

Clouds of Witnesses
Christian Voices from Africa and Asia
by Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom

Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2011. 300 pages. \$25.00.

In 1915, the Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada published *Comrades in Service*, a book that contained biographical sketches of prominent Christians from North America, Asia, and Africa. In order to educate North American Christians about the burgeoning world Christian movement, the book's author, Margaret E. Burton, chronicled the lives of such far-flung Christians as Kaji Yajima of Japan, Samuel Adjai Crowther of West Africa, and Chundra Lela of India alongside American Protestant luminaries like Dwight L. Moody and Grace H. Dodge. Burton introduces her book with a note to the American reader about her intention, explaining that her inclusion of such a diverse medley of believers from "different nations and different races" is to persuade North American Christians toward godly living and faithful service. "As you become acquainted with these comrade-folk," writes Burton, "I think you will find that they were all alike in the answer they made to that ringing challenge, 'What are you going to do with the gift of life?'"¹

Nearly one hundred years later, Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom have written *Clouds of Witnesses*, detailing the lives of seventeen nineteenth and twentieth century Christians from Africa and Asia. Not unlike *Comrades in Service*, Noll and Nystrom state that the purpose of their book "is to introduce readers in the Western world to noteworthy Christian believers from the recent history of the non-Western world" (9). The authors note that "in 1900 more than four-fifths of the world's Christian population lived in Europe and North America, while a century later about two-thirds live outside those regions" (10). In light of these demographic and geographic

paradigm shifts in Christianity today, *Clouds of Witnesses* tells the stories of Bernard Mizeki, John Chilembwe, and Albert Luthuli from Southern Africa; William Wadé Harris and Byang Kato from West Africa; Simeon Nsibambi and Janani Luwum from East Africa; Pandita Ramabai, V.S. Azariah, and Sundar Singh from India; Sun Chu Kil from Korea; Dora Yu/Yu Cidu, Mary Stone/Shi Meiyu, John Sung/Song Shangjie, Yao-Tsung Wu/Wu Yaozong, Wang Mingdao, and Ignatius Cardinal Kung/Kung Pin-Mei from China.

Over the last twenty years, a number of scholars have provided informative studies that have advanced the burgeoning field of world Christianity in the church and academy.² Much of this work has centered on methods and theories for understanding the transmission of Christianity across different geographic regions amidst the changing vicissitudes of Western colonialism, geopolitical conflict, and cross-cultural exchange in global history. Additionally, great emphasis has been placed on the complex and multiple roles of the Western missionary as civilizer, colonialist, cultural mediator, evangelist, and linguistic translator in foreign mission fields throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania. *Clouds of Witnesses* is designed to be a companion volume to an earlier book by Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*, where he looked at the conditions of non-Western Christianity in relation to the history of Christianity in the United States.³ By focusing directly on individuals in *Clouds of Witnesses*, Noll and Nystrom place African and Asian Christians, rather than methods or missionaries, on center stage.

Through their presentation of seventeen biographies, Noll and Nystrom illumine several important facets about the expansion of Christianity in Africa and Asia. By selecting a myriad of different individuals from each geographic region, the authors resist a monolithic portrait of African or Asian Christianity and rightly demonstrate the ample diversity of Christian thought and practice in every region or nation. For example, Noll and Nystrom's two chapters on West Africa present William Wade Harris's prophetic ministry and visionary encounters with the angel Gabriel alongside Byang Kato's aims to create a distinctly Christian theology for Africa through scholarly study of the Scriptures and theological education. Whereas Harris believed that Christianity grounded in the Old Testament did not prohibit polygamy and other traditional African practices (77–78), Kato contended that the Scriptures prohibited acceptance of traditional African religious practices (89). Both Harris and Kato ardently sought an indigenous Christianity for their West African context, but they possessed different approaches that have each shaped the various forms and practices of Christianity in contemporary West Africa.

In their three chapters on India, Noll and Nystrom detail the biographies of Pandita Ramabai, V.S. Azariah, and Sundar Singh to present a diverse spectrum of Indian Christian beliefs and practices, each of which expresses differing notions of the relationships between Hinduism and Christianity and the East and the West. Ramabai, for instance, noted that the key difference between the Christian and Hindu religions was that the Christian Bible, unlike any of the Hindu religious books she had read, explicitly taught its practitioners to care for and reclaim oppressed and marginalized

women in the example of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman (139). Singh's Christian thought, however, was influenced by Indian models of spirituality and advocated a fulfillment theory that viewed the higher forms of Hinduism as preparation for the message of Christ (160–64). In their biography of Azariah, Noll and Nystrom aptly describe Azariah as “a man in the middle,” who embodied and enacted a complex and complicated stance toward Anglicanism and the Church of England as the first Indian bishop of the Anglican Church (141–56). Azariah befriended and maintained close relations with a number of Britons in India, but also urged missionaries to exchange their paternalism for partnership in their interactions with non-Western Christians in the twentieth century. Azariah oversaw the construction of a prominent Anglican Cathedral in India that incorporated indigenous emblems like the lotus flower alongside emblems of the cross, but also gladly adopted middle-class British dress over his native clothing in order to commend the British for introducing a common style of dress to replace the Indian styles that “so closely (and oppressively) marked the strata of Indian caste divisions” (150–51). Noll and Nystrom note how Stephen Neill, a British churchman, historian, and Bible scholar, reported with amusement the times he went to church with Azariah: “Neill would go barefoot to express his identification with the Indians; Azariah would wear ordinary shoes to express his thanks for how the colonial power had opened dignity and sanitation to all!” (151).

In their Afterword, Noll and Nystrom observe that one of the repeated phenomena in their seventeen biographies is “how often a spark lit by missionary-native contact initiated remarkable Christian expansion through native agency” (276). Citing examples such as John Chilembwe's relationship to British missionary Joseph Booth and Sun Chu Kil's to American missionary Samuel Moffett, Noll and Nystrom contend that closer study of these intercultural and transnational relationships will unearth crucial insights in the expansion and development of Christianity in the Global South and the Global North. Noll and Nystrom herald a “fresh appreciation” for the importance of mission work, but in a way that moves beyond “former times when the missionary could be depicted as the cause, guide, and guardian of Christian life wherever it existed” and acknowledges both missionaries and indigenous converts as vital components in world Christian movements (276–77). Another significant insight from *Clouds of Witnesses* in addition to missionary-native contact is that a number of the seventeen individuals from Africa and Asia spent considerable time in the West, mainly as foreign students in colleges, universities, and seminaries across the United States and Europe. For example, John Chilembwe spent two years studying at the Virginia Theological Seminary and College in Lynchburg; Shi Meiyu studied medicine at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor; and John Sung and Yao-Tsung Wu both studied theology at Union Seminary in New York City. Noll and Nystrom interestingly note how Sung and Wu both attended Union Seminary in the 1920s, during the heyday of American Protestant liberal theology, but had entirely divergent experiences at the school. While Sung vehemently rejected the teachings of his teachers Henry Sloan Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick as empty and useless for religious faith, Wu embraced the thinking of these same professors and others like Reinhold Niebuhr and

cited them as influences for his Chinese version of America's "social gospel" (233–34). Noll and Nystrom's biographies provide rich forays into these individual encounters and invite further investigations of not only missionary-native relationships, but also Western teacher-foreign student interactions and the larger transnational dynamics of African and Asian Christian experiences as foreigners in the West.

Written with lucid prose, Noll and Nystrom's biographical sketches present each notable African and Asian Christian individual in vivid detail. They also conclude every chapter with a robust list of bibliographical sources for readers curious to learn more. At the onset, the authors concede that by limiting their scope of Africa and Asia (and thus omitting Latin America) and including only one Catholic (Ignatius Cardinal Kung) in their volume, they have chosen a "small and skewed sampling of biographical possibilities" (13). In addition to regional and confessional tilts toward African and Asian Protestants, *Clouds of Witnesses* also contains a gender imbalance. Only three of the seventeen biographies are of women, which could be considered odd in light of Philip Jenkins's observation that statistically the "typical" contemporary Christian is not a man, but rather "a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela."⁴ Yet, the authors themselves write that their book is meant to be an introductory effort in enhancing our understanding of Christian expansion in the non-Western world. With *Clouds of Witnesses*, Noll and Nystrom's fruitful efforts both contribute an invaluable addition and stimulate further exploration within the ever-expanding field of world Christian studies.

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Notes

1 Margaret E. Burton, *Comrades in Service* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1915), ix–x.

2 See, for example, John L. Comaroff, and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1, *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1991); Charles E. Farhadian, ed., *Introducing World Christianity* (Chichester, UK : Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2008); David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford, UK : Wiley-Blackwell, 1993); Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Chichester, UK :Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2008); Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996); and *ibid*, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002).

3 Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

4 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.