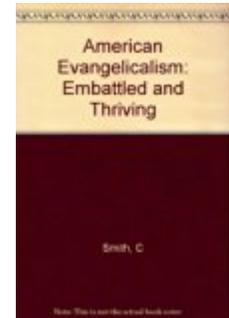




Christian Smith. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xiii + 310 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-76418-4.



Reviewed by Malcolm Magee

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Christian Smith, working with Michael Emerson, Sally Gallagher, Paul Kennedy and David Sikkink, has produced an exceptionally insightful analysis of the current state of American evangelicalism. Basing his findings on a three year study of evangelicals and other religious (and non-religious) respondents, Smith provides evidence that evangelicalism is thriving as it interacts with modern American society. Far from weakening and fading away in the face of modernity, as some have theorized, evangelicalism has derived its strength directly from its interaction with modern society. Modern society has strengthened evangelical groups, yet this has not been the result of uncritical adaptation by evangelicals to modern social norms. Indeed, evangelicals have responded to modern challenges by constructing strong sub-(and in some cases, counter-) cultural communities as a means of differentiating themselves from modernity.

Smith begins the book with a brief historic overview of evangelicals in America. The high point for evangelicals was the nineteenth century when "...Christian rhetoric, values, and morals

hegemonically permeated public discourse, shaping the focus, content, and limits of imaginable popular debate" (p. 4). From this period, Smith traces the decline of evangelicalism's cultural dominance. This decline was the result of several factors, including such things as the rise of liberal theology, the secularization of academic institutions, the urbanization of rural America, and a decline of emphasis on conversion. Of particular interest to Smith is how mainstream evangelicals responded to this decline. Some gave up and joined the liberals, some chose to ride out the storm, but a significant group reacted strongly to this decline and became the fundamentalist backlash within the American church. It was in 1942 that a group of younger fundamentalists, including such individuals as Billy Graham, who had grown weary of their own tradition, met in St. Louis to attempt to revive evangelicalism. To this end they formed the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The NAE moderated many of the fundamentalist positions and opened their organization to non-fundamentalist groups. The emphasis on unity reflected the times and mirrored the ecumenical movements of moderate and lib-

eral Christian groups. Most significantly for this study, however, the new group began a movement which could be distinguished as evangelical and which was separate from conservative fundamentalism.

Smith addresses the problem presented when researchers attempt to determine the strength of a religious movement. Conceding that there is no one correct method to determine strength, and that all methods are problematic when applied generally, Smith settles on a set of criteria for this study that seems to work. Having established that the focus of the study is on the strength of "ordinary" evangelicals, rather than church leadership or organization, Smith offers six criteria for determining strength: adherence to essential Christian beliefs, the importance of faith to personal life, confidence in belief, regularity of participation, commitment to action in order to accomplish church vision, and membership retention rates of the groups studied.

Based upon the six markers established for the study, evangelical strength compares favorably to fundamentalists, mainline churches, liberals and Catholics. The study at this point is quite instructive, including charts, survey summaries and question samples. At the same time, it is this point in the study that Smith's conclusions pose problems. The standards which are being used as a determination of strength work well with evangelicals but they also seem to favor evangelicals over other groups. Questions arise, in particular, when comparing evangelicals with Catholics in regard to strength. Does regularity of participation, for instance, adequately measure Catholic strength? Smith also includes non-religious in his study. The standard of strength used for evangelicals might indicate a weakness of conviction when applied to non-religious. The conclusions also cause the reader to wonder why this great strength has not been more evident in previous studies. Smith devotes Chapter Seven to addressing this last concern.

In Chapter Three, Smith challenges a number of previously accepted theories. Taking them one at a time he challenges the assumptions of 1) the sheltered enclave theory (Peter Berger, James Davidson Hunter), 2) status discontent theory (Richard Hofstadter, Joseph Gusfield), 3) strictness theory (Dean Kelly, Laurence Iannaccone), and 4) competitive marketing theory (Roger Finke, Rodney Stark) as paradigms for assessing the "why" of religious strength. Showing that all four theories are contradicted in some way by the findings of his research, Smith argues for a new paradigm which he calls the "subcultural identity theory" of religious strength. Briefly stated, the subcultural identity theory is based on several propositions which Smith has derived from the survey. Human drives for meaning are satisfied primarily by location within social groups that sustain distinctive collective identities. Social groups construct collective identities by drawing boundaries between themselves and outgroups. Religious traditions have always renegotiated their identities by reformulating their orthodoxies to engage the environments they face. Modern believers establish stronger identities through choice than those who derive their identity through ascription. Antagonism toward outgroups perceived as dissimilar and antagonistic make these identities stronger. Groups thus form subcultures, something which modern pluralism promotes. The ensuing conflict in the pluralistic context strengthens group identity. Thus modernism actually increases the appeal of religion by creating social conditions which intensify the felt needs which religion satisfies: "In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural" (p. 118). Evangelicalism is exactly this kind of religious group.

Rather than deriving its strength from distance, protection from, or accommodation with

modern society, Smith contends that evangelicalism derives its strength through difference, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat. Modern society, he argues, is good for evangelicals. Smith illustrates his argument with statements from the respondents in his surveys. These are also used to show how competing categories work themselves out in the thinking of ordinary evangelicals. An example is the contrasting of evangelicals' views of their own moral superiority with their feeling of second class citizenship. Evangelicals' feeling of moral superiority is couched in the language of pragmatism: Christian morals simply work better. In spite of this, evangelicals feel that society has rejected their, obviously superior, way of life in favor of lifestyles that are both immoral and unworkable. As a result of this rejection, evangelicals no longer feel welcome in the public square. Here evangelicals echo the sentiments expressed by some religious liberals such as Stephen Carter. This may explain, in part, the popular reception among evangelicals of Carter's book, *The Culture Of Disbelief*.

Finally, Smith addresses the question raised by his assertions that evangelicalism is being strengthened by modern society. If evangelicals are so strong then why have they had so little success in accomplishing their mission to save the world? In Chapter Seven, Smith argues that the very factors that foster strong ingroup identity inhibit cultural influence. To begin with, very few people outside evangelical circles recognize any difference between evangelicalism, and the very different fundamentalism. The inner focus of evangelicalism as well as the battles they have chosen to fight have wedded them in the minds of outsiders with fundamentalism. The very things that evangelicals view as their strengths are in fact viewed by outsiders as their weaknesses. For example, the evangelical sense of moral rightness is viewed by non evangelicals as narrow, rigid, and judgmental. Another weakness is what Smith calls voluntary absolutism. Voluntary absolutism is the intellectual tension which arises among

evangelicals when they state that Christian standards are absolute and should be the law of the land, while at the same time holding that one cannot legislate morality, asserting that individuals should voluntarily follow these absolutes. Smith uses some very revealing contradictory quotations from the same survey to highlight the impossibility of this position and how it undermines social action. The biggest obstacle to evangelicals' stated desire to transform the world for Christ is the centrality of the individual in evangelical thinking. The strength of the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s was the recognition of what Reinhold Niebuhr called institutional evil. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr proposed that individuals can be personally moral and yet serve immoral ends through participation in immoral social institutions. Evangelicals tend to reject this notion, believing instead that if they get enough individuals converted to Christ the institutions will automatically change. Thus there are few great calls for evangelicals to engage in social activism other than indirectly through evangelism, and when such calls do come they usually cluster around issues of personal morality like abortion or sexuality. Evangelicals are hesitant to champion institutional change, preferring to work within established structures. Thus, evangelicals become supporters of the status quo and cannot turn their considerable internal strength into external social influence.

Overall, Smith presents an insightful examination of modern evangelicalism. Smith's definition of what constitutes an evangelical may be a bit narrow. Many of those within organizations he categorizes as "mainline denominations" would also consider themselves evangelical. The study might look different if they were included as evangelicals. However this book provides helpful new material for the study of American religion. The "subcultural identity theory" developed by Smith may prove to be a useful tool in future sociological studies. Smith concludes that Evangelicalism will continue to thrive for the foreseeable fu-

ture, but that it will never be able to achieve cultural dominance. Evangelicals are destined to be a thriving subcultural group with a longing for greater influence, a longing which will continue to elude them--always at the party, never asked to dance.

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