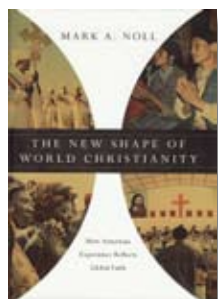


Book Reviews & Notes

The New Shape of Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith, by Mark A. Noll (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009, 200pp.)

—reviewed by Brad Gill



Publications interpreting the shifting center of world Christianity are now standard fare, such that one must dig around for any new perspective for frontier mission practice. How one applies global trends to any particular frontier context is often left to the reader, but the potential payoff may keep one digging, reading, and speculating. A very original contribution has come from Mark Noll in his book, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*. In previous writings, Noll has indicated the critical role missiologists could play in historical studies, but here in his new book is the reciprocal contribution of an historian to missiological studies. He believes the sweeping changes in the world demand that a new history of Christianity be written, but herein he modestly posits an interesting theory from his vantage point as an historian.

It took the perception of this eminent scholar of American religious history to connect the dots in a way that could more accurately explain the rampant “Americanization” of non-Western Christianity. His intent is to simply “mediate between older and newer histories” and to focus his command of American history “against the backdrop of the world” (p. 11). But he’s made a very informed historical hunch about the “American factor” in world Christianity, a hunch that may have insightful application as we reflect on frontier mission settings. Punctuating Noll’s broad survey of world Christianity is the following claim:

In recent decades world Christian movements, especially Protestant and independent movements, have come increasingly to take on some of the characteristics of American Christianity. Yet the primary reason for that development is not the direct influence of American Christians themselves. It is rather that *social circumstances in many places of the world are being transformed in patterns that resemble in crucial ways what North American believers had earlier experienced in the history of the United States*. Without discounting the importance of direct American involvement around the world, the appearance of Christianities similar to forms of American

Christianity highlights parallel development rather than direct influence. (p 109)

Essentially Noll has noted the correlation between the conditions of American religious development in the 19th century and contemporary conditions that pertain to non-Western societies under the increasing impact of globalization. He’s suggesting that these similar social, economic and political conditions have produced similar features in religious responsiveness across the globe. He’s convinced that the distinctive traits of an earlier American Christianity anticipated the shape of world Christianity, becoming an “American template” for emerging “American-style variants of Christianity” across the world. It’s a bold thesis that he supports over three sections of his book.

The first third of the book introduces both the conditions of world Christianity (chapter 2) and 19th century evangelical (American) mission (chapter 3). For his assessment of the world Christianity he relies heavily on scholars such as Andrew Walls, David Martin, Dana Robert and African scholars Lamin Sanneh and the late Ogbu Kalu. But he brings to bear his own astute grasp of the 19th century in assessing evangelical identity, power and culture, by combining key insights from Korea, Africa and America. Noll presses beyond standard definitions of evangelicalism (i.e., biblicism, conversionism and activism) to highlight the unique socio-religious characteristics present on the American frontier, distinctive traits such as jettisoning the authority of tradition (even evangelical tradition); appropriating faith for one’s self; the legitimacy of self-created civil societies; guidance by institutions chosen by the people, and the role of charismatic leaders recognized for their ability to lead. Noll is claiming that these were features on a frontier “where no Christian institutions existed to channel the energy of converts or immigrants” (p. 52). Again, he’s claiming that what was critical to the emergence of this American “free church pattern of religious life” were the same conditions reflected in present non-Western societies under the impact of globalization.

In the middle third of the book he poses the question of American dominance throughout world Christianity (chapter 4). Has direct American domination or manipulation been the determining factor, or is it more American influence of another sort? He answers this first with a statistical review of evangelical missionary growth (chapter 5), ascertaining whether the powerful movement of American missionaries can be directly correlated with the pervasive nature of Americanness across world Christianity. Secondly, he examines the scholarly ideology that indicts American missionaries as destructive change agents (chapter 6), and contradicts any assumption that missionary self-interest explains the American imprint on non-Western societies. For Noll, Americanness in the world was not a result of manipulative, dominant and direct American power. Noll

Is it not possible that these conditions pertain to particular social environments within large unreached ethnic and religious populations? Noll identifies certain tendencies that would characterize these social environments . . .

concludes with his own rationale (chapter 7), namely, that historic American forms of Christianity have an “affinity” with the present turbulence of non-Western societies. Therefore, the “American template” is an attractive model in the emergence of world Christianity being voluntarily chosen, utilized and mingled into indigenous response to the gospel.

Noll goes on in his final third of the book to give three case studies to support his thesis, a selection that includes Korea, Africa and America. His thesis seems well supported by the explosive growth of Korean Christianity and the East African Revival. But one begins to see through and behind these samples. It ignores large chunks of the globe that remain outside the Christian movement, those enormous clusters of peoples under the religious canopies of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Thus, while Noll’s thesis is legitimately global, it is not comprehensive. He is but describing the style of world Christianity “as is,” as do many of the other publications on global Christianity. One who hopes that this book in any way might suggest real answers for many remaining frontiers of mission might feel short changed.

But, wait, let’s bend Noll’s ideas around a bit. Isn’t Noll simply asserting that certain conditions in non-Western societies might encourage a more American type of religious response? Is it not possible that these conditions pertain to particular social environments within large unreached ethnic and religious populations? Noll identifies certain tendencies that would characterize these social environments, such as:

- individual self-fashioning over communal identification
- a language of choice and personal freedom alongside a language of given boundaries
- a conception of religious organizations as voluntary bodies
- an optimistic hope in the creation of new institutions
- personal appropriation of sacred writings over inherited interpretation
- a plastic, utilitarian attitude toward geography as opposed to a settled, geographically-determined sense of identity
- a ready willingness to publicly mingle certain ethnic groups (p 120–21)

Could these social characteristics be apparent at the fringe, or even towards the core, of certain peoples within societies experiencing the disruptive influence of globalization? Should we not expect that global conditions might shape just how certain segments within unreached peoples might respond to the gospel? Noll’s thesis might lead us to expect that their responsiveness may even reflect an American type of religious voluntarism. So, would the shape of their responsiveness, this self-fashioning, voluntary, optimistic orientation towards new institutions, automatically lift them out of their traditional communities? It would seem to, but not necessarily. I believe we need to at least anticipate a responsiveness that combines in hybrid fashion both these American features and retention of traditional ethnic and religious values. My guess is that the push and pull of global conditions will create many new and diverse combinations.

I commend Mark Noll for forcing us back into a study of the particular conditions within frontier regions. His fresh historical perspective calls us to appreciate again how social, economic and political contexts, whether historic American or globalized non-Western, can shape the religious and social orientation of new believers. His book could be a surprising stimulus to frontier mission praxis.

Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology, by Roger Olson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, 247pp.)

—reviewed by Rick Love

Over a decade ago I wrote an article entitled “A Plea for Missiological Theologians and Theological Missiologists.”¹ I have not withdrawn my plea, and the substance of my call remains a major burden for me. That’s why I consider Roger Olson’s “Reformed and Always Reforming” a missiological treasure. He outlines an approach to theologizing that scratches where cross-cultural workers itch! Whether he realizes it or not Olson writes like a missiological theologian and he equips those serving among the nations to be theological missiologists.

I have chosen to write a brief review of Olson’s book, leaving the theological footnotes and debates to others. Instead I want to highlight four important aspects of theologizing that speak to a global setting:

Olson describes the four hallmarks of evangelicalism as the *authority of Scripture, the need for conversion, the centrality of the cross of Christ, and the imperative of evangelism/*

Whether he realizes it or not, Olson writes like a missiological theologian and he equips those serving among the nations to be theological missiologists.

social activism (p. 42). Nothing new here. But then he adds a fifth distinctive: *deferential respect for the “great tradition”*—the orthodoxy of doctrine developed by the early Christian church and the Reformers of the sixteenth century (p. 43). While acknowledging the importance of the great tradition, he holds unwaveringly to the authority of the Scriptures over every theological construct.

This is crucial for those contextualizing the gospel in pioneer settings. For example, there are now many communities of Jesus’ followers in the Muslim world. They are in the process of what believers throughout the history of the church have done, namely, developing theology that fits their context. Olson’s approach encourages them to understand and honor the theological deposit of the past, while being free to theologize within biblical parameters.² Thus, Olson affirms the best of the Reformation: “A basic Protestant principle going back to Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin is *sola scriptura*. Scripture alone is our ultimate authority. Another guiding Protestant principle is *reformata et semper reformanda*—reformed and always reforming” (p. 186).

Olson argues for the importance of narrative theology. Many evangelical theologians either build their theology with an emphasis on the expository or didactic portions of Scripture, like Romans or Ephesians, or talk of God in dulling abstractions, creating the “impression that God has presented us with a set of ideas, as if revelation were some kind of data bank.”³ For them, the narrative portions of Scriptures are mere illustrations at best. But Paul the apostle teaches that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim 3:16), not just the didactic portions. Thus, theology should be built on the whole counsel of God, both the didactic and narrative portions. A focus on narrative theologies offers great hope for those living and serving in the majority world. Most people in the majority world are oral learners; they learn best through stories. And more than half the Bible is story! So this emphasis on narrative theology,—as encouraged by Olson, has great promise for kingdom workers and for the communities of faith that are growing in new contexts.⁴

Olson adapts Paul Hiebert’s centered-set approach to theology (and ministry) as distinct from a bounded-set approach (p 59).⁵ Bounded-set thinking defines the Christian faith in terms of crossing “boundaries,” the most common being: saying the sinner’s prayer, attending church, and so forth. While there are important boundaries in Scripture (baptism for example), the focus of Scripture is on active

discipleship: picking up our cross and following Jesus—daily! A centered-set approach is more concerned with “the direction of a person’s life,” the main question being, Is he or she drawing closer to Jesus and ever-increasing allegiance to him?

According to Olson,

The center is Jesus Christ and the gospel, but it also includes the four or five common core commitments identified above: biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism, activism in missions and social transformation, and deferential respect for historic Christian orthodoxy. People gathered around the center or moving toward it are authentically evangelical” (p. 60).

This kind of thinking makes ministry more effective on the edges of kingdom growth.

Finally, Olson affirms “critical realism” as a presupposition for theology (pp. 89-90). To grasp the significance of this presupposition, it is helpful to contrast critical realism with naïve realism. Naïve realists enjoy 20-20 theological vision. They see things exactly, exhaustively, and without bias: no uncertainty, no ambiguity, no mystery. Critical realists, by contrast, affirm objective truth, but at the same recognize that truth is subjectively apprehended. Critical realists realize they know in part and thus acknowledge mystery along with objective truth, and thus display humility.⁶ Anyone who has lived for years in another culture realizes that the presuppositions of critical realism encourage an engagement with friends from other cultures that can be bold and prophetic, yet winsome, humble and open to correction.

Paul the apostle speaks about comprehending Christ’s love “with all the saints” (Eph 3:18). This implies that it takes the multi-cultural global church to grasp the full meaning of Scripture. The four principles outlined in this book enable us to do just that.

Some cross-cultural workers may think that these four themes are obvious. So what’s the big deal? The big deal is that Roger Olson is a world-class theologian who outlines a theological agenda that fits kingdom workers where there is no church or where a church is emerging. This is good news . . . and it is a good book to read for serious apostles!

Endnotes

¹ A paper presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society West Region Meeting, April 7, 1995.

² My mentor, the late Harvie Conn, rightly points out that every creed and confession is historically conditioned contextualization. See *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* by Harvie Conn, Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, pp. 211-260.

The “systemic” reason is that mission leaders had no “missiology of success” . . . Because of long-standing commitments and the ever-present needs, a flow of resources begins that is difficult to stop.

³ Alister E. McGrath, 1991. “The Biography of God.” *Christianity Today* 35(8):24.

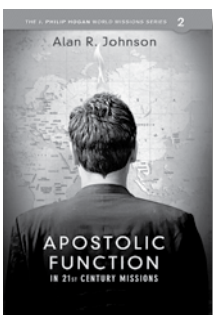
⁴ See two excellent articles by Jack Colgate on this topic: “Bible Storying and Oral Use of the Scriptures” in *From Seed to Fruit* edited by J. Dudley Woodberry, William Carey Library, 2008. “Relational Bible Storying and Scripture Use in Oral Muslim Contexts” Part one and two, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*. http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/25_3_PDFs/colgate.pdf http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/25_4_PDFs/25_4_Colgate.pdf

⁵ See *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* by Paul G. Hiebert, Baker Books, Grand Rapids 1994:124.

⁶ Since many have written on this subject, Olson does not mention Paul Hiebert as a source for his views of critical realism. But it is worth noting that Hiebert has written a whole book specifically addressing this topic: *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts* by Paul G. Hiebert. Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA 1999. See especially pages 37, 69, 70. Presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society West Region Meeting, April 7, 1995.

Apostolic Function in 21st Century Missions, by Alan R. Johnson, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009, 258pp.)

—reviewed by Dave Datema



A testament to the strength of the frontier mission movement is the fact that while one of its founders, Ralph Winter, was a Presbyterian, one of its most articulate current advocates, Alan Johnson, is from the Assemblies of God. Considering that AG missions were, like some others, slow to jump on the frontier mission bandwagon, it is perhaps ironic that Alan Johnson’s book figures second in

the J. Philip Hogan World Mission Series, commissioned by the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. But such is the irony and, more importantly, the power of a movement that now spans theological divides as wide as those represented by Presbyterians and Pentecostals. Johnson, a field practitioner for over 20 years (who continues to serve among the urban poor in Bangkok through a network of house churches), has written a work that represents, next to the *Perspectives* Reader, the most thorough and up-to-date treatment of classic frontier missiology in print. In short, this is a must read for every subscriber to this journal.

Chapter one sets up the book as a three-part answer to a problem in missions, namely, “a lack of clarity about the nature and practice of cross-cultural missions” (p. 6). The three answers Johnson suggests are 1) the importance of

the “where” question of missions (chapters 5, 6, 8); 2) a recognition and integration of current frameworks of mission (chapters 3, 7); and 3) Pauline apostleship (chapter 4). As indicated, the chapters jump between the main points outlined above.

In chapter two, Johnson explains more precisely the “problem” in popular mission thinking today, that mission is defined too broadly and lacks specificity. He notes that “mission” is often seen as any kind of outreach, thus the need to distinguish between “home” and “foreign.” Thus, a missionary is anyone who engages in any kind of outreach, regardless of location. The advent of short-term missions as a viable (at times) mission activity has also influenced thinking by blurring the essential task of missions and skewing missionary placement toward reached areas. Johnson states that the placement of cross-cultural workers around the world is the strongest evidence that “missions is now seen as activities of the church where the church is found” (p. 20).

According to Johnson, there are two main reasons for this shift. First, the “systemic” reason is that mission leaders had no “missiology of success” when churches were planted and movements were started. “Success” Johnson writes, “creates a machinery of mission and historical relationships with these new indigenous church movements” (p. 25). Because of long-standing commitments and the ever-present needs, a flow of resources begins that is difficult to stop. The other main reason is technological and economic; breakthroughs in travel and communication and the affluence of the West have radically changed how missions is practiced. The end result of all this is that missions gravitate toward reached areas and the mission task is minimized to projects, quick results and amateurization.

In chapter three, Johnson begins to propose a solution to this problem by identifying three current “frameworks” (or mid-level paradigms) within which all missionaries work: 1) church planting/multiplication, 2) Christian social concern and 3) unreached people groups. “Historically, mission organizations start within one of these frames and their primary ethos and operations are defined by that frame” (p. 45). Each of these frameworks “serves as a lens that has a powerful point of focus rooted in a key Scriptural theme” (p. 46). Johnson argues that distortion results if these frameworks are followed exclusively, and stresses integration. Further, Johnson says “in order to properly address the problem of a lack of clarity in missions, we need to add a fourth paradigm, that of missionary identity” (p. 49).

Chapter four paints the picture of this fourth framework, that of missionary identity, which Johnson calls apostolic function (thus the title of the book). Johnson contends that the framework of apostolic function should serve as the “umbrella rubric” for the other three. In other words, apostolic function helps integrate the other three by aligning all of them in the same direction. Johnson summarizes the significant scholarly debate about exactly what “apostle” means and distinguishes between apostolic office and apostolic function. “I am creating space for an ongoing apostolic role while holding a sense of the office as limited to the first generation” (p. 57). It is best to let Johnson speak for himself when describing exactly what he means:

By apostolic function I mean that at both the level of the individual cross-cultural worker, the mission team, and the sending agency, there is a focus on the apostolic task of preaching the Gospel where it has not been heard, planting the church where it does not exist, and leading people to the obedience of faith so that they, too, will express Jesus Christ in their social worlds and participate in God’s global mission. It is a catalytic and comprehensive function that shapes cross-cultural work so that whatever local expression it may take, the ultimate goal is to see the church planted where it does not exist and to see local bodies of believers become fully obedient to Christ and missional themselves. (pp. 75-76)

What Johnson envisions is a Christian community that is apostolic in orientation, regardless of the particular role or country they are engaged in. A church planter, a relief and development worker, even someone in an unreached people group—ALL of them are to have as their north star the spread of the Kingdom into unreached areas. Thus apostolic function, if properly in place, constantly spurs us on to this ultimate end.

The great strength of this concept is that it has the potential to break down the walls between those interested in “foreign” fields and those more captured by “domestic” ministry, or those working in the “10/40 window” and those serving in post-Christian Europe. Johnson’s idea turns this either/or dilemma into a both/and solution. No matter what your focus in ministry may be and no matter where you are serving, apostolic function (missionary identity) always provides “an edge, an ear turned to the Spirit to seek out those who have never heard” (p. 76). There is no longer the potential for a cross-cultural worker to convince an urban worker in Los Angeles to “get God’s vision for the nations” by moving overseas. That person can stay right where (s)he is, doing whatever they are doing, and still demonstrate apostolic function. According to Johnson,

What each worker actually does may continue to be the same—printing, media, teacher training, Bible school teaching, curriculum development, children’s ministry, training youth leaders—but the reason for each activity is radically altered. Each worker shapes their labor around the ultimate apostolic goal of bringing the believers, local churches, and the entire

national church movement they are working with and among to embrace the vision of reaching not only every person in their sociocultural setting, but of taking the Gospel to places where it has never been (p. 84).

By introducing this concept of apostolic function, Johnson in one quick stroke legitimizes everybody’s ministry while maintaining the apostolic priority of taking the gospel into new peoples. It is “not an issue of placement, but of purpose and direction of the work” (p. 186). This has great potential to heal wounds caused by well-intentioned frontier missionaries who have sometimes unwittingly made certain types of Christian workers (those staying at home or in reached areas) feel like second-class Kingdom citizens.

While this is a great strength in theory, it will be difficult to see happen in practice. Ministry by necessity blinds us to other kinds of ministry or ultimate purposes. Can the urban worker really demonstrate apostolic function for the unreached when (s)he is besieged night and day with local needs and problems? That seems unlikely and may be the major reason why the present bifurcation remains—those up to their necks in ministry have neither the inclination nor leisure to ponder how they might bring Jesus to an unreached people in North India. Yet if this concept were embraced and integrated into ministry practice, it would legitimize all Christian work while giving it all the same ultimate purpose. That would be a new thing in the mission enterprise. Instead of unreached peoples being merely a third mission framework to choose from, it becomes the ultimate goal for all Christian activity, domestic and overseas. It is hard to see the remaining unreached peoples seriously engaged within the next one hundred years without such a shift in thinking. For that reason, Johnson’s ideas on apostolic function have awesome potential to change much of what is wrong in current mission practice. This concept of apostolic function is Johnson’s personal contribution to missiology and the gem of the book.

In chapter five, Johnson shifts from his main thesis described in chapter four, to a broad treatment of what he calls “frontier mission missiology.” His purpose for doing so is “because of the way frontier mission missiology has been co-opted, misunderstood and ignored” (p. 104). Johnson covers the significance of the E-scale, the difference between frontier and regular mission, missiological breakthrough, the P-scale, the three eras of Protestant mission history, the biblical basis for frontier thinking, and defining “people groups,” “reached” and “unreached.” Johnson brings precision and clarity to these concepts, distinguishing between (what was often Winter’s) original meaning and subsequent usage.

Chapter six continues in the same vein as chapter five, this time highlighting the problems and contributions associated with frontier mission missiology. While the issues are too many to delve into here, this is a rich chapter of

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thoughtful engagement with issues raised by frontier missiology. In both chapters five and six, Johnson successfully provides an up-to-date picture of current frontier thinking, with one notable exception. For some reason, Johnson omits entirely any discussion of “insider movements,” a topic that has sparked much current debate in frontier mission circles. Given its prominence as a topic of discussion over the past decade, this omission is striking, and one can only surmise why Johnson chose to avoid it.

In chapter seven, Johnson returns to the ideas advanced in chapters three and four regarding frameworks of mission (church planting/multiplication, Christian social concern, frontier mission and apostolic function), and argues for their integration. He urges a more comprehensive approach whereby mission agencies, instead of choosing one of the frameworks to pursue, allow themselves to be critiqued by the biblical themes represented in the other frameworks.

The final chapter is titled, “Issues Related to the ‘Where’ Question in Missions” and focuses on three major issues: the placement of cross-cultural workers, questions of terminology, and problems associated with human constructs.

I have always struggled to know what to do with my enthusiasm for frontier mission as distinct from other valid forms of Christian ministry. I often feel like I’m competing with other ministries for an individual’s or church’s interest and support. I’ve had a tendency to feel that I am part of an elite group, a very small one mind you, focused on the frontiers, and that others just don’t “get it.” Johnson’s idea of apostolic function as an umbrella rubric over other existing frameworks of mission calls these attitudes into serious question. It values all legitimate Christian ministry foci (and all Christians in ministry), helps us appreciate each other as fellow members of the Body and leads all of us to an ultimate purpose—the advance of the gospel into all the peoples of the earth. This is not an attempt by a frontier mission insider to stealthily bring everyone under the frontier mission banner. It is an exceedingly profound idea whose time has come, that while our foci are diverse, our direction can be the same—to the ends of the earth. **IJFM**

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