Introduction

A collection of scholarly articles on margins and peripheries in Christian history runs the risk of seeming almost wilfully diffident and restrained in ambition. The topic suggests a concern with places – as well as persons, concepts, themes – that, while perhaps interesting, are by definition subordinate and relatively inconsequential. As students of religious history – and perhaps as people too – our priorities are instinctively structured by metaphors of 'centrality'; one's valuable time is probably not best spent engaging with merely 'marginal' matters.

The contributions to this volume represent a resounding rejoinder to all such unexamined assumptions, and make a collectively compelling case for the importance of paying attention to a diversity of places, propositions and people that, over the long sweep of Christianity's historical development, have been considered marginal or peripheral. The articles here were originally presented as papers to the summer and winter conferences of the Ecclesiastical History Society, in July 2023 and January 2024, where participants, including an encouraging number of talented early career scholars, took up with alacrity an invitation to interrogate critically the concepts of 'marginality' and 'peripherality' in relation to Christian history, and to track their changing meanings and utility over time.[1]

It is important to state at the outset a fundamental premise of this collaborative endeavour: that the margins and peripheries of historical Christianity – whether geographical, societal or theological – have never been simply natural and God-given, but rather are subjective, contingent and socially constructed; they are always, to some degree or other, a matter of perspective. The processes of their construction, or imposition, often for implicitly or overtly ideological reasons, thus offer considerable insight into the workings of the churches as social institutions and the dynamics of religious life within them. A connected premise is that margins or peripheries are always, and

[1] In writing this introduction, I have benefitted from the comments of participants in a round-table discussion at the conclusion of the 2023 Summer Conference, and from a set of written reflections kindly forwarded to me by Robert Swanson.

Studies in Church History 61 (2025), 1–11
doi:10.1017/stc.2025.1

of their very essence, relational. They have no intrinsic or autonomous meaning, and exist only in connection to some recognized moral fulcrum or known geographical centre. But where, in Christian terms, is the centre to be found?

A full account of the disputed attempts, over many centuries, to resolve that question might well require an entire historical survey of Christianity, a religion which traces its origins to the birth of a disadvantaged child in a subjugated province on the eastern periphery of the Augustan Roman empire. Jerusalem, the place of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and expected Second Coming, was from the start the core of Christianity's eschatological imagination and the pivot of its moral geography. An ancient notion of Jerusalem as 'the navel of the world' was popularized by the biblical commentaries of Jerome, and the city was usually placed at the centre of medieval maps of the three known continents, a convention that has left its mark on modern cartography.[2] Yet Jerusalem, lost, regained, then lost again to the expanding forces of Islam, paradoxically became and remained a place on the margins of the Christian world.

A position of primacy, and of consequent centrality, was meanwhile claimed, and continues to be claimed, by the papacy in Rome – though one strongly disputed by the Orthodox churches, who looked to Constantinople (latterly, sometimes to Moscow) as first in honour among various institutional centres of the faith. With the split within Latin Christendom at the time of the Reformation, new centres of magisterial reform in Zürich, Geneva, London and other places established lines of connection and dependence with their own margins and peripheries, while an assortment of free-thinkers, dissidents and radicals planted their rival understandings of the faith in a variety of New Jerusalems or promised lands. The centre-periphery model of Christianity was reinforced in an age of global expansion and encounter, and through a European self-understanding of pre-eminence and centrality which largely shaped, and to an extent continues to shape, the subsequent historiography of religion. However, ancient churches in the Near and Middle East, in Ethiopia and in India, their establishment long predating the Christian ascendancy in Western Europe, certainly did not regard themselves as marginal or peripheral.

[2] Adriaan H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, transl. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI, 1994), 95–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christianity's margins have thus always been fluid and malleable, subject to sometimes contentious negotiation and to changing alignments over time. People and places once almost universally regarded as peripheral can suddenly find themselves at the centre of the action: in the early sixteenth century, the small-town backwater of Wittenberg, situated in thoroughly provincial Saxony, presents itself as a pre-eminent case. A more recent example of peripheries in motion is precisely identified by George Mak's article in this volume examining Bible publishing in mid-twentieth-century Hong Kong. As a result of the Communist Revolution of 1948–9, a small British colony, in a peripheral location off the coast of southern China, developed rapidly into the world centre for the printing and distribution of Chinese Protestant Bibles and other devotional works. These were aimed at an international diaspora which itself had once been marginal to Western missionary priorities, but, with access to mainland China now restricted, developed into a main focus for those efforts. In the case study presented in Alan Ford's insightful article, a place acknowledged to be on the extreme edge of Christian civilization became a focus of intense confessional debate precisely because of its peripheral character. The renowned pilgrimage site of 'St Patrick's Purgatory', a cave on a small island in Lough Derg, County Donegal, was believed in the Middle Ages to be a physical point of entry to the Otherworld. At the Reformation, Protestant polemicists blasted it as a symbol of popish obscurantism and corruption, while Roman Catholics hailed the remote location as a pristine repository of piety, tradition and faith.

Lines of connection between centre and periphery, and what happens in the course of these being traversed, is a theme of several of the articles in this volume. John Sawkins offers a meticulous examination of financial arrangements for the support of the ministry within the Free Church of Scotland created by the 1843 Disruption. He demonstrates how, through a system of cross subsidy, poorer rural parishes in the highlands and Northern isles were generously supported by wealthier urban ones in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Here, the margins were being sustained, rather than neglected, albeit through a system that was itself a highly centralized one. A millennium and more earlier, in the emergent kingdom to the south, currency of a different kind was expended to strengthen links between the centre and margins. Miriam Adan Jones examines the distribution and extent of medieval church and chapel dedications to St Gregory, the pope who in the late sixth century initiated the Roman mission to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

English. The dedicatory process was overseen by political and ecclesiastical leaders who regarded the patronage of St Gregory as a powerful symbol of a not-always-obvious connectedness between the island kingdom on the western edge of Christian Europe and the mother church in Rome. There were fewer such dedications in the centuries after the Norman Conquest, but this development, Adan Jones intriguingly suggests, might indicate how England was becoming a less 'marginal' part of the Christian world, and more confident about its place within it.

Attempts by the 'centre', particularly the Roman papacy, to impose its authority and norms on peripheral territories usually relied on the co-operation of locally based agents, who often possessed their own priorities and agendas. Contrary to received wisdom, geographically distant territories were not necessarily resistant to new initiatives from the centre. The medieval church in Iceland, on the fringes of the Scandinavian world, and thus in Roman terms a periphery-within-a-periphery, has usually been seen by historians as a de facto independent entity, and one which was two centuries or so late in adopting the reforms of Gregory VII (1073–85). Davide Salmoiraghi provocatively argues, however, that Gizurr Ísleifsson, bishop of Skálholt between 1082 and 1118, was a remarkably effective agent of Gregorian reform in his diocese, dedicating his new cathedral to St Peter as a symbol of loyalty to far-off Rome. In one respect at least, however, Bishop Gizurr – married with six children – was hardly a model Gregorian. It would have been culturally and politically unthinkable for an early medieval Icelandic chieftain – which Gizurr was – to remain single and celibate. This is one example of a theme identified by several of the contributors to this volume: the periphery as a place for creative adaptation of universal norms to local needs and circumstances, and of periodic experiment and innovation.

Shaun Church, for example, draws on archaeological evidence in an ambitious attempt to reconstruct experiences of worship on the edges of the Roman empire in the fourth and fifth centuries, his analysis focusing on sites in the Egyptian western desert, on the border with Persia, and at the frontiers on the Danube and in northern England. He finds that the basilica form of ecclesiastical building, specified by Constantine for churches in Rome and the Holy Land, was widely and conscientiously adopted even on the outer fringes of the empire. But at the same time spatial designs were adapted in flexible and inventive ways to serve practical needs and reflect local cultural contexts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The frontier as a place of creative institutional initiative features too in Jonathan Jarrett's detailed exploration of the region around Manresa in tenth-century Catalonia, on the boundary between Christianity and Iberian Islam. Sponsorship of settlement and provision of pastoral care in such contexts is conventionally attributed to covetous warlords and adventurous peasantry, with assistance from monastic churches. Jarrett, however, identifies a crucial role played by the secular collegiate church of Santa Maria, in a pattern displaying some similarities to, though also important differences from, the minster system operating in parts of Anglo-Saxon England. The frequently improvisational character of 'peripheral' Christianity stands in contrast to clichés about backwardness and stubborn resistance to change. This is seen too, in a very different context, in Daniel Inman's thoughtful account of intellectual culture in mid-eighteenth-century New England, a periphery of imperial Britain. Despite, or perhaps because of, colonial America's religious pluralism, many of its episcopal clergymen were precocious proponents of Enlightenment theology and philosophy, and active participants in an Anglican 'republic of letters'.

A conceptual difficulty with the terminology of 'periphery' is that it implicitly adopts the perspective of external authority, for whom the periphery was frequently conceived of as a challenge or problem, rather than of the people who actually lived in the places in question. It is incumbent upon us, as far as we can, to restore the agency of the periphery, and to understand the ways in which its inhabitants represented themselves, and identified and advanced their own communal and individual interests. Teodora Popovici, in her prize-winning article, explores this for the Catholic community of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Transylvania, on the eastern edge of Latin Christendom. Her study focuses on indulgence requests directed to the papal chancery, a quintessential form of communication between centre and periphery in the late medieval church. In pursuit of the benefits such indulgences offered, petitioners (who were, in reality, often wealthy and powerful people) instrumentalized their own putative marginality, not in terms of physical distance from Rome, but by portraying themselves as vulnerable *fideles*, surrounded by 'schismatics' (Orthodox Christians), and increasingly at the mercy of Ottoman Turks.

As with medieval Transylvania, Christianity's – and particularly Catholicism's – historic margins and peripheries often turn out to be borders and boundaries, zones of exploratory encounter with a variety

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of perplexing 'others'. Such margins could be social and existential, as well as, or rather than, geographically outlying. Dirceu Marroquim's illuminating article contextualizes the life-story of a German Franciscan friar, Casimiro Brochtrup, who at the end of the nineteenth century emigrated as a missionary to Brazil. He initially worked in the rural hinterlands, but shifted his focus to working-class districts of the city of Recife, principally because the inhabitants there were increasingly susceptible to the blandishments of preachers belonging to the *nova-seita* ('new sect') of Pentecostalist Protestantism. Marroquim shows how this ministry to the marginalized and disadvantaged was entangled with the agenda of local political powerbrokers, but also how it anticipated the concerns of later liberation theology.

In perceived peripheral settings, relationships between self-identifying true Christians and supposedly deviant 'others' were often, but not always, contentious and confrontational. In his article on late seventh-century Wessex, Aloysius Atkinson persuasively argues that the conventional picture of unremitting hostility in this period, between Christians of native British descent and English churchmen who regarded the Britons as heretics, is misconceived, at least for south-western Britain. Here, interactions between the churches remained surprisingly fraternal into the early eighth century, albeit the persistent English appeal to Roman endorsement and authority had an effect of marginalizing the British spiritually, a parallel to their increasing confinement to the island's geographical extremities. In Carolingian annals of the eighth and ninth centuries, as Robert Evans demonstrates in his prize-winning article, peoples from the geographical margins of Christian Europe might even be valorized rather than villainized, and held up as a mirror to Frankish society. Such texts regularly recounted improving episodes involving Greeks, Englishmen, Bulgars and Frisians, in which these stranger peoples were hailed as fellow Christians, and the periphery identified as a source of exemplary moral counsel.

Beyond the realms of rhetoric, actual relations between different ethnic and religious groups in peripheral settings can be difficult to reconstruct. Staying in the world of early medieval Europe, Lesley Abrams's article provides a compelling survey of patterns of conversion from paganism to Christianity within the Scandinavian diaspora during the so-called Viking Age, with a particular focus on England and Francia. Though the evidential problems are significant, and the voices of converts themselves almost entirely silent, Abrams identifies a 'striking creativity' on the part of ecclesiastics tasked with bringing

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Northmen into the Christian fold. It is reflected in a flexible approach to the strict application of canon law, and, in the English case, in the survival of stone monuments mixing Christian and Norse mythological elements. These, Abrams suggests, may be not so much a sign of confused syncretism as of pagan narratives being purposively deployed to reinforce Christian truths.

'Accommodation' as part of a missionary or conversion strategy is a theme of several of the articles in this volume, again pointing us to margins and peripheries as places where Christian orthopraxis might prove particularly supple and imaginative. There were, of course, failures on this front. Tim Grass assiduously tracks the progress of Protestant reformation on the Isle of Man, from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth century, and concludes that over the course of this period the island's religiously peripheral position was exacerbated rather than alleviated, principally due to a failure on the part of reformers to engage seriously with the Manx language. There were no published Manx translations of the Bible or Prayer Book in this period, and the religious formation of the laity and recruitment of suitable clergy was in consequence significantly hindered.

The travails of some Catholic clergymen in the same period are explored in John-Paul Ghobrial's absorbing article on French Capuchin missionaries operating in the seventeenth-century Ottoman empire, principally in territories corresponding to the modern states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. The mission they were engaged on might seem a clear instance of churchmen seeking to subordinate the periphery to the centre; its goal was to persuade a variety of Eastern Christians – Armenians, Copts, Jacobites, Nestorians and others – to acknowledge the supremacy of the papacy in Rome. Yet these representatives of an external and alien authority were usually, in Ghobrial's view, thoroughly 'rooted'. French Capuchins learned Arabic, co-operated with Ottoman officials, and often became closely integrated into the social and devotional lives of Eastern Christians, people who quite naturally did not regard themselves as in any way marginal. Indeed, the Capuchins in their letters made few references to conversion, and in practice made numerous accommodations to the social and religious cultures of the Middle East, not so much as a considered stratagem as out of pragmatic adaptation to the specific local contexts in which they lived and worked.

In a thought-provoking article dealing with another sphere of the Counter Reformation's evangelistic reach, Manning Chan takes a

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fresh look at perhaps the best-known case of accommodationism: the seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century controversy over so-called 'Chinese Rites'. Jesuit missionaries, in the face of opposition from Dominican rivals, argued that Confucian patterns of ancestor veneration were civil ceremonies compatible with Christianity. Chan's account focuses on the writings in support of the Jesuit position produced by fourteen Chinese Catholic laypeople, another striking instance of the creative agency of the periphery. Her conclusion that both the missionaries and their Chinese allies failed to grasp the metaphysical meanings of Confucian ritual practice points, however, to some of the limitations of Christian peripheries as places of successful spiritual experiment.

A centre-periphery model of Christian cultural interaction needs to take account of the fact that the 'peripheries' sometimes spoke to each other. Two of the articles in this volume, by Anastasia Stylianou and Alex Beeton, address themselves to encounters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Greek Orthodox clergymen and representatives of the Church of England, two groups inclined to regard each other as exotic and geographically remote, but with a potential common interest in resisting the universalist aspirations of Rome. Beeton's informative study of the visit of two Orthodox priests to England in the late 1640s, and his chronicling of the warmth of welcome they received, suggests the ways in which marginal figures could become optimistic repositories of (probably unrealistic) hopes in a confessionally divided Europe. Stylianou's expansive account of the interest in England taken by two leading 'Venetian Greeks' explains how what might perhaps have ended as merely fleeting and contingent political contacts produced significant afterlives in print, promoting an enduring awareness, replete with potential, of religious difference at the opposing cartographic margins of European Christendom.

Marginality, in religion as in other spheres of life, can represent not only a geographical designation, but a social ascription, a lived experience and an unsettling state of mind. The sociological terminology around 'marginalization' is of relatively recent origins: the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s earliest example of, in this sense, 'to marginalize' dates only from 1970.[3] But the impulse itself is undoubtedly much older. In medieval Europe, as Catherine Rider demonstrates in her

[3] See 'Marginalize, verb', *OED*, online at: <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/marginalize_v?tab=meaning_and_use#38067264>, accessed 15 October 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sensitive discussion of a still inadequately researched historical topic, a married couple's failure to reproduce was frequently a cause of spiritual disparagement and social stigma, a failing symptomatic of divine displeasure. Yet in some fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English sources dealing with the apparent infertility of Joachim and Anne, the later-life parents of the Virgin Mary, Rider finds more nuanced attitudes, and hints of a genuine pastoral concern about the distress caused to people by reproductive disorders.

The vicissitudes of another undoubtedly marginalized group are closely examined by Kateryna Budz, an early career scholar from Ukraine, whose research in the UK the Ecclesiastical History Society has been delighted to co-sponsor. Her article deals with priests of the underground Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, who after 1946 defied orders from the Soviet authorities to 'reunite' with the Russian Orthodox. It is a story of remarkable resilience, fortitude and improvisation: Greek Catholic priests continued to serve clandestine congregations, while working in secular occupations and skilfully exploiting the deficiencies of the Soviet bureaucratic system. Fears about marginalization within an evolving ecclesiastical system feature too in Martin Wellings's intricate account of the mid-nineteenth-century Reform crisis within the Wesleyan Oxford Circuit, in the course of which rival parties tried hard to portray themselves as central to the doctrinal and institutional structure of Methodism, and their opponents as peripheral to it.

A strictly ecclesiastical marginality is not necessarily to be equated with impotence or obscurity. Emily Bailey's lively article focuses on the remarkable figure of Hannah Whitall Smith, a prolific writer, preacher and correspondent in the British and American Holiness movement of the later nineteenth century. Smith occupied no stable denominational position, but Bailey argues that her career suggests how margins and peripheries provide 'a fertile context for understanding religious dialogue, authority, innovation, and acceptance.' In more recent times, theologically liberal and socially progressive attitudes have often seemed distinctly marginal to mainstream evangelicalism. But this scarcely renders such voices unproductive or irrelevant. Our understanding of the 'evangelical left' in one Asian context is significantly enhanced by Dongjun Seo's article on the evangelical network formed in the 1980s at Seoul National University, in reaction to South Korea's authoritarian military regime. Although ultimately unable to transform the predominantly quietist and conservative tone of Korean

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

evangelicalism, the movement in its heyday represented a vigorous and resourceful effort to redefine religion 'from the margins'.

Historians, of course, do not stand outside the parameters of centrality and marginality they purport to chronicle. Certain themes, topics and sources have been, and sometimes continue to be, marginalized within the study of religious history itself. One of these, so Lydia Fisher argues in her carefully researched contribution, is the profusion of fragments of stained glass to be found in English medieval parish churches. Though often neglected in favour of the handful of surviving complete sequences, or the elaborate schema located in cathedrals, such shards of evidence have the potential to tell us much about both collective religious culture and individual piety at the parish level. Another topic of relative historiographical neglect, as well as of cool condescension within mainstream churches, and frank bemusement from the secular world, is covered in Mary Heimann's fascinating article on the smuggling of Bibles into Eastern Bloc countries during the decades of the Cold War. Heimann shows how an initially small-scale and amateurish activity developed into an extensive, sophisticated and well-funded covert operation, comparable to, and in some ways more effective than, the work of the Western intelligence agencies. This allegedly 'peripheral' activity, Heimann argues, substantially helped to form the worldview of evangelical Christianity, and to shape the contemporary culture wars in which such Christians often feel themselves to be on the losing side.

The principal thread running through the highly diverse subject matters, chronologies and methodologies represented in this volume is the conviction that margins and peripheries deserve to be explored: not out of 'completism', or even a sense of moral responsibility towards the historically marginalized, but because their elucidation significantly enhances our understanding of the history of Christianity as a whole. The past, like a statue or painting, is always best viewed from a variety of angles, and the 'perspective of the periphery' usually has the potential to make us look more closely at, and think more carefully about, what we are seeing. My own contribution to the volume argues that a study of the British Reformations from the vantage point of Britain's off-shore islands can help move us away from 'diffusionist' models of religious change, and to appreciate more keenly the character of its locally negotiated reception, and the importance of its international dimensions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In a speech to cardinals on the eve of his election in 2013, Pope Francis declared that 'the Church is called to come out of herself and go to the peripheries', explaining that he meant not just the geographical margins, but the 'existential peripheries' of pain, injustice, indifference and misery.[4] Historians might want to interject that the churches themselves have often been complicit in the construction and preservation of such peripheries, and arguably continue to be so. Nonetheless, it is an exhortation that scholars of religious history would be well advised to take to heart. As the articles in this volume ably demonstrate, Christianity has always been shaped, challenged, cheered and troubled by its margins and peripheries. They have proved to be founts of experiment, innovation and renewal; locations of encounter, conversion and resistance; and sites where meaning and worth have been negotiated and defined. Talk of 'cutting-edge' historical research has become a habitual scholarly cliché, but as these articles remind us, edges possess a persistent capacity to sharpen our analysis of the past.

Peter Marshall
University of Warwick
p.marshall@warwick.ac.uk

[4] Paul Philibert, 'When Not in Rome: Lessons from the Peripheries of the Church', *America: The Jesuit Review* (24 March 2014), online at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/when-not-rome>, accessed 15 October 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press