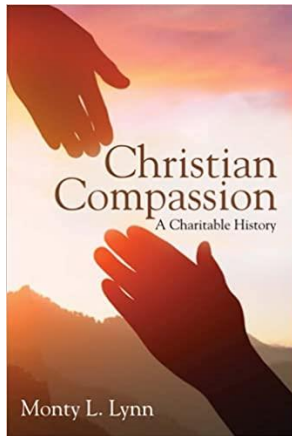


BOOK REVIEW

Christian Compassion: A Charitable History

By Monty L. Lynn

Reviewed by Tokunbo Adelekan



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It takes a unique sensibility of historical consciousness, ethical imagination, and pastoral wisdom to write the kind of history found in *Compassion: A Charitable History*, where every section, in some cases every paragraph, requires capturing befuddling dramas, many-stranded ideas, and evolving moral practices. Yet in many ways, Monty Lynn, Professor in the Department of Management Sciences at Abilene Christian University, is up to the task, providing a readable map of Christian charity that reflects an admirable knowledge of the variegated Catholic and Protestant contributions to Christian social understanding and progress.

Lynn invokes the biblical metaphor of a “river” (Psalm 46:4) to mold a fluid portrait of compassion that courses around three epochal developments; 1) from the inauguration of the Church in 1st-century Roman Palestine to the 4th century, 2) from the fall of Rome through the Medieval period into the period of the Reformation, and 3) from the early Modern Enlightenment project/experience to today's capital-driven North Atlantic-Centric theatre. As a primer, Lynn's work not only maps the ways in which compassion has been imagined, but tactically (if not always evenly) implemented through a complex patchwork of historical, geographic, cultural, and even continental theatres. Lynn's account embodies the

witness of the great hymn “*Thro' many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.*”

Lynn begins the book by setting a foundational framework for defining and understanding Christian compassion through the ages. Combining insights from social science and theology, Lynn argues the divine nature of compassion can best be understood as being comprised of five facets, all ensconced in Christ: Seeing, Feeling, Hearing, Acting, and Desiring. The more these facets are present at the individual and communal level, the more energized Christian compassion becomes. As Lynn uses these to choose and frame what, who, and how to include in this history, he traces the evolution of Christian compassion through the epochs, from small-scale individual and communal efforts geared to those in need, to the development of the church as the patron of the poor, to the institutionalization, professionalization, and specialization of care during Christendom, and to the explosion of parachurch organizations fostered in a significant way by the globalized and competitive missions movement that has resulted in what Lynn sees today as three streams of Christian charity: the liberation and justice stream, peace and humanitarianism, and mutual aid and community development.

The book can be read in at least three distinguishable, yet inseparable ways. First, it can be read as a prismatic attempt to capture the Church's priestly and prophetic role in alleviating human suffering en route to shaping the contours of civilization. It can thus be read as a treatise on how Christians of different stripes have lived out the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Second, it can be read as a treatment of compassion as a malleable, elastic, polyvalent category whose peculiar and protracted manifestations stress how institutional and individual actors have revised the boundaries of the church's ethical vocation. For example, what may be read as aid to the poor under a specific set of conditions may be construed as fomenting sloth, curbing moral and intellectual potential, and draining on institutional or national economies under a different moral regime. Therefore, given the radical contingency and intractable

changeability of all human affairs, it is important that we approach the grand scheme of Christian witness with a degree of epistemic humility and philosophical irony. Third, the book can be read as a *mission-evangelism manifesto*; a bold appeal to those who are disenchanted with arid forms of Christianity and who wish to reclaim the soul of the Church's earthly witness, to plumb the faith for its rich reserves of coping and care, and for its ethic of defense and deliverance from repulsive and retrograde systems.

Lynn's work is dialectical, discursive, and disciplinary. It is *dialectical* because it highlights the creative interplay between the heart of a loving God and the fallen, yet faithful, witness of Christian heroic actors. Accordingly, Christian mission is foremost a declarative act of participation in God's mission in the world. The *discursive* dimension of the book is seen through the manner in which Lynn deploys the social sciences to interpret the prism as stated above of Desiring, Seeing, Feeling, Hearing, and Acting as the five distinguishable yet inseparable nodes through which compassion is imagined. Finally, compassion, for Lynn, is *disciplinary*. It is the formed and lived witness of a dynamic ethic of self-surrender and self-overcoming—an *idea* conveyed not just in our confessions, creeds, policies, and pronouncements. Therefore, compassion is curricular as well as liturgical behavior.

Three interwoven dimensions of compassionate practice delineated in the text are 1) the ministry of spiritual direction often informed and inspired by the biblical faith and sacred texts, 2) the problems and possibilities that describe and prescribe the existential affairs, moral habits, and spiritual disciplines of Christian communities as they navigate specific social conditions, and 3) the exploration of the links between sacrificial leadership and heroic communal practice in overcoming the myriad dimensions of our human fallenness and finitude—as they serve as signs of the Kingdom of Heaven. In short, Lynn's narrative trumpets the truth that "*they will know we are Christians by our love.*"

Though rife with explanatory sobriety and interpretive power, Lynn's study is essentially a chapter on the compassionate witness of the Church to North Atlantic civilization. Lynn's "river" may be an apt metaphor, but it bends curiously and unsettlingly outside of the "Global South"—Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This restrictive outlook not only fails to meet the ambitious goal that Lynn has set for himself, but it also overlooks the colorful and burgeoning waterfalls that could provide substantive and sophisticated fauna and flora for his otherwise salutary "riverful" account. To what degree have the contributions of Pentecostals and Charismatics fostered and expanded the church's compassionate witness—much of which highlights the undeniable role of the red, yellow, black, and brown

peoples, also, perhaps more importantly, the astounding role of women in the flourishing of the Christian story? Any "charitable" map of Christian compassion must come to terms with these ennobling and expanding missional "theatres," instead of treating them as merely tributary to the Western currents of Christianity.

Needless to say, at present, the Western mainline Church is at a crossroads, thus compelling deep self-interrogation, reformation, and perhaps even repentance when necessary. We can no longer take as axiomatic (and it pains me deeply to confess) that the church is a regenerative force in society—especially because some of the evils of modernity, such as slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism, to name a few, have had partial roots in Christian institutional identity. This requires an acknowledgement of how issues of knowledge, privilege, power, and status have shaped not only the charitable practices of Christian communities, but also the animus against the Church that lingered and seems to have deepened in the present moment.

Overall, this book is resourceful and relevant to Christian practitioners in all areas of the global church, including those working in relief, development, and advocacy organizations. Specialists will doubtless find omissions and oversimplifications, but it is important to remember that Lynn has understood and attempted to chart a course, not to provide an encyclopedic mosaic. The inclusion of stories, images, and charts adds a personal element that prevents the work from becoming a dry, laborious academic exercise. The work can be a guidepost for those who seek to mine the Judeo-Christian faith for tools and templates needed to demystify and decenter the hierarchical and repressive systems that continue to degrade and devalue human creative potential—I read it as an accessible and applicable exploration of doing mission in the real world.

As Augustine reputedly quipped, "*tolle lege,*" take up and read.

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