

MARK A. NOLL

THE NEW SHAPE OF
WORLD CHRISTIANITY

How American

Experience Reflects

Global Faith

 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

CONTENTS

Tables and Figures	8
1 Introduction	9
2 The New Shape of World Christianity	19
3 Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Identity, Power and Culture as Anticipating the Future	39
4 Posing the Question	67
5 What Does Counting Missionaries Reveal?	77
6 Indictment and Response.	95
7 American Experience as Template	109
8 American Evangelicals View the World, 1900-2000.	127
9 What Korean Believers Can Learn from American Evangelical History	151
10 The East African Revival.	169
11 Reflections	189
Guide to Further Reading.	201
Index	207

Introduction

THE NEW WORLD SITUATION FOR THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION demands a new history of Christianity. Naturally, with the startling changes that have taken place over the last century in the church worldwide, quite a bit more is needed than just a new history, especially since those changes have been as dramatic as anything experienced by the worldwide body of Christ since its very earliest years.

Older histories of Christianity remain irreplaceable; their insights are still valuable for readers with the time and energy to study them. The problem is not that earlier historical accounts are necessarily erroneous or misleading. It is rather that they presume a core Christian narrative dominated by events, personalities, organizations, money and cultural expectations in Europe and North America—and then surrounded by a fringe of miscellaneous missionary phenomena scattered throughout the rest of the globe. Such a historical picture was all but inevitable given conditions, say, in 1900 when over 80 percent of the world Christian population was Caucasian and over 70 percent resided in Europe.¹

¹David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, “Status of Global Mission, Pres-

But today—when active Christian adherence has become stronger in Africa than in Europe, when the number of practicing Christians in China may be approaching the number in the United States, when live bodies in church are far more numerous in Kenya than in Canada, when more believers worship together in church Sunday by Sunday in Nagaland than in Norway, when India is now home to the world’s largest chapter of the Roman Catholic Jesuit order, and when Catholic mass is being said in more languages each Sunday in the United States than ever before in American history—with such realities defining the present situation, there is a pressing need for new historical perspectives that explore the new world situation.

Christian theology is also being asked to address new issues that are important to the world’s new Christian communities. For example, urgent questions about the place of unevangelized ancestors in the kingdom of God or about battles between angels and demons are now taking the pride of place among believers worldwide that was once given to debates concerning human free will, the changelessness of God, the subjects and mode of baptism, or the status of the papacy.

These changes now affecting all aspects of Christian life include a shifting balance in missionary activity. Today more Christian workers from Brazil are active in crosscultural ministry outside their homelands than from Britain or from Canada. More than 10,000 foreign Christian workers are today laboring in Britain, France, Germany and Italy—more than 35,000 in the United States.² Obviously, once-fixed notions of “sending country” and “receiving country” have been tossed into the air.

Again, the new world situation is witnessing unprecedented educational opportunities and unprecedented educational dilemmas. In the Majority World, vast numbers of eager Christian students strain thin economic resources, while in the West some well-endowed establishments are begging for students.

ence, and Activities, AD 1800-2025,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32 (January 2008): 30.

²David B. Barrett, Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, “Missiometrics 2007,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31 (January 2007): 31.

Throughout the rapidly expanding Christian world—as also in the old Christian heartlands—change and changed perceptions have become the order of the day. Among many other results, the tidal wave of change is also raising important questions about how it all got this way. Thankfully, as the Guide to Further Reading at the end of this book indicates, an increasing supply of detailed writing is now becoming available for almost every part of the Christian world.

Rather than duplicating the gratifying increase of solid work on the non-Western world, this book attempts to mediate between older and newer histories. Its focus is on Christianity in the United States, but against the background of the world. For that purpose, it is vital to understand how “American Christianity” developed out of European experience, how it was transplanted to the new world, and then how it absorbed distinctive traits from the course of American experience. But the point of this book is not primarily to shed light on the history of Christianity in North America. It is, rather, to address the question of what American Christianity means for the worldwide Christian community. How, in other words, should responsible participants and observers understand the role of American Christianity in the great recent transformations of world Christianity? What has been, is and should be the relationship between Christian development in North America and Christian development in the rest of the world?

To answer that question, this book examines connections between American religious life and key developments in the recent world history of Christianity. It probes the American role in the tumultuous cascade of events that have so rapidly altered the character of worldwide Christianity. And it tries to interpret that role as both a positive and negative force. The book hopes to show why such questions are important, both because of what the United States has done in the world, but even more because of what kind of Christianity we Americans practice.

The book’s major argument is that Christianity in its American form has indeed become very important for the world. But it has become important, not primarily because of direct influence. Rather, the key is how American Christianity was itself transformed when Europeans carried their faith across the Atlantic. The American model rather than

American manipulation is key. Without denying the importance of American churches, money, military might, educational institutions and missionaries for the Christian world as it is now constituted, I am suggesting that how Americans have come to practice the Christian faith is just as important globally as what Americans have done.

The chapters that follow set out this argument in some detail, but the main points can be summarized in this introduction. First, the proper start for understanding the United States in relation to world Christianity is to understand what happened in the United States itself beginning in the late eighteenth century.³ From that point in time and over the next century one of the most successful missionary ventures of all time took place, and it took place in the United States of America (and to only a slightly lesser extent in Canada).

Second, this remarkable missionary work was accomplished through voluntary means. In North America, the older pattern of European state churches was set aside and Christian faith advanced (or declined) and flourished (or decayed) as believers took the initiative to do the work themselves. The formal and legal intermingling of church and society that had defined European Christendom for more than a thousand years faded away as a new way of organizing churches and Christian activity took its place.

Third, the type of faith that resulted when North Americans traded Christendom for voluntary Christianity was not completely different from all that had gone before. Some parallel movements in Europe have indeed shared some of the American traits, if never to the same degree.⁴ Yet visitors from outside the United States have always noticed several characteristic features about the American form of Christian faith that set it apart from European forms:

³In this book it is possible only to sketch developments in American history that I have set out at greater length in *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); and other books.

⁴David Bebbington has offered helpful reminders that qualify the sense of extreme American exceptionalism. See his essays, "Canadian Evangelicalism: A View from Britain," in *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, ed. George A. Rawlyk (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), pp. 38-54; and "Not So Exceptional After All," *Books & Culture* (May/June 2007): 16-18.

- It was much more oriented to the Bible and the individual conscience as ultimate norms of religious authority than to tradition or history.
- It was much more pragmatic and commonsensical than formal and dogmatic.
- For successful leaders, it looked much more to entrepreneurs selecting themselves than to figures designated by a hierarchy.
- Its strong investment in the building of Christian communities relied much more on self-motivating creativity than on inherited patterns of operation.
- Its strength lay with the enterprising middle classes rather than the privileged upper classes or subservient lower classes.
- And it enjoyed an elective affinity with free-market initiatives rather than with controlled economic practice.

Fourth, it is important to remember that these American developments led to both positive and negative results. Whether they resulted in a net improvement in understanding and living out the gospel is a complex question. Some things doubtless got better. For example, by comparison with Europe, American churches witnessed much increased participation by laymen and laywomen in carrying out the tasks of the gospel. But some things doubtlessly worsened. For example, the laity and many clergy came to ignore the riches of the Christian past and the practical lessons of godliness, discipleship and effective service taught by that history. Although further evaluation of this American style is attempted at the end of the book, its main point is not evaluative but descriptive. Over the course of the nineteenth century a new style of Christianity flourished in the United States. Then—and the book is trying to underscore this latter development—over the course of the twentieth century what had become standard American religious practice grew increasingly representative of what was taking place around the world.

Finally, different explanations can be offered for why American styles of religion have become more important in the world at large. It is possible to view this development in terms of direct influence—that

is, much of the rest of the Christian world now looks more and more like the Christianity in North America because North Americans have pushed it in that direction. Without denying a substantial American influence in the world, however, I will stress the advantage of seeing the newer regions of recent Christian growth as following a historical path that Americans pioneered before much of the rest of the Christian world embarked on the same path.

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE WRITTEN

This book can be no more than an interim report, since what it is trying to describe is changing so rapidly. Even more, my own limited grasp of recent world history must keep conclusions provisional. Yet because of a series of influences and opportunities, I am convinced that even an interim report may stimulate other North American believers to ponder more seriously the great ongoing drama of world Christian transformation. As a reader, I have been greatly stimulated by a host of authors whose works have discerningly probed the major changes under way, especially Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Dana Robert, David Martin and Philip Jenkins.⁵ I have also benefited greatly from informative personal conversations with Christian workers and Christian scholars with special knowledge about China, India, South Korea, Romania, Russia, Chad, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines and the South Pacific. In addition, for several years it has been my privilege to teach a course on “the twentieth-century world history of Christianity” at Wheaton College, Regent College—Vancouver, Calvin College and the University of Notre Dame. Although I have much appreciated how students in these classes have responded to what I tried tell them, I have appreciated even more their papers, reports and experiences from around the globe. I have also been privileged to have the able assistance of my friend and coauthor Carolyn Nystrom for this project. In recent years I have been asked to write papers and deliver lectures on themes related to the new shape of world Christianity. And I have received

⁵For titles, see the “Guide to Further Reading.”

articles, books, insights and much more from friends and colleagues whose generous contributions are acknowledged in the notes.

These duties, contacts and experiences have emboldened me to prepare this book. It puts to use much material that was prepared for the classroom and other assignments, but rethought and rewritten for these pages. In what follows, I am hoping to communicate to others some of the great challenges and great encouragement that I have received for my own faith from attending seriously to the new shape of world Christianity.

The book is aimed primarily at my fellow evangelical Christians, with several of the chapters focused directly on American evangelicals in relation to the world at large. There is no need to apologize for that focus, since evangelical Christianity has always been the main bridge for American believers to the non-Western world—and, with Roman Catholicism, the main religious bridge back to Europe. Still, if I could have treated the subject completely, the book would have included much more on Catholics, mainline Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Mormons and other groups, since American representatives of these bodies also sustain rich connections to the world at large.

THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK

The central section—chapters four through seven—develops the argument that American form rather than American influence has been the most important American contribution to the recent world history of Christianity. But as a context for that contention, the first section begins in chapter two with a short sketch of the Christian world as it exists today and with a brief attempt to outline some of the challenges posed by this new reality. Then chapter three describes several developments among evangelicals during the nineteenth century that pointed in the direction of what would happen more widely in the world during the twentieth century.⁶

The second section is the heart of the volume. Chapter four first

⁶This chapter is revised from “Evangelical Identity, Power, and Culture in the ‘Great’ Nineteenth Century,” in *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald M. Lewis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 31–51.

expands on the question about American influence in the world. Then chapter five provides a numerical history of twentieth-century missionary activity as a concrete way to chart American activity overseas. In the same vein, chapter six examines criticism that has claimed to see a controlling American hand behind modern Christian development throughout the world, and it sketches responses to that criticism. Chapter seven uses the material from the preceding chapters for returning to the main argument—that the way Christianity developed in North America during the nineteenth century has been much more characteristic of contemporary world Christianity than the older forms of European Christendom. In this second section as a whole I try to flesh out the corollary point that it is not convincing to explain the new shape of world Christianity in terms of direct American influence.⁷

The book's third section, which contains several case studies, is somewhat looser in organization. Its goal is to draw spiritual and historical lessons from the interactions of American Christianity and world Christianity. The first of these chapters examines American evangelical perceptions of the world from 1900 to 2000.⁸ It surveys American evangelical magazines that were published in 1900, 1925, 1950, 1975 and 2000 in order to ask how American perceptions related to global realities. The next chapter takes up the question of what a "young church" (in this case, in South Korea) might learn from the history of Christianity in America.⁹ The third case study provides an overview of the East African Revival, which began in the 1930s and continues to affect churches from the headwaters of the Nile to the southeastern African coast and in far-flung places throughout the globe. Its main point is to ask why, if so many features of this revival seem so directly related to

⁷This section represents an extensive rewriting and expansion of "L'influence américaine sur le christianisme évangélique mondial au XXe siècle," in *Le Protestantisme Évangélique: Un Christianisme de Conversion*, ed. Sébastien Fath (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 59-80.

⁸This chapter is adapted from "The View of World-Wide Christianity from American Evangelical Magazines, 1900-2000," in *Making History for God: Essays on Evangelicalism, Revival and Mission In Honour of Stuart Piggan*, ed. Geoffrey R. Treloar and Robert D. Linder (Sydney: Robert Menzies College, 2004), 367-86.

⁹This chapter is adapted from a lecture to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Graduate School of Theology at Yonsei University, 2004, which was published in Korean to mark the event.

features of American (and European) church life, it should be considered an indigenous expression of African Christianity.¹⁰ A short concluding chapter summarizes the book's main contentions about the great recent changes in world Christianity and then reflects on the larger meaning of these developments for believers and Christian organizations in the United States. It represents a historian's efforts to highlight the Christian meaning of the dramatic events of recent Christian history. In this last chapter, as well as at earlier points, I make use of some of the insightful things that foreign observers have had to say about the development and character of American Christianity.

* * *

As this book was going to press, students of world Christianity were deeply saddened by the untimely death of Ogbu Kalu (1943–2009), the Henry Winters Luce Professor of World Christianity and Mission at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. Ogbu's friendship, his vast learning about Christianity in Africa, his insightful guidance for historical writing on the new shape of world Christianity, and his specific insights that are used in chapter seven below—all these and more make me one of the great number who mourn his passing and thank God for his life.

The book is dedicated to three individuals who have been a special encouragement in my efforts to explore the new shape of world Christianity. Andrew Walls first opened my eyes as a historian and my mind as a Christian to the immensity of what was happening in the contemporary world. Don Church, with gentle persistence, got me to briefly set aside suburban predictability for experience on the ground in Eastern Europe, and then has remained an inspiration through the wealth of his own world Christian connections. John Jauchien, whose treasured friendship goes back more than forty years, has opened up to me the difficulties and the dilemmas, but also the nearly indescribable joy, of God's ongoing work in the non-Western world. For what these mentors have given to me this book is a meager, but heartfelt, return.

¹⁰I'm glad to acknowledge the especially helpful work of Carolyn Nystrom for this chapter.