

A Book Review: *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches*

by Robert Wuthnow, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2009. Reviewed by Robert L. Montgomery, Asheville, NC (rmontgo914@aol.com)

[Robert Montgomery, PhD, served as a Presbyterian missionary in Taiwan from 1956 to 1972. Montgomery is the author of a book *Introduction to the Sociology of Missions*, published by Praeger Publishers in 1999. In June 2008 he wrote of a then return visit to Taiwan.]

Finally! A leading sociologist of religion has researched the overseas mission efforts of American Christianity. For over thirty years I have been hoping that sociologists of religion would give attention to this important aspect of American church life and work that reaches millions of people around the world. Instead, the major focus of sociology of religion has been on American congregations and on church growth and decline in Europe and America, particularly as influenced by secularization. At the same time, missiologists, while making some use of anthropology, have virtually ignored sociology of religion with its three American professional associations, its major international association, and its many publications. Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University, a very prolific researcher and writer, has broken the ice from the sociological side with a book showing how the mission efforts of American churches and their members have been major participants in and contributors to globalization.

In chapter one he notes how American Christianity is very locally oriented (a fact that sociologists have recognized more clearly than many church leaders), but that American Christianity has also continued and increased its transcultural activities in recent years (a fact that social scientific researchers have largely ignored.) One of the tasks of sociology is to puncture commonly accepted notions and he does this in chapters two and three in his nuanced criticism of the "global Christianity paradigm." While recognizing the demographic shift of Christianity from Euro-America to the non-Western world (a shift recognized by missiologists before most of the academic world, not to speak of the population at large), in chapter three he shows that the complex effects of globalization on American Christianity must include many more factors than only the demographic factor.

Chapter four, "The Evolution of Transnational Ties," covers ground that is most familiar to missiologists (but not to sociologists of religion), which is the development of the modern mission movement from the nineteenth century up to the present. At the end of this chapter and as an introduction to chapter five, Wuthnow states: "Were the face of American religion to be considered only in terms of the worship services, choirs, Sunday school classes, and the community projects of local congregations, the extensive organizational ties that link the

United States with other parts of the world could be missed. The same is true of the abstract discussions of globalization that feature generalizations about the world as a whole but fail to take adequate account of the grassroots mechanisms through which global ties occur" (139). True to this point, Wuthnow in Chapter five ("The Global Role of Congregations") shows in great detail how American churches and their members are linked on a general, but especially a personal and direct level with Christians and churches throughout the world. Some of the differences among Christian groups in America are presented, but again puncturing common notions he shows how mainline Christianity is continuing its considerable global involvement even while the efforts of independent evangelical churches has increased tremendously.

Chapter six ("Faith and Foreign Policy") shows different emphases of American church groups, but also gives a nuanced analysis of the "influence" of American Christianity on government overseas policies, which is often more in the rhetoric of church leaders and politicians than most people, including religious leaders, realize. Nevertheless, there is a complex interconnection and interaction between the government and the many faith-based organizations leading to a mutual influence.

Chapter seven ("The Challenges Ahead") is the last chapter and it raises a series of tensions that are likely to continue and "will pose important considerations about the future role of the United States in the world:" (1) Connecting local and global, (2) Balancing service and spirituality, (3) "Doing for" versus "Partnering with," (4) the historical legacy, and (5) conscience of a nation.

It is difficult to do justice in a review of a book like this. It has both numerous statistical figures and also many narratives of specific cases. As a sociological book it is primarily analytical, meaning that it shows relationships with the aim of being explanatory (theoretical). It makes use of description, but it is for analytical purposes. True to sociology, it casts doubt on widely held assumptions, such as: "that American Christianity has withdrawn from the wider world," "that local congregations have imploded, serving as self-help societies for their own members," and "that American Christianity is primarily an evangelical voice in U.S. foreign policy that encourages the nation's leaders in imperialistic adventures involving free trade and unilateral military action." Primarily the book shows how American Christianity is increasing in its global engagement. Wuthnow identifies four factors as contributing to this increase: "the shrinkage of distances," "cultural flattening of the world," "organizational muscle in international faith-based humanitarian and relief agencies," and "the grassroots energizing activity of congregations themselves."

Missions have two sides: sending and receiving. The book shows that the global engagement of American Christianity is helping to reduce this distinction, but it does focus primarily on the sending side of missions. However, I must point out that there are still large variations in receptivity to the Christian faith in the societies of the world. My major aim has been to try to explain these variations in receptivity. The scope of Wuthnow's study is primarily the last two centuries and the efforts made by American Christians. I believe that there still remains an important task of explaining the variations in receptivity to Christian missions throughout the world.

I add a note regarding a basic perspective in sociology of religion that is found in Wuthnow's book. This perspective is that religion is affected by its social circumstances making it a dependent variable to a variety of independent variables. However, unlike some sociologists, Wuthnow also sees religion as an independent variable that affects life in the world. Nevertheless, Wuthnow does show that the increasing speed of globalization in recent decades (a social condition in the world) has contributed to increased mission activity. This is really not a surprising finding, as Wuthnow notes. I simply want to note that from the beginning, Christianity and individual Christians have been affected by circumstances and conditions in the world. The Roman Empire provided a large area with numerous competing religions as a positive field for the spread of Christianity. I also often point out to people that Jesus Christ made a sociological statement when he said that it was more difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25). In other words, our religious faith is influenced by our SES (socio-economic status)! Just as the age of exploration and the industrial revolution (unfortunately attended by colonialism and imperialism) aided in the spread of Christianity, so modern globalization is providing circumstances that aid in the spread of Christianity, as well as the spread of other religions. But as well as being affected by globalization, Christianity contributes to globalization. Wuthnow shows this dual effect more clearly than anyone to date.

[The book *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* is now available from the University of California Press, or from Amazon.]