



Many Architectures for Multiple Christianities

Nikolaos Magouliotis, ETH Zurich, Switzerland, nikolaos.magouliotis@gta.arch.ethz.ch

Review of parts 1 to 3 of Richard A. Etlin (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 1056 pages (ISBN: 978-1-10847-151-0). Etlin's *Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity* is an extensive collection of texts covering many aspects of Christian architecture from early Christian holy sites to modernist churches and written in a manner that is accessible to a nonspecialized reader. However, the book's adherence to the geographic canon of Christianity leaves out many important histories from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Additionally, its tendency to silo Christianity from other religions means that it falls short when it comes to accounts of transcultural encounters, syncretisms, and hybrids. This review was commissioned alongside the one of part 4, authored by Maximilian Sternberg. Both reviews should be read together for a comprehensive account of this two-volume set.

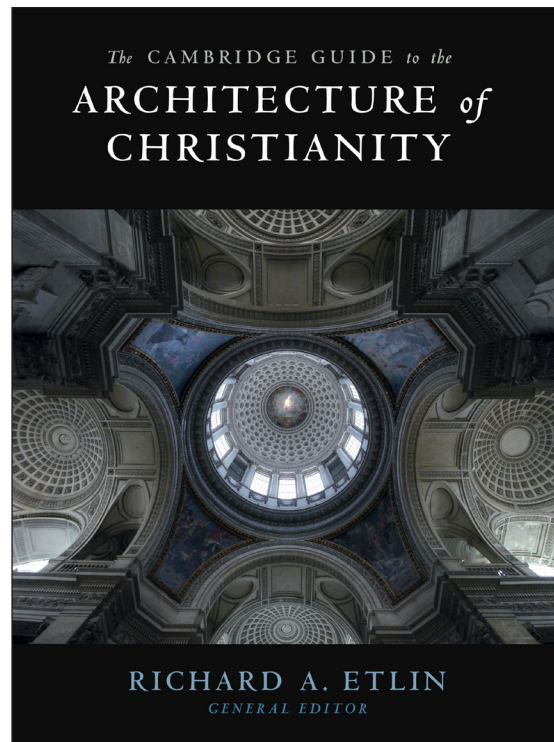
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The Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity, published in 2022, is more than a simple history of church building: it is a collection of texts that touches upon many different architectural and spatial iterations of Christianity, ranging from early Christian holy sites, medieval cathedrals, and early modern landscapes to modernist designs for cemeteries and churches. The book therefore provides a comprehensive mapping of how Christians have assigned meaning to space and place in different historical instances. Some chapters focus on instances of transcultural and/or interconfessional exchange and conflict and thus provide nuanced histories of Christian architecture and refreshing

revisions of canonical narratives. However, this book does not escape the canonical geography of Christianity: the majority of its chapters are focused on Europe and the Middle East (the latter examined mostly during the early Christian period and the Middle Ages). The rest of Asia, Africa, and the Americas (and the numerous architectures generated by Christianity in those places) are largely left out of its narrative. It is curious that there is not more about European colonies in the Americas and in Africa, where Christianity blended with Indigenous religions. Or about Asian empires, where Christian minorities practiced their faith and built their churches alongside Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

The book consists of two volumes structured in four sections that follow a chronological order from early Christian to medieval, early modern, and modern (my review focuses on the first three). These four sections contain an impressive total of 103 chapters by different authors. The editors have brought together a large and diverse group of experts, from archaeologists and medievalists to architectural historians of the 20th century, who discuss numerous facets of Christian architecture through a variety of analytical foci including architectural form, layout, style, and ornament as well as religious dogma and practice, financial concerns, geopolitics, political history, and social stratification. The book's 103 chapters balance building and ritual and formal and iconographic analysis and often delve into useful theological exegesis (e.g., chapter



38). Despite all this thematic and methodological heterogeneity and the fact that many authors deal with highly specialized topics, the chapters have succinct and factual titles and a uniform, short format. These features make the book easy to navigate and friendly to a more uninitiated reader. In light of these features, the compendium could serve well as reading material for undergraduate students studying a broad range of fields from archaeology and art history all the way to architecture and monument conservation and as a teaching aid for lecturers in these fields.

The extensive content of the book could have perhaps benefited from more elaborate introductory framing: the book's two-page preface, by general editor Richard A. Etlin, describes the process of its making and acknowledges the people involved in it but refrains from theorizing or taxonomizing its content. The preface also fails to explain to the reader why and whether, at a time when research puts emphasis on intercultural encounters and hybrids, we need a volume on the architecture of Christianity. The editor remarks that when first reading these 103 essays, he noticed certain recurring themes (across different texts of each section and across sections) (xv). But he does not elaborate on what these were. It would have been extremely helpful for the reader if these had been laid out at the opening of the book or at the beginning of each of the four sections (which have no individual introductory texts). Etlin also writes that each of the four associate editors (Ann Marie Yasin, Stephen Murray, John Beldon Scott, and Patrick J. Quinn) were given a set of 21 questions regarding "spirituality, cult practices, building type, site and region, ornament, and structure," which they had to keep in mind when looking for essays for their sections (xv). These questions would have likewise been useful for the reader to have seen at the opening of the book.

The structure of the book is straightforward but contains a number of blind spots and conundrums. Overall, the book prioritizes the history of early Christian architectures over their equally complex historiography and reception from the late 18th century onwards. Many authors offer interesting analyses of the reception of premodern architectures in the 19th and 20th centuries in their chapters (for example, chapters 30, 39, 54, 58, 69, and 89). But such instances of modern historiography are scattered in the medieval and early modern sections of the book and thus risk going unnoticed. Given the amount of existing scholarship on the rediscovery of medieval and other premodern Christian architectures in the long 19th century (from Goethe's Strasbourg Cathedral all the way to Gropius's Bauhaus manifesto, with its reference to Gothic cathedrals), one would expect a separate section on the matter, which would fill the chronological gap between the book's early modern section (whose chapters largely only address periods before the 18th century) and the modern one (which is dominated by the 20th century). Such a historiographic section would have provided the

reader with an account of the sources of many of the themes and historical genealogies that are taken up by the book (the Gothic, the Romanesque, the Byzantine) and why certain medieval monuments were canonized while others were relegated to obscurity. The one chapter in the book that focuses fully on the reception of the Gothic and the Romanesque in the 19th century (chapter 61, by Kathleen Curran) is well written but not enough to cover all this ground. Plus, it is obscured by its awkward position at the end of the medieval section (it would fit better at the end of the early modern or the beginning of the modern section).

The book often goes beyond canonical topoi of Christianity and sheds light on various rural peripheries and the regional variations of certain architectural typologies and styles. One must commend the effort of specific authors to write polycentric histories of the topics they have been assigned – for example, Janice Mann’s attempt to define Romanesque architecture by bringing together the examples of the Norwegian stave church of Borgund and the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence (chapter 40). Or the effort to maintain a global perspective while discussing specific case studies, as in Jesús Escobar and Michael Schreffler’s chapter on Spanish and Latin-American Baroque (chapter 86), which refers to simultaneous changes in the religious architecture of seemingly disparate places such as Antwerp and Tunja (in Colombia).

Contributions focus on instances of intercultural and interconfessional exchange or conflict, such as Helen Saradi’s essay on the first Christian emperors’ treatment of pagan precedents (chapter 4) and Richard Wittman’s meditation on the mixture of Gothic and classical elements in early modern Parisian churches (chapter 64), offer more interesting angles on the history of Christian architecture. The same goes for Kristofer Neville’s nuanced account of the numerous grey areas between Catholic and Protestant religious spaces in the German-speaking lands of central Europe (chapter 62), Maria Georgopoulou’s analysis of the clashes and synergies between medieval Christian crusaders and the ethnic and religious communities of the near East (chapter 23), and Alicia Walker’s intriguing take on the appearance of Islamic ornamental motifs on the walls of Byzantine churches (chapter 24). Such nuanced accounts challenge canonical narratives and present Christianity and its architecture from a transcultural perspective. At the same time, they make the book potentially interesting for experts on the art and architecture of Islam and other religions.

Even though these chapters, among others, critically revise the canon of Christian architecture and question a Euro-centric understanding of the topic and its geography, the book overall does not, and so the few chapters that go beyond this established geography come across as mere tokens of diversity. Countries such as France or Italy

are the subject of numerous chapters (throughout parts 2 and 3), whereas the whole of South America — a continent where Christianity has been the dominant religion for centuries — is represented only by a single chapter, Escobar and Schreffler's. Similarly, whereas highly specific phenomena of European history such as Carolingian architecture or the distinct baroque of the Benedictines enjoy individual chapters, a vast area in Asia — from India all the way to China and the Philippines — is discussed in just one chapter, that by Gauvin Alexander Bailey (chapter 87). These two chapters are well-written, comprehensive surveys of their areas. They make nuanced analyses of, respectively, Spanish colonialism in Latin America and Portuguese colonialism in Asia while at the same time demonstrating the agency of Indigenous communities and actors. But two chapters are not enough to cover such immense geographies and complex histories. A book of this breadth could afford several more specialized chapters on South American and South and East Asian Christianities and their architectures. One could argue the same for Eastern Christianity, whose early modern ('post-Byzantine') dimension is underrepresented in the book, or the different Christianities of Africa (the famous churches of Lalibela, in Ethiopia, deserve a place in any compendium of Christian architecture but are absent from this one).

At the beginning of his preface, Etlin clarifies that the book is 'neither an encyclopedia nor a Cambridge history of Christian architecture but rather a selective thematic treatment' that 'in many respects reflects the state of the field at this time' (xv). It would indeed be unfair to ask this book to be an all-encompassing encyclopedia, but we can ask that it reflects the current state of the architectural field — one that embraces an unprecedented degree of diversity and acknowledges previously underrepresented geographical regions, cultures, and voices. Such questions have, in fact, been part of the field for decades: in their chapter Escobar and Schreffler indicate that religious architecture in South America has been the subject of surveys since the end of the 1950s and that the field has been growing and diversifying ever since (799). And Bailey emphasizes that Latin Americanists have been 'trying to put a name to the intercultural blend of style, technique, and iconography' of South American church architecture since the 1920s, adding that 'scholars are increasingly acknowledging the global scope of Baroque and Rococo architecture as new studies expand far beyond the traditional focus on Europe and Latin America into the furthest reaches of Africa and Asia' (817). Such expanded views of the field are shared by several of the authors contributing to the book (even those working within canonical geographies) but are not reflected in the overall editorial choices.

That being said, the book does contain a number of paradigmatic instances of this sort and many innovative histories of Christian architecture that go beyond the

European canon. Among these, I focus on Bailey’s analysis of a particularly interesting church in Macao (**Figure 1**) whose architecture has served as a material witness of Christianity in cultural translation and transculturation:

The granite façade of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Assunção (more popularly known as São Paulo, begun 1601), is one of the most theatrical examples of an Asian Hybrid Baroque Designed by the Italian Jesuits Carlo Spinola and Giovanni Niccolò and built by 150 to 200 Chinese workmen, it follows Italian late Renaissance treatises on a basic level ... , with free-standing columns, statues in niches ... and a pediment. But the sculptural decoration of the façade, carved decades later (c. 1620s–44) by Chinese and possibly Japanese sculptors, tells a different story. Chinese temple lions support the obelisks at the very top of the façade, peering down as if from a Buddhist temple. The drapery even of figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary have the beveled line and windswept appearance of Buddhist sculpture, and motifs such as Chinese cloud scrolls and carps are borrowed from traditional Chinese art. The angels look more like Apsaras spirits (shared with Buddhism) than anything that might inhabit a Christian paradise. (Bailey, 821)



Figure 1: Our Lady of Assumption (popularly known as São Paulo), Macau, China, 1601. This facade dates between the 1620s and 1644. Photo: Gauvin Alexander Bailey, 2003.

Bailey's choice of topic and analytical framework resonate with current research in the field of historical anthropology that explores how Indigenous cultures interacted with Christianity, such as Ben Leeming's 2022 *Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico*. The book deals with two theater plays about the Antichrist written in mid-16th-century Mexico by a Nahua (Aztec descendant) nobleman named Fabián de Aquino. As Leeming explains in a summary of his work for *Sapiens* magazine, these plays were based on the medieval-European legend of the Antichrist, but they were written in Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs) and adapted to the local cultural context, and they make numerous references to the Indigenous religion and its clashes with Christianity. In these plays, the figure of the Antichrist serves mainly as a symbol of the old, native religion of the Aztecs (which is repeatedly expelled and exorcized as 'false'), thus indicating that the Nahua author was a fervent Christian. But as Leeming points out, de Aquino's detailed descriptions of some of the old rituals and beliefs (a forbidden topic for both native and European authors in Mexico at the time) suggest the situation was more complicated:

What significance might the Antichrist story have had for Indigenous people living in what must have seemed like apocalyptic times — the fall of the Aztec Empire and the arrival of Spanish colonization? And should a Nahuatl-speaking Antichrist be interpreted as a sign of submission to the colonial regime, or an act of resistance, or something in between? (2022 n.p.)

Leeming avoids giving firm answers to such questions, but he affirms that such historical testimonies are incredibly valuable to our understanding of 'the dizzying variety of ways some Indigenous cultures engage [and have engaged] with Christianity'. Even though there are tremendous differences between 16th-century Mexico and 17th-century Macao, the same open-ended questions can be asked with respect to the sculpted façade of the Church of Nossa Senhora da Assunção, and indeed Bailey's careful analysis in the *Cambridge Guide to the Architecture of Christianity* raises them. One cannot be certain as to whether this mixture of Buddhist symbols and Christian architecture was a gesture of subversion of (and resistance to) Christian dogma or one of compliance and subordination to it. But such artifacts and such histories can help us attain a more nuanced and varied understanding of the architecture of Christianity, or rather, the distinct architectures of multiple Christianities.

Besides exploring the history of Christian empires and imperialism and the architectural and artistic norms they brought with them, we must also begin writing the multiple histories of vernacular Christianities and how they assigned meaning and form to their spaces. Writing such a comprehensive history of Christian architecture(s)

requires that we do not treat Christianity as a silo but as a porous organism that was not only split in half through internal schisms but that also evolved and diversified by absorbing the religious cultures that were around it (even while trying to annihilate them). We must also remind ourselves that Christianity was not always a dominant religion. In some places, it was an intrusive heresy or a minority faith that survived thanks to the tolerance of non-Christian rulers such as Ottoman sultans or Chinese emperors. To study Christian architecture from this broadened perspective, we need the help of experts on the architectural and artistic expressions of other religions and cultures. And we need to take into account the contribution of non-Christians in the formation of different Christian architectures. As Escobar and Schreffler remind us, we must acknowledge 'the agency of non-European peoples and local conditions in cultural production throughout the empire' (801).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

Leeming, B. 2022. The Aztec Antichrist: Chronicles Indigenous Resistance and Religious Conversion. *Sapiens*, Oct. 26.. <https://www.sapiens.org/language/aztec-antichrist/>.

