?” He was in sober earnest—no greater veneration was paid to anyone in Buganda than to the ancestral royal house. The Kabaka installed both missions at his court, and the two versions of Christianity went forth simultaneously. Initial response was slow, but in the early 1880s numbers of young men, members of the ruling class from which district chiefs were recruited, moved towards the Christian faith. The Kabaka soon found that their embrace of Christian teaching made them unwilling to cooperate with his sexual activities. Enraged, the Kabaka moved to damp down the Christian movement. Aware that the Protestants were expecting a bishop to come to the infant church, he ensured that the bishop was killed before he could arrive. Then he turned on the young converts. Some were tortured, some

³The source materials for Takla Haymanot are complex: see G. W. B. Huntingford, “The lives of Saint Takla Haymanot,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 4 (1966) 35–40. A useful analysis is given by Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

cut and sliced with knives, many were thrown on the fire and burned to death. These were very young Christians, with little teaching and limited knowledge of their faith, who reached martyrdom before they reached maturity. Some were Catholic, some Protestant, but the two missions were equally helpless; the word of the sacred monarch was law in Buganda.

But the infant church of Buganda stayed firm; there was no major departure from the faith. And after a few years, there came an extraordinary mass movement, with hundreds declaring their allegiance to Christ. This movement had little to do directly with the missions; the Catholics had actually temporarily withdrawn from the area, and the Protestants were down to one man, and he died when the conversion movement was at its height. By 1890, Buganda could be described as a substantially Christian kingdom, where leaders in the state were often leaders in the church also. The slaughter of the young men bore a rich harvest among their peers and successors.

Buganda produced its own missionaries who worked outside their area of cultural comfort as much as any Western missionary, and it produced not a few saints also. Apolo Kivebulaya, who was both missionary and saint, moved the Christian frontier deep into Congo. It was the custom of his people to be buried with the head pointing to home. The dying Apolo asked that he be buried with his head towards the Congo, towards the people with whom he wanted to share the gospel.

By the 1920s, Christianity had spread through vast areas of Uganda, and in many places Christianity could be taken for granted as the general custom of the neighborhood, as it had been in Antony's village many centuries earlier. Again, as with Antony, there was a movement of revival, of renewal, that transformed whole communities. It began in a mission party, part English, part Ganda, that was opening work in Rwanda. The party became bogged down with racial tensions and bitterness. Then both groups confessed their sinfulness and were reconciled. The renewal movement spread back to Uganda and developed as a movement of radical Christianity, challenging cherished sins and long-standing compromises with territorial powers outside Christ, and the piling up of wealth. It opened unexpected ways for lay and for women's ministry. How the movement spread to other parts of East Africa—to Tanzania, Kenya, Sudan—taking different forms as it did so, lies beyond the scope of this essay. For the present, it is enough to note that suffering, witness, and renewal have been recurrent themes of African Christian history from its earliest centuries to our own times.⁴

⁴On Buganda, see John V. Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda* (London: SCM, 1958); on the martyrs, see John Francis Faupel, *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs* (London: Chapman, 1962). On the Ganda role in spreading the Christian faith, see M. Louise Pirouet, *Black Evangelists: The Spread of Christianity in Uganda* (London: Collings, 1978), and on Apolo Kivebulaya, see Anne Luck, *African Saint: The Story of Apolo Kivebulaya* (London: SCM, 1965).

DEATH HAS COME TO REVEAL THE FAITH: SUDAN TODAY

Colonial rule did more for the spread of Islam than all the jihads, and nowhere has this been more true than in the Sudan. Colonial rule, under the unusual guise of a condominium between Britain and Egypt, assisted a steady expansion of Islam and brought into being, at independence, a country where Arab Islamic rule was secured over peoples who were neither Arab nor Islamic. After independence, the cry “One nation, one faith” helped to consolidate that rule and to restrict or force out Christian missions.

Sudan has suffered more appalling violence than most countries could bear—almost unremittingly from 1964 until the present. It has seen whole populations uprooted from their land and their way of life—and the cattle that supported that way of life destroyed. Many of its Christian communities have been scattered—exiled to camps in Kenya and Ethiopia, or to shantytowns around Khartoum, driven from their towns to a countryside devastated by scorched-earth policies. There have been many martyrs and, as often in former times, their blood has been as seed. Areas that resisted the gospel for decades have responded to it. There are many stories about the *jak*, the traditional spirits of the land, now deserting that land, telling local people as they leave that they should no longer worship them but worship Nhiliac, God, instead. Soldiers in the early days of armed resistance “smoked the Bible,” that is, tore out its leaves to roll cigarettes; the time came when they wanted Bibles to read.

The Dinka poet Mary Aluel Garang has a haunting line: “Death has come to reveal the faith.” In the unspeakable suffering of Sudan, not only has the faith of Christ spread, but servants of the Christ who suffered have recognized new dimensions to their faith. So perhaps some further lines by this Christian poet of South Sudan may bring our survey of African Christian martyrs and witnesses to a conclusion in the present day.

God has come among us slowly,
And we didn't realize it.
He stands nearby, behind our hearts,
Shining his pure light upon us.
We ask you, our Father,
Great Lord of peace in heaven,
Who is calling us with a whisper.
Our Father knows the depths of the heart of humankind.
Our faith is weak; make us strong,
That we may stand firm with courage,
Until you reach us undeterred....

Send us your power, O Lord,
The guiding Spirit of truth

To teach us the law which has been written.
We receive salvation slowly, slowly,
All of us together, with no one left behind.⁵

Our chosen chapters from the long history of Christ's church in Africa provide abundant testimony to the cost of discipleship, the processes that produce Christian quality.⁶ In its witness to Christ the African church has had to withstand false gods, sometimes dressed up in patriotic garb. It has seen recurrent renewal movements when in danger of succumbing to easygoing Christianity. It has known what Paul calls the principalities and powers, and confronted them in the guise of both malign spiritual entities and malign political structures. In the light of events of our own day, is it not right to ask: Whom has God been preparing through the fires of affliction for leadership in his church at large? ⊕

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⁵The recent (and earlier) Christian history of Sudan is explored in the monograph series Faith in Sudan, edited by Andrew C. Wheeler and William B. Anderson. Volume 11 in this series, Marc R. Nikkel, *Dinka Christianity: The Origin and Development of Christianity among the Dinka of Sudan with Special Reference to the Songs of Dinka Christians* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2001), is the source of the poem quoted (in Nikkel's translation).

⁶The best general survey of African Christian history is Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Its restricted chronological scope is partly offset by a good introductory section, and by the same author's *History of African Christianity 1950–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971). Other useful general works are: Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1994); Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *History of the Church in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Ogbu U. Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005). More discursive essays on African Christian history are offered by Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); and Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), and *The Cross-Cultural Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).