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American Evangelicals
The Overlooked Globalizers and Their Unintended Gospel of Modernity

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Introduction

When people talk about the American dimensions of contemporary globalization, they generally speak about the spread of American popular culture, financial markets, multinational corporations, and political ideals. The images they evoke come effortlessly to mind: McDonald's, Nike sneakers, MTV and hip-hop music, Disneyland, Levi's jeans, the New York Stock Exchange, and American-style democracy, to name but a few. More astute observers are quick to note, however, that such examples are simply the more noticeable expressions of a seemingly endless array of other less culturally-identifiable, but no less American "products," including skyscrapers, greeting cards, chewing gum, microwaves, modern passenger airplanes, basketball, snowboards, the ATM, cell phones, computer hackers, and so on. Taken together, these familiar, and often bemoaned, instances of the diffusion of American "goods," "ideas," and "styles" provide a certain warrant for the claim that the US is the primary source and symbol of most of what passes as "globalization" in the planetary popular imagination.

Missing from this typical listing of dominant American cultural diffusions, however, are those emanating from American religion. Indeed, even the more sophisticated academic accounts of the so-called "modern global circumstance" – those charting the "flows" and "networks" of people, images, ideologies, technologies, disease, and the like – often ignore what may be one of the most significant aspects of globalization in the contemporary period: the worldwide spread of a

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peculiarly American brand (in both origin and form) of Christianity – that is, Evangelical Protestantism. [...]

American Evangelicalism: Vanguard of a Transnational Religious Movement

Of all the instances of religious resurgence, nothing can match the global explosion of Evangelical Protestantism. Not even renascent Islam matches Evangelicalism's spectacular growth: "By 2050," asserts historian Philip Jenkins, "there should be still about three Christians for every two Muslims worldwide." Evangelical Protestantism (especially in its Pentecostal manifestations) is arguably the most consequential religious movement in the world today. Its growth around the world has been nothing short of stunning. In Latin America, for example, Protestants numbered around 15 million in the 1960s; in less than two decades, that number grew to at least 40 million. The growth of Pentecostalism has been particularly noteworthy, growing from only 10,000 in the early 1900s to over 150 million by 2000.

Beyond Latin America, the expansion of Christianity in its Evangelical and Pentecostal forms is as remarkable. The number of Christians on the African continent rose from around 9 million in 1900 to over 330 million by 2000 – over 120 million of whom are Pentecostal. In Asia, the story is no different. In 1900, the number of Christians figured around 20 million; by the year 2000, it had grown to over 300 million – 130 million of whom are Pentecostal. Currently about a third of the world population has some affiliation with Christianity. Estimates of total world population of Evangelicals figure around 700 million, half of whom are charismatic or Pentecostal.

Unlike the upsurge in the number of Muslims worldwide, what makes the growth in Evangelical Christianity even more astounding is that, with the exception of Latin America, a significant amount of the growth has taken place in societies traditionally uncongenial to Christianity in any of its forms. In 1900, 83 percent of the world's Christian population lived in Europe and North America; by the late 1980s, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific accounted for 56 percent of Christians worldwide. If current trends hold course, it can be expected that the net effect of this new "Christianization" will revolutionize how the world thinks of Christianity. No longer will it be considered the religion of the North and West, but of the global South (indeed, save perhaps for the US, Ireland, and Poland, practicing Christians number among minorities in nations most associated with Christendom historically). Likewise, it will be increasingly a religion of non-white Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians. "If we want to visualize a 'typical' contemporary Christian," explains Philip Jenkins, "we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*."

Although the evidence appears to support the claim that Evangelical Protestantism is a thoroughly indigenized global phenomenon, Western (predominantly American) missionary and para-church organizations, operating in a manner similar to that of multinational, non-governmental organizations and corporations, continue to constitute a primary source of material resources; technical, educational, and professional

assistance; as well as evangelistic, ecclesiastical, and theological models to Christians the world over. In this way, the centers of American Evangelicalism, while by no means the center of worldwide Evangelicalism, nevertheless continue to form the backbone of a transnational religious movement. As Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan Rose point out:

> When believers enter a church in Africa, Asia, or Latin America they participate in a form of worship that can be found in Memphis or Portland or New York City. Perhaps it will be Pentecostal, Southern Baptist, or a ubiquitous charismatic product marketed by Bible schools in places like Tulsa and Pasadena.

Organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth with a Mission, World Vision, Focus on the Family, Compassion International, the Fuller School of World Mission, and the Christian Broadcasting Network are some of the largest and most visible of the American Evangelical organizations. Campus Crusade for Christ, for instance, employs 20,000 full-time staff, has offices in over 150 countries, and has chapters at nearly 700 universities worldwide. *The Jesus Film*, a project launched by Campus Crusade for Christ, has reportedly been shown in over 236 countries and territories, translated into 745 languages, and presented throughout the world to an estimated 4 billion people – two-thirds of the human race! Youth with a Mission averages a predominantly volunteer staff of 10,000 people in over 650 locations in 130 countries. World Vision, the largest Christian relief and development organization in the world, has an annual budget of $460 million and serves around 73 million people a year in 92 countries. The "global influence for Christ" of Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission (the largest missions school in the world) comes through its vocational training of men and women from all around the globe; its graduates are now ministering in 110 countries as directors of local seminaries, churches, and organizations. The second largest international religious cable network in the world (behind the Trinity Broadcasting Network), the Christian Broadcasting Network airs its *700 Club* in more than 90 countries and in 46 different languages. Likewise, Focus on the Family boasts that its flagship radio program hosted by Dr. James Dobson is heard daily by more than 660 million people in 95 countries. Finally, the total number of American missionaries reportedly at large in the world today ranges from 67,000 to 118,000. With such global reach, it is rather surprising that American Evangelicals are so often overlooked in the popular and scholarly accounts of contemporary global change. [...]

The Language of the Market

Surprisingly, most Evangelical organizations express their mission and work in terms more typical of multinational corporations than religious organizations. One Evangelical leader declares, "We want to do business with the world and in so doing put ourselves out into the market. It's just how it works." All of the American globalizers, including the Evangelicals, describe their operations as taking place in a world

characterized by "expanding markets," the need for "competitive advantage," "efficiency," "cost-effectiveness," "maximizing benefits and minimizing costs," "niche markets," "profitability," and the "bottom-line." Nowhere is this view articulated more dramatically among the Evangelicals than when Campus Crusade for Christ's President Bill Bright tells potential investors in a promotional video that for every New Life Training Center established around the world, 100,000 people will hear the gospel and at least 10,000 souls will be saved in the very first year of operation. As he puts it, "I have never heard of an investment with greater spiritual return." With similar dynamism, Paul Crouch, of the Trinity Broadcasting Network, proclaims:

> God promised to give you "EVERY PLACE where you SET YOUR FOOT..." (Josh. 1:3 NIV). With 21 SATELLITES carrying TBN, the WORLD is almost COVERED with your "FOOTPRINTS" spreading the Gospel everywhere! Every SOUL saved through TBN is going to YOUR account in heaven because you GAVE. Praise God, the account is GROWING! [capitalized words in original]

Another component of the market idiom appears in the frequent equation of the believer with consumer. Not surprisingly, this is most explicit among Evangelical broadcasting organizations for which listeners and viewers are, quite literally, consuming their religious media "products." "Not only has your TBN grown to 3,309 stations, and is carried on 21 satellites and thousands of cable systems around the world," exclaims Crouch, "but no matter where you are, day or night, you can watch TBN via the Internet. It is literally available to anyone, anywhere who can access the Internet!" The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) is somewhat more strategic in its appeal to religious consumers using the most cutting-edge advertising tactics. Describing the global success of CBN's WorldReach program, one promoter says,

> When the secular world wants to really grab the attention of the consumers of a country, they "four-wall-market" a product. We want nations to know of Jesus' love and His plan for each of us, therefore CBN uses the "four-wall-marketing" concept in the form of media blitzes to spread the Gospel. CBN's creation of the media blitz has proven to be an effective and entertaining outreach tool to share Christian, family-oriented programming using various forms of media: television, radio, videotapes, literature, etc.

The Language of Multiculturalism

Needless to say, this conception of the individual framed by the logic of the market has consequences. In each realm of globalizing activity, it universalizes specific notions of organizational progress and, more generally, human progress. However, the desire to globalize a brand or a message or a service by appeal to these culturally specific, if globally attractive, notions cannot be made without qualification. The elites in the vanguard of globalization are aware of the historical heavy-handedness of American or Western organizations and are eager to temper both the image and reality of their work as a form of cultural imperialism. Balancing the moral appeal to universal rights and needs, then, is a tendency to indigenize their

brands, organizational identities, and constituencies. It is here where we see a common recourse to an idiom rooted in multiculturalism, one that focuses on sensitivity to local cultures.

Coca-Cola is paradigmatic in this regard. As the vice president at Coca-Cola puts it, "our business is fundamentally local, our principles are global." To explain he uses the metaphor of architecture:

> Think about the architecture as a blueprint of your house. We operate with a "global brand architecture" in positioning our brands that are essentially the same everywhere. Depending on where we are, the roof shingles might be tile in one place and asphalt in another.

A Vice President for Marketing and Research at MTV articulates the same view of his company, "We're one of the few brands who have nailed the notion of being able to be global and local at the same time." Evangelicals echo the views of Coca-Cola and MTV in this regard. As the Vice President for World Vision explains,

> The business of an NGO is about trust. Local communities won't trust us if we're not local. So we have to be local. Thus, we have a World Vision-New Zealand, World Vision-Taiwan, World Vision-UK, etc. But, on the other hand, if you're truly only local, you may not be trusted by donors and therefore will not be able to get the resources necessary to accomplish your mission.

Similarly, the Vice President for Focus on the Family describes how his organization maintains their global–local structure for radio by contracting with local, indigenous offices that have their own legal status, but "we license the use of the Focus on the Family name." He continues:

> Our local partners have a desire to help families in their regions and we stand behind them. We bring to the table radio expertise as well as resource assistance. However, we do not feel it is our place to control what is aired. We emphasize basic biblical principles; our partners contextualize it so that it will connect and communicate with the local person.

The Campus Crusade for Christ Vice President is as quick to emphasize how most of their international staff are recruited from the societies in which they work: "Most of all our work is directed by nationals. We have only 700 Americans [out of 20,000] serving outside the US." Indeed, nearly all of the Evangelicals claim that they work hand-in-hand with partners from the places they are engaging.

Conclusion: An Unintended Gospel of Modernity

What should be apparent from the foregoing examination of the American Evangelical globalizers is that they do in fact share a family resemblance with their secular counterparts, despite their disagreements. There are important disputes between Evangelicals

and their secular counterparts over certain moral issues, representing deeply divided ideological commitments, and these disputes could take on greater global importance if they become politically charged for Evangelicals in other societies. The extent to which such battles are fought abroad is at present, however, limited to the exports of the American globalizers. More significant at present are the commonalities found at the level of institutional and organizational practice. What counts as "success," "progress," "opportunity," and the like is for the American Evangelicals managed according to the same rationalizing techniques as for their secular counterparts and, by and large, accounted for in the same cultural languages. [...]

Thus, it is safe to say that the Evangelical globalizers have endorsed an intensely modern (and modernizing) cultural orientation, if unwitting of its implications for their work and message. Taken individually, there will no doubt be significant differences in the extent to which Evangelical groups reject or embrace the various logics of modernity. Taken as a whole, however, Evangelicals do demonstrate a certain symmetry of engagement at the level of practice both among themselves and with their secular counterparts. Given their access to the most advanced technologies of transportation and communication, moreover, they cannot help but be some of the leading apologists for Western (American) modernity, even if unintentionally. [...]