
Most of us who are members of struggling and declining churches in western countries, like New Zealand, have become aware of the rapid growth of Christianity in the global south and east. Authors like Andrew Walls and Philip Jenkins have provided detailed descriptions of this. In this book Mark Noll provides a succinct summary and important interpretation of this, looking at the role American Christianity has played.

The first part of the book provides a brief sketch of this dramatic change. A Christian Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep midway through the twentieth century and woke today, would not recognise the changed shape of global Christianity. “It is as if the globe had been turned upside down and sideways. A few short decades ago, Christian believers were concentrated in the global north and west, but now a rapidly swelling majority lives in the global south and east. As Rip Van Winkle wiped half a century of sleep from his eyes and tried to locate his fellow Christian believers, he would find them in surprising places, expressing their faith in surprising ways, under surprising conditions, with surprising relationships to culture and politics, and raising surprising theological questions that would not have seemed possible when he fell asleep (pp. 19-20).

Here are some of the examples Noll uses by way of illustration. This last Sunday:

- More Christians attended church in China than in all of ‘Christian’ Europe.
- More Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda than in Britain.
- More Presbyterians were at church in Ghana than Scotland, and in Southern Africa than the United States.
The second part of the book, the core, seeks to explain America’s role in bringing about this new shape. The arguments around this can be put into three different positions. (1) Its role amounts to “malevolent manipulation” of mission for imperial interests; (2) it has been “influence” rather than control and manipulation; (3) the fact that Christianity in these places has arisen in similar and parallel historical experiences to those in which it arose in the US has led to it taking similar shape and characteristics. Noll rejects the first argument, sees the second being present, but argues the third is the most significant explanation.

While acknowledging that American missionaries (who were a majority of the global missionary force after World War II) have influenced world Christianity, the primary reason for this is shared experience. As Christianity developed in nineteenth century America, the state-church system of Europe gave way to a voluntary system. As it expanded into new territories and populations, free of traditional institutions and hierarchies, conversionist and voluntaristic evangelicalism enjoyed remarkable success as it adjusted to and was shaped by the fluid, rapidly changing and ethnically pluralistic culture of the century. He claims that in the twentieth century Christianity is advancing mainly in societies where similar social conditions “have come to prevail – where, that is, social fluidity, personal choice, the need for innovation and a search for anchorage in the face of vanishing traditions have prevailed” (p. 116). These less traditional and non-hierarchical forms of Christianity have encouraged new Christians to pick up the gospel themselves and developed local Christianity suited to their own cultural context. In this “the primary agency” has “not been the missionaries but the new converts themselves (p. 106), a point increasingly established by recent missiological research.

The final part of the book looks at three case studies. The changing content of evangelical mission periodicals; the growth of Korean Christianity; and the East African revival. He summarises his key contention “that American Christianity is important for the world primarily because the world is coming to look more and more like America… But correlation is not causation… Understanding
American patterns provides insights for what has been happening elsewhere… American actions by no means dominate or simply ordain what is happening elsewhere (p. 189).

Noll’s mix of survey information, insightful interpretation and case studies, make it a very important book for those of us who want to get a handle on what has been happening, and is still happening, in the rapidly changing global Christian community.

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