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Review: Mark Noll's 'The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith'

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Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009. Pp. 212. \$25.00.

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It has become commonplace to observe that the center of Christianity has moved from Euroamerica to the global south and east. Still, it is a bit jarring to realize, as Mark Noll notes at the beginning of this compelling book, that “this past Sunday” more “Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the United States combined,” more “members of Brazil’s Pentecostals Assemblies of God [were] at church than the combined total in the two largest U.S. Pentecostal denominations,” and “more people attended the Yoido Full Gospel Church pastored by Yongi Cho in Seoul, Korea than attended all the churches in significant American denominations like the Christian Reformed Church, the Evangelical Covenant Church or the Presbyterian Church in America” (20).

As Noll makes clear in his typically lucid prose, this dramatic change in the course of Christian history has brought with it a remarkable multiplicity of Christian “forms,” as Christianity once again demonstrates its capability to become fully inculturated in wildly diverse local settings. This said, another striking quality of world Christianity in the twenty-first century is the degree to which—despite this riotous diversity—it resembles American Christianity, specifically American evangelicalism, in its emphasis on conversion, voluntarism, and entrepreneurial leadership. What this resemblance means, particularly why this resemblance exists, is at the heart of *The New Shape of World Christianity*: “How,” Noll asks, “should responsible participants and observers understand the role of American Christianity in the great recent transformations of world Christianity?” (11)

A commonplace answer to this question is that world Christianity looks like American Christianity because of American hegemony: America dominates the globe,

and so the globe will get an Americanized Christianity. As Noll observes, this interpretation can be cast as malign—i.e., American missionaries have joined with and are in service to the U.S. military and U.S. corporations in the effort to establish and maintain the American Empire. It can also be cast, at least in the eyes of American evangelicals (to whom Noll directs this book), as benign—i.e., American missionaries and mission agencies have successfully spread American evangelicalism throughout the globe, and so it is not surprising that world Christianity looks a lot like what one would find in a Colorado Springs megachurch.

Rejecting both forms of this interpretation, Noll uses two chapters of *World Christianity* to emphatically make the argument that it is untenable to assert that “American missionaries, whether for good or for ill, have been the controlling, hegemonic, or sovereign agents of change in the recent world history of Christianity” (107). Noll does not deny the power of American institutions and culture, but he presumes that people around the world who have adopted an American form of Christianity have done so voluntarily and actively. More than this, and central to his argument in *World Christianity*, Noll asserts that the aforementioned emphases on conversion, voluntarism, and entrepreneurial leadership that characterize much of contemporary world Christianity are due to “the fact that globalization and other factors have created societies that resemble in many ways what Americans experienced in the frontier period of their history” (189). That is to say, the resemblances are not the product of American hegemony. There is historical correlation, but not imperial causation.

There is no great effort here to clinch the case that nineteenth century America and, say, twenty-first century sub-Saharan Africa, bear striking similarities, and I would be curious to know how scholars of African, Asian, and Latin America history, politics, and society respond to this assertion. Similarly, that there is no substantive discussion of American “empire” (about which much sophisticated work has been done in the last few decades) will make it difficult to convince some readers that “hegemony” does not explain (at least in some part) why various peoples in the empire are so readily adopting the empire’s religion.

But *World Christianity* is not designed to be the final word on the matter. Nor is it addressed to a great variety of academic audiences. Instead, Noll makes very clear that this little book is “aimed primarily at my fellow evangelical Christians” (15). In this regard there is a great deal to be said on behalf of Noll’s nuanced argument. In particular, his reading of Christian history does a wonderful job of making clear that, whatever the degree of American influence and power, believers around the world have agency. Noll recognizes that there are some in his evangelical audience who will be discomfited by his argument, finding it to be an interpretation that downplays and denigrates the role of missionaries. But for Noll, to see what he is doing here as “anti-missionary” is to mistakenly buy into the notion that “the fate of Christianity depends upon missionaries from any one part of the world bringing the faith to other parts of the world,” thus missing the crucial point that “the actual movement from Christian beachhead to functioning Christian community is almost always the work of local Christians” (195).

The spread of Christianity throughout the globe is no cause for American evangelical triumphalism. And Christianity is not American, or Western: “the gospel belongs to every one in every culture; it belongs to no one in any one culture in particular” (191).
