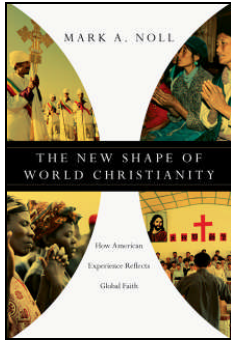


BOOK EXCERPT



The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith

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Understanding American Christianity offers insights on global Christianity

The new world situation for the Christian religion demands a new history of Christianity. Naturally, with the startling changes that have taken place over the last century in the church worldwide, quite a bit more is needed than just a new history, especially since those changes have been as dramatic as anything experienced by the worldwide Body of Christ since its very earliest years.

Older histories of Christianity remain irreplaceable; their insights are still valuable for readers with the time and energy to study them. The problem is not that earlier historical accounts are necessarily erroneous or misleading. It is, rather, that they presume a core Christian narrative dominated by the events, personalities, organizations, money and cultural expectations of Europe and North America—and are then surrounded by a fringe of miscellaneous missionary phenomena scattered throughout the rest of the globe. Such a historical picture was all but inevitable given conditions, say, in 1900, when over 80% of the world's Christian population was Caucasian and over 70% resided in Europe.

But today, when active Christian adherence has become stronger in Africa than in Europe, when the number of practicing Christians in China may be approaching the number in the United States, when live bodies in church are far more numerous in Kenya than in Canada, when more believers worship together in church Sunday by Sunday in Nagaland than in Norway, when India is now home to the world's largest chapter of the Roman Catholic Jesuit order, and when Catholic mass is being said in more languages each Sunday in the United States than ever before in American history—with such realities defining the present situation, there is a pressing need for new historical perspectives that explore the new world situation. . . .

These changes now affecting all aspects of Christian life include a shifting balance in missionary activity. Today more Christian workers from Brazil are active in cross-cultural ministry outside their home lands than from Britain or from Canada. More than 10,000 foreign Christian workers are today laboring in Britain, France, Germany and Italy—more than 35,000 in the United States. Obviously, once-fixed notions of “sending country” and “receiving country” have been tossed into the air.

Again, the new world situation is witnessing unprecedented educational opportunities and unprecedented educational dilemmas. In the Majority World, vast numbers of eager Christian students strain thin economic resources, while in the West some well-endowed establishments are begging for students.

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Throughout the rapidly expanding Christian world—as also in the old Christian heartlands—change and changed perceptions have become the order of the day. Among many other results, the tidal wave of change is also raising important questions about how it all got this way. Thankfully, as the Guide to Further Reading at the end of this book indicates, an increasing supply of detailed writing is now becoming available for almost every part of the Christian world.

Rather than duplicating the gratifying increase of solid work on the non-Western world, this book attempts to mediate between older and newer

histories. Its focus is on Christianity in the United States, but against the background of the world. For that purpose, it is vital to understand how “American Christianity” developed out of European experience, how it was transplanted to the new world, and then how it absorbed distinctive traits from the course of American experience. But the point of this book is not primarily to shed light on the history of Christianity in North America. It is, rather, to address the question of what American Christianity means for the worldwide Christian community. How, in other words, should responsible participants and observers understand the role of American Christianity in the great recent transformations of world Christianity? What has been, is, and should be the relationship between Christian development in North America and Christian development in the rest of the world?

To answer that question the book examines connections between American religious life and key developments in the recent world history of Christianity. It probes the American role in the tumultuous cascade of events that have so rapidly altered the character of world-wide Christianity. And it tries to interpret that role as both a positive and negative force. The book hopes to show why such questions are important, both because of what the United States has done in the world, but even more because of what kind of Christianity we Americans practice.

The book’s major argument is that Christianity in its American form has indeed become very important for the world. But it has become important not primarily because of direct influence abroad, but because of how American Christianity was itself transformed when Europeans carried their faith across the Atlantic. The American *model* rather than American *manipulation* is key. Without denying the importance of American churches, money, military might, educational institutions and missionaries for the Christian world as it is now constituted, I am suggesting that *how* Americans have come to practice the Christian faith is just as globally important as *what* Americans have done.

Adapted from the introduction to The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith