REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI RENDU

Evangelicals, Democracy and Values in America[1]

Steven Brint and Jean Reith Schroedel, eds., *Evangelicals and Democracy in America, Volume I: Religion and Society*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009, 373 pp. $US 49.95 hardcover (978-0-87154-067-6).

Steven Brint and Jean Reith Schroedel, eds., *Evangelicals and Democracy in America, Volume II: Religion and Politics*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009, 373 pp. $US 49.95 hardcover (978-0-87154-068-3).

Brint and Schroedel's two volume series is, quite simply, an outstanding exploration of America's conservative Protestants and their interaction with democratic politics. The twenty-two essays are the work of sixteen sociologists, ten political scientists, a psychologist and a religious studies professor. Many have spent their careers studying religion and will be well known to students of the topic. The essays tackle a wide range of issues: social movement theory, survey data on values and voting, historical development, the implications of partisan involvement, race, and much more. Space constraints will limit my review to two key themes that emerge in these essays: the entwinement of evangelicals and American politics, and evangelical values.

THE MARRIAGE OF EVANGELICALS AND AMERICAN POLITICS

One major theme emerging from the essays is how well evangelicalism fuses with American politics. Rhys Williams posits three characteristics that lie at the heart of this alliance. First, while evangelicalism's individid-

1. I use the terms "evangelical"and "conservative Protestant" interchangeably here despite their differences, as distinguishing how each author circumscribes the group they are studying would be tedious.

ualism is well known, a corporatist dimension employs covenant metaphors to link with notions of American destiny and nationalism. Second, American evangelicalism's sectarianism provides the conceptual apparatus for making stark us/them distinctions which dovetail with the needs of politics. Lastly, American evangelicalism's populism lends itself to democratic mobilization (II, pp. 153–8). Willams's argument provides a frame for insights from other contributors. D. Michael Lindsay, for example, concurs that evangelicalism's political talent stems from its populism and boundary-creating capacities. He adds, however, his concept of *elastic orthodoxy,* which describes evangelicals' ability to build bridges with other groups while maintaining their core beliefs (II, p. 307). This talent, Lindsay suggests, distinguishes them from fundamentalists (a distinction noted by Christian Smith and others) and, more importantly, has allowed them to be the linchpin in a powerful religious-political coalition that John Green labels, in his chapter, the "Traditionalist Alliance" (all white evangelicals plus weekly attenders of other faiths) (I, pp. 118-9).

Lindsay's elastic orthodoxy is on brilliant display in Philip Gorski's chapter (though Gorski does not cite the concept). Gorski shows how evangelical framing has developed bridgeheads to other conservative frames: evangelical covenant language emphasizing American exceptionalism and national greatness fits well with neoconservative militarism and unilateralism; emphasizing individual morality as the solution to moral problems fits with free market ideology and antistatist impulses; ties with secular and Catholic "values conservatives" are achieved seamlessly via a natural law outlook emphasizing moral absolutes; and evangelical discourse links with a Jeffersonian vision of good America that pits small towns, the Midwest and the South against opponents who are not only secular but — even worse — secular "elites" (I, p. 79).

Evangelicalism's political strength stems from more than its useful conceptual apparatus however. Key institutions, above all the congregation, also play a role. Nancy Ammerman contends that evangelical congregations are "communities of political discourse" in a way that Catholic parishes are not (I, p. 64). The voluntarist nature of evangelical congregations leads to greater political homogeneity as political attributes become one of the "signals" that churchgoers look for when congregation shopping (I, p. 67 n. 23). Hence, whereas Catholic prolife activists cannot use parishes as bases of political activity because abortion is too divisive, in evangelical congregations political discourse may be espoused in sermons, Bible-study groups and even the casual conversation of pot-lucks (I, pp. 59, 64). The same point emerges in John Evan's description of mainline Protestants churches, which are also afraid of

raising contentious political issues due to internal diversity and a Lockean liberalism that values diverse views (I, pp. 235-8).

These congregations are only the start, however, as Ammerman also points to an evangelical penchant for institution-building. She is backed here by Peter Hall and Philip Gorski who, in separate chapters, each note that evangelicals have persistently formed voluntary associations and ecumenical organizations throughout American history to pursue public activism (e.g. abolitionism, temperance). Whereas Alan Wolfe has suggested that the modern political involvement of conservative Protestants is unusual and against their sectarian impulses, Gorski argues that evangelicals are long-time lobbyists who even played a key role in inventing the practice over a century ago (I, p. 92). Lindsay concurs and, reversing Wolfe's argument, claims that the enclave mentality of 1930-70 is the real anomaly (II, pp. 314–5). Such a past helps explain the modern emergence of what Brint and Seth Abrutyn describe as an institutionalized moral-values system with three interlocking tiers: party, social movement organizations, and churches (II, p. 110). In this way, Ammerman's evangelical congregation as community-of-political-discourse provides the bedrock for a political-moral edifice unparalleled by mainline Protestants or Catholics.

All of this paints a compelling picture: sectarian impulses facilitate the creation of us/them frames; covenant theology lays claim to rightful ownership of the nation; populism and activism foster mobilization geared towards reforming society; voluntarism creates politically active evangelical congregations that provide a foundation for the powerful party-movement-church structure; and elastic orthodoxy enables the formation of broad coalitions with Mormons, conservative Catholics and pro-market business interests. The result is evangelicals' disproportionate influence in American politics.

Values? Religion? Or Religious Values?

So what do evangelicals want? Brint and Abrutyn identify three key values that evangelicals prize: religiosity, gender-role traditionalism and moral certainty. Brint and Abrutyn's statistical analysis suggests that of these three, moral certainty may be the most important (II, pp. 112–5). This quantitative study is supported by Julie Ingersoll's historical investigation of the influence on the ideology and rhetoric of the Religious Right by Christian Reconstructionism, an extremist fringe movement within conservative Protestantism. Grounded on notions of God-centred authority, Reconstructionism reframed the meaning of family on au-

thority (rather than, say, reproduction) and attributed social ills, family breakdown, etc. to men not assuming leadership in the home (language echoed today by the Promise Keepers amongst others) (II, pp. 192–5).

A potentially competing claim is offered by W. Bradford Wilcox, who suggests that evangelicalism advocates a "familistic ideology" that imbues the family with "transcendent significance" for "social, emotional and moral life" (I, p. 253). Reconstructionism emphasized authority on many issues besides family life (e.g. radical suggestions for education and law that the Religious Right never adopted), but reading Wilcox reminds us that it was uniquely the family arguments that were taken up. Wilcox's survey data shows that evangelical family life does reflect the call for authority (evangelical men who attend church at least weekly do less housework and are slightly more likely to spank) but also goes beyond this (they also spend more time with and express more affection and appreciation to their wives and kids, and their wives report greater personal and marital happiness). A picture emerges of a desire for manly authority meshing with modernized notions of supportive family life to create what Wilcox has termed "soft patriarchs" (I, p. 268). Puritans these are not. Wilcox's claim that familialism undergirds evangelical life and political activity finds support in key quotations in other chapters (I, 173n19; I, 159). The counter-argument that "authority" underlies all family values rhetoric would still need to address why family issues take precedence (over say, authoritative education) and Wilcox's evidence that familialism embraces more than just authority (e.g. fatherly devotion).

If moral certainty and familialism are dominant views, other authors remind us to attend to conservative Protestantism's diversity. John Evans argues that the cohesiveness of conservative Protestants can be overstated. He shows that while conservative Protestants are more united than mainliners on issues like school prayer, marijuana and abortion, they are more divided on views about women and premarital sex. He makes a now familiar argument that conservative Christian leaders spotlighted in the media often think very differently than the rank and file (I, pp. 237-8). Similarly, Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout show a substantial class divide in party identification amongst conservative Protestants, whose shift to the Republicans over the past forty years was driven by the rich amongst them and somewhat by middle incomers. Poor conservative Protestants did not shift at all. They conclude that conservative Protestants are "more — not less — divided by class issues than other large social groups" including mainline Protestants and Catholics (II, p. 76). They also show that Republican identification was affected by views on abortion, so that by 2008, a forty point gap had opened up

between conservative Protestants with liberal abortion views and those most strongly opposed to abortion (II, p. 72).

Wayne Baker and Connie Boudens argue that "values that cut across groups" are the key drivers of political behaviour rather than religion (echoing Robert Wuthnow's famous argument) (II, p. 85). Their analysis of a Metropolitan Detroit survey shows that being evangelical was not correlated with voting for Bush in 2000 (black evangelicals' penchant for Gore offset white evangelicals' preference for Bush). However, a values scale (which tracked views on abortion, importance of God in one's life, respect for authority, national pride and a preference for teaching obedience and religious faith to children) was positively correlated with voting for Bush, more important than income or church attendance and comparable in influence to race. A conventional view that, in America, religion drives voting but that race trumps religion is here reworked to say that values underpin both factors. Thus, evangelicals vote differently than mainliners for the same reason that black evangelicals vote differently than white evangelicals: due to different values (II, 89–95, 98). In support, Brint and Abrutyn found that controlling for certain values eliminates much of the voting effect of denomination (II, p. 112) while Greeley and Hout find the claim works among Protestants but that Catholics and non-Christians vote differently than Protestants even when they share the same social views (II, 78).

The values versus religion claim is intriguing and warrants continued research but it has shortcomings too. The analyses treat denomination and values as separate variables despite their co-implication. Brint and Abrutyn try to strip away views on the three key values (moral certainty, gender-hierarchy and religiosity) to see what independent impact evangelicalism has. But arguably these values are much of what constitutes an evangelical. Once you subtract a higher degree of religiosity (including attendance, Biblical literalism, etc.), moral certainty, and gender-hierarchy, what is left of "evangelicalism" to measure? Additionally, one must assess *why* these values became central. Michèle Lamont, Paul Lichterman and Prudence Carter suggest in their chapter that surveys of private belief must be bolstered by analyses explaining why certain tools in a culture's repertoire become dominant issues while other possibilities languish. Why has abortion become a key metric for voting, when the Southern Baptist Convention originally issued a statement approving *Roe v. Wade* and evangelicals did not initially pay the decision much attention (see Wilcox, I, p. 253)? Why do blacks disapprove of abortion so strongly, yet vote Democrat?

Attempts to explain why certain values became salient will have to confront the familiar tension between the particular and the general. Sev-

eral chapters emphasize particular, contingent causes, such as Ingersoll's investigation of Reconstructionist influences, and Brint and Abrutyn's contention that the development of an institutionalized moral-values system favoured certain issues over others. Similarly, Clyde Wilcox demonstrates how GOP backing provided a "reproductive advantage" to voices in evangelical culture emphasizing hard binaries (condemning secular elites) and wedge issues (abortion) over less politically useful voices wanting to address poverty (II, 344–8). Contingent causes also fit Peter Hall's claim that a "relatively unchanging set of evangelical beliefs and practices" over the past two centuries "have produced very different kinds of public activism" ranging from progressive to conservative (II, p. 250). Those favouring more general causes will counter that the arguments of Brint and Abrutyn, Clyde Wilcox and Ingersoll do not account for the near global extent of the alliance between conservative religionists and family values. Pippa Norris' essay draws on the World Values Survey to show just how widespread this tendency is. My contrast of particularist and generalist is stylized but it highlights that a satisfying explanation of America's family values politics will likely need to address three issues. First, it will need to acknowledge Hall's historical argument and find contingent reasons why family values have emerged now, whereas evangelical Progressivism once dominated in nineteenth century America. Second, it will need to show that these causes have cross-cultural relevance since family values politics is not limited to America (cue broad issues like capitalism, secularism and the globalized export of cultural battles over gender, sex, etc.). Third, it will need to find contingent causes explaining American exceptionalism from among candidates such as religious nationalism (possibly linked to retention of a masculine form of American Christianity in the face of feminization elsewhere); the dissenting and populist character of its religion; the existence of a strong subculture with critical mass and influence; the absence of a strong welfare state and the security it provides; and possibly substantial Christian immigration.

Looking Forward

Evangelicalism displays enormous strength in America. The subculture is massive: a multibillion dollar publishing industry, over 400 colleges and seminaries, over 100,000 congregations and hundreds of parachurch organizations including family lobby groups that raise more than $200 million annually to promote their views (I, pp. 257-8). Robert Wuthnow observes that this subculture has enabled evangelicalism to successfully

create its own cultural capital (or perhaps subcultural capital) whereby status and recognition are gained by knowing the Bible well, using its idioms, and being active in one's church. The subculture also facilitates the kind of encapsulation that John Green details in two studies which suggest that conservative religionists have fewer social contacts outside their religious tradition (I, p. 125). Such encapsulation is effective at maintaining ideological strength and transferring tradition to one's children.

However, not all is rosy. Numerous authors see tensions in the traditionalist alliance as new issues like poverty and environmentalism sow division. The alliance also weakens when non-cultural issues (e.g. economics, foreign policy) take centre stage, as Kimberly Conger shows in her chapter (II, esp. pp. 289–90). There is also much sectarianism in the alliance and Hall's historical overview showed that evangelical ecumenical work has generally been followed by sectarian squabbles and waning influence, which may be happening now (II, p. 274). As for evangelicalism itself, Ammerman reminds us that its growth has stagnated (I, p. 59) despite gains from immigration, as others have noted.

I think that some modest weakening is occurring and side with Ammerman's claim that conservative Christian separateness is eroding. Lindsay's elastic orthodoxy is a fecund concept but his claim that "Evangelicals' core religious beliefs about God, the Bible, heaven and hell are relatively similar today to … fifty years ago" is only somewhat true (II, p. 307). As J.D. Hunter has shown, views on hell, the devil, and heaven's openness to non-Christians have all shifted dramatically. Views on morals have shifted even more and amongst evangelical youth today, homosexuality is accepted by about half. If the claim by Lindsay and others that social movements need a devil more than a god is true, than as distinctiveness erodes, evangelicals will need to rely on rhetorical distinctions to create the other. Happily for the GOP, there is reason to trust their talent on this front. Additionally, we should note that if the culture is changing evangelicals, surely they have changed the culture. Hall notes that previous evangelical political waves left legacies and this one is likely no different. These would include the polarization of politics and the intensive (even obsessive) attention to candidates' religiosity and certain moral issues. More substantively, W. Bradford Wilcox's familialism might be another. Some survey data suggests the young are more conservative than their parents and even academia has been swinging the pendulum back somewhat from the family critiques of the 1960s and 1970s by stressing the value of family stability for children.

This is an excellent collection and a must have for any student of the subject. There may not be a more informative 700 pages on the historical sociology of American evangelicals for many years to come.

University of Toronto Brian Carwana

Brian Carwana is completing his PhD in Religion on conservative Christian lobby groups in Canada and their interaction with the secular state.
brian.carwana@utoronto.ca