

Review of *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* by Mark A. Noll. Reviewed by Benjamin L. Hartley

Eight pages. That is how much attention my seminary textbook (that Noll co-authored) for my first church history survey course gave to the history of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹ That was just twelve years ago. Much has changed since then, and Mark Noll's latest book provides readers with a good introduction to what Noll calls a "cascade of scholarship" in the area of world Christianity – an area that Noll himself is a relative newcomer. Noll introduces this subject by showing his readers the extent to which world Christianity reflects a familiarly American style of Christianity characterized by entrepreneurial religion, lack of state-supported religious institutions, response to urbanization and a host of other social factors.

By telling the story of world Christianity with reference to an American template of religious development Noll runs the risk of appearing to be the "ugly American" who sees all the world to be, well, like America! But Noll strenuously tries to prevent his readers from coming to this conclusion. His thesis is simply that the way American Christianity developed in the nineteenth century has intriguing similarities to the way evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity has developed in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the twentieth century. This similarity does not mean that "Americans are dictating to the world" (189), but it does mean that the study of world Christianity may benefit from studying how Christianity developed in North America.

Noll's central thesis is compelling in many ways, and his book certainly can be a good introduction for readers who know something about American Christianity but very little about Christianity elsewhere. Such a reader can easily find a few "hooks" to connect their historical awareness across continents. But Noll's argument that there is a correlation (not causation) between American Christianity and Christianity elsewhere is less convincing when the particular details of any given

¹ Howard Clark Kee, et. al. *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*. (New York: Macmillan, 1991).

geographical and historical context are examined more carefully. In the first place, some of what Noll describes as an “American model” may also be said of the development of Christianity in other places well before Christianity’s expansion in North America. Seventeenth century evangelicalism in Eastern Europe is but one example where revivalism took place within a chaotic setting with similarities to what occurred on the American frontier in subsequent centuries.

Second, when Noll points to the case of Korea without any reference to the centuries-long work of Roman Catholics in that country prior to Protestant missionary work in the 1880s he fails to see the ways this earlier Roman Catholic period of Christianity’s expansion in Korea departed from an American model. Noll ascribes to Protestant Bible translation such innovations as the *hangul* script pioneered by Roman Catholics a century earlier – although more with liturgical texts other than the Bible. Many examples of Christianity on the African continent today can likewise be noted which would leave one wondering to what extent such manifestations were essentially American in their make-up. The influence of African traditional religions and Islam on African Christianity departs rather significantly from American experience.

One could argue, however, that such criticisms about particularity are inevitable for a book that seeks to make a complex area of study more accessible through historical generalizations. Noll is well-aware that individual contexts are complicated. That his first book on world Christianity would seek to make connections to the field of American religious history that he knows so well and that it would sometimes make generalizations a bit too easily are understandable. So long as the reader also keeps this in mind, *The New Shape of World Christianity* remains a valuable contribution for those who would like an excellent introduction to a growing area of historical scholarship. His suggestions for further reading and helpful charts and graphs are in themselves worth a careful review. What is abundantly clear is that this topic now must unquestionably be given far more than eight pages in any seminary’s church history textbook.