

“Centers for the Study of World Christianity, Global Theology, and Global Theological Education: Aims and Benchmarks”

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<https://aqueductproject.org/conference-room/>

SUMMARY:

In this conversation, Jonathan Armstrong, Ph.D. (President of Aqueduct Project and Director of the Center for Global Theological Education at Moody Bible Institute) interviews Brian Stanley, Ph.D. (Professor of World Christianity and Director of the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh). Stanley begins by discussing the history and mission of the Centre for the Study of World Christianity. He notes that the Centre was founded by Andrew Walls as the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World to compile documentation regarding the expansion of Christianity into the Global South [2-3]. When Stanley became director in 2009, he changed the name to the Centre for the Study of World Christianity to reflect the reciprocal influence of Christianity in the Global South on its expression in the North and the West [4].

Stanley goes on to lament that it is becoming increasingly challenging for students from the Global South to study at the Centre. He describes three specific reasons for this. First, he comments on changing immigration policies [10]. Second, he notes that strict entrance and language requirements are a particular barrier for those who did not grow up in the educational system of the North and West [11]. Finally, Stanley observes that, as universities continue to transition from operating under charitable to business models, less funding is available to help students from the Global South afford rising tuition costs [12-13].

Despite these challenges, Stanley maintains that the proliferation of the organizations such as the Centre for the Study of World Christianity is valuable. He notes that the work of the Centre challenges theologians to consider questions that go beyond the European theological tradition, “questions about survival and how you respond as Christians to issues of sickness and health, of good and evil, and the reality of spiritual power” [28]. Additionally, such centers provide valuable information to historians, anthropologists, and social scientists as they seek to understand the impact of Christianity on various global cultures [8, 20-21, 29].

In concluding the discussion, Stanley notes the value of a conversation between leaders of these centers. Such a gathering would provide an opportunity for like-minded individuals to network with one another [32]. In addition, it would be an avenue to discuss practical solutions to current problems in global Christianity, such as the lack of access to publishing across the South [37]. Thus, the interview concludes on an optimistic note regarding the potential for future conversations.

TRANSCRIPT:

[1] **Jonathan Armstrong:** You represent the most known center for the study of world Christianity. Could you speak to the history of the organization, the Centre, and perhaps how that mission is changing as you look to the future?

[2] **Brian Stanley:** All right! Well, the story of the Centre in Edinburgh is very much tied up with the life and career of Professor Andrew Walls, who was the original founder of the Centre, but not in Edinburgh. It was in Aberdeen, where he had gone after his initial work in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. He joined the staff of the University of Aberdeen and then the head of the Department of Religious Studies. There, he began to develop more and more of an interest in the history of African Christianity, African religions, and missions studies. Particularly, he began to develop as a bibliographer of the still fairly small amount of literature then that was devoted to African Christianity. He was concerned that this expanding area of literature should be recorded. He began two journals, one of which still exists: *The Journal of Religion in Africa*. He began work as the bibliographer of the *International Review of Mission* periodical that goes almost back to the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, and he was the compiler of that bibliography from 1972 onwards.

[3] So, out of that sort of work in compiling documentation and bibliography he had the vision for founding a center for the documentation of the expanding Christianity of the Global South. And that was how the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World began in Aberdeen in 1982. In a sense it began with a vision for documentation, bibliography, and recording the process of the shift of the center of gravity of Christianity. Then, as the documentation increased, students wanted to come and work on those resources. So the Ph.D. students and the master's students came later, and it developed out of that vision.

[4] And then in 1987 the Centre moved down to Edinburgh, partly because of changes in the University of Aberdeen. It moved to Edinburgh in 1987, where it's been ever since. I've been the director of the Centre since January 2009. One of the first things I did was to change the name of the Centre. It was the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World. It was a little bit of a mouthful. And I changed it to the Centre for the Study of World Christianity, which is a bit easier to say, and it's also more inclusive, I think, because one of the trends, as I'm sure we're all aware, is that you don't have to go to the Global South to find African Christianity, or you don't have to go to China to find Chinese Christianity, or to Korea to find Korean Christianity. They are in cities in the North and the West. So, the Centre for the Study of World Christianity is, I think, a bit more of an accurate description of where we are now.

[5] **Jonathan Armstrong:** Very good! Tell me about the challenges and opportunities facing the Centre. How have you watched them shift, perhaps even as far back as from the original founding of the institution to today? And then, since you have been director, how have those shifts been taking place in the last several years?

[6] Brian Stanley: All right, well, I'll begin with the opportunities. It's always good to begin with the expanding opportunities, and I think what is clear is that the world of academic scholarship is actually much more open now to the serious analysis of Christianity in its multiple global settings than it was back in the early 1980s when Professor Walls began that center in Aberdeen. Because at that time we were still just coming out of the era of decolonization, it tended to be an assumption that the Christianity that had been planted in Africa and Asia was simply planted as a somewhat regrettable by-product of Western imperialism, and it wasn't really going to survive, at least certainly not in anything like a recognizable form.

[7] But I think where we are now, there's a much greater willingness to recognize that Africans and Asians and Latin Americans have made their own decisions in accepting Christianity or not accepting it, and have made of it what makes sense within their own environments. And so we've really shifted from a perspective which said, "Well, the Christianity of the non-Western world was simply parasitic on Western imperialism," to one that says, "Well, we actually take non-Western agency seriously," and "Let's see what people saw in Christianity. What bits of Christianity did they emphasize? Which did they de-emphasize?"

[8] And one other aspect of that is the growth of what's called the "anthropology of Christianity." Anthropology developed as a social science in the West, where the assumption was that people from a Christian background, even if they weren't Christian, were looking at so-called primitive people or animistic people and looking at what made them tick. No one thought of saying, "Well, maybe we should look at Christians and see what makes them tick!" But actually, in the last twenty or twenty-five years there's been a remarkable expansion of scholarly interest in the anthropology of Christianity in its various settings, and that has fed into the sort of work the Centre for the Study of World Christianity can do.

[9] Those are the opportunities! I think that that's really encouraging. The challenges, I think, are very often financial and structural for centers that are situated in the Global North. Back in the early 1980s there were rather more funding bodies around that were willing and able to fund post-graduate degree programs in the North. Now that has become much more difficult. University fees have risen enormously, especially for international students. Some of the big organizations that used to fund majority world students are no longer doing so, or if they are still doing so, low interest rates mean that their money doesn't stretch very far. Some funders have shifted their priorities or are shifting their priorities to funding institutions within the Global South, and that's entirely right and proper. But I still think there's a role to play for high-level centers in the North in the provision of theological education at the post-graduate level - not really at the undergraduate level so much now, but at the post-graduate level, particularly at the doctorate level.

[10] Immigration policies are another obstacle. Without mentioning too many names, certain immigration policies are becoming a real obstacle for universities that seek to recruit students from Nigeria or areas that have a Muslim majority.

[11] Educational standards are still an issue. The gap between the resourcing of education in the North and the South means that those who want to come to the North sometimes struggle to meet the entrance requirements or the language requirements of a world-class university.

[12] But I think the most serious obstacle of all, actually, in the university world, is the growing commercialization of universities, which decreasingly see themselves as charitable institutions with a mission, even though in law many of them still are charitable institutions. They tend to see themselves as business corporations that have to maximize their income in order to survive. This is particularly so outside of the United States, where there is no strong culture of endowment of universities. Increasingly, they have to survive from the income. Theology sits very low in the list of priorities for such universities, and so there's a general reluctance to invest in funding students from the majority world. The assumption is, "Well, if we're going to take students from the majority world, governments and business corporations will be the source of their funding," which is fine if you're working in business studies or informational science or even education or law, but in theology it's much, much harder.

[13] So, one of my biggest challenges with the Centre is, if I may so say, to stop it becoming an "American Centre for the Study of World Christianity," because students from the United States, and they're great students, are almost the only ones who can afford the fees. So those are the challenges, I think, particularly.

[14] **Jonathan Armstrong:** I'm surprised and impressed by how parallel those challenges sound to my own context at Moody Bible Institute. There are some clear differences concerning post-graduate and undergraduate education, but many of those challenges strike very close to home. Thank you for enumerating those!

[15] One of the reasons why I called the dialogue was because I believe I've seen a proliferation of centers for the study of world Christianity. As you named, in many academic contexts, people are becoming generally aware of the importance of the field of study. And also because of something you mentioned there, the increasing fees and so on, I think there's a trend to have more outside centers. It's sort of a safe way for a university or seminary to expand without necessarily fully underwriting the risk of the programs. So it's a way that a seminary or undergraduate school can innovate a little bit and not bear full risk for the enterprise.

[16] So what would your counsel be to others who have started centers? I'm in that class. I've taken on the responsibility of a newly started initiative called the Center for Global Theological Education, which is somewhat different from a study center. Our friend Moses Owojaiye from Nigeria, whom I was hoping to have on this call, as I understand has also recently taken on the responsibility for a newly founded center. Harvey Kwiyani is

somewhat in the same case. There were a whole fleet of leaders of centers for the study of global Christianity that we invited, including Dana Robert. Joel Carpenter was actually the one who recommended to me that I get people together. Apparently, Dana Robert called everybody together for a physical gathering, somewhere.

[17] Brian Stanley: There was one in Austin, yeah.

[18] Jonathan Armstrong: Okay, so Joel Carpenter was the one who actually recommended to me that I get everybody together again for a chat, and I think probably having to do with the summer session, people have been very hard to get. But what would your counsel be to this new group of young centers? What ought their outlooks be and how is it that we can potentially collaborate between institutions?

[19] Brian Stanley: I think it's difficult to come up with one rule that fits all. I think a lot depends on whether you're linked to a university, whether you're linked to a private seminary, or whether you're sort of a freestanding center. There are still major differences between the United States and Britain and continental Europe in the way in which university funding works and the level of endowments that are available and so on. And so it's quite difficult, I think, to come up with a "one size fits all" prescription.

[20] You have to be quite clear what your particular mission is and how it relates to your parent institution's mission. I mean, originally when the Centre came to Edinburgh it was a little bit semi-detached from the university's School of Divinity. And I think that was quite deliberate, partly as a way of maybe protecting it, as you have indicated, from changing policies. But, on the other hand, the more semi-detached you are, the less seriously the mainstream academics will take you. So, we're actually now right in the main building, whereas we used to be in the building next door. We're one of a number of research centers in the school. Everybody accepts us on the same basis as the Centre for, say, Christian Origins, or the Centre for Theology and Public Life. We're not seen as those oddballs next door who are fixated about world Christianity. We're able to push the agenda of world Christianity within the mainstream of theological education offered within the university.

[21] So, there's a little bit of swings and roundabouts, really. You do become perhaps more subject to the potential vagaries of university policy. On the other hand, if you're right in the center, in a sense that's where you ought to be, because that's where increasingly the center of Christianity is. So if you too much sort of hive off the study of non-Western Christianity into a little hut on its own, for enthusiasts, you can actually be downgrading the subject. There is an interesting ambiguity there, I think.

[22] Jonathan Armstrong: Very good. Okay. This question will reflect the particular interest of my own context, the Center for Global Theological Education at Moody. I understand that part of my particular mission with that initiative is to craft or to investigate new modalities for theological education. Moody as an institution is looking forward—the analogy that comes to my mind is a raft group approaching rapids, and the waters look pretty rough. So, projecting out the amount of change the institution will have to bear is going to be

significant. Part of those changes have to do with the rise of digital realities: the conference call that we're holding now, the ease of international communication, what that means for a campus-based institution. So part of what I've been tasked to do is to explore new modalities for theological education. We're trying all kinds of things, including quite experimental things with virtual reality, which as you know is an emerging technology that some are saying will continue to accelerate the pace of international communication.

[23] I'm struggling to even formulate the question, but what is the responsibility that you see for your own institution or that you would like to see from somewhat like institutions. Your institution obviously is the flagship of these type of centers, the centers that have cropped up around this area of study. What is it that you would like to see? How can they contribute to the knowledge base that's needed for these seminaries and universities and colleges to successfully transition through these changes up ahead?

[24] Brian Stanley: Well, I think what Dana Robert did at Austin a few years back is a step in the right direction, and maybe we should think in terms of another colloquium that brings together centers. I wasn't able to get to that, but I suspect that it was largely centers in the North. Maybe what we need to do is to try to find a way to make it even more comprehensive than it was and interface with centers like the one at, say, the International University at Nairobi. There are centers beginning to emerge in the Global South that are addressing the same issues.

[25] You're right that the future does look increasingly online. We haven't gone down that road yet, but we may have to. A challenge for us is how to find the funding to actually set staff aside to prepare online programs. It's not something you can do just in the course of your normal duties. You have to set aside people for a significant length of time and invest in appropriate technology. I think the biggest challenge of online education is how you actually give students a corporate experience. You can probably overcome the reading resources issue increasingly with digital sources, but how you actually have really effective collaboration and interchange between students? I know you can have chatrooms and so on, but students actually like to be together with other students and learn not just from formal class sessions, but also from personal interaction. Traditionally, that's taken place within a seminary, within a university, within a college. For somebody who is completely isolated, it's very difficult for them to get the same richness and level of learning as has traditionally been available in residential settings. Maybe we've got to find ways of trying to make that happen.

[26] Jonathan Armstrong: I have two more questions, if I may. The dialogue that we're going to have on August 18 with a group of seminary presidents—Ramesh Richard and Manfred Kohl will be chairing that dialogue—they will be asking the presidents, "How is it that you see the life of the university or seminary that you represent enriched by these outside centers?" What would you say speaking into the group? What is it that you see as the primary contribution, both particularly for your institution, the Centre for the Study of World Christianity, and perhaps for other younger institutions? What is the value that you

would like to see them contribute to the broader academic life or community life of the school?

[27] Brian Stanley: Okay, well, obviously I speak primarily from the context of Edinburgh, which is a very large secular research university with 37,000 students. We're tiny. The School of Divinity is 450 students, which is big by UK standards, but that's tiny in relation to the university as a whole, and so it's a very different context than a large seminary or Christian college in the United States. Within our context I would say that the first contribution of a center like ours should be to remind colleagues and students working in other areas of theology and religious studies that Christianity began as a non-Western religion, not as a European religion, which is what they tend to think it is, and that it is now once again very visibly more of a non-Western religion than a Western one.

[28] Theologians still tend to be preoccupied with the sort of questions that were thrown up by the European theological tradition, by the Reformation, by the Enlightenment, and by the Scientific Revolution. These are extremely important questions, but I think it's part of the job for a center such as ours to say, "Actually, for the majority of Christians today, there's another set of questions which are on their agenda, questions about survival and how you respond as Christians to issues of sickness and health, of good and evil, and the reality of spiritual power." Those are the sort of questions that shape the theological agendas of much of the world Church. As important as the questions coming out of the European context are, they're not the only questions. Or, if we are talking to scholars in religious studies, they talk a lot about "world religions," but they don't include Christianity sometimes. We have to say, "Hang on a moment, Christianity actually probably has a better claim to be regarded as world religion even than Islam!" Christianity is everywhere. So that would be the first contribution, I think: to remind colleagues and students of just how truly global a religion Christianity has become.

[29] The second contribution, I think, in my context, is addressed to colleagues and research students working in other areas of Humanities: historians, anthropologists, social scientists, and development studies people who are continually confronting the evidence of Christian belief and practice in their own research, particularly if they're working in the non-Western world. And they don't quite know what to make of it. They're almost uniformly secular themselves and they're coming across people for whom Christianity really matters, for whom it makes an enormous difference to the way in which they view the world, and a whole range of other issues. And so they don't quite know how to react. They need maps to guide them, and actually they're very open to hearing from a center such as ours help them interpret the perspectives and insights that are coming from Christians in the Global South. So I think, in that sense, we have a mission to the rest of the Humanities.

[30] So it's a little bit different from the strictly theological education agenda, but we're not primarily a theological institution in the sense of training people for ministry, though we do have a very small number of students training for ministry. So, obviously, my answers would have been different if we'd been in a more traditional ministerial education environment.

[31] Jonathan Armstrong: No, that's beautiful. Thank you so much for those responses. Brian, the last question that I know I need to ask is for your counsel. Shall we try to get yourself, Joel Carpenter, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Todd Johnson and Dana Robert, plus a cohort of new leaders of attempted starting institutions, including our own here at Moody and Moses Owojaiye's, and we'll comb through the websites and see if we can scrounge up another twenty or so, and invite them to a colloquium? Doing a conference call like this requires us to do a lot of email writing, but there's almost no other expense. We'd be happy to bear that. And we can plan it for maybe sometime March or April, so that we have enough time to get everybody together and have a coherent agenda. What would your counsel be there, and if you'd like to see that happen, could you speak directly to the agenda that you would like to see addressed in such a conference call?

[32] Brian Stanley: Yeah, I think it could well be worth pursuing. I think I'd want to circulate an email to some of the key people and ask them for ideas so that one's not being prescriptive about what the agenda should be, but genuinely listening to what sort of ideas come back, then trying to distill some sort of pattern or agenda out of the responses. And don't try to do too many different things at once, but maybe if we only focused on even just one particular objective which seems to be emerging out of the responses, one could then have a constructive online colloquium, which might lead to some significant outcomes. I think I'd want to think about, myself, what might that agenda be and what might ideas be. Quite a lot of these people do talk to each other anyway, and they are in touch, but the networks aren't all interlocking, so it might be good to be reasonably comprehensive. You can't have too many people on an online colloquium, because it becomes impossible to manage, but you must have it as reasonably comprehensive as you can, I would think.

[33] Jonathan Armstrong: Do you know Wesley Granberg-Michaelson? As of this past year, he has become a formal advisor to our project.

[34] Brian Stanley: I know the name, but I don't think I've ever met him.

[35] Jonathan Armstrong: He retired as the Secretary General of the Reformed Church of America, and he started his early career with the World Council of Churches and was an assistant to Senator Mark O'Hatfield. He's a highly connected individual and perhaps I could ask him to co-author an email to some people to get that first part of the conversation together.

[36] May I ask you to just touch on that one more time? So, we should be addressing a single question, likely. And you mentioned that you'd like to see some significant outcomes. Can you give me an example or point me in the right direction? What is the type of outcome that you would really like to see?

[37] Brian Stanley: One outcome might be in the area of appropriate publishing, that is, more accessibility to those working within the Global South. There's still this enormous imbalance between what's available to centers such as yours and mine in the North and those that are available in the South, and so it's not surprising that some of the most gifted guys in Africa ended up working in the United States or some of them in Europe. And so the

brain drain from the Church in the Global South is continuing and possibly even accelerating, and it's great for institutions in the North to have these folk. But, at the end of the day, if it's not actually benefitting the Church in the South, "Is it actually benefitting the Church in the North more than the Church in the South?" is the question that has to be grappled with.

[38] And so there's all sorts of dimensions to that, but publishing is certainly one of them, and you might even want to bring in someone who is deeply involved in mission publishing. Joel Carpenter, I'm sure, would have helpful things to say on that. My own book just out is fortunately quite reasonably priced. At Princeton, it's very good. But if you look at stuff that's coming out of other university presses, it's three or four times as much, and so it's quite inaccessible even to institutions in the Global South. So that's just one area.

[39] Jonathan Armstrong: Great! I'm extremely grateful for your counsel, so thank you so much for sharing your insights with us. I apologize again that we didn't have a full representation as we had prepared for.

[40] Brian Stanley: Sorry for your sake, but that's no problem to me!

[41] Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you so much, sir! You have a wonderful afternoon!

[42] Brian Stanley: And you! Nice to speak to you, Jonathan! Bye for now!

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