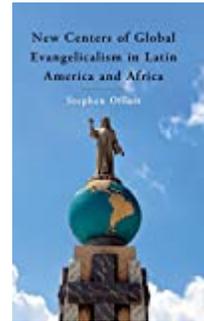




Stephen Offutt. *New Centers of Global Evangelicalism in Latin America and Africa.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 208 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-07832-1.



Reviewed by Lowell Gustafson (Villanova University)

Published on H-Diplo (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Christianity is rapidly losing adherents in many sectors of western Europe and the United States. However, evangelical Christianity is vibrant and growing in much of Latin America and Africa. Stephen Offutt contributes to the scholarly understanding of this phenomenon by presenting a religious social forces framework for a comparative analysis of global religious movements as they are shaped by local faith communities in El Salvador and South Africa.

Offutt begins by defining and distinguishing between types of evangelicals, and then explains why he uses the cases of El Salvador and South Africa, the different kinds of religious social forces at work, and how local entrepreneurs shape the political contours and global reach of new centers of evangelicalism (NCEs). He defines an evangelical as someone who emphasizes conversion or a change in one's life, an active concern for sharing the good news of the gospel, a high regard for the Bible, and an emphasis on Christ's atonement or reunifying God and people through suffering and sacrifice. NCEs are contrasted with the variants of evangelicalism from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the post-World War II era. The greater ease of travel and communication have transformed these centers through increased movements of people, goods, money, services,

and information. Compared to earlier evangelical organizations, NCEs are becoming socioeconomically diverse, better connected internationally, and increasingly socially engaged, as well as more often led by local entrepreneurs (p. 2).

In *New Centers of Global Evangelicalism in Latin America and Africa*, Offutt discusses the influences of global economic, political, and social forces on local religious entrepreneurs in NCEs. Evangelicalism has not occurred in a vacuum. It has proceeded within the complex political economies, cultures, and histories of the two nations Offutt investigates, El Salvador and South Africa. He locates his discussion of NCEs within their larger settings that are influenced by many forces.

Offutt argues that the growth of evangelicalism in the 1970s and 1980s was shaped in part by a bipolar world and US hegemony in Latin America and much of Africa. He traces the types of transfers of various resources from the United States to the African and Latin American NCEs. He acknowledges the importance of transnational actors, especially faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from the United States. Religious denominations, independent agencies, and congregations send mission teams and long-term mission-

aries, raise funds, send in-kind donations, welcome visitors from abroad, and otherwise foster relationships and transfers of resources. However, he rejects foreign influences as the primary explanation for the growth of evangelicalism. He emphasizes the predominance of local actors in African and Latin American evangelization. He argues that religious sources of change are the most important causes of key transformations occurring within the NCEs. Local actors are building NCEs through their use of religious symbols, how they receive and utilize resources made available from external actors, their development of organizational structures, as well as global religious forces.

Christian evangelicalism has been surging even as colonial and American power has been receding. Offutt cites David Martin, who argues that some evangelicalism is explained by people seeking escape from oppressive premodern social systems. People who experience as undesirable the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, or the elders of tribal society, have been especially open to NCEs.

NCEs not only accept resources from abroad, they also are exporters of religion, sending missionaries and materials to other churches in the region and other nations. And as important as these sources of resources are, local actors are necessary to accept, distribute, and manage them. It is these local actors who make creative use of the resources and are experimenting with new types of organizational structures.

The NCEs have led to some of the world's largest churches, with one in El Salvador with no less than 110,000 members. Evangelicals make up between 25 and 30 percent of El Salvador's population; about 80 percent of South Africans are Christians. There are some 147 million Pentecostals and Charismatics in Africa, mostly due to local evangelical movements rather than foreign missionaries. Of the world's largest churches, the top ten or fifteen exist outside the West. Primary among these is the Elim congregation of Guatemala, with its 129,000 members. These churches are made possible in part by their cell group organization, in which discipline and order is emphasized. A hierarchical pyramid headed by a senior pastor, who oversees district coordinators, zonal pastors, and cell leaders, keeps small groups involved in the larger whole.

Over recent decades, NEC leaders and members have become more engaged in social and political action. Very often, these actors are part of a transnational professional class whose members may also be found in managerial

positions in government and business throughout local societies. A generation ago, evangelicals often were primarily drawn from less well-positioned classes; now middle and upper social echelons are represented. Offutt notes how participation in evangelical churches can develop members' public speaking skills and social organization, as well as support individual choice and stable nuclear families. Critical of gambling, drinking, illegal drugs, and extramarital sex, it prohibits vices that drain resources and prevent economic advancement. Evangelical teachings are valued since they are perceived to lead to economic and social improvement. Otherworldly teachings result in this-world betterment.

The reasons for the shift in social representation among evangelicals is complex. Part of the reason are the skills developed by members in local congregations. Frequent public speaking in churches and other gatherings, as well as organizing them, provided the skills that were fungible and later applied in sectors beyond evangelical circles. Another reason is that local evangelicals sometimes were offered and took advantage of opportunities to study abroad, returning to their local communities college-educated and transnationally connected. Various networks such as the World Evangelical Alliance and others maintained and developed these relationships. These networks also often developed local primary and secondary school systems in Africa and Latin America, educating local students who went on the leadership positions in local evangelical, governmental, and business settings. Evangelicals' higher levels of education has been one reason for their social advancement.

Local leaders have also become established within the transnational evangelical class. Their understanding of local customs and cultures enables them not only to shape the forms of evangelicalism, but also to assert themselves within global evangelical groups. They are most sensitive to local symbols and organizational methods, making each NCE unique. Foreigners who are unfamiliar with local nuances learn to accept the decisions of local leaders.

Women are often empowered by evangelicalism. They play leadership roles in churches. Evangelical teachings reduce the siphoning off of meager incomes for unproductive activities such as extramarital affairs and drinking, thereby allowing families to invest more in children and families. Increased family sentiment, frugality, individual accountability, and active participation in local churches all lead to a community ethos in which local entrepreneurs shape their societies.

Large, well-organized local churches with access to transnational resources have often made local evangelicals recognized actors within local politics. Rather than eschewing politics, as some evangelicals had in the past, a greater social presence has often given them more of a political presence as well. Evangelical leaders praying at presidential inaugurations are but one example of this. Active programs designed to influence society are another. Evangelicals increasingly work to alleviate poverty, help disaster recovery, provide medical care, support cures for addictions, and serve gang members and prisoners. Offutt examines all of the above practices, including examples when evangelicals succumbed to clientelistic self-serving practices and corruption.

Effective at spreading their movement throughout their own countries, they also have begun their own missions in other countries as well. These include organizing local emigrants who have settled in in other countries. For example, Spanish-speaking Assemblies of God are highly visible in the United States, from Brooklyn to Los Angeles.

Offutt worked for five years to interview 115 people in El Salvador and South Africa. He attended and observed evangelical meetings and activities. This impressive ethnographic research helps demonstrate his authority on the NCEs, although he acknowledges the lack of quantitative data and an Asian case study.

The book's title promises more than Offutt delivers. He makes a valuable, rich, well-substantiated, and organized contribution to our understanding of evangelicalism in El Salvador and South Africa. He does make important references to cases outside of these two countries, but does not do enough to claim that his work adequately represents all of Latin America and Africa. These two enormous and complex continents are not satisfactorily explained by the two national cases. This study needs to be part of a series that includes Brazil, Chile, Nigeria, and other nations. Then we can better judge how effectively a religious social forces framework permits us to explain global evangelicalism in Latin America and Africa.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Lowell Gustafson. Review of Offutt, Stephen, *New Centers of Global Evangelicalism in Latin America and Africa*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44144>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.