

Sam Reimer. *Evangelicals and the Continental Divide: The Conservative Protestant Subculture in Canada and the United States.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. 256 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-2624-2.



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In the past year, Canadians and Americans both heard a good deal about mixing politics and religion. South of the border, commentary consistently pointed out the salience of conservative Christian groups in deciding elections. North of the border, the last election campaign rang with insinuations that Canada was in danger of following that lead. Whether they liked it or not, conservative evangelical Christians in Canada and the United States were in the news.

Sam Reimer's comparative study of those two groups, then, is a timely one. In *Evangelicals and the Continental Divide: The Conservative Protestant Subculture in Canada and the United States*, Reimer explores the similarities and differences among a small number of committed evangelical Christians in the two countries. "This book is not the first analysis of evangelicalism in the U.S. or in Canada," he aptly states, "but it is the first sociological comparison of the two" (p. 152). As such, it fills a rather large void in the scholarly literature.

Given the varied ways in which the term "evangelical" might be used, some terminological clarity might be in order. Evangelical Christians,

as most often defined, can be recognized by their most important convictions. They believe that Jesus Christ is divine, and that through his death and resurrection, he has become the only savior of humanity and the gateway to eternal life. People can obtain eternal life by establishing a close relationship with Jesus, and can come to know Jesus through the study of the Bible, a book regarded by evangelicals as the uniquely inspired and authoritative word of God. Also important to evangelicals is "evangelization," or the effort to convince others to be evangelical Christians, too.

Evangelicals and the Continental Divide is interested in what characterizes evangelical Protestant Christianity at its core, in the distinctiveness of evangelical Christians in their cultural environments, and in the influence of broader cultures on evangelicalism. Reimer's conclusions are significant. "The institutions and commodities of evangelicalism provide an adequate base to maintain a distinctive subculture that spans national boundaries," he argues (p. 6). "Evangelicals, particularly active evangelicals, in both countries resemble each other far more than they resemble their fel-

low countrymen" (p. 6). At the same time, however, less significant but still important distinctions remain. Canadian and American evangelicals differ with regards to political attitudes. There is a greater level of tolerance and civility among Canadians and greater incongruity between belief and practice in the United States. And the two national groups differ in their most prominent national concerns.

While this study is well grounded in secondary historical and sociological literatures, its contribution rests in data collected by Reimer through personal interviews and written surveys. Wanting to examine in-depth the similarities and differences between Canadian and American evangelical subcultures, Reimer chose not to attempt a nationally representative study. Instead, he carefully selected a limited number of subjects to ensure lengthy interviews with only those deeply committed to the evangelical subculture. At the same time, he tried to isolate potential regional and national variations among his respondents by eliminating as many other potential differences as possible.

His methodology is crucial to the study. First, Reimer selected four cities in key regions of Canada and the United States where data would be collected. Minneapolis, Minnesota and Winnipeg, Manitoba were chosen for their many striking similarities. Jackson, Mississippi and Saint John/Moncton, New Brunswick, though very different locales, were chosen because of their locations within the respective conservative Protestant heartlands of the United States and Canada. Reimer then chose similar or related denominations to investigate in each location: Baptists in New Brunswick and Mississippi, for example, and Mennonite Brethren and Lutherans in the West. Approaching the centralized organizations of those denominations in each location, he requested information about local congregations. Based on that information, he approached the senior pastor of the largest local church in each denomi-

nation, as well as a few other local pastors. In this manner, a total of thirty-eight pastors were interviewed. Sixteen of that number were asked to recommend for interviews five of the most active members of their congregations, each conforming to certain demographic qualifications. Finally, Reimer distributed written surveys to adult Sunday School classes or to attenders at Sunday evening services in the same sixteen congregations. All told 118 "core" or committed evangelicals were interviewed, and 286 surveys collected.

Throughout *Evangelicals and the Continental Divide*, Reimer's own results are carefully placed in context with other survey data (the 1996 "God and Society in North America" survey is particularly important to this study), with the broader literature examining North American evangelicals, and with comparative studies of Canada and the United States. After a careful and thorough introduction to the book, chapter 2 examines the most influential and popular arguments for national and regional differences within North American evangelicalism. Reimer subjects the common arguments to close scrutiny from the perspective of globalization and new institutionalism theories, as well as with evidence for a distinct transnational evangelical subculture.

In chapters 3 through 6, Reimer makes it clear that similarities, not differences, dominate his results. Chapter 3 focuses on understanding evangelical identity and sub-cultural boundaries, and argues for a number of important common characteristics shared by all of his interviewees and respondents. Chapter 4 concentrates, in particular, on the shared significance of religious experience within North American evangelicalism. In chapter 5, Reimer argues for a common orthodoxy, or set of beliefs and values, held by core evangelicals in both Canada and the United States. Those beliefs and values, he argues, are not waning in the face of more liberal surrounding cultures. Some, such as the evangelical position on gay marriage, have been so vociferously defended

precisely because they have been chosen as the border-marking issue upon which the distinctive identity of the community rests. In chapter 6, Reimer examines the practice and commitment of North American core evangelicals, again arguing for striking commonalities across national or regional lines. Only in chapter 7 does he finally change his focus from similarity to difference. While the former is more striking than the latter, he argues, significant differences in political attitudes, levels of irenicism, and national concerns cannot be ignored.

To Reimer's great credit, *Evangelicals and the Continental Divide* is a model of clear argumentation and methodological transparency. While not all of us are comfortable with the language of "logistic regression," Reimer distills his hard-won data into well-explained tables and easily understood conclusions. He also deals with the most important elements of the book—his methodology and the difficulty of comparative analyses—in a bold and candid manner. Finally, he presents his findings not as abstract concepts or numbers, but as the deeply held convictions, life-defining experiences, and sometimes confused actions and ideas of people. The study is marked by empathy and understanding.

Equally to his credit, Reimer raises some excellent questions. His analysis of the evangelical subculture in the light of "new institutionalism" theory, for example, seems full of potential. Evangelical institutions, he convincingly argues, have adapted themselves to the recognized "organizational field" to which they belong. Following the broader norms of evangelicalism, they find, "gives a church added legitimacy and stability and increases its chances of growth" (p. 158). Reimer is content here to note the broadest of such shared norms, particularly in the realm of evangelical theology and experience. One wonders, however, if his interviews might have provided the opportunity to examine more carefully the existence of more specific norms, perhaps in rhetoric (the use

of "born again," for example), or in the rapidly growing field of liturgical music.

Following similar lines, Reimer's key findings of broad theological agreement and differing political attitudes, levels of irenicism, and national concerns among North American evangelicals are important, serving as confirmation of the results of the nationally representative "God and Society in North America" survey of 1996. His more in-depth interview approach might have gone beyond those conclusions, however, to discuss levels of agreement among North American evangelicals on less explored issues such as the role of women in religious institutions, or the interpretation of radical supernatural experiences, or approaches to suffering, or beliefs about the relationship between spiritual commitment and material wealth.

Though a careful and detailed study, the book might be critiqued on two particular issues, one a matter of emphasis, the other of methodology. With regards to the first, Reimer's well-chosen focus on national or regional differences might have led him to place too much importance on the existence of a broadly defined North American evangelical subculture, and not enough importance on the fracture lines, perhaps neither regional or national, which run through that subculture. *Evangelicals and the Continental Divide* argues that similarities between core evangelicals in Canada and the United States are greater than their differences, an important point that is hard to dispute when one compares those core evangelicals, as Reimer does, with non-evangelicals outside of their subculture. (To some extent, that is not unlike comparing Orthodox Jews in Canada with non-Jewish Canadians, and then with Orthodox Jews in the United States.) It should not be overlooked, however, as Reimer himself points out, that his respondents commonly saw greater differences between themselves and evangelicals of other congregations, denominations, or regions, than did Reimer himself. Assuming the broad commonalities between them, perhaps,

they paid greater attention to the kinds of differences that "outsiders" might deem insignificant, but that "insiders" might deem vital for boundary keeping *within* the subculture.

Equally important, it should be noted that the differences between Canadian and American evangelicals, which Reimer saves for the last chapter, are crucial for an understanding of the present political context in each country. Canadian evangelicals, Reimer notes, are less willing than their American counterparts to use political issues and attitudes to distinguish themselves from others, and are also often uncomfortable with the heated religious rhetoric sometimes used south of the border. They are more irenic or accommodating than American evangelicals, he suggests, not least of all because they are a much smaller percentage of the national population, and must therefore rely more on cooperation and goodwill to survive. While they share basic religious belief systems, then, Canadian and American evangelicals think and act differently in very different political worlds.

Finally, while Reimer makes it clear that he chose his methodology with great care and consideration, that methodology might have shaped his results in one unforeseen and potentially significant way. In planning his study, Reimer deliberately traded national representation for focused interviews with committed members of the evangelical subculture. Therein lies the significance of the book. His means of selecting interviewees, however, may have compromised the objectivity of some of his results. Reimer, after all, permitted the denominational leadership to inform which congregations he would study, and to direct which individuals within those congregations he would interview. One can only expect that pastors of evangelical churches, when given the opportunity, would select parishioners for interviews who they felt would best represent their community to the academic, inquisitive sociologist. Not surprisingly, Reimer finds little evidence of outright

racism amongst his respondents in Mississippi, or of anti-French sentiment in New Brunswick. Not surprisingly as well, Reimer notes that respondents were generally careful, if not downright vague, in their comments on one of the most criticized elements of the evangelical subculture--its emphasis on evangelism, or, in harsher language, proselytization. "Evangelicals in all regions," he writes, "preferred more holistic or civil approaches to evangelism and societal betterment" (p. 111). If, as others have done, Reimer had selected his interviewees independently of denominational and congregational leaders, one wonders if his data would have been less uniform, and perhaps less accommodating to broader national cultures.

With interest in North American evangelical subcultures apparently on the rise, *Evangelicals and the Continental Divide* is a timely, innovative and accessible study that might help further understanding where there is often more heat than light. Reimer effectively reveals what lies at the heart of a strong, well-defined, cross-border evangelical subculture in North America. Though in more muted tones, he also notes significant differences between, among other things, the political cultures of Canadian and American evangelicals. More detailed studies await, but we might beware: shared theologies do not necessarily translate into similar political structures, political values, or votes.

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