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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

USD \$25.00, ISBN 978-0-8308-2847-0

Reviewed by Jack Mitchell

Former Faculty Member, Scott Christian University

Western Christianity, and particularly for Mark Noll's study, *American Christianity's* influence on the development and shape of the Christian Church around the world has been a subject of ongoing speculation and debate. Whether for praise or blame, few question that the influence of the Church in North America has been robust and pervasive throughout the rapidly expanding Christian world over the last one hundred years. Assessments of the American Church's role range from indictments to careful praise. With this in mind, the author's goal in this volume is, in his own words, to seek to answer the question, "What has been, is and should be the relationship between Christian development in North America and Christian development in the rest of the world?" (p. 11)

Noll is particularly qualified for this study in light of his decades of reading, research, and prolific writing on American Church history. A long time professor at Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL, he is now the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. Noll, along with other evangelical historians has greatly contributed to the world's understanding of evangelical convictions and attitudes, past and present. It is from this forthright evangelical perspective that he has sought to articulate an answer to the above question.

Noll's approach to this important question begins with a marvelous introductory chapter that aptly uses a multitude of statistical profiles to illustrate that many of the fixed notions of the West's role and influence in Christianity no longer typify the rapidly changing shape of World Christianity. Much has changed, he insists, and these changes call for a fresh examination of how European and then American Christianity have touched vastly diverse Christian expressions around the world.

Moving into a brief but careful description of the new shape of world Christianity (Chap. 2), Noll describes this “shape” through a series of issues that highlight the radical developments that face the universal Christian Church. His catalogue of developments includes new and innovative evangelistic methods, universal missionary service and the political implications of Christian expressions worldwide to the new questions being raised for theology and practice. Through this survey the author paints an incredibly diverse and vibrant picture of worldwide Christianity.

What follows is an important chapter (3) which assesses the rapid and pervasive worldwide expansion of Western evangelical movements to the whole world. The author’s compact and wonderfully insightful survey of the elements of evangelical identity, power, and culture during the nineteenth-century are foundational for the remainder of the book. Noll understands the American experience to be a paradigm for other specific cultural contexts.

In his next chapter, Noll further refines his thesis by posing the question (p. 67), “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?” His central point emerges in this discussion which employs two object lessons: the phenomenal impact of the *Jesus Film*, and the unquestionable economic, military and cultural influence (both pop culture and religious) of America on the rest of the world. Given these factors, he suggests however, that the relationship between American Christianity and world Christianity “involves parallel historical development more than direct influence” (p. 76). This is his central thesis.

To support this thesis, the next two chapters assess the influence of American missionaries internationally. Because they are stereotypically seen as some of the primary carriers and purveyors of American influence, Noll marshals statistical evidence (chap. 5) and specific historical missionary contexts (chap. 6) to assert that “the primary agency in recent movements of Christianization has not been the missionaries but the new converts themselves” (p. 106). His point here is that the inherent power of evangelical Christian experience is in itself the *primary* transformational force in diverse cultural settings, not western and particularly American Christianity.

The title of his next chapter, “American Experience as Template,” aptly captures his point. He traces the diverse American religious movement’s transition from the traditional worldview of Christianity *and* Christendom to a much more informal identity. Noll highlights the elements of individualism, voluntarism, and anti-institutionalism as characteristic of the new American experience. Logically, he reasons that these qualities pushed “for ever-more-flexible institutions and ever-newer innovations in responding to spiritual challenges” (p.112). Referring to the increase of non-western missionaries and the world Pentecostal experience, Noll concludes that these factors support “a

general picture of Christianity as a world religion with many connections between nations, but with no one nation as the controlling force” (p.125).

In chapters 8-10, Noll addresses three case studies to particularize his perspective. Beginning with the worldview of American Evangelical 1900-2000, he uses a fine summary of periodic literature during that century to affirm that evangelicals were not guilty of religious myopia. The “Big Story” of God’s work in the world was part of their understanding. Secondly, he draws on his own experiences with South Koreans to address what they might learn from American Evangelical history. He asserts that there are remarkable parallels between American Protestant history and Korean Protestant history that provide potentially valuable lessons for both groups.

Finally in chapter 10 the author briefly sketches and analyzes the relationship between American Evangelicalism and the East African Revival. From Uganda in 1935, this revival spread to four other East African nations and continues to influence “the day-to-day lives of millions of ordinary believers throughout this region” (170). Again the question Noll raises is exactly what was the nature of America’s influence? His conclusion is that what transpired was another example of observing a parallel pattern of development rather than determinative American influence.

Noll does not minimize American Evangelicalism’s influence. Rather, he qualifies it and challenges the tendency to assume that America’s influence was primarily determinative. In doing so, he sheds light on the nature of God’s work among a diverse collection of nations and cultures. It is the inherent power of the Christian faith that was clearly present in nineteenth century America that has been replicated around the world. The fact that America played such a significant role is somewhat incidental. To Noll’s credit, he emphasizes the purposes of God that lay behind the scenes.

For Africans, this book is valuable because the author’s thesis more clearly analyzes America’s contribution to the development of worldwide Evangelicalism. Thus it provides a more accurate basis for understanding the nature of present day African Evangelicalism. Given African tendencies to indict or overly puppet America, this is an important contribution. Noll also synthesizes an immense amount of literature on global Christianity. His use of Andrew Walls particularly, can assist Africans to better understand their place in the shape of world Christianity. This book can help to equip African pastors, teachers, and theologians address the huge needs of the Church in the midst of seismic political, economic, and cultural upheavals precipitated by globalization, world economics and politics, and technology. Finally, through his clear and simple prose Noll once again has taken a complex and sophisticated subject and made it accessible for a general audience. All this and more make this a valuable read for the African Church.

William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik, Janice A. McLean
Editors

***Understanding World Christianity:
The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls***

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011. 294 pages pbk.

ISBN 978-1-57075-949-9. US \$30.00

Reviewed by Andrew Wildsmith
Faculty Member, Scott Christian University

According to the editors, this book is not a traditional tribute or *Festschrift*. Instead of a collection of unconnected essays from colleagues and former students to honour Professor Walls, “it is a serious and significant set of reflections on and engagements with his life, ideas, institutions, networks, publications, activities, and proposals” by friends and colleagues who are “in one fashion or another, all students of Andrew Walls” (Introduction, p. 1). When you consider that the contributors include people as diverse as I. Howard Marshall (professor emeritus of New Testament exegesis and honorary research professor at the university of Aberdeen, Scotland) and Moonjang Lee (senior pastor of Doorae Church in the City of Guri, South Korea), and that the editors of this book work in New York City, one realizes that Professor Walls’ influence extends as widely as World Christianity itself.

William Burrows is Research Professor of Missiology in the Centre for World Christianity at New York Theological Seminary, managing editor emeritus of Orbis Books, and author of *New Ministries: The Global Context*. Mark Gorink is the director of City Seminary of New York, a former pastor, and a researcher in African churches in the USA, and the author of *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*. Janice McLean is the coordinator of the Global New York Church Project and the Seminary Library of City Seminary of New York.

Besides an introduction by the editors, a conclusion by the late Kwame Bediako, and a 20 page (partial) bibliography of Prof. Walls’ works, the book consists of sixteen chapters distributed in five major parts: (1) A Man with a Large Map; (2) Breaking Boundaries, Building New Ways of Scholarship; (3) Themes in the Transmission of Christian Faith; (4) Transformations in Understanding Christian History; (5) Africa’s Place in Christian History.

Of these five parts, the first two tend to give insight into the man himself and his impact on scholarship, while the other three tend to treat familiar themes from Walls' work. But the chapters in all five parts are interwoven with the themes, ideas, and effects on people that appear in Walls' works, just as his own many articles and other writings play variations and progressions on themes found elsewhere in the Walls' corpus. We learn not only that Walls is a brilliant academic researcher and writer, but that he has been a Methodist local preacher for almost 60 years, a hymn writer, has interest and involvement in UK politics and the fine arts, and was even a trade union representative for a short time. The role he is most noted and loved for is that of teacher and mentor, and this too comes out repeatedly. The man and his ideas seem always to walk hand in hand in the minds of the writers. For example, one section, entitled 'The Influence of His Ideas' in Jon Bonk's chapter (*Changing the Course of Mission and World Christian Studies*), starts with the sentence, "If Walls is notorious for his modesty, his devotees – including former students, professional colleagues, and academic peers – tend to be effusive in their admiration of the man" (p. 62). And a few paragraphs later Bonk writes, "One would be hard-pressed to write a credible history of World Christianity today without using ideas, themes, and orientations traceable to Walls" (p. 63).

The serial nature of Christian expansion across cultural boundaries where margins become new centres of strength while the former centres recede to the margins; the shift in the centre of Christian gravity from the West to the non-Western world and what that means for Christians and Christian scholarship; the relationship between the incarnation of Christ and the translatability of the Gospel; the indigenizing and pilgrim principles; conversion as turning towards Christ, both individual conversion and cultural conversion, "turning that which is already there" toward Christ; converts versus proselytes; the Ephesian Moment; [the rise and fall of the concept of Christendom and what that meant and means for missions](#); as in Walls' own works so in these essays these concepts and others are refined and extended, examined as if they were facets of a beautiful diamond placed in yet another new setting.

Walls' labour to create and encourage the creation of centres to study World Christianity and to collect documentation pertaining to it is recorded. Several centres similar to the one Walls founded in Scotland (at Aberdeen and later Edinburgh) have sprung up all over the world. One wonders if there is a former student of Walls who *hasn't* dreamed of starting something similar to the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, now the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh. Other themes include the Church, the missionary movement, theological education, history, and theology, especially theology in Africa.

Gillian Bediako's contribution, 'Gospel and Culture: Andrew F. Walls in Africa, Africa in Andrew F. Walls' quotes Walls as saying, "All I know, I learned

in Africa” (p. 212). Although trained in patristics under F.L. Cross [at Oxford](#), teaching church history in Sierra Leone (beginning in 1957) and interacting with African Christianity turned Walls in a new direction. Most of the contributors have African connections and interests, if not Africans themselves. Many of Walls’ students have been and continue to be Africans and missionaries to Africa. If Africa has had a defining effect on Andrew Walls, Walls has had a significant effect on Africa and Africans, both in his own continuing work in Africa and through his many students.

The contributors come from across the Christian world and represent different parts of the Christian Church in its wider sense. This is not a book designed for one end of the theological spectrum or another, but reflects Walls’ own warm and firm Christian faith as the writers interact with Wall’s contributions to Christianity and the cause of Christ. Discerning readers will have a sense of feeling at home in the discussions as believers, but interacting with some of Walls’ concepts challenges us with the fact that there are other believers [who](#) have other ways to feel at home, ways beyond our experience. These essays are examples of world Christians interacting with Walls’ ideas.

The book does not attempt to systematize or codify Walls’ thought, tying all his concepts together. Walls has yet to do that himself, and his bibliography includes a forthcoming book entitled, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity*, so we can expect the discussion around his work to continue. But Burrow’s contribution contends that Walls’ theological concept of *conversion* underlies much of his writing (p. 113), while Bevans, in his essay on Walls’ ecclesiology, twins *conversion* with *translation* as he discusses Walls’ focus on the missionary task of the Church. The fact that Bevans quotes Walls’ linking *translation* with *incarnation* shows that tying these concepts together helps us to better understand Walls’ vision (p. 131).

This volume is important because it gives additional insights into the man who changed the course of mission studies and the study of world Christianity as well as contributing to the study of African theology and church history. Through his teaching, personality, and students, Walls has influenced many Christians around the world. To quote Jon Bonk again, “it is difficult to imagine an informed discussion of either the missionary movement or World Christianity taking place anywhere without the use of language and concepts traceable directly to Walls” (p. 70). To understand world Christianity today and Christian history, it is essential to understand Andrew Walls’ work, and this book about him, his work and his vision is helpful in doing that.

This book is recommended for libraries in universities and theological institutions, scholars of Christianity around the world, especially in the areas of church history, missions, world Christianity, and theology, and especially in Africa. Though this is unlikely to become a textbook (until someone develops a course entirely about Andrew Walls’ work and vision), bookshops serving theological education communities will want it on their shelves.