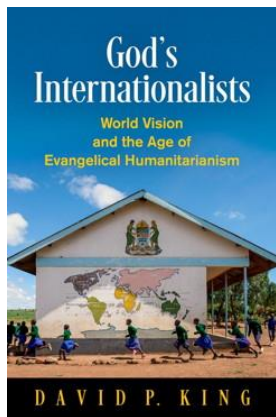


BOOK REVIEW

God's Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism

By David King

Reviewed by Ryan Vroegindewey



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\$39.95

Whether or not we realize it fully, our convictions and patterns of behavior are profoundly shaped by institutions and cultural forces around us and preceding us. While not unique in this fact, Christians may be especially prone to overlook it given that we strive to center our worldviews on Scripture. Arguably, nowhere is such honest introspection more critical than in our engagement with the world's most vulnerable.

David King's *God's Internationalists* is a book fit for this purpose. It chronicles the origins and history of World Vision International, one of the world's largest faith-based relief and development organizations. Given the significant role that World Vision has played in Christian, U.S., and international spheres, King utilizes World Vision's story to tell a broader one about the critical role that global events and engagement have played in the formation of the post-World War II evangelical identity.

King structures his book chronologically, with each chapter capturing a different period of growth and challenges in World Vision's history. The first few chapters focus heavily on the story of founder Bob Pierce, a globe-trotting entrepreneurial evangelist. Pierce first created World Vision as a missionary

organization in 1950 and set the organization on its trajectory of expansion and eventual professionalization as a major relief and development agency. As King tells how World Vision's story unfolded in the following decades, he shows how many of the founder's personal values and traits would become key organizational capabilities. Among these are a readiness to go to the frontlines of material need and adaptability and innovativeness in fundraising, partnerships, development practice, and communications.

One primary audience for this book is scholars interested in the history of American evangelicalism, to which King contributes a novel internationalist lens. Another includes those interested in the under-researched nexus of religion and the international relief and development system. This audience will appreciate King's balanced analysis of both the strengths and shortcomings of World Vision and its founder, as well as the rich historical and cultural detail he provides.

These readers, King's academic peers, may be disappointed by the fairly weak framing he provides in the introduction, which lacks any discussion of research methods or motivation. There is another gap worth noting, although it is more an inevitable limitation of the book's scope than a core weakness: the role that host national believers—namely, local churches and national offices—have played in shaping World Vision. We get hints of this important dynamic and these important voices throughout the book. As King finally acknowledges in the epilogue, however, his focus is World Vision's U.S. office. As a result, King notes that more research is required to “to paint a full picture of the organization” (246). I heartily agree with this last point. Those wishing to better understand the complex but deeply formative relationships between an international Christian agency and its host national stakeholders might start with Barbara Cooper's *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel*, an excellent study of the experience of the Sudan Interior Mission in southern Niger.

While academic in nature, King's book also has value for many international relief and development practitioners—leaders and young professionals alike—

who have the patience to pause and reflect on the forces that shape their sense of calling, worldview, and the organizations and industry in which they work out their vocation.

In my own particular case, as I read King's description of the evolving evangelical social conscience during the past three decades—of which World Vision was both a product and determinant—I could identify cultural forces that helped shape my own convictions and experiences. For example, growing up in the 90s, one of my first windows on the world was reading letters from a child in Rwanda who our family sponsored. My first college text on international development was *Walking with the Poor* by Bryant Myers, a former VP of World Vision. Years later, while working in West Africa, numerous other personal connections with World Vision inevitably emerged: it was a major partner to the secular development agency I worked for, employed many members of my local church, and gave micro-loans to a good friend who was trying to grow his business.

By the end of King's book, the reader walks away with an appreciation for the particular and complex task that international faith-based organizations face—that of operating, building bridges, and maintaining consistency across disparate places, cultures, and stakeholders. In the case of World Vision, this has meant operating within “an American evangelical subculture, a collection of missionary agencies, a global evangelicalism, large-scale fund-raising non-profit organizations, and secular development INGO network” (14).

In 2011, while working in Mali, I was able to meet a boy my parents had been sponsoring through World Vision. I met him and his family, walked around his village, and chatted with local World Vision staff. Afterwards, I remember trying to sort through the kinds of issues and tensions that King describes in his book. For example, I understood World Vision's Area Development Program model—which allowed for long-term presence and planning in a given community—to be the organization's effort to do good development work. Yet the realities of the approach—e.g., its focus on a community rather than the individual child within it, or its ways of contextualizing in a Muslim context—felt removed from the child sponsorship model that was marketed in the U.S. and from the assumptions that were probably held by many U.S. sponsors (World Vision's largest source of funding).

Following my visit, my reflections gravitated towards these tensions because they resonated with many of my own challenges as a Christian development practitioner. My vocation was the same broader one that Bob Pierce, as an individual, and World Vision as an organization, had tried earnestly to live out. For this reason, there is a lot to learn from the seventy or so

years of experience—mistakes, successes, and all—that King so meticulously recounts in his book.

References

Cooper, Barbara M. 2006. *Evangelical Christians in the Sahel*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Myers, Bryant L. 2011. *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

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