

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches. By **Robert Wuthnow.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xi + 348 pp. \$26.95 cloth.

Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion. By **Dana L. Robert.** Blackwell Brief Histories of Religion. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. xii + 217 pp. \$89.95 cloth; \$21.55 paper.

The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith. By **Mark A. Noll.** Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009. 215 pp. \$25.00 cloth.

These three books enter a fairly small field of works that discuss the whole of global Christianity. The academic study of “world Christianity” has focused mainly on local, national, regional, or denominational contexts. As a result, there are numerous studies on Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well as works on African Independent Churches, Pentecostals, and other forms of Christianity. Consequently, studies on the whole of Christianity are a small portion of the total body of knowledge. This is attributable in part to overspecialization in the academy. For example, one doctoral student recently told me that his dissertation in world Christianity would focus on the impact of one custom in one denomination in one village in Africa. While this, and many like it, contributes to our global understanding of Christianity, the overview offered by the three books under review represents an important counterbalance to the dominance of local studies. The three by no means neglect detail on local forms of Christianity, but all three make a valiant effort to deal with the dynamics of the universal expression of Christianity while highlighting the tensions between the global and the local.

All three books self-consciously owe a debt to Lamin Sanneh (for example, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989]) and Andrew Walls (for example, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996]) who began, thirty years ago, building a framework for understanding world Christianity. In addition each author builds on the demographic work of David B. Barrett, who pioneered this field with his

landmark *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). In this sense, they share a pedigree with Philip Jenkins, who brought global Christianity to the attention of the wider academy with *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and the follow-up *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). One strength of all of these works is they interact vigorously with each other's ideas.

Due to their training and backgrounds, each author brings something different to the field of study. Robert, as macro-historian, summarizes and connects the dots. Noll, as comparative historian, draws parallels from two different time periods and two different places. Wuthnow, as sociologist, overcomes myths about the role of American Christianity with data. Reading all three books at the same time gives a broad perspective to the reader, but it also highlights how much more can be accomplished in this field. World Christianity, especially with a global purview, is a rich and understudied subject.

BOUNDLESS FAITH

Wuthnow's central argument is that "American Christianity has been significantly influenced in recent years by globalization and is, in turn, playing a much larger role in other countries and in U.S. policies and programs abroad" (viii). Because he is concerned primarily with practice, his research focuses on what ordinary people are doing through their congregations. As a sociologist, Wuthnow sees the globalization of American Christianity as part of a larger canvas of commerce, politics, and culture. In fact, Wuthnow prefers the term "transcultural" to describe the way in which American Christians are responding to globalization. He defines this term as "being involved in or interested in activities that take place outside of the United States and holding attitudes about such issues as international trade or military intervention that affect people in other countries" (30). Transcultural congregations have to maintain a balance in their commitments to the local and the global. His book is meant to illuminate the relatively neglected global aspects of American Christianity.

In chapter 2, Wuthnow deals with the popular notion that "Christianity's center of gravity has shifted to the point that it may no longer matter very much what Christians in the United States do or think" (32). Many publications have expressed this view over the past few decades, including the works of Philip Jenkins mentioned above. Wuthnow examines the data supporting this view, much of them collected and published by David Barrett. While acknowledging

that the numbers support a shift in Christian demographics, Wuthnow questions whether these correlate directly with influence. He cites Barrett as a major source of the counterargument that Christians in the U.S. contribute a disproportionately large amount of resources to the global Christian effort. Wuthnow concludes by making a case for global interconnectedness as a truer narrative.

Wuthnow next tackles the subject of globalization and its impact on America and American churches. In chapter 3, he argues that with the widespread use of English, communications within global Christianity has become easier while at the same time ease of movement is limited to elites. He observes that straightforward arguments about an American gospel being exported transnationally are too simple. He shows that while globalization does not benefit everyone, it does provide opportunities for some segments of the population. Finally, he argues that even those overlooked in globalization draw inspiration from this knowledge of a potentially better life. These factors provide evidence for a continued American presence around the world, especially in the context of global Christianity.

In chapter 4, Wuthnow investigates the origins of transnational ties from American churches to the rest of the world. He states that these endeavors share two central challenges: distance and difference. Overcoming these obstacles requires more than technological solutions—it requires social organization. To illustrate this, Wuthnow recounts the history of denominational mission societies from the early nineteenth century. By the end of that century social conditions (*à la* Noll) were different than at the start and made organizing in new ways possible. These include diplomatic treaties and trade agreements opening up vast areas for new work, technologically advanced communication and travel, and the founding of Bible institutes, colleges, revival meetings, and conferences. American missions began with denominational agencies, but under these conditions new interdenominational and faith-based organizations sprang up. By the middle of the twentieth century, large numbers of missionaries were sent out through these latter two structures. Nongovernmental organizations set up during the second half of the twentieth century have become a third vehicle for American Christian missionaries.

Chapter 5 explores direct engagement by American Christians around the world. Today most congregations have “highly coordinated global outreach programs involving humanitarian assistance, partnering with international agencies and local congregations in other countries, working with refugees, sponsoring missionaries, and on occasion becoming involved in peacemaking and human rights issues” (141). Thus transcultural congregations are involved globally in a variety of ways. However, none seems to be more potent than sending people abroad. Wuthnow charts the phenomenal growth of short-term missions in the latter part of the twentieth century. He estimates that 1.6

million American Christians are involved in short-term mission trips annually. At the same time, an even larger number are involved in assisting their own congregations and communities at home. This evidence faults the “global Christianity” paradigm in two ways. First, “churches in the United States are not just moribund organizations that have abandoned mission work to the point that whatever vitality Christianity is experiencing in the rest of the world must be understood strictly as an indigenous development” (185). Second, many churches in the United States have responded to globalization by developing innovative ways of partnering with churches in the Global South.

After investigating the relationship between American churches and foreign policy in chapter 6, Wuthnow concludes his book with a helpful list of three assumptions, four social factors, and five tensions. The assumptions (on which his research has cast serious doubt) are (1) American Christianity has withdrawn from the wider world; (2) local congregations have imploded; and (3) evangelicals encourage the nation’s leaders in imperialistic adventures involving free trade and unilateral military action.

All three assumptions are inconsistent with the empirical evidence Wuthnow presents in his book. Instead, he has also identified four social factors that have contributed to the increasing global engagement of American Christianity: (1) shrinking of distances because of transportation and communication; (2) cultural flattening of the world with the spread of English, television, and pop music; (3) organizational muscle in international faith-based humanitarian and relief agencies; and (4) grassroots energizing activity of congregations themselves.

Wuthnow sees five areas of tension caused by American Christians’ wider engagement of the world. These five likely will impact the future role of the United States in the world: (1) Connecting local and global: how much effort will be engaged in home-based programs vs. overseas ones? (2) Balancing service and spirituality: how much effort should be engaged in serving the poor vs. evangelizing them? (3) “Doing for” vs. “partnering with”: how should churches appropriately structure their relationships with people they are serving? (4) The historical legacy: how do churches benefit from their own cultural legacies while learning from others? (5) Conscience of a nation: how do churches provide a moral conscience for the country that is holistic and well thought out?

In the end, Wuthnow concludes “globalization has tempered American Christianity. It has exposed the most devout Christians to other religions and to other ways of being Christian” (250). Wuthnow also obtains some comfort from the fact that the diversity of American Christianity protects it from a monolithic presence in American and international affairs.

Wuthnow buttresses his strongest arguments with mountains of survey data that are treated with great care (presented in an appendix or in footnotes).

If there is a weakness in his presentation it is in factors beyond the purview of surveys, such as the difficulties American Christians face in understanding culture, language, and religion when they encounter non-Christians at home or abroad. In addition, as Americans take advantage of increased mobility and independence from ecclesiastical institutions, they create more competition and duplication on the mission field.

CHRISTIAN MISSION

Robert has written a remarkably compact history of Christian missions, considering that she deftly covers twenty centuries in only the first eighty pages of her book. While the Western classic on the subject remains the much longer and more detailed *A History of Christian Missions: The Pelican History of the Church, Volume 6*, by Stephen Neill and Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin, 1964), Robert's book, by drawing on more recent scholarship, incorporates a global view and puts world Christianity at the center of the narrative, where it belongs. This "rewriting" of the history of Christian missions has just begun and likely will occupy scholars for years to come.

Robert asks the question, how did Christianity get to be so diverse and widespread? The short answer is the concept of "mission" whereby Christianity moves from one culture to another. This is based in the universal nature of the Christian gospel—it should be shared with all peoples. Robert notes that, unfortunately, mission is often stereotyped as Western colonialism, obscuring the role of indigenous agents and of the important role of mission in identity formation. Robert's book provides a concise response to critiques of mission as well as a sweeping overview of the spread of world Christianity.

In chapter 1 Robert starts at the very beginning of the Christian story and traces it through the centuries. But first she defines Christianity as a world religion in that it is "a mosaic of local beliefs and practices in creative tension with a universal framework shaped by belief in the God of the Bible, as handed down through Jesus and his followers" (9). Much of Robert's recounting of Christian history is found at the intersection of the global and the local, the universal and the particular.

Chapter 2 begins deep within European Christendom, where Latin is the *lingua franca*, providing a framework for Christian scholarship. But, Robert notes, everything is about to be turned upside down by the invention of the printing press. Gutenberg's invention, whose first project was a Bible, sparked an explosion of new ideas when individual self-awareness was greatly enhanced through increased literacy. Bible translation, besides

revolutionizing personal interpretation of scripture, became a source of modern nationhood by initiating “a body of literature that cemented a people’s sense of cultural unity” (34). This pattern was to be repeated again and again around the world up to the present day.

Robert highlights the role of trade relations and colonization in the flourishing of missions because missionaries followed colonial trade routes. She also observes that missionaries took on a dual role, speaking on behalf of the non-Western cultures to churches and governments in Europe and, later, North America.

Meanwhile, Protestants in Europe had firmly embraced the principle of the vernacular but could not utilize it abroad until Protestant (namely British and Dutch) trade routes opened up. A slow stream of missionaries turned into a flood once William Carey modeled the creation of a Protestant mission, sending structure. In addition, world trade was creating a middle class with the ability to travel.

Protestant involvement also introduced the family as the new missionary unit after one thousand years of celibate Catholic males. This provided a relevant model to the surrounding society. Eventually some of these families settled permanently in their new lands. Robert points out that European colonialism provided both opportunities and limitations in the missionary enterprise. For the most part, missionaries were welcomed in the colonies of their home countries—but they generally were not welcome in the colonies of other countries.

Most nineteenth-century missionaries were involved in translation or church planting (though most converts were won by indigenous evangelists). Eventually missionaries founded schools and hospitals, and became involved in agriculture. Robert notes that the greatest irony in the colonial expansion of Christianity is that missionaries offered tools to indigenous cultures that equipped them to eventually challenge European empires.

Chapter 4 covers the twentieth century, beginning with the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. This conference marked a turning point in mission history because, even though it was barely recognized at the time, churches in Africa and Asia would grow exponentially throughout the twentieth century. Only a few from these continents attended the meeting, but one, a future bishop in India, reflecting on the sacrifice of missionaries in India, said, “Give us friends.” Robert notes, “the delegates were determined to move beyond racial stereotypes to promote full equality between western missionaries and eastern converts, and between older and younger churches” (55).

Robert notes another irony of European colonization: the massive trade networks established by European powers opened the way for missionary strategy. This was largely the result of improvements in transportation and

communication. After Edinburgh, the church around the world became increasingly connected. Global networks of all types grew up in this period, transforming not only denominations but also groups that were seemingly unconnected.

Part of the context for these global networks was awakenings or revivals around the world. These movements were often in defiance of colonial authorities. They were found in all traditions and, significantly, paved the way for indigenization, even in the Catholic Church, where a missionary revival was underway under Pius XI and six Chinese bishops were consecrated in 1926. All of this was a foreshadowing of the “World Christianity” that Henry Van Dusen would recognize in a book with that title in 1947 (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury).

After World War II, European colonialism collapsed, inaugurating a radical critique of European Christendom. Robert documents how mission was rejected as a Western imposition on other cultures and religions. In 1960 the success of communism and rationalism appeared to mark the end of Christianity around the world. Instead it was the death rattle of European Christendom. Freed from an unhealthy dependence on the West, Christianity around the world was liberated to grow into new cultural forms.

Other internal factors that assisted in the shift to the Global South were Vatican II for Roman Catholics (1962–1965) empowering local languages, indigenous theology, and laypeople as missionaries. For Protestants it was partnership as postcolonial global denominational federations were formed. Robert comments that all of these developments mark not the end of missions but “its transformation into a multi-cultural, multi-faceted network” (73).

In the second half of her book, Robert examines themes in the history of mission. First she tackles politics in mission by examining the life of missionary explorer David Livingstone. (Ironically, Livingstone’s efforts to protect his beloved Africa from colonialism had the opposite effect.) Robert also examines scholarly critiques of mission, most of which were penned by anthropologists. Anthropologists presented themselves as neutral observers while treating missionaries as biased agents of change. In the end, Robert observes, all outsiders bring about cultural change whether they recognize it or not. Perhaps more telling is the lack of attention paid by critics to the role of indigenous people in cultural change. This is important because “the bridging work of early indigenous Christians was even more crucial to the cross-cultural transmission of Christianity than the work of the foreigner” (95).

As another theme, Robert catalogues the role of women in missions. She points out how, from the earliest days of the Christian faith, women like the twentieth-century martyr Annalena Tonelli have played an essential role in the growth and consolidation of churches, as well as a significant leadership role in serving the poor and advocating for women’s rights. While patriarchal

leadership often opposed their work, they have faithfully performed their ministries.

Finally, Robert looks at how societies respond to conversion by comparing and contrasting Patrick's evangelization of Ireland in the fifth century with Bernard Mizeki's work among the Shona at the end of the nineteenth century. In this Robert reiterates her theme, "Missionaries carry creative tension between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the local and the global, the traditional and the modern" (172).

In a postscript, Robert returns to the overarching theme and places mission in the context of overlapping human networks. Mission in the twenty-first century is "a network, an international web of human relationships in which the 'missionaries' scamper back and forth like human spiders, weaving and expanding the web in all directions. It is important to study the spiders, but it is equally important to notice the web" (177).

Robert provides the reader with an engaging overview of Christianity and, in condensing mission history, has chosen her material well. In a book this short there is much that, by necessity, must be left out. One subject that might have been given more space, however, is the dramatic expansion of Christianity by the Apostolic Church of the East across the Silk Road in Asia over several centuries. For good reason, this story is called "hidden history" or "lost history" by historians.

THE NEW SHAPE OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY

Noll begins his book calling for a "new history of Christianity" because older histories "presume a core Christian narrative dominated . . . by Europe and North America—and then surrounded by a fringe of miscellaneous missionary phenomena scattered throughout the rest of the globe" (9). Noll is concerned that old narratives do not properly account for the recent changes in Christian demography—namely, the shift of the center of gravity to the Global South. Noll's expertise in the history of American Christianity informs his consideration of the history of Christianity around the world. He notices connections and parallels between these two stories. His major argument is that American Christianity has become important in the world, not directly, but as a model for how people come to practice faith (11–12). Noll sets out five reasons for studying these two in tandem: (1) the growth of Christianity in America is one of the most successful missionary ventures of all time; (2) its growth was accomplished by voluntary means; (3) it represented a shift from European Christendom to believers taking initiatives for themselves; (4) it resulted in both positive and negative developments, such as more participation by laypeople and less appreciation of tradition

and history; and (5) while one can argue for a direct influence of American Christianity around the world, Noll is concerned primarily with the historical path both have followed. Noll also notes that the book was written for fellow evangelicals who have “always been the main bridge for American believers to the non-Western world” (15).

Many themes run through Noll’s book. One of the most significant is that of the multiplicity of new Christian expressions. These emerge because of the universality of the Christian message and the centrality of translation in Christian history. Noll acknowledges here the contribution of both Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls, who explore how the activity of translation (Bible and otherwise) has brought spiritual and cultural empowerment to those who experience the Christian message in the vernacular. Translation provided the tools for the independence movements that characterized both political and ecclesiastical life in the twentieth century. In addition, the demographic shift of Christianity to the Global South has theological implications. Noll identifies the relation of the spirit world to the everyday world, the idea of group conversions, and the way in which the Bible is read as three significant areas to study.

But, Noll notes, the demographic shift of believers has not been accompanied by a shift of resources. Most of the educational resources are still found in the Western world. As an example, Noll states that someone studying the East African revival would find more resources in Cambridge, Boston, and Pasadena than in Uganda or Rwanda where the revival began.

Noll points out that all forms of Christianity are culturally embedded and that it is in analyzing this process that one can make comparisons between eighteenth-century evangelicals in America and world Christianity. Perhaps the most telling observation that Noll makes is that some evangelicals in the eighteenth century had a tendency to distance themselves from tradition, whereas today most evangelicals have thrown out tradition and developed a self-created evangelical authority—either institutions and practices they have chosen or charismatic leaders who guide them.

The issue of who has the power is another important observation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evangelicals in America were ambivalent about power, wielding it without fully understanding its role. This continues today in world Christianity when those who have the power are unwilling to consider its impact on the church.

Cultural adaptation is another area of comparison. Noll recalls the story of evangelical Bible translation into Korean. The translators used an indigenous word for God that opened the way for widespread conversions among Koreans but probably also made it easier for Korean Christians to incorporate shamanism into their lives.

Moving into the core of his book in chapter 4, Noll poses the question, “What, in fact, has been the American role in creating the new shape of

world Christianity?" Three answers are usually offered to the question: (1) America controls or manipulates events around the world; (2) America influences the world; and (3) America shares the historical experience of many newer expressions of Christianity around the world. Noll feels that a combination of the second and third answers is the best description of the present situation. Using the *Jesus* film (of Campus Crusade for Christ International) as an example, Noll illustrates how the film has influenced the growth of Christianity in new places but also how the film has been used by these new movements to forward their own perspectives.

In chapter 5 Noll shows how the American missionary movement has interacted with new Christian movements around the world. Again Noll stresses the similarities between the two, identifying conversionist, voluntarist, entrepreneurial, and nondenominational characteristics. In the next chapter, Noll (like Robert) points out that American missions have been successful in many places precisely because indigenous preachers end up doing the bulk of the work.

In chapter 7 Noll returns to his central thesis, that social conditions in world Christianity are similar to those in American Christian history. Thus, he is able to chart a parallel development between the two, eventually arriving at the conclusion, "Christianity in various forms is now rapidly advancing in parts of the world where the instincts of ancient Christendom are largely absent" (114). In addition, Noll cites the work of sociologist David Martin, who charted the role of globalization in world Christian movements, identifying characteristics of social fluidity, personal choice, the need for innovation, and a search for anchorage in the face of vanishing traditions (116).

Noll's thesis is greatly strengthened by his use of global pentecostalism as an example of how this works. Utilizing the work of the late Nigerian scholar Ogbu Kalu, Noll posits that, despite American influence, pentecostal movements grew up all over precisely because of the social conditions in their locales. Noll highlights Kalu's findings that these movements defined themselves by the use of scripture, included confession of sin, predated Azusa Street, often were not related at all to the Western world, dealt with the spirit world not found in the West, and thrived without the benefits of economic globalization.

Noll then moves on to three case studies. The first examines how American evangelicals have viewed the world across the twentieth century (via their magazines). The second focuses on Koreans learning from American evangelical history. Noll identifies remarkable similarities between the two and then offers four prominent characteristics of American evangelical history that might be instructive for Korean Christians. The third case study recounts the story of the East African revival, including the tensions between missionaries and traditional African practices and the distinctly African form of the revival.

Noll concludes his book by reflecting that correlation is not causation but maintains that understanding American patterns provides insight for what has been happening elsewhere in the world. He offers these two insights, among others: (1) Christianity itself appears more and more as an essentially pluralistic and cross-cultural faith (190–92); and (2) missionaries have a small but important role in the growth of world Christianity, but the movement from an initial beachhead to a functioning community is largely in the hands of local believers.

Noll's central thesis is well serviced by the end of his book. But if world Christianity can be viewed as a kind of parallel to the expansion of American Christianity in the nineteenth century, we are presented with a few worrying thoughts not well covered in his book. What does this mean for global racial relations within Christianity? Should we look for major blind spots in world Christianity in this area? How does the competition between "sects" play itself out on the world stage? Are we to anticipate on a global scale the massive duplication of efforts that is part of the American scene today? Nonetheless, Noll has done his part by bringing a helpful thesis to our attention.

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES

The strengths of these three books are found in their global approach, their use of solid historical (Robert and Noll) and sociological (Wuthnow) data, and their comparative analysis. Robert paints with the broadest brush, but both Noll and Wuthnow, in making American Christianity their focus, manage to cover much ground. All three books offer new perspectives on world Christianity that will have to be taken into account by later scholars.

Their description of a world Christianity that is becoming less tied to the state or an authoritative ecclesiastical body is also timely. They corroborate what sociologists like Peter Berger (with Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt* [New York: HarperOne, 2009]) are now saying about modernity and religion. Berger writes that the old paradigm was "modernity secularizes" whereas the new understanding is "modernity pluralizes." This applies to religions externally and internally, and this theme features prominently in all three books. With an estimated forty-one thousand denominations in the world (*Atlas of Global Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009]) it remains to be seen whether or not this is an entirely positive development.

As mentioned at the beginning, world Christianity as a global phenomenon is a wide-open field for study. The fact that these three authors are Americans who hail from Princeton, Boston University, and Notre Dame, respectively, is

evidence that most of the resources for this kind of study are found in the Western world. Most of the work by non-Western scholars has produced national, regional, and continental studies. In the future one would hope to see more global reflections from non-Westerners. This is not merely a question of resources, as the other major obstacle, also mentioned earlier, is the overspecialization in the academy. These three books are a clarion call to scholars around the world to take up the global study of world Christianity (a strange twist of phrase that highlights the problem).

In a similar way, one would hope to see more scholarship on world Christianity emerge from the non-Protestant world. There are many fine examples, but more is needed. Two of the oldest and largest Christian traditions tend to produce books on continental and global expressions of their faiths (for example, Orthodox in Europe, Roman Catholics around the world) but not on the whole of Christianity. Scholars from so-called alternative points of view (African Independent, for example) should be welcomed into this conversation. After all, they are featured in the books by Protestants!

Finally, as an American Christian currently on sabbatical in Northern Thailand, I interact on a weekly basis with Christians from dozens of denominations and countries. All three books speak to me about finding my primary Christian identity in the global body of Christ. Successfully navigating the tension between the universality of the Christian message and its local expressions is emphasized in all three books and is useful for any kind of Christian living anywhere in the world at any time in Christian history.

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