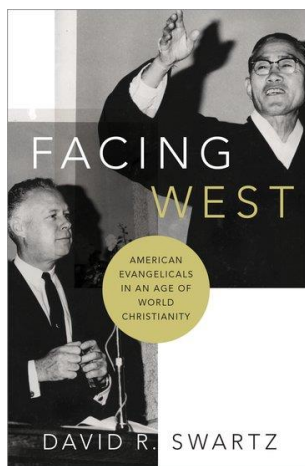


BOOK REVIEW

Facing West: American Evangelicals in an Age of World Christianity

By David Swartz

Reviewed by Ruth Padilla DeBorst



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I begin this review with a warning based on the old adage, “There are none so blind as those who will not see.” Regardless of where you are sitting, in the global East or West, South or North, if you would rather not be forced to question your assumptions or challenged to see the world and the Christian movement within it afresh, you had better keep this David Swartz’ book at arm’s length.

Facing West: American Evangelicals in an Age of World Christianity ambitiously spans five continents and some 100 years of history, unveiling influences, currents and crosscurrents in world Christianity that do not fit into the categories constructed in the West, and revealing alternative stories that upend traditional scripts regarding the direction of mission and Evangelical influence. These stories challenge and complexify the assumed movement of mission “from the West to the rest.”

The book first portrays the symbiosis between US patriotism and evangelistic fervor in Billy Graham campaigns, exemplary of a Christian Americanism that sought to propagate spiritual liberty along with political and capitalist economic liberty across the world during

the Cold War era. Against this backdrop, Swartz then narrates one same story –the founding and first years of World Vision, the Christian humanitarian organization,– through two vastly contrasting lenses. According to the US version, fiery US American Bob Pierce is the star protagonist and US American evangelicals are the moral benefactors of “his” orphanages. Meanwhile, the Korean version retells how Kyung-Chik Han, a respected Korean pastor, welcomed an unexperienced Pierce to Korea and built on his own long and proven trajectory of humanitarian work and political activism to co-found World Vision. This case study sets the ground for the other chapters by demonstrating that, while Christian Americanism influenced global expressions of evangelical Christianity, US American evangelicals also received significant pushback and were impacted by global Christians.

“Global encounters” is the natural Part II, which, in consecutive chapters, carries readers to India; Lausanne, Switzerland; Mindoro, the Philippines; Almolonga, Guatemala; and Uganda, portraying how global Evangelical expressions not only resist being boxed into US American categories, but also challenge the very construct of evangelicalism, as well as reverse the traditional direction of mission. Readers first witness E. Stanley Jones’ missional conversion to contextual sensitivity and to social and racial justice as he encountered India’s caste system and eventually grew to advocate prophetically for these concerns in his home country. The 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization became the forum for what Swartz terms “a Latin American Challenge to North American Missiology,” a strong and theologically articulate challenge to Christian Americanism and the cultural trappings imposed on others by its adherents, in the voices of Samuel Escobar and René Padilla, from the *Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana*. Chapter 4 details how, in spite of much initial reticence, the post-colonial move towards contextualization, and the broadening of the evangelical agenda to include social concerns made inroads in North Atlantic

evangelicalism. Chapter 5 describes the progressive “de-Americanization” and internationalization of World Vision, thanks to the experiments of deep indigenous popular education and empowerment in the Philippines, and how personnel in the Majority World prompted the re-focusing of evangelicals’ vision from emergency relief to holistic, transformational development both abroad and in the US. Chapter 6 delves into the realm of the supernatural and portrays the often ambiguous but increasingly welcoming reception given in the US to demonstrations of Pentecostal faith around the world. The section ends with a chapter titled “An East African Critique of American Sexuality,” which depicts the conflicts and unexpected East-West allegiances within the Anglican Communion in relation to the ordination of same-sex clergy. The detailed account of Bishop Orombi’s actions, a nuanced integration of a conservative sexual ethic with progressive stances on economics and politics, serves to highlight how the rest of the world cannot be forced to fit into US American categories.

The final section, “Disorientations,” first carries readers abroad, into slums, brothels, and the underworld of human trafficking. It focuses particularly on the human rights work of The International Justice Mission. It parses out the complexities of cross-cultural encounter and the need for indigeneity, the challenge of structural injustice, the lessons learned in Thailand and beyond regarding protection, prosecution, prevention, partnership and policy, and highlights the disjoint between the holistic understanding of the NGOs on the ground and the “raid and rescue triumphalism” of donors of their US-based constituency. The section is completed with a portrayal of Christian communities in New England, and especially in Boston, as examples of how Christian immigrants are “re-Christianizing” the US and changing the face of evangelicalism by gifting it with renewed concern for the poor, and a focus on the relational dimension of the gospel, communal prayer and holistic indigeneity. “Reverse mission” is, in some cases, the fruit of intentional “missionizing” on the part of global Christians and, in many others, a natural result of the increasingly diverse ethnic make-up of the cities.

Swartz concludes that “faith moves in disorienting directions.” By portraying global and diverse evangelicals as agents rather than passive receptors he showcases a reversal of the assumed direction of mission from the rest to the West. The new subjects, he affirms, see the US as the new ends of the earth that must be reached with the good news.

In addition to recommending this engaging book, as one of those many subjects from outside US evangelicalism, I propose one significant editorial change. One of the assumptions constitutive of Christendom is that greater power naturally confers on

its representatives the right to be heard and to shape the forms of religious observance, culture, and values of peoples with less power. Swartz helpfully unearths stories of resistance and reverse-influence that push against that assumption. He does so by effectively centering the voices from outside what he terms “Christian Americanism.” In my estimation, his terminology is helpful in as far as it reflects the association between faith (Christian) and nationalism (Americanism) so a-critically assumed in Christendom. As perceptive readers might have noted, in this review, however, I push terminology a step further. The term “American,” for many millions of people, alludes to all the inhabitants of North, Central, and South America, ranging from Alaska to the Patagonia. Since thorough resistance to colonialism requires sensitivity to how language acknowledges or invisibilizes people, I propose that if future editions employed the rather clunky but more respectfully humble term “Christian US-Americanism,” the post-colonial turn which underlies Schwartz’ work would be yet more powerfully effected.

It is my hope that this bird’s eye view of *Facing West...* will have piqued readers’ curiosity enough for them to pick up the book and allow themselves the opportunity to revise their positions if these included the commonly held assumption that Christian mission and influence moves exclusively from greater to lesser power. Yet better, they might choose to humbly recognize that their categories to explain faith and its outworking in the world are anything but universal and to re-consider how they, personally and communally, might acknowledge and open space for the valuable contributions from corners of the world other than theirs.

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