



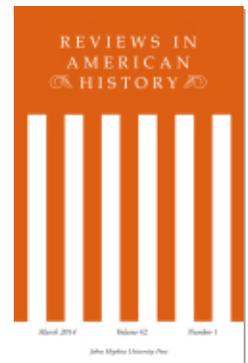
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Reviews in American History, Volume 42, Number 1, March 2014, pp.
174-180 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rah.2014.0023



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SO LONG, JERRY FALWELL: RECONSIDERING EVANGELICAL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Mark A. Lempke

Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson. *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 384 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$29.95.

David R. Swartz. *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 266 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, and index. \$47.50.

Environmentalists, antiwar demonstrators, and Nobel Prize-winning scientists are not always the first people who come to mind when considering the American evangelical. Aside from the occasional post by Jim Wallis on *The Huffington Post*, those who run in secular circles seldom encounter signs of just how ideologically and philosophically broad the evangelical world is. Thankfully, within the space of a year, two books have assumed the task of exploring key undercurrents of the evangelical community, while acknowledging that a resilient majority remains invested in the culture wars. Collectively, these two books do their readers a great service, challenging the stereotypical perception of evangelicals in ways that may surprise even the evangelical community itself.

Public ignorance of American evangelicals' breadth and diversity is paralleled by an enduring scholarly silence on the matter. To be sure, the Christian Right has gotten plenty of attention, with William Martin's *With God on Our Side* and Daniel Williams' *God's Own Party* leading the pack. Yet collectively, these works project a more or less unified Religious Right reacting against the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Until recently, one would need to till very carefully through older works from the 1980s, such as Erling Jorstad's *The Politics of Moralism: The New Christian Right in American Life* or Robert Booth Fowler's *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966–1976*, to find some of the last thoughtful words on evangelicals who did not neatly line up with the Reagan Revolution. Thankfully, Randall Balmer's provocative and quasi-autobiographical pieces like *Thy Kingdom Come* (2011) considered the

unexplored places of evangelical society, as did Pamela Cochran's underappreciated *Evangelical Feminism: A History* (2012).

Randall Stephens and Karl Giberson's *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* and David Swartz's *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* are two worthy developments in that vein. *Moral Minority* turns its gaze to the Evangelical Left that formed in conversation with, rather than opposition to, the social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *The Anointed*, meanwhile, is decidedly presentist, exploring how some contemporary evangelicals acquire their understanding of science, American history, child rearing, and other topics through a litany of dubious authorities. Giberson, a physicist, and Stephens, a historian, approach this question with contempt and admiration in turns; for they bring to light not only evolution skeptics and ex-gay therapists, but also accomplished evangelical scholars in the fields of genetics and history, whose contributions often go unnoticed.

At the heart of *The Anointed* is the question of how authority, credibility, and trust are built within evangelical society. As the authors put it, the book examines "why intellectual authority can be obtained so cheaply" and uncritically among the faithful (p. 243). It asks the questions that vex those peering into the evangelical world from the outside. Why does the Rapture-obsessed *Left Behind* series routinely top the bestseller lists? Why has Texas amended its educational standards to teach creationism and evolution as equally valid? And how can "young-earth" creationists who manage the Answers in Genesis website reach an audience far larger than any conventional scientist could hope to attain?

Much of the book delineates how evangelicals receive the information that informs their approach to contemporary issues, particularly from poorly credentialed sources. To demonstrate, Giberson and Stephens introduce the reader to a motley cast of self-appointed but media-savvy leaders. This includes David Barton, an undergraduate history major and Texas Republican chairman who purports that the Founding Fathers intended America to be a distinctly Christian nation. Also involved are Ken Ham, a prominent creationist, and James Dobson, the child-development specialist whose arguments for physical discipline have been the cause of controversy since the 1970s.

The authors argue that Ham, Barton, and company succeed by generating distrust of the secular world. The evangelical worldview perceives itself as an unwelcome cultural outsider fighting a hostile and antireligious elite. The evangelical public responds by finding safe havens such as the Answers in Genesis website, which promotes belief in a young earth, and in the *Left Behind* novels, which theorize that the United Nations is a tool of the Antichrist. These conduits of information and interpretation thrive through their use of "cue-based epistemology" (p. 245). As the authors put it, "someone just like us is more likely to tell us the truth . . . than is a famous egghead from a far-off

university with whom we have nothing in common" (p. 244). Accordingly, the manner of determining truth and authority relies on relationship more than reason. (As the authors are correct to point out, this means of establishing trust is in no way unique to evangelicals). These opinion-makers purportedly offer scholarship that is grounded in familiarity and in shared grievances against "activist judges" and "secularist academics" (even though, as Giberson and Stephens acknowledge, some young-earth creationists earned Ph.D.s from excellent universities).

Their findings ridiculed by the conventional academy, evangelicals peddling godly answers to tough questions create their own journals and think tanks, most notoriously the Institute for Creation Research, as an alternate system of authority. Yet, these institutions serve little purpose except to validate their participants' predetermined conclusions. For Giberson and Stephens, the scandal behind young-earth creationism or childrearing based on the book *Dare to Discipline* is their failure of the crucial tests of peer review and original research. Frankly, these scholars are not in serious dialogue with anyone in a position to disagree with or challenge them.

If all this seems a trifle polemic, perhaps it is. Stephens and Giberson write this book with a dog in the fight; each man is a professing Christian and faculty member at Eastern Nazarene College, a highly regarded denominational school. Accordingly, both men are understandably eager to demonstrate the often-unrecognized brainpower at work in the evangelical academy. However, their portrait of the evangelical world juxtaposes hucksters and honest scholars in terms that are worryingly dichotomous. For every Bryan College operating with threadbare accreditation, there is an intellectually formidable Christian school such as Gordon College. Ken Ham is held up against Francis Collins, a Nobel Prize-winning evangelical scientist who played a key role in developing the Human Genome Project. David Barton's attempt to spin a faith-friendly version of America's founding is meant to appear hollow compared to Mark Noll, the Notre Dame professor and unofficial dean of evangelical historians.

A few topical and timely issues, however, are strikingly absent from *The Anointed*. A study of climate change and environmentalism, an issue where even very conservative evangelicals have expressed concern, might have added a great deal. Even mainstream groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals have weighed in on the issue. Such a treatment could have projected a badly needed shade of gray between Giberson and Stephens' bifurcations of scientific and unscientific, reasonable and unreasonable, evangelicals. Moreover, such a book begs for fuller coverage of quack therapists "curing" gay Christians of their homosexual inclinations, particularly after the controversy surrounding the ex-gay therapy conducted by Michelle Bachmann's husband and California's recent success in banning such procedures. Aside from a perfunctory treatment of Love Won Out, gay conversion ministry is handled only

briefly, while James Dobson, a man now on the cutting edge of irrelevance, is made the exemplar of a complex body of evangelical social scientists.

Despite these reservations, this is a deeply revelatory book shedding light into a misunderstood and caricaturized American subculture, even as it takes sides in its internecine battles. The notorious Creation Museum in Kentucky is the special target of the authors' ire. "No compelling case can be made that the Bible 'teaches' young earth creationism, in any sense other than a simple, decontextualized reading in English," they remind the reader at one point (p. 47). Passages such as this make the book not only a study of truth-making and trust-making, but also an earnest plea to the evangelical community to make its peace with modernity and stop touting pseudo-scholarship as the genuine article. Its ambitious breadth works to its advantage, running a gamut from hard science to history to social science. It is exemplary of the good fruit that can be borne when two scholars in different fields, but sharing a common set of concerns, collaborate.

If *Anointed* surveys the present state of affairs within the evangelical community, David Swartz, in *Moral Minority*, considers a road long ago not taken. Swartz's book explores the progressive evangelical movement that formed in the 1960s and 1970s, a vibrant enterprise that never entirely caught traction with the rest of the faithful. The Evangelical Left has served as a strident voice of dissent and remonstrance within the evangelical community, entreating coreligionists toward issues of peace, income inequality, and environmentalism. Their story is a refreshing tonic to the persistent image of American evangelicals as monolithically conservative.

Swartz demonstrates that the Evangelical Left, like the American Left more generally, consists of disparate elements brought together by a common set of crises in the 1960s and '70s. Some came from vestiges of the New Left: Jim Wallis of Sojourners and Fuller Seminary president Richard Mouw joined Students for a Democratic Society and agreed with many of its critiques about corporate America and the dehumanizing of modern life. Others had roots in Southern California's easygoing religious scene, encountering the counterculture's embrace of simple living. Still others became politically aware through civil rights activism.

But liberal Protestants like William Sloane Coffin, these young activists were not. Theologically conservative, the men and women Swartz examined were uncompromising on the inspiration of scripture, the gravity of sin, and the reality of redemption. Their politics drew upon the biblical conception of *prophetic* action, not in the sense of predicting the future but of articulating moral truth. They delivered the harsh message that their country, and particularly their brothers in Nixon's Silent Majority, had strayed from the righteous path. Collectively, the group stood for solidarity with the poor (which often

meant living in less affluence themselves), and above all, for ending American militarism epitomized by the war in Vietnam. Brought together by these public crises, the young evangelicals created a manifesto called the "Chicago Declaration of Social Concern," hammered out at a dingy downtown YMCA in 1973. A kind of evangelical Port Huron Statement, the document laid out a biblical case for the traditionally leftist causes of peace, social justice, and participatory democracy.

As Swartz examines this fascinating counterpoint to conservative mobilization in the 1970s, the success of his book hinges on the answer to this question: why did progressive Christianity fail to catch the same fire as the Religious Right? Swartz pins the greater share of blame on identity politics, finding that follow-up meetings to the Chicago Declaration were marred by a balkanization of caucus groups lobbying for their particular interests. Cleaving along lines of gender, race, and especially theology, the cause of progressive evangelicalism endured "the loss of beloved community," as Swartz eloquently puts it (p. 195). Unable to agree amongst themselves upon the direction or the focus of the movement, they were hardly in a position to win over others.

As the 1970s ended, the Evangelical Left also adopted, after much soul-searching, an opposition to abortion—or as its leaders put it, a "completely pro-life" ethic consistent with their peace and antinuclear activity (p. 245). This issue would complicate their relationship to more secular branches of the Left. The contrast to conservative Christians is clear. One significant reason why the Christian Right achieved such success was its ability to work with other groups and fruitfully collaborate with neoconservatives, Sagebrush rebels, and antitax monomaniacs. They happily mobilized, went to the polls, and became part of the Republican coalition that defined the 1980s and 1990s. Reagan, Swartz writes incisively, "did not offer greater piety. But he did offer greater spoils" (p. 231). The Evangelical Left, prioritizing authenticity and identity much like other left-wing organizations of its time, was not willing to commit to partisanship. Its members often held Democrats in contempt as the Democratic Party grew more hospitable to abortion rights and steered away from the War on Poverty toward a suburb-friendly "Third Way."

Swartz's case for the relevance of these Christian leftists might have been stronger if he spent more time laying out their importance to the present day. Young evangelicals, in increasing numbers, feel as though their parents' heroes in the Moral Majority have served them poorly. Many evangelical critics of the Religious Right—Shane Claiborne, Donald Miller, Rachel Held Evans—are now major players in the conversation, and each owes a great debt to the progressive trailblazers from the Nixon era. But on the whole, Swartz uses his epilogue to give rather uninteresting updates on the lives of the Evangelical Left's major players. This was a lost opportunity to connect the generational

dots and to demonstrate how his subjects remained relevant even as they lost the larger battle for the evangelical conscience.

Moral Minority contains few mistakes of either fact or interpretation, but those that remain usually come to light when Swartz addresses national politics. He is at times unduly unkind to the Democratic Party. Swartz characterizes the Democrats' sympathies during the 1970s as "cultural libertinism" (p. 219), absurdly radicalizing what others might call important developments in establishing voices for women and gay Americans in politics. Robert Casey is listed as an anti-abortion senator who was denied a speaking role at the Democrats' 1992 convention; he was in fact the governor of Pennsylvania at the time (p. 251). (Casey's son, also named Robert, would become senator many years later, the probable source of the confusion.) More problematically, Swartz assumes that Democrats such as Joe Biden, Al Gore, and Dick Gephardt moderated their opposition to abortion in the 1980s "under party pressure," an unfair extrapolation of an agonizingly complex matter of public morality and personal liberty (p. 221).

With respect to organization, Swartz's decision to spend most chapters focusing on one major figure usually works. Oregon senator Mark Hatfield stands in for evangelicals in electoral politics, Latin American theologian Samuel Escobar represents the movement's transnational aspirations. Fred Alexander, editor of *The Other Side*, an evangelical social justice magazine, is used to demonstrate how the civil rights struggles of the 1960s attracted a small number of white evangelicals. (Indeed, when one reads this chapter, one is struck by how rarely white evangelicals play any positive role in most civil rights narratives.) Compared to his lovingly researched but exhaustive and sometimes unwieldy dissertation on this movement, Swartz's schema allows for a much clearer and reader-friendly tour through the Evangelical Left. Only on a few occasions does this strategy fail Swartz, most notably in chapter five, where an attempt to grapple with spiritual communities and the Christian World Liberation Front meanders badly from "Jesus freaks" in southern California to early activity by Francis Schaeffer in Switzerland.

These are, however, relatively small flaws in what is otherwise a very impressive piece of history. This book will fundamentally challenge its readers' perception of evangelical political action in the last forty years. Indeed, Swartz's book deserves to be placed alongside those of Mark Noll, the evangelical historian so highly regarded by Stephens and Giberson. He writes in clear, lucid prose, with a special gift for explaining what would, in maladroit hands, seem like obscurantist theological concepts. It is to be hoped that this work will serve as a starting point for further inquiry in evangelical history, especially scholarship challenging assumptions of standard-issue conservatism.

Collectively, these books are the products of historians dissatisfied with, and embarrassed by, the latest televised gaffe by Pat Robertson, or yet another

anti-Islamic remark by Franklin Graham, blighting the evangelical reputation. But they also explain why voices that challenge evangelical hegemony, whether the Nobel Prize-winning scientists in *Anointed* or the peace activists of *Moral Minority*, fight an uphill battle for public recognition. For at the heart of both of these books is the dispiriting reality of two very different Americas, a sacred and a secular, holding one another in contempt. Although these books imply hope for a more meaningful dialogue between evangelicals and the wider academic and lay public, both concede the breadth of the chasm separating them. One is left wondering, like Tertullian, precisely what Athens and Jerusalem can say to one another.

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