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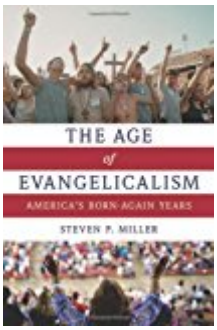
Steven P. Miller. *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years.* New York: Oxford University Press, viii + 221 pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-977795-2.



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In recent years, a number of historians of American religion have examined the effects of evangelicalism on contemporary American society, impacts as widely felt and skilfully documented as suburbanization and the rise of the "service economy." Although Steven P. Miller's *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* integrates many aspects of these stories into an accessible and enjoyable volume, his work's greater contribution is following these various lines of inquiry to their single, logical conclusion: evangelicalism, though often portrayed as either a budding or a besieged subculture, in truth sits "at the very center of recent American history" (p. 7).

Miller, in his introduction, identifies three insightful yet incomplete narratives about evangelicalism and sets out to reconcile them. One popular argument, he writes, has traced evangelicalism's supposed ascendance from the disastrous Scopes Monkey Trial to more recent triumphs, emphasizing the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the so-called Year of the Evangelical four years prior. Another approach has focused on explaining the evangelical mindset to a presumably skeptical or even hostile readership, presenting it as worthy of scholarly consideration yet still viewing it as in some way deviant from the American mainstream. The most recent interpretation, which peaked in popularity during the presidency of George W. Bush, has portrayed evangelicalism as a singular source of grave danger to many cherished American values. Although he does not cast aside any of these models outright, Miller does set his sights on moving the historiographical conversation beyond this current impasse. What each of these narratives misses about evangelicalism, he contends, is that its reach, its significance, its importance, have always extended beyond evangelicals themselves. By identifying its strengths and its limitations, by incorporating the perspectives of its adherents as well as its detractors, and by including its cultural artifacts along with its political manifestations, we can begin to grasp the extent to which evangelicalism--which Miller defines as the "public expression of born-

again Christianity" (p. 4)--profoundly transformed the United States over the last forty years.

Chapter 1 illustrates how the late-1970s cultural fascination with all things evangelical, often seen as a byproduct of Jimmy Carter's election, was in reality a well-established fact of life before 1976. Events like Honor America Day and the Watergate scandal had also begun to motivate evangelical politicos like Illinois congressman John Anderson, who claimed that "the lesson of Watergate … is that we cannot afford to be silent and passive when our political life is threatened by political opportunists" (p. 13). Yet, as Miller's second chapter shows, evangelical politics were just as complicated as their mainline and secular counterparts, and the eventual preeminence of the movement's right wing was hardly predestined. Notably, Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter successfully presented himself to evangelicals as a man of sincere faith. But Carter's deference to Supreme Court decisions on abortion and sanctioned prayer in public schools rankled socially conservative voters, including the self-styled "Moral Majority," which--rather than Carter's personal piety--would come to define "public impressions of born-again Christianity for the coming generation" (p. 58).

The 1980 election season proved to be a springboard for right-leaning evangelicals, and chapters 3 and 4 show their leaders coming to grips with a larger stake in the governing enterprise. Whether or not socially conservative evangelicals' support was critical to Ronald Reagan's election in 1980--and number-crunchers' analysis indicates that it was not--public faith in the kingmaking ability of televangelists like Jerry Falwell soared to new heights. As journalist Tina Rosenberg wrote in the aftermath of the election, "What's described as powerful often ends up being powerful" (p. 64). The marriage between Reagan and the Christian Right did have its share of issues, and the near-constant media attention focused on evangelical leaders gave them plenty of opportunities for political pratfalls. Even so, over the next two decades, evangelicalism's salience gave figures like theologian Richard John Neuhaus and sociologist James Davison Hunter the ability to set the terms of a renewed debate over faith and the public life, and the proliferation of megachurches and contemporary Christian music demonstrated that evangelicalism still retained a great deal of cultural sway.

Too, as Miller's final two chapters demonstrate, evangelicalism was as relevant politically in the early 2000s as it had ever been. The presidency of bona fide born-again George W. Bush had a religious cast of characters exceeding that of any of his predecessors, and his cousin, John Ellis, famously claimed, "I always laugh when people say George W. is saying this or that to appease the religious right…. He *is* the religious right" (p. 127). Conventional wisdom held that Bush's successful reelection bid in 2004 was largely the result of the support of "values voters," a stand-in term for conservative evangelicals. The run-up to the 2008 election season, conversely, saw a resurgence of the evangelical Left in response to the candidacy of Barack Obama. Whereas Bush explicitly ran as an evangelical, Obama chose a different path: "as Ronald Reagan had done in 1980, Obama was asking an evangelical audience to join a new coalition" (p. 145).

For brevity's sake, I have focused primarily on the political side of ***The Age of Evangelicalism*** in this review, tracing the waxing and waning of the movement on the national stage. But one of the greatest strengths of Miller's work is his deft handling of evangelical cultural sources, such as Tim LaHaye's and Jerry B. Jenkins's ***Left Behind*** books, the ***VeggieTales*** cartoon series, and all points in between. Historians will also appreciate that Miller delves into the writings of figures like Mark Noll and George Marsden, placing them in context both as scholars and as examples of "thoughtful evangelicalism" (p. 97). Although in less capable hands the presence of both political

and cultural narratives might have seemed disjointed, Miller clearly demonstrates why their dual inclusion is crucial: if, after all, evangelicalism profoundly shaped the course of recent American elections and entertainments, to say nothing of the innumerable impacts described by other scholars, then it stands to reason that it was not merely a subculture, but--for better or for worse--a culture unto itself.