

Christianity's First Millennium: Reflections on Robert Louis Wilken's *Magnum Opus*

C. KAVIN ROWE
Duke University Divinity School
Durham, NC

IN THE SECOND LETTER to his pupil Lucilius, Seneca the Younger offered some advice about reading. Read only the good books, said Seneca, and read them over and over again. Reading, he thought, was writing on the soul. Why write on your soul with anything other than the best? Lay down lines worth following, Seneca counseled, and trace them again and again and again.

There were fewer books back then than there are now, but the ranking of books is surely as old as the writing of the second book. And the task has always been hard. Even today university literature departments argue bitterly over what constitutes a good book. It would be difficult to contend that any of the learned volumes produced by academics would rank among the books worth reading repeatedly to write on our souls. But Robert Wilken's book is about as good as the academic sort can be.

To call it learned, however, is to point only to the remarkable erudition behind every page, not to the style. The style, in fact, is anything but the typical prose of the academic. Wilken writes briskly and with a sense for what a lively tale can do. Far too often professors kill their subject matter with their lack of style. Not so Robert Wilken. And for this he deserves full praise. If Christianity is anything at all like what Christians think it is, how could a millennium's worth of its life be boring?

An engagement with a book of this kind is, almost by definition, less interesting than the story the book itself tells. Still, for the purposes of this symposium at least, there are three features of Wilken's work that invite further comment and reflection. Of all the things that I thought about

while reading the book—and this would fill many pages—these three features are those that I see as education in the more significant sense of helping to shape our perception of what Christianity was and is (and may come to be).

First, Christianity is memory. Insofar as we are able to say what the word “Christian” means we will have to remember its past use. “The past doesn’t vanish at once,” says Wilken, “it dies slowly.” But, “if remembered, the dead maintain their ground and live among us” (1). As general statements, such comments could sound banal, and in one sense we already do know this (or should). Yet I would wager—an educated wager, I hope, from both experience and study—that none of my colleagues at Duke or elsewhere will have gone through this book without startling new discoveries about Christian history, or, at the very least, without learning a surprising amount about people or places that have simply not been on our received intellectual maps (geographically expressed in maps 2 and 3 at the end of the book). More specifically, and perhaps most importantly in this regard, Wilken shows the truth of memory’s importance in an arresting way: we Western Christians have forgotten the East. “[F]rom the perspective of the West, Christianity in the East seems part of a vanished past” (359). Wilken’s point is not that we lack specialists in Syriac or the early Syrian church or St. Ephrem, nor is it the now wearisome point about Western imperialism (or imperialistic epistemology)—that it has tended to exclude non-Westerners. It is rather that the typical picture of the broad sweep of a millennium’s worth of Christian history has been *fundamentally* misshapen: we Westerners, Wilken implies, do not really know the story of our own faith. Even with all the various correctives in recent years to “colonialist” histories, we have been telling ourselves—at best—only some of what Christianity has been. And we have therefore distorted our sense of what it is. Our intellectual cartography has been radically deficient, as deficient as if we were to make a map of the world and leave off Asia and India and China.

In Wilken’s reading of the first half of our history, Christianity has always been a global phenomenon. We now hear much talk of the globalization of the Christian faith, its move toward the southern hemisphere (and its corresponding decline in the northern), its emergence in China, and the like. While there are doubtless deep differences in both locale and substance between Christianity’s original reach and its current global shape, Wilken’s book would teach us that the current trends in world Christianity point toward a re-globalization rather than a first one. In other words, if Wilken is right about the shape of the first millennium of

Christianity, and if the third millennium of its life is less about the North Atlantic West than elsewhere, then the time that is Western Christianity will look dramatically less like a remarkable achievement with staying power and more like an interlude in Christianity's global development. Of course, no one knows how a thousand or more years of history from today will unfold. But the point remains that we are and have been fundamentally forgetful and that such forgetfulness imposes serious constrictions on our understanding of the Christian faith. Christianity, Wilken would forcefully remind us, was born a global faith. To conceive of "world Christianity" is not thereby to think of something northern and western with important new additions from elsewhere. It is to think, rather, of a movement beginning in an eastern part of the world and expanding from there to all corners of the earth. Conceptualizing the Christian faith in accordance with its historical shape, Wilken says, is a matter of keeping Jerusalem as the center of our interpretative map (see Warren Smith's essay in this book symposium for further reflection on Jerusalem).

Second, Christianity's global history is not only a history of remarkable growth and civilization creation, but also one of dramatic decline and eventual eclipse. "The extraordinary success of Christianity in the first millennium," says Wilken, "must be set alongside the dramatic rise of Islam and the decline of Christianity in historic Christian lands" (3–4). Christianity is rightly maligned for its crusades as a betrayal of the core of Christian conviction about the way God was in Christ, but what is often missed in such maligning is the fact that in a large part of its geographical reach Christianity was fading fast and becoming extinct during the latter part of the first millennium. Indeed, "in North Africa, Christianity disappeared and no indigenous Christians remain in countries such as Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria" (4).

It is a sobering fact to think of Christian history as one of decline and disappearance. We do not normally think this way in the West, but were we to write the history of Christianity in vast parts of its former habitats, we would be forced to say something like this: it was here, and then began to disappear, and then went away—no Christian children to raise, none to teach, no pastors to shepherd their flocks or bury their dead. Only the Prophet Muhammad and his One God. "Set against the success of Islam and its staying power, the career of Christianity is marked as much by decline and attrition as it is by growth and triumph" (358). Sociologically speaking, in a wide area of the world Christianity was defeated by the rise of Islam.

Anyone who pays attention to the decline of Christianity in Europe would do well to see from the growth of Islam that a decline in Christian communities does not have to end in renewal; it can go all the way to extinction. We are often theologically invested in the attempt to stem decline—and for many good reasons—but Wilken’s focus on the historical power of Islam reminds us that it is possible to fight a losing battle.

Christians do not, I think, have a fundamental stake in self-preservation, especially if the cost of such preservation is violence—in which case we betray our very reason for staving off diminution and extinction. We trust in the resurrection of the dead in Christ, whether God chooses to prosper our communities in the here and now or to let them die and raise us at the end. Still, a world without Christianity as a global force is a world without the truth of all things in its midst in a palpable and public sense. Such a world may come to exist, but if so, I pity those who will have to live in it. If nothing else, Wilken’s description of Christianity’s decline helps us to think about the importance of Christian existence simpliciter. What is it that the world owes to the existence of Christianity? (For a good exploration of this question in our time, see David Bentley Hart’s *Atheist Delusions: the Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009].) Such a question points further toward the importance of mission as a dynamic internal to the existence of Christianity as a form of life. Wilken repeatedly notes the missionary drive from the beginning of Christian existence. As long as there are Christians, there will be mission. Yet, as the Islamic case shows, it does not follow that as long as there is mission there will be Christians *en masse*. With around two billion Christians today it is admittedly hard to conceive—I do not mean hard to believe—but it is not impossible that over time we could, once again, be a very small group.

Third, Christianity is a form of life that is inescapably structural in a very concrete sense. In an age in which many people look on structural religion with suspicion, mistrust, and disdain, it is worth remembering that without institutional patterning from beginning to end Christianity would not have been the phenomenon it has become. To put it slightly differently, if the story Wilken tells is anything like the phenomenon Christianity was, there is no such thing as Christianity in and through time without institutions that shape, hold, and carry its life. “Wherever Christianity was adopted a structure was put in place, through the person of the bishop, that provided continuity with the Christian past and spiritual unity with Christians in other parts of the world. . . . There is no evidence for enduring Christian communities without the office of the

bishop" (356–7). The point Wilken makes is, of course, that of historical truth—it was this way in fact—but the lesson is of no less theological importance: Christianity is a religion in which authority is indispensable. All the preaching in the world about the priesthood of all believers and, in its modern French-revolution echo, "egalitarianism" cannot rid the past of the fact that the Christian faith flourished through authoritative structure and not apart from it.

The ordered community of monastic life was no less important in the first millennium. Today, among many Western Protestants at least, it is inconceivable that human beings can go their entire lives without sex. In the older world, says Wilken, a "chaste community" was an indispensable part of the way Christianity maintained and/or established its existence. The monks and nuns witnessed to a new reality, to God's work on earth through the form of life that practiced the awaiting of the final consummation (not a seeking of its earthly analogues). "By the end of the third century small groups of men or women lived chaste lives in community. . . . [Later] wherever Christianity was adopted, one found monks. In some cases, in the Syriac-speaking East, in the Slavic world, and in the Latin West, monks carried the gospel to new peoples" (357).

So, too, from the first days of the earliest Church, Christianity was something to be learned and therefore to be taught (Acts 2–4). Christianity was always a religion of the book, implying at the least that it needed ways to train interpreters of Scripture and those who could communicate its truth to the faithful. Illiteracy was the norm in antiquity regardless of locale—though in terms of social groups it was lower among the Jews than among others—and Christians thus tried to establish educational means wherever they set up shop for any length of time. Intellectual life was always nourished, but it was not for curiosity's sake as much as it was for the working out of the logic of the faith. The Christians knew that faithful thinking was not ultimately rooted in individual intellectual talent but in the truth that had been handed on from generation to generation. Their controversies showed their willingness to innovate and learn new things, but, as Wilken illustrates, what endured were the innovations that drew most deeply from the wells of tradition. The practice of thinking thus involved remembering, and this remembering required education. One had to learn what to remember, and what was remembered had to be passed on. "Wherever there were churches," Wilken says, "Christians forged a learned tradition and handed on a cultural inheritance" (358).

In short, according to Wilken, "Christianity came into the world as an ordered community and made its way as a corporate body with insti-

tutions and offices, rituals and laws. Christianity is inescapably social. Its spread among new people had little to do with the conversion of individuals and everything to do with building a new society” (358). Wilken’s denial of the importance of individual conversion is overdone—why must we always have the dichotomy between communities and the people who make them up?—but the drift of his remarks is crucially important: Christianity was and is a total way of life. It is not only a matter of the heart—but it is this!—nor is it personal preference, such as the color of ink in which you prefer to write; it is a *regula vitae*, a rule of the lives we live from the broadest social dynamics down to the thoughts we think only to ourselves. This hardly means that on Wilken’s view Christianity lacked profound internal difference or avoided complicated contestation over its legitimate expressions. “The global outreach of Christianity in the early centuries is a testimony to its cultural adaptability and diversity. Christianity as practiced among the Armenians differed from the ways of the Greeks or Ethiopians. . . . [T]he differences in language, customs, liturgical practices, architecture, and art gave birth to distinctive spiritual and cultural forms of life across the Christian world” (356). But it does mean that there was enough of a “thing” called Christianity to see where, when, and what it was. And, Wilken’s book argues, the defining conditions of this thing were structural and institutional all the way down.

In conclusion, let us say it out loud: there are only a handful of people with the erudition and stylistic gracefulness to write a book like this. Many would aspire and some have tried. But Wilken has written a readably elegant book that covers a millennium of Christian history without either dumbing it down or pretending to know things he does not. And he has taught us much.

But it is just this achievement that makes one finish the book worried as much as satisfied. The worry is this: the habits of learning that Wilken’s scholarship presupposes are dying off. We specialize so rabidly now that we risk losing the educational conditions that could help to produce other Wilkens. Specialization is not, of course, a problem in itself; indeed, it can be a way we come to see something of the richness of God’s creation. The knowledges that specialization both requires and creates are a reflection of the unfathomable height and depth of our world. Finite creatures, after all, can see the grandeur of creation only in bits and pieces.

But it is still true that academic culture cultivates research trajectories that over time reduce our capacity for seeing the larger pictures that contain the central stuff of our history. We will doubtless see volumes upon volumes on many of the things Wilken mentions throughout his

book—and rightly so. But where are the scholars who can see something of a whole, get it into a readable story that neither ignores nor fixates upon the tangles of Christianity's complex existence, and produce a book that shows us a millennium's worth of humanity's most significant form of life? Of course, in one sense it takes a whole career to get to the point where one can write this sort of book; but in another sense the habits of study and thought throughout that career are what give one the capacity for grander vision. I do not know Robert Wilken very well at all, so perhaps he would contradict my sense of how he has studied. But if so, his book would speak against him and for me. A thinking through of the necessary intellectual habits presupposed by such a book should be part of every younger scholar's reaction to it. Hopefully such thought will lead to other books of this sort in the future. For now we can read Wilken. N&V