Ancient and Modern: What the History of Religion Teaches Us About Contemporary Global Trends

Philip Jenkins
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Humanities at Pennsylvania State University
Distinguished Senior Fellow at Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion
Religious developments in the contemporary world attract a great deal of scholarship drawing on a wide range of methodologies — ethnographic, economic, and sociological — but the historical component is still not as prominent as it should be. Certainly modern scholars have traced the historical origins of modern conditions, for example in terms of the Christian missions that created the flourishing churches of Africa and Asia, or the contemporary rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Having said this, surprisingly little work on contemporary conditions draws on the vast and flourishing scholarly literature concerning religion in earlier centuries, in the ancient, medieval and early modern worlds. Historians dwell in one academic world while scholars of contemporary religion inhabit another, and the two sides have little contact.¹

Yet such a separation is unfortunate, in that the earlier history contains a vast amount of information and case-studies that are highly relevant to contemporary conditions. More important, perhaps, these studies tell us repeatedly that contemporary trends that we believe to be modern and unprecedented are in fact no such thing, and that they have often appeared in earlier eras. It is futile, then, to try and explain these supposed novelties in terms of strictly modern developments. Moreover, contemporary scholarship often describes processes that assume a historical trajectory, but often, the historical pattern is assumed rather than demonstrated. When we speak for instance of secularization or modernization, we are assuming that the world was once in state X but over time moved to condition Y: in order to be worthwhile, such statements must of necessity be just as rigorous in their historical framework as in their assessment of contemporary realities. The same is true of other statements that compare changing conditions over time — sentences involving such loaded historical terms as “more” and “less,” “better” and “worse.” If we fail to understand the past, we cannot possibly interpret the present.

The best reason for the serious study of history is that virtually everyone uses the past in everyday discourse, but the historical record on which they draw is abundantly littered with myths, half-truths, and folk-history. Historians can, or should, provide a corrective for this. In order to suggest the potential uses of historical study, I will focus on several themes that are of lively scholarly interest today, including the character of Global South Christianity, the role of religion in building civil society, the rise of Pentecostalism, the emergence of Islamic political extremism, the cultural roots of religious violence, and the global revival of Sufi Islam. In each

¹ There are of course some prominent exceptions, including such historically aware scholars as David Martin and Andrew Walls in the study of Christianity.
case, the historical reality differs substantially from the assumed narrative that has become enshrined in conventional discourse. All these examples, of course, are matters of acute relevance to policymakers.

Finally, I will suggest some of the general principles that might be of use in scholarly research in religion, even (or especially) by those who do not consider themselves historians. I will divide them into three major sections, although they certainly overlap. The areas are, respectively, the Scope of Religion, High and Low Religion, and Understanding Religious Movements.

Global Histories

The study of religions is one of the most active and exciting frontiers of historical research today. To observe some of the high points of this work, we might look at the multi-volume series of edited works that have appeared on the history of Christianity just since 2005 or so, namely the *Cambridge History of Christianity* and the *People’s History of Christianity* produced by Fortress Press.2 Each volume contains chapters by several authors, sometimes dozens in a single book, covering every possible aspect of the topic within a given time period. Taking these collections together, we can trace the work of several hundred active and lively contemporary scholars, exploring every aspect of their subject and applying the most current methodologies. Obviously these remarks just apply to the study of Christianity, and other religions such as Judaism and Islam have attracted comparable enthusiasm.

One dominant theme in contemporary scholarship on the history of religions is the quest to treat their subjects in global or transnational terms. All the recent histories of Christianity at least aspire to some kind of global coverage, to treat the faith as it manifests itself in many different cultures around the world, and histories of Islam try to be as comprehensive. Apart from giving proper recognition to all cultures — and not just confining our attention to Western Europe and North America — such studies provide a vital context for religious change. When we look at the Protestant Reformation, for instance, we realize just how different regions

---

2 The *Cambridge History of Christianity* is projected to include ten volumes in all, and has been appearing since 2006. The *People’s History of Christianity*, from Fortress Press, has produced seven volumes, all since 2005. See also Diana Butler Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).
contribute to each other, and how vital it is to include events on what we once might have thought of as the fringes of the story — in Poland or Transylvania, Spain and Italy. 3

It is however in the context of the Great Awakening that we best see the results of a transnational approach. Once, historians studied different aspects of this movement in isolation, focusing on particular great individuals — the American Great Awakening, the English Methodist movement, or German Pietism. Now, the best histories insist on a global evaluation, and once they do this, all kinds of hitherto unsuspected influences and comparisons emerge. Once we see the movement in these terms, we realize the impossibility of trying to explain it in a piecemeal fashion — to blame the changes on conditions on the German Lutheran church, or the Church of England. Any explanations must be global, and must be rooted in social, economic and political realities. They must explain why revivals swept the Christian world in great waves, arousing such similar responses in very different communities around the globe. 4

Above And Below

Another common theme in these works has been the emphasis on lived religion, the study of religion from below, from the grass roots. For many years, the history of religion tended to be written from the top down, in terms of (in the Christian context) the story of churches and denominations, battles between churches and kings, feuds over liturgy and theology. The reason for that approach was simple enough, in that historians like to use official documents which are abundant and reliable in what they try and tell. The problem is, of course, that the world of actual lived religious practice is very different from the view as seen through the window of an episcopal palace or a diocesan chancery.

At least for half a century, historians have struggled to cure this tunnel vision by focusing on religion as seen from below. Where possible they do this by texts produced by ordinary people, but also explore records of legal proceedings in which elites try to suppress heresies or regulate lower class behaviors. Some scholars have proved very imaginative in reconstructing the unsuspected pictures of plebeian life and belief, the mentalités of a

---


lost world. Throughout, historians integrate social scientific research methodologies into their work, and the results have been quite revolutionary. By far the most radical changes in our perspectives affect the role of women, whose activities are critical to the survival and evolution of any lived religious system. Again, some of the most insightful and relevant work comes from studies of both the Reformation Era and the eighteenth century Evangelical Revivals.  

Among the many surprising findings has been the astonishing religious diversity that existed at all social levels from ancient times through the verge of modernity. This amazing spectrum included numerous heresies and fringe beliefs that survived unchecked, often mixed with esoteric and occult practices, despite all the efforts of the churches. So widespread are these elements, in fact, that we might perhaps think of them as universal building blocks of religious behavior.  

Radical and unorthodox Christian sects dominated whole territories and operating functioning states, even in the heart of Europe itself. And there were whole European nations where contemporary outsiders genuinely did not know whether established churches were teaching standard orthodoxy or gross heresy. In cities and villages, we regularly find organized alternative institutional networks that often amounted to parallel churches, with national and international ties. These underground churches existed over several centuries, using their own secret codes and languages. Whatever established church authorities felt about the fact, the spectrum of religious belief in medieval or early modern Christendom — whether in 900 or 1300 or 1750 — was actually broader than in the North America of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. In fact, it looks very much like the Christianity of the earliest centuries; or indeed, of modern times. But even within the official mainstream churches, we also see a widespread tolerance for beliefs that startle anyone used to thinking of religion in sober cerebral terms. Heretical ideas remained in constant dialogue with what we think of as mainstream Christianity, cropping up among bishops and clergy of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, to say nothing of the ordinary faithful.

Global Christianity

To give an example of the kind of insights that scholars of modern religion might draw from historians, let us for instance look at the explosion of Christianity in the global South over the past forty years or so, the emergence of what I have called a “Next Christendom.” By common consent, the kinds of faith that have been so successful in these years have followed patterns quite different from the conventional practice of mainline churches in Europe and North America. The newer churches have been more exuberant in their faith, with a powerful charismatic element manifested in belief in healing, trances and visions — above all, healing.7

In interpreting this upsurge, scholars commonly make two general assumptions. First, these charismatic elements appeal as they do because they draw on older African and Asian primal religions, rooted as they are in shamanism. In other words, global South churches have annexed and appropriated a rational faith and somehow primitivized it. Second, that the “primitivism” derives from Western Pentecostalism, a movement that supposedly originated in the United States at the very start of the twentieth century. The key date normally given is the Azusa Street revival of 1906.8

Both these assumptions are highly dubious. The more we look at the history of European and North American Christianity, whether in the ancient world, the Middle Ages, or the Early Modern period, the more evidence we see throughout of “charismatic” behaviors and beliefs, which mainstream churches often appropriated into their own practices. This is nowhere more true than in the case of healing, which arguably is quite central to the ordinary experience and expectation of all religions, in all societies. Sometimes that expectation is pushed into marginal cults, at other times it becomes the chief raison d’être of the faith as such. But one way or another, a religion that does not offer healing is a strange and monstrous being. Modern African churches, in other words, might be thoroughly African, but they are also quite as Christian as any European practitioners of that faith in 800 or 1800 AD.9

Building a New World

---

8 For a fine survey of US Pentecostal history, see Grant Wacker, Heaven Below (Harvard University Press, 2001)
The fact that Christianity is booming around the world is of intense interest to enthusiastic believers, but it also matters for governments. As successive aid and development projects have failed over the years, international agencies have come close to despair of any hope of reducing poverty in the global South. Yet historical analysis suggests that the religious changes we are now witnessing in the global South are very much what occurred in the North when it was passing through a comparable stage of social development. We can trace countless parallels between Pentecostal/charismatic growth today and the much-studied story of English Methodism in the century after 1760, the most rapid stage of that nation's industrialization. Then as now, popular sects arose to meet the needs that could be filled neither by secular society, nor by the established churches, which had scarcely a foothold in the burgeoning cities. The new dissenting churches were a triumph of cooperative endeavor, at once providing material support, mutual cooperation, spiritual comfort, and emotional release in the bleak wastes of the expanding industrial society. Then too, the new sects had a fascination with “charismatic” behaviors, with visions and prophecies. But they also laid firm foundations for modernization and, ultimately, for industrialization.10

In other ways too, the experiences of England between (say) 1780 and 1840 are highly relevant to those of the contemporary global South. Then as now, emerging churches, especially independent and charismatic congregations, promote a new work ethic, together with values of self-reliance, thrift, sobriety, self-discipline, and family cohesion. The issue of sobriety is especially critical in a modern society overwhelmed by drugs and alcohol, and curing such indulgence is commonly a major element of the healing mission boasted by such churches. In 1800, the problem was gin. Today, it might be cocaine. Taken together, these emerging values could create something much more like an Anglo-American civil society, perhaps with an enterprise culture, the desirable foundations for a functioning democracy.11

English and U.S. historians know well how the rising nineteenth century churches served as training grounds for democratic participation. Modern observers comment on the self-confidence and leadership


experience that ordinary people, even of the lowest classes and disfranchised races, acquire in the new churches. Here, they are encouraged to speak out publicly, to organize autonomously for the good of the community. In the words of sociologist David Martin, they acquire “tongues of fire” which will certainly be heard equally in the public political realm. This trend too contributes to the creation of a wider civil society. 12

Of course, no reasonable writer expects that the relationship of politics and religion in coming decades will precisely reproduce that in the Atlantic world of two centuries ago. But that past experience is the best model that we have to go by presently, and an instructive (and encouraging) guide.

**Pentecostal Mythology**

Recent scholarship is distinguished by its emphasis on what we might call *breadth* and *depth*. By *breadth*, I mean the concern to seek out transnational and global dimensions of a topic, to trace connections that might escape a scholar who focused only on one nation or one society, and as we have seen, such studies can be valuable. By *depth*, though, I mean the quest for the deeper long-term origins of a movement or theme, beyond the activities of a particular prophet or revival event. From their ideological preconceptions, religious movements in particular have a strong tendency to claim that they are radically new, unprecedented and even revolutionary. Closer examination often reveals that they are in fact based on much deeper trends that even cross centuries. One useful historical caveat on these issues is found in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes:

> There is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things. (1: 9-11)

A search for depth can be particularly instructive in terms of challenging the familiar image of modern-day Pentecostalism. Of necessity, the mythology of that faith always emphasizes the gifts of the spirit as a new event associated with the last days. In practice, Pentecostal/charismatic practices have never vanished from the church, and if we do not see them in operation, that is often because we are not looking closely enough.

---

Just to give an idea of that continuity, we might look at a novel published several years before the Azusa Revival: it appeared in the nation of Brazil, which in recent decades has experienced a transforming charismatic revival. The novel in question — *Os Sertões*, or *Rebellion In The Backlands* (1902) by Euclides da Cunha — must make us rethink the modern Pentecostal movement, and perhaps to see that movement as much more deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. Despite its date, the book offers some of the shrewdest and most historically informed commentary ever written on the phenomenon of Pentecostalism.

The story begins in 1893, with the emergence of yet another would-be messiah in Brazil, a prophet who foretold the imminent end of the worldly order. The man, Antônio Conselheiro, attracted a mass following among marginal people, many of whom were freed slaves or people of mixed-race. Da Cunha accompanied the government forces sent against the movement, which crumbled following a dreadful slaughter in 1897.

Trying to understand this vast and baffling phenomenon, da Cunha wrote an encyclopedic account of the movement, the region and the landscape, which is regarded as the monumental work of Brazilian literature. For da Cunha, nobody should be surprised at the eruption of charismatic or apocalyptic movements among a people so deeply imbued with Catholic mysticism. Brazil was heir to “a multitude of extravagant superstitions.” Even the first Catholic settlers had been so fascinated by miracles, visions, and mysterious tongues of flame.” Reinforcing these ideas were the beliefs of various immigrant communities, especially the descendants of African slaves. In some ways, Da Cunha saw Antônio’s movement as a kind of social and racial atavism, a throwback to primitive religion.13

But far from placing Antônio on the far fringes of Christianity, Da Cunha knew his history well enough to understand just how closely the prophet stood to Christians of the first centuries of the faith, and to those prophets in Asia Minor who followed Montanus and his band of inspired women. Antônio was in fact “a second century heresiarch in the modern world.” Rather than drawing on a conscious tradition, the Brazilian movement was tapping into a subterranean stream of charismatic belief that emerges in the New Testament and flows through all later Christianity, however vigorously the churches try to dam or channel it. Da Cunha knew how that impulse resurfaced in each succeeding era.

Although later Pentecostal churches know nothing of this turbulent predecessor, they follow precisely in his path. Da Cunha could be describing a thousand congregations in modern day Brazil when he describes the believers who followed Antônio into the wilderness. His hearers, overwhelmingly poor, were drawn from traditionally excluded racial and ethnic groups: “all ages, all types, all shades of racial coloring.” And as in a modern congregation, women believers were very much in evidence. Antônio’s claims to direct access to the Holy Spirit make him a forerunner of the countless modern preachers who have successfully channeled the mystical impulse into a spate of flourishing denominations. Like them, Antônio offered millenarian preaching, together with a “mixture of dogmatic counsels, the vulgar precepts of Christian morality, and weird prophecies.” Then as now, the whole was entangled with a stern puritanism, and strong doses of anticlerical and anti-Catholic fervor.

The manifestations of faith change little over time. What changes is the labels that scholars give them in various eras, and the misleading belief that such movements are as new as they pretend.

Global Jihad

To take a similar example from the Islamic world, look at the concept of jihad and Islamist extremism. These topics have of course been studied at endless length since September 11, 2001, and most books present a similar study. Although rooted in earlier thinkers, radical Islamism originated in the early twentieth century with the formation of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood (1928) and India’s Jamaat i-Islami (1941), and was developed by activists like Sayyid Qutb and Maulana Mawdudi. It then reached fruition after 1979 with the Iranian Revolution, and the Afghanistan war that spurred the militancy of Osama bin Laden. However radical its anti-modern ideas, the movement is thus purely modern in origin.14

As with Pentecostalism, though, a quest for historical depth shows this to be only a pseudo-history, and if the historical narrative is false, so also is any explanation formulated to account for it. In reality, Islamic revolutionary and military movements had flourished around the world for at least a century before the 1920s, and the theaters of combat were very much the same then as now, with prolonged and often successful jihadi

struggles in the Sudan and the Horn of Africa, in Algeria and Morocco, India and Afghanistan, the East Indies and the Caucasus, China and Central Asia. The story is striking enough in its global sweep, but it also tells us much about how scholars in the contemporary West write and understand history, and how often they fail to take account of religious dimensions. Whether or not the theory of a clash of civilizations should shape attitudes in the modern world, conflicts between Muslim societies and European Christian nations undeniably have been a fairly continuous reality in modern history. So important were these movements — and so easy to find in the historical record — it seems amazing that modern day Westerners have been so startled by the potency of religious-based revolutionary militancy. Even more puzzling is their belief that this represents something new.

From the late eighteenth century onwards, much of European military history and lore was formed in conflict with Muslim populations — by the British in India, the French in North Africa, Russians in the Caucasus, Dutch in the East Indies, Spanish in Morocco, Italians in Libya. From the 1830s onwards, expanding European empires everywhere encountered militant nationalist movements, which were commonly motivated by Islam and the rhetoric of jihad. What the British remember as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 was to thousands of its participants a jihad against the British infidel. In the 1860s, Muslim rebels in southwest China sustained an independent sultanate in rebellion against the Chinese imperial regime, and other Muslim revolts flared elsewhere in China’s weakly controlled far West. In 1873, the East Indian sultanate of Aceh began a thirty-year revolution that the Dutch never wholly suppressed. At the height of its success, the Muslim secessionist regime in Aceh was quite as independent of imperial control as was the Mahdist state in Sudan. Even as far afield as Brazil, black Muslim slaves kept alive a sturdy militancy, which occasionally flared into open urban revolt.

Perhaps the greatest of the Muslim opponents of empire was Imam Shamil, who fought doggedly against Russian expansion in the Caucasus from 1834 to 1859. He became the legendary exemplar for Muslims in the Caucasian state, and is also commemorated in Tolstoy’s novel Hadji Murad. Imam Shamil’s contemporary Abd al-Qadir occupies the same heroic position in the mythology of modern Algeria. In the 1920s, Omar al-Mokhtar led mujahedin resistance against the Italian occupation of Libya, becoming a hero for Libyans and others. When Palestinian Hamas supporters parade in contemporary Gaza, they commonly march down Omar al-Mokhtar Street. Somalis venerate Mahammad Abdille Hasan, who kept British forces at bay from 1899 until his death in 1920. Moroccans fondly recall Abd al-Krim, whose forces slaughtered thousands of Spaniards, and whose guerrilla tactics inspired Ho Chi Minh.
Through the 1890s, the Sudan was ruled by a messianic revivalist movement led by the Mahdi. In 1899, Winston Churchill expressed his concern about the “militant and proselytizing faith” of Islam. So dangerous was it, he felt, that “were it not that Christianity is sheltered in the strong arms of science — the science against which it had vainly struggled — the civilization of modern Europe might fall, as fell the civilization of ancient Rome.” His contemporary, Lord Cromer, administered Egypt as an energetic modernizer: how else, he worried, could he prevent the deadly danger of the “political regeneration of Mohammedism”?

In many ways, these various movements resemble the forces of contemporary Islamist radicalism, not least in the centrality of the concept of jihad. Nineteenth century Iranian regimes proclaimed the holy quality of their struggles against infidel Russians and British. Then as now, revolutionary movements received the support of Muslim scholars and clergy, and Sufi orders were critical to the organization of radical activities. Modern jihadis differ from their predecessors chiefly in their access to modern means of travel and mass communication, which permit the formation of international alliances and coalitions. Nor, of course, could those nineteenth century rebels count on sympathetic Muslim populations within the imperial states themselves. Often, we can see direct continuities from the radical movements of that earlier period. Modern south Asian Islamist movements such as the Taliban and the Tablighi Jama’at trace their origins to the Deobandi school founded in the aftermath of India’s failed 1857 jihad. Chechen movements similarly trace their inheritance to nineteenth century predecessors, and modern-day guerrilla leader Shamil Basayev was named for the legendary Imam.

If radical Islamism originated in the 1920s, we would have to understand its roots in a particular way. If in fact the movement already existed fully-fledged several decades before that, our interpretations need to change fundamentally. Without a reliable and accurate history, policy responses must of necessity be flawed, perhaps catastrophically so.

*The Violence Of Faith*

Some modern observers would not be surprised to know that Muslims have for many years been involved in religiously-motivated violence. According to some critics of the faith, violence and intolerance are so intrinsic to that religion at its core level — including in its holy scripture — the whole of Islam is irredeemably flawed. Numerous books have made this case, generally using historical examples to prove a consistent record of Islamic violence. If this view is correct, then it has powerful, and chilling, consequences for contemporary
policymakers. Once again, though, historical scholarship throws a radically different light on the issue. We can indeed find numerous connections through history between Islam and violence, but in scale and character, these are almost indistinguishable from incidents in the history of Christianity. For consistency, any analysis applied to one of these faiths must be used for the other.

Although we could take many Christian parallels, let us for instance take the prolonged theological struggles that rent the Christian world between 450 and 650 over the theology of Christ’s nature: was he fully man or fully God, or a blend or mixture of the two? The exact philosophical questions matter little here, but the popular responses were at least as savage as anything ever recorded in the history of Islam. The degree of violence is suggested by an event that occurred in Constantinople around the year 511. The church of the day had a beloved hymn, the *Trisagion* or Thrice Holy, which the then-emperor wanted to revise according to the beliefs of his own theological faction. So angry were the capital’s residents that they launched a bloody riot:

Many principal parts of the city were set on fire. In the house of Marinus the Syrian, the populace found a monk from the country. They cut off his head, saying that the clause had been added at his instigation; and having fixed it upon a pole, jeeringly exclaimed: ‘See the plotter against the Trinity!’

We can imagine the response if, in the twenty-first century, a Muslim mob beheaded a dissident theologian, and paraded the grisly trophy around the streets. Not only would the crime be (properly) denounced, but Westerners would assume that such behavior was part of the fundamental character of that religion, a bloodthirsty, warlike, intolerance that could be traced back to the sternest passages of the Quran. The beheading would be seen as a trademark of Islamic fanaticism. Surely, we would say, Christians would never act like that. But they assuredly did, and with great frequency. Hundreds of thousands were killed in these struggles.¹⁵

Nor were such outbreaks the work of a handful of demented (Christian) extremists. Rather they arose from structures deeply embedded in the Christian polity. In Late Antiquity, bishops and other Christian leaders could mobilize an impressive amount of muscle to promote their causes, making them powerful independent

political actors. The church became not so much a state within a state, as a parallel state mechanism. Bishops commanded the absolute loyalty of their faithful clergy and other followers, much as secular lords and patricians could rely on their clients. Monks especially served as private militias, holy head-breakers whom charismatic bishops could turn out at will to sack pagan temples, to rough up or kill opponents, and to overawe rival theologians. These were not rogue monks or clergy gone bad, but faithful followers of the church doing exactly what was expected of them over and above their disciplines of prayer, meditation and healing. When cities or regions divided along lines of theology or faith, rival bishops and monks literally fought for domination in the hills and on the streets.  

Out-of-control clergy, religious demagogues with their consecrated militias, religious parties usurping the functions of the state …. It all sounds like the worst stereotypes of contemporary radical Islam, in Iran and Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. And then as now, the problem lay not in any characteristics of the religion itself, of its doctrines or scriptures, but of the state’s inability to control private violence. Just a century after the conversion of the Roman Empire, Christian churches were acting precisely on the lines of the most extreme Islamic fanatics today. This in itself suggests that none of the violence or intolerance commonly seen in modern-day Islam is, so to speak, in the DNA of that religion, but just reflects particular social and political circumstances. Christianity changed over time: Islam can and will likewise.

Looking at “Muslim violence” today, then, we need to explore not the problems of Islam or the Quran, but rather the factors present in many varieties of organized religion that give rise to these conditions in different eras. Above all, we need to recall the special concepts of authority driving religious politics. Charismatic hierarchs claim guardianship of holy truths; prophets and visionaries seek to redirect history according to the personal instructions of the divine; religious orders try to bypass the secular state in order to create theocracy; and a cult of martyrdom sustains an escalating cycle of violence. The better we understand the contemporary politics of the Islamic Middle East, the more intelligible becomes the Christian past; and vice versa. Constantinople or Alexandria then; Baghdad today. Although the kind of weaponry involved is different, the monkish militias can easily be compared to the Shi’ite forces supporting Muqtada al-Sadr in contemporary Baghdad and Basra. The Christ Army predated the Mahdi Army by some 1600 years.

---

**Crossing Boundaries**

As religious issues and conflicts have become so extraordinarily important in the modern world, many observers have denounced governments and legislatures for being slow to understand or take account of the new realities. Only since September 11, 2001, have intelligence agencies (for example) given religion its proper place in global affairs, and the news media have rarely performed better. Yet even so, commentators on religion still succeed in missing large and critical parts of the story, precisely because they fail to understand the historical dimensions, or to pay attention to work that is only too familiar to historians themselves.

One complaint of religious minded observers is that agencies and media grudgingly accept the existence of religion, but even now treat it as vaguely problematic, especially if it is manifested in passionate or enthusiastic forms. In fact, such enthusiasm is basic to revivals and revivalistic movements that — far from being exceptional or extreme — are a mainstay of all major religions, and a constant expectation. This is certainly true of Christianity, and some of the most insightful studies stem from accounts of the eighteenth century evangelical movements discussed earlier. But very comparable movements occur in Islam, Judaism, and the South Asian religions. Revivals happen, and they are commonplace. In fact, we might say that great religions have three possible states of being: preparing for revivals, experiencing revivals, or absorbing the long-term effects of revivals.

Historically, too, and in the present world, we can learn much from looking at revival movements across faith frontiers, comparing and contrasting simultaneous movements in (for instance) Islam and Christianity. Such comparisons often produce fascinating results. In eighteenth century Europe, for instance, very similar revivalistic trends drove the great pietist and evangelical movements among Christians, and the Hasidic movement among Jews. In the modern world, many writers have described the booming world of Christian Pentecostalism, especially in the global South. Few also draw the quite obvious comparisons with the surging Sufi movements in exactly the same regions, even the same nations. Arguably, the two greatest religious stories in the world today are the rise of two movements, each of which is charismatic and prophetic, and centered on healing movements: these are Global South Christianity, and Sufi Islam.17

---

Historians, like other scholars of religion, must be able to bridge those artificial boundaries of faith and denomination, to understand the broader social forces at work. Just to give an example of such an approach, we note the surge of Christian churches in black Africa from the 1890s; but Sufi Muslim movements also boomed in exactly the same years, and understanding the appeal of each movement helps us understand the other. Once again, a breadth perspective can be multiply profitable.

The early twentieth century is a critical period in the modern history of Christianity, especially the years around the First World War and the great epidemics that followed that conflict. In Africa, that was the point at which Christian prophets and evangelists took the faith wholeheartedly into their own hands, translating it into local cultures and worship styles, and creating churches thoroughly rooted in African soil. In doing so, they began the mass conversion of the continent. Although we can point to hundreds of activists, a few heroic names stand out, such as Liberia’s William Wadé Harris, and Simon Kimbangu in the Congo. At the time, colonial authorities deeply distrusted the new churches. Chiefly, they feared possible sedition, but they were also wary of any syncretistic mixing of Christianity with animist beliefs. Simon Kimbangu spent thirty years in a Belgian colonial prison; French authorities kicked Harris out of the Ivory Coast.

The best-known Muslim equivalent of the Christian prophets was the saintly Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, from Senegal. At the end of the nineteenth century, he founded a pious Sufi order called the Mourides, the Muridiyya, founded in mystical devotion to God. Cheikh Bamba taught a practical message of hard work, charity and pacifism; and his movement drew heavily on African roots, with its cultivation of local saints and shrines. Like African Christians, the Mourides stand or fall on their promise of healing in mind and body. The Mouride Way today claims several million members — about the size of the Kimbanguist church — and like them, Mourides are spread around the globe. Mourides and their order are particularly strong in southern Europe and in American cities. Pictures and mementoes of Bamba can easily be found in markets across West Africa, but also in Rome, Paris, Madrid and (now) New York. 18

But why did the twin revivals occur at the same time? For better or worse, the presence of empire played a critical role, by disrupting traditional societies and political orders, and by forcing social and geographic mobility. These sudden changes — basically concentrated in a generation or so after 1880 — opened the doors to

18 John Glover, *Sufism And Jihad In Modern Senegal* (University of Rochester Press, 2007)
radical new world-views. New ideas appealed especially to the young and flexible-minded, often to those who had been marginalized in traditional societies. Yet the ideologies that proved most successful were those that took familiar and beloved aspects of the older culture, with its profoundly religious bent, and showed how to integrate them into a new faith that spoke the language of universalism. People could become Christians — or Muslims — without forfeiting their Africanness. Societies in rapid flux were ready to hear the voices of charismatic evangelists: as the phrase has it, "leadership is a function of followership."

Reading Historically

I have offered some case-studies of the history of religion, and how these can inform scholarship on contemporary realities. I will now try to draw some general principles from such studies, guidelines that can apply to many different kinds of study on global issues.

The Scope of Religion

1. If we speak of “religious” movements or actions as distinct from “political,” we must always be prepared to define these terms and the differences between them. The distinction scarcely exists in many societies, past or present, and it can be agonizingly hard to explain.

2. This process of differentiation can be nearly impossible when analyzing religious conflicts or violence.

3. This definitional problem is critically important when seeking to attribute motivation to individuals who occupy some religious role. We must be cautious about assuming that their conduct was “just political” or “just religious.”

4. Most religions through history have firmly held the view that incorrect or immoral behavior has direct consequences for what we call the “real world,” which might be manifested in ugly consequences such as plague, famine, natural disaster or military defeat. Conversely, a state that pleased God could expect to boom. This doctrine — sometimes called providentialism — is by no means dead, and it makes particularly problematic any attempt to isolate religious from political motivations.
5. We should never assume that “fundamentalism” automatically connotes political or social reaction. In its origins, the word implies a strict belief in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the entire Bible text. Growing as it does out of debates within Christianity, the term can only with difficulty be applied to other faiths, such as Islam. “Fundamentalist” and charismatic religious movements are perfectly compatible with social and political progress, not to mention quite rapid economic development.

*High and Low Religion*

6. World faiths differ substantially in their doctrines and approaches, but ordinary members of those religions often share common assumptions across faith-boundaries. The ordinary lived practices and assumptions of believers easily cross the formal frontiers separating religions.

7. The official clerical agencies within any faith tend to have a quite different idea of the goals and scope of the religion than do ordinary believers. However, the clergy have vastly better access to the official record, which gives their words disproportionate weight.

8. We should not assume that the authentic core of any religion is literate, cerebral and rational, while ritual or enthusiastic popular manifestations are somehow inferior or marginal. Nor should we dismiss such popular conduct by denigrating and inaccurate terms such as superstition or folk religion, leave alone syncretism. Scholars are often prone to what we might call the Protestant Fallacy in assessing which forms of religion are good and desirable, and which not.

9. The notion that supernatural forces might affect our conduct for good or ill may be hard-wired in the human consciousness, and surfaces in most belief systems, including in modern societies. Belief in angels, spirits and demons does not taint a society as irredeemably primitive or backward.

10. We must never be surprised at the success of healing or charismatic movements, which flourish in all religions. Rather, we should seek to explain why some religions apparently manage to cope without such manifestations.
11. Nor should we be surprised at the prominent role of women within religious movements, including among religions that, fairly or otherwise, have a reputation for being very conservative on gender issues. All religions have a place for women, or they would not survive. All religions recognize at last a potential for women’s leadership, whether that is spiritual, charismatic or even prophetic.

12. We must not assume that ordinary lived religion — “folk religion” — is necessarily associated with a lack of critical skills or intelligence. All religions have lively traditions of plebeian skepticism, often linked to radical and anticlerical views, all of which can coexist with official faiths in what to us can seem a bizarre juxtaposition.

**Understanding Religious Movements**

13. We must always be careful with claims about origins. An account of a religious movement or trend will commonly begin at a particular point, as with the emergence of Islamic radicalism in the 1920s, and assigning a date in this way also makes at least an implicit statement about causation. We should always seek earlier precedents for the alleged moment of origin: such usually existed.

14. This does not mean that the writer claiming origins in such cases is dishonest or slovenly, but he or she might be relying on earlier scholarship that failed to take full account of religious motivations (a common flaw).

15. This neglect of earlier trends is all the more likely when — as with most great religious trends — the movement in question is transnational. Few scholars have the background to trace movements that (like nineteenth century jihad movements) operate within dozens of societies, and which must be studied through several different languages. Always be conscious of likely transnational connections, parallels and influences.

16. When exploring movements, we must also be prepared to cross religious boundaries. If a phenomenon is occurring within one religious tradition, ask whether comparable trends might also be happening over the fence, in another faith tradition. They usually are.
17. We should be suspicious of the rhetoric surrounding great revival movements. In particular, remember that claims of innovation or novelty are commonly part of the mythology inherent to most religious movements. Religious reformers always affect to be creating a brave new world.

18. No less suspect, and for similar reasons, are claims that the old religious order was extremely corrupt or lifeless.

19. In appropriate circumstances, any religious movement can provide justifications for violence and extremism, or provide justifications for such behavior.

After offering so many caveats and negative statements, it is pleasing to end on a positive and encouraging note. For anyone interested in global religions today, the excellent news is that some fine scholars have provided a magnificent body of literature on so many aspects of the early history of religion, and so much of that is highly relevant to contemporary studies. This scholarly world is there ready for discovery.