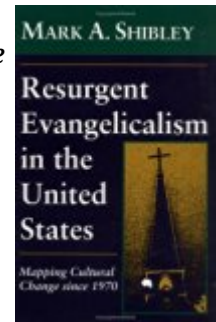


Mark Shibley. *Resurgent Evangelicalism in the United States: Mapping Cultural Change Since 1970.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996. x + 156 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-106-9.



Reviewed by Robert E. Weir

Published on H-PCAACA (November, 1997)

Recent massings of Promise Keepers have rekindled discussions of evangelical Christianity. In the popular mind, evangelicalism evokes the likes of Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, and Jerry Falwell, men who massage the media while mixing God and right-wing politics. Toss in Biblical inerrancy, family values rhetoric, patriarchy, veiled racism, and a location south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and the picture is complete. Loyola University Chicago sociologist Mark Shibley finds a lot wrong with this picture. He deftly separates fact from fiction, and rhetoric from practice and concludes that the evangelical world is far more diverse than is usually appreciated. Forget the South, he argues, and think California. Far from being a bastion of big-haired Stepford Wives and pompadored male Bible Belters, a typical evangelical service more resembles a carefully orchestrated Promise Keepers rally.

Shibley concedes that Southern-style evangelicalism often conforms to popular stereotype. He traces this to the Second Great Awakening's challenge to constituted authority. Although Shibley could have developed more fully the ways in

which white and black religious expressions cross fertilized, he ably describes the decoupling of Caucasian and African-American agendas. The Civil War made evangelicalism the religion of the "Lost Cause" (14) and the solace of a defeated Confederacy. As modernist forces gathered in the early 20th century, evangelicalism proved useful to opponents of ascendant secularism.

The Dust Bowl and war industry opportunities fueled a Southern exodus, but not necessarily a repudiation of long-held values. In essence, Southerners transported Southern culture and Southern religion to new homes. For Shibley, this raises the first of many red flags. Working from a thorough statistical base, he demonstrates that Southern out-migration was greater than the growth of evangelicalism, suggesting that not all Southerners retained their culture.

Then why do evangelical churches now outnumber mainline Protestant congregations? Shibley turns to participant observation sociology to paint a different portrait of evangelicalism. Baptist and Pentecostal churches in California that preserve a Southern preaching style and its ag-

gressive assault on popular culture are ill-adapted to the pluralist population of the Golden State. Several churches visited by Shibley have suffered a 93 percent decline in membership between 1975-1990, leaving them with graying Southern-born congregations and shrinking treasuries.

They stand in marked contrast to evangelical churches who filter conservative theology through popular culture media. Such churches are growing rapidly, the pews filled with new converts who were weaned on television, rock music, and the language the street. Moreover, these evangelicals tend to be morally conservative, but socially liberal.

In 1976, Ernst Troelstch argued that churches that adapted to pluralism would survive; those that resisted would decline. California-style evangelicalism validates his claim. In an incisive chapter entitled "Jesus Rocks," Shibley notes that modern evangelical services often look "more like a rock concert than a religious gathering" (94). He also challenges the idea that adherents are poorly educated, economically marginalized Baby Boomers. The congregations he observed were well-heeled: 22 percent held college degrees, and 83 percent were under 40. Moreover, they were surprisingly tolerant on issues like divorce, drinking, abortion, and homosexuality, with a large number of them having come from "fallen" backgrounds before conversion. The much-ballyhooed "family values" debate is of little interest to this group, and on issues such as race relations and class injustice they lean to the left politically.

Shibley's detailed data reveal that not all evangelicals are the conservative spawn of Reaganism. In fact, Shibley substantiates a long-neglected Richard Niebuhr thesis that one's denominational choices tend to have more to do with one's status, than ideological or theological predisposition. Shibley notes that those who "lack social ties and encounter crisis" are most likely to join an evangelical church, irrespective of their socioeconomic status (127). Given that personal need is

as powerful as tradition, it makes sense that evangelicalism is "giving up southernness" and embracing diversity. What is on the rise is not the Bible Belt church of popular stereotype, rather "liberal" evangelicalism and the very popular culture so deplored by old-style evangelicals (134). Shibley predicts this will have the ironic effect of convergence: evangelicals, like mainline Protestants, will find religion increasingly "less relevant...in public life" (136).

Shibley provides a nuanced counter to evangelical stereotypes. Indeed, those of us not inclined to such theology might be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief. There is, however, a disquieting omission that prevents me from doing so with gusto--Shibley's (non) treatment of politics. Though I agree that conservative theology need not presume conservative politics, I cannot dismiss the studies linking the New Right with evangelicals. It may well be the latter hold liberal private views, but it does not negate conservative voting patterns. By reducing social issues to the personal level, Shibley undervalues their institutional political context. Who, one wonders, votes for anti-gay ballot initiatives or provisos to cut off welfare to legal immigrants?

Shibley also needs to pay more attention to long-term trends when he locates modern evangelicalism in an historical continuum. "Americanized" evangelicalism currently eschews politics for moral suasion, but this is no imperative for future apoliticism, if the past is any indication. One need only remember the xenophobia of Josiah Strong, the anti-radical ravings of Billy Sunday, or the strong-arm pressure politics of the Moral Majority. Shibley notes that evangelicalism tends towards cyclical history. I would add, so too does its flirtation with politics. Many analysts are unconvinced by the stated nonpartisanship of groups like Promise Keepers. I'm equally leery of the churches Shibley describes.

These caveats aside, Professor Shibley has made a valuable contribution to our understand-

ing of how evangelical churches look, recruit, preach, teach, and operate. Though one can quibble over the implications of his study, his is a wonderful description of how evangelicalism has fared in the past quarter century. The text is readable and provocative, and would be quite suitable for undergraduate students in sociology, religious studies, or American studies. Shibley is to be commended for testing assumptions rather than repeating them.

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Citation: Robert E. Weir. Review of Shibley, Mark. *Resurgent Evangelicalism in the United States: Mapping Cultural Change Since 1970*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

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