



BOOK REVIEW

## A Review of *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*

Tyler Horton<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Cambridge

<https://doi.org/10.64830/001c.144271>

---

Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion

Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2025

---

Hanciles, Jehu J. 2021. *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 479 pp.

The tenor of Christian history writing is shifting. There is a welcome move away from the triumphant, militaristic narrative of the European Christian tradition pushing back the forces of darkness in the so-called uncivilized world. But this framework is deeply entrenched, and only a continual stream of new works will displace it. Further, postcolonial accounts have been troubling in their reactive emphasis on the interplay of empire and Christian expansion. Jehu Hanciles has written an excellent book that speaks to both these issues.

In *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*, he sets out to display key points “in the history of Christianity that demonstrate the pivotal impact and profound implications of human mobility for the cross-cultural and transnational expansion of the Christian faith” (p. 6–7). By using the lens of migration, Hanciles unseats the traditional narrative focused on the prominence of power by demonstrating the unquestionable contribution of the ordinary and shows that Christian expansion is not irrevocably bound to the structures of empire.

After an Introduction, the book splits into two sections. In Part One (“Conceptual Overview”), Hanciles deals with classifying migration and conversion before considering the place of migration in the Bible. He relies heavily on the work of Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls to characterize the process of Christian expansion.

Part Two (“Historical Assessment”) makes up two-thirds of the book. Hanciles traces the expansion of Christianity through its first 1,500 years with an eye to the role of human migration. The section is, of course, selective, with some moments chosen because they were pivotal in themselves and others because they are especially important for demonstrating the role of migration. In a concluding chapter (“Beyond Empire”), Hanciles uses his findings to chastise the Western tradition of Christian history telling and to criticize the centrality of the empire argument as an explanatory rubric for Christian history.

This book presents a significant amount of carefully done work and makes an immediate contribution to the study of Church History, Global Christianity, and human migration. Hanciles breaks free from the “near exclusive focus on dramatic events and the contribution of elites” (p. 418) and thus provides a much-needed corrective. In comparison with Vince Bantu’s *A Multitude of All Peoples*, Hanciles is a much more in-depth. This makes *Migration* more substantial offering but it also suggests a narrower frame of readership. Both books retell the story of Christianity, with Bantu broadening out geographically and Hanciles changing the lens sociologically, and both fill a significant apologetic need. Bantu combats the idea that Christianity is an essentially white/Western religion and Hanciles undercuts the idea that the Church is inseparably bound to structures of power, oppression, and exploitation.

Crucially, Hanciles demonstrates that “the use of force was seldom decisive in the process of Christianization” (p. 308). This is important for understanding Christian mission but also for the historical-apologetic task of characterizing Christianity. The Church must own (and renounce) her entanglements with empire, but we also need to tell the fuller story. Hanciles allows us to see that “the most extraordinary missionary accomplishments in the first 1,500 years of the world Christian movement had nothing to do with empire or state sponsorship” (p. 414).

The challenge of writing history from below is that the available material is quite sparse. Hanciles admits that his case for the centrality of migration for Christianity’s expansion relies on “deductive reasoning and, frankly, disciplined imagination” (p. 160). The result is that there are places where his work feels a bit thin. For example, he uses an expansive definition of migration to include as much material as possible. It is valuable to have all this in one place, but there is a noticeable tension when placing migrant slaves (p. 190) and Christian queens (p. 281) under the same rubric. There are also places where the focus on migration seems to wane from a lack of material to work with (I found this to be the case in Ch. 6).

Hanciles’ work is at its strongest where he demonstrates that migration is an essential explanatory factor in Christian history. In chapter 5, he shows that “it is difficult to provide a satisfactory explanation for the spread of Christianity among the Goths and other Germanic tribes without attentiveness to the migrant element” (p. 203). In chapter 8, Hanciles directly confronts the assumed normativity of the European traditions, making clear that “the spread of Christianity in Asia was wholly dependent on migration on the missionary capacity of Christian migrants” (p. 321).

Ancient creedal boundaries are a persistent barrier for dealing with World Christianity. While Hanciles does not give space in this book to solving the issues, he does address them and offers what appear to be fruitful suggestions for moving forward (p. 234–4).

A point which needs further reflection is what may be an over-theologizing of migration. Hanciles builds on a reading of Babel, which is useful for his thesis but is not immediately convincing. The traditional “pride and punishment” is now “corrective” so that Genesis 11 “establishes that the multiplicity of languages, peoples, and nationalities dispersed throughout the world reflects divine purpose, not divine punishment” (p. 87). From there the story moves to Abraham who, in contrast to the builders in Babel, is willing to move and thus becomes a paradigm as the “quintessential migrant-itinerant” (p. 88).

The question is: what exactly does Hanciles mean when he argues that migration is “imbued with profound religious and theological significance in the biblical text” (p. 89)? It seems to be that migration takes on significance in and of itself, but this is a questionable assertion. Consider other theologically rich motifs such as sheep and shepherding, or vineyards and wine. They are also imbued with profound religious and theological significance, but does that necessarily make them something ‘more’ in themselves? In chapter one, Hanciles showed that migration has been “a constant feature of human existence” (p. 14), but if this is the case, is it not more difficult to make the claim that God was doing something distinct and special in the migrations of his people? I think more than a theology of migration, what Hanciles presents is better framed as an exposition of providence in this case. It is true that “the vulnerability, powerlessness, and marginalization integral to the experience of migration allow divine purpose and promise, rather than human effort, to be directly perceived” (p. 92). But isn’t the crucial thing the power-in-weakness motif and not its distinct expression in the experience of migration? So, when Hanciles argues that the “fusion of migrant existence and divine election is irrevocable” (p. 94), he seems to be in danger of giving more to migration than what the biblical tradition itself does.

Still, this issue does not change the fact that *Migration* is a substantial contribution which pioneers new material and advances crucial conversations. Hanciles set out to tell the story of Christianity outside the old boundaries, and he is unquestionably successful in this aim. What he has accomplished here is a subversion of the narratives which leave Christianity as nothing more than the impotent tool, or even willing ally, of empire. His conclusion is well-earned and worthy of reflection: “When all is said and done, the rise of Christianity as a world movement has been predominantly through the agency and activity of migrants – individuals and communities living as strangers and outsiders in foreign lands” (p. 420).

Tyler Horton

SIM / PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge

Published: October 17, 2025 CDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.