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THE NEW SHAPE OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith. By Mark A. Noll

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¹ Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 248.

**THE NEW SHAPE OF WORLD
CHRISTIANITY: How American
Experience Reflects Global Faith.** By
Mark A. Noll. InterVarsity Press, 2009.
212 pages. Softcover. \$25.00.

There are an increased number of works investigating the rise of global Christianity. Amid the sundry works discussing theological and practical distinctives of Christianities across the world, there are limited attempts at investigating how US Christianity has impacted, or perhaps directly shaped, the global faith. At best, these efforts are significantly couched in post-colonial language, for good and for ill, and may miss the lessons to be learned if global Christianity would be compared to the experiences of US Christians.

In *The New Shape of World Christianity*, distinguished historian and scholar Mark Noll contends that there is indeed value in comparing North American Christianity, specifically its evangelical manifestations, with global developments because “the world is coming more and more to look like America” (189). Noll notes that world Christianity, particularly Protestantism and Pentecostalism, has taken the shape of

its North American architects. The question he considers is whether this is due to direct missionary influence, neo-imperialistic hegemony, or “parallel development” (109). The author claims that the characteristics and factors at work in shaping US Christianity are now uniquely present in the places where Christianity is taking on a decidedly North American appearance. He contends this is not due solely to missionary influence or US political, cultural, or economic supremacy (although these do play a role), but to confluences of contextual strands of local cultural developments and global trends. To prove his point, Noll moves from the global shape of world Christianity to comparing particular case studies in different countries similar to movements in North American Christian history.

First, Noll chronicles the spread of Christianity across the globe in the present and past, and then focuses on its recent rapidity, volume, and implications. He also points out the questions the scattering of evangelicalism’s center predicates. This first section introduces the subjects of globalization and transnational Christianity and, in many ways, serves as a disturbing summary of international Christianity for those who have hitherto had their heads in the seemingly settled sands of Christianity in the West. While other books offer a more in-depth treatment of these themes, Noll’s handling of the topic does well to unsettle the reader sufficiently for what comes next—“What, in fact, has been the American role in creating the new shape of world Christianity and what is now the relation of American Christianity to world Christianity?” (67). This question serves as the hinge in the book, dividing the contextual content

from the meat-and-potatoes of Noll’s thesis.

Noll proposes that North American Christianity molded, and is related to, worldwide Christianity via an amalgamation of missionary influence, evangelical attitudes, and shared historical contexts. The subsequent few chapters after “Posing the Question” mentioned above (chap. 4) deal with the first two factors—missionary influence and North American continental evangelical attitudes.

Included here is an interesting section displaying and dissecting missionary statistics. It proves a tad tedious, and in the center of the book, perhaps off-putting. Another foible here is Noll’s neglect of the Lutheran presence in the US evangelical missionary milieu. While Lutherans in the United States can be pegged as either “mainline” (due to liberal denominational expressions or the statistics of decline that Lutherans, conservative and progressive, share with traditional mainline denominations) or “evangelical” (due to some shared theological emphases, despite Lutheranism’s more explicit confessional basis and strong sacramental character), they at least deserve mention in Noll’s data tables.

Another portion of Noll’s book is his survey of evangelical publications throughout the twentieth century. This chapter vacillates between being diverting and providing a diversion as it offers little to his overall thesis. The main points to be gleaned from this middle portion are: 1) how missionary efforts, and US evangelical attitudes, geared towards missionary models of “translation” (as Lamin Sanneh uses the term) made it possible for indigenous theological, financial, and ecclesial development throughout the globe in the twentieth century; and 2) because of this, parallel

social circumstances can then produce evangelicalism that mirrors US expressions.

The scholar offers two case studies to make his argument tangible.

These case studies compare and contrast evangelical movements in the United States and in Korea and revivals in East Africa and America. The lessons, indictments, suggestions, and critiques that Noll offers here and in his final chapter (“Reflections”) are immensely valuable and provide some of the most pertinent conclusions and practical applications for globally-minded missionaries, denominations, and laity. These case studies are so worthwhile that one wishes that Noll would have provided a few more to offer juxtapositions and correspondences between US Christianity and movements in Latin America, Oceania, and the Middle East as well. Such case studies would have added inexorable value to an already solid overview.

Still, as it is, the book is a worthy addition to the increasing corpus of studies on global Christianity. Its unique offering is the question it poses to the study of worldwide evangelicalism—viewing the global spread of Christianity from the lens of American influence. That viewpoint makes it possible for Noll to speak to various themes including colonialization, globalization, mission partnerships, and church planting initiatives. The book only suffers when the specificity of the study becomes too minute. If the reader can avoid getting lost in the details, there is much this book has to offer for those interested in the global scope and the state of global Christianity from a North American point of view.

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