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BOOK REVIEW

Book review editor: David G. Robertson
david.robertson@open.ac.uk

Evangelicalism in America. Randall Balmer. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016. 199pp. ISBN: 1481305972.

Reviewed by: Alex Fry, Durham University. alex.d.fry@durham.ac.uk

The question of the rise and decline of religious expressions globally has received much scholarly attention in recent years, and many note that institutional churches are in decline in the west. Within this social and intellectual milieu Randall Balmer wrote *Evangelicalism in America.* Comprised of a mixture of updated lectures and academic articles, this monograph charts broadly the rise of evangelicalism in the US to (what he understands as) its contemporary turmoil.

Balmer's monograph begins with a helpful preface where the background to the text is explained and useful definitions are provided. In the first chapter, Balmer argues that American Christianity has contributed to the historic and present conservatism of US politics. He claims that the First Amendment to the US Constitution has historically directed political malcontents from the political sphere to the privatised sphere of American religion. He suggests that the multiple options on offer to Christians enable them to partake in a form of church life of their preference and so social discontent is channelled in this direction rather than via politics. In order to demonstrate this, he draws selectively on key historic figures and events in American history, whilst making comparisons with European parallels and divergences. It is these that provide the socio-political-historical context to evidence his argument.

In the second chapter, the history behind anti-intellectual interpretations of the Christian Bible is mapped by tracing their European origins, particularly the impact of Scottish Common Sense Realism, the great awakenings, and the reaction to scholarship from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The third chapter builds on this and explains how literalist understandings of the Bible were coupled with church growth. For example, Balmer notes how Baptists did not require the education of their clergy and so could ordain from within their own structures, rather than be externally reliant on the provision of leaders. This chapter also discusses the social impact of literalist readings. In particular, Balmer notes how millennial interpretations of the New Testament

book of Revelation led to wide spread social justice efforts, whereas post-millennials, believing in the imminent return of Jesus, failed to see the significance of such endeavours.

Chapters four and five tease out some of these themes further. The former accounts matters of social progression at the hands of evangelical movements, particularly those concerning education, feminism, and slavery (as well as noting some of the limitations of these movements). Balmer evidences how this stems from the Second Great Awakening where some Christian leaders began to believe that following the example of Jesus meant more than conversion: it entailed social reform. The latter sets out the impact of literal interpretations of the Bible on evangelicals' relationship to wider US culture. For example, apocalyptic thinking, states Balmer, influenced how they understood their surrounding environment, as well as their marginalisation in mainstream US culture, which was itself a response (in part) to evangelical anti-intellectualism.

Chapter six concerns the employment of a variety of communicative methods in order to promote evangelical rhetoric from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. It explains how evangelicals utilised emerging technology in order to bring their theological and political ideas into public discourse. Balmer sets this within the historical context of the abolition movement and the priority of orality in the American consciousness in order to demonstrate the specific impact that evangelical rhetoric had, and why particular forms of communication were favoured over others.

Chapter seven discusses the evangelical break with history in largely resisting second wave feminism. Balmer explains that by this time industrialisation had led to the division of labour where women tended to remain in the domestic sphere and men became the primary (if not sole) breadwinner, working in urbanised areas. He claims that, in this context, came the religious interpretations of women's domestic role as their first vocation, not least as the primary religious influence on the lives of children.

The eighth chapter discusses how the 'abortion myth' became salient for the religious right. Balmer explains that this occurred when the government ceased to provide tax-exempt status for religious educational institutions that segregated along racial lines. He elaborates that this development moved many evangelicals into protest at the idea of government interference in Christian education, and that President Carter was blamed for these legal sanctions. The writer asserts that the narrative of unwanted government interference in Christian subculture was thus cast, and that it was only a small step to then place blame on Carter and his administration for the immorality of abortion thereafter.

Chapter nine continues this historical development and explains that the emergence of the religious right was connected with evangelical defiance of Carter in the 1970s. Chapter ten continues to deal with gender ideals in the twentieth century. The idea of muscular Christianity, and the Promise Keepers are discussed. In particular, Balmer explains that the development of a

masculine Christianity was juxtaposed alongside resistance to the perceived threat of the feminist movement. As a result, the author posits that traditional gender roles in a familial context were rearticulated in line with sporting and military motifs, in order to encourage men (and boys) to adopt these more traditional roles.

In the final chapter Balmer turns his hand to theology, in addition to history and social science, in order to make the claim that it is necessary that, in order for evangelicalism (and perhaps Christianity more broadly) to flourish in the US context, a certain amount of exclusivity is necessary, and expressions of ecumenism abandoned. He claims that the US also needs more Baptists, by which he means that evangelicals need to be less involved in political affairs (i.e. more separatist), rather than reliant on the state asserting Christian values on the nation. Current evangelical practice, he claims, overreaches the historical meaning of the First Amendment.

There is much in *Evangelicalism in America* that is commendable. It is certainly an achievement to have charted the historical development of this phenomenon in American culture. A helpful feature of the monograph is the interconnectedness of several of the chapters. Many of them flow on from each other, both chronologically and thematically. Balmer also revisits certain areas in greater depth, as they are relevant to the time period he is discussing, providing the reader with an insight into the multidimensional aspects to the social history of US evangelicalism.

They key criticism is in fact readily admitted by Balmer himself in the preface: because many of the chapters began as papers in other contexts previously, there is (at times) a lack of up to date scholarship supplementing his own work. This is an unfortunate lack that, if present, would have contributed to making the monograph a fuller piece of research. For example, he draws parallels to the European context and could have provided a fuller contrast by drawing on recent sociological scholarship on religion (particularly evangelicalism and established religion) in the UK. This could have assisted him in defining the cultural distinctives of US evangelicalism and made some of his arguments more effective.

Engagement with important debates was also sometimes absent in so far as Balmer did not directly refer to them or cite some of the key scholars. For example, in his discussion on separatism, a theme that emerged in several chapters, there was no mention of Christian Smith's theory of engaged orthodoxy or Peter Berger's enclave model to name only two. Indeed, it would have been instructive if Balmer had discussed which of the various competing models- if any- were best employed to understand the relationship between evangelicalism and wider US culture at any one point in time.

With that said, key primary sources are well utilised, making effective argumentation for his claims surrounding important historical and social developments in evangelicalism. This provides the reader with a clear insight into the particulars of US culture and its relationship with conservative Protestantism. There is, therefore, a helpful balance of an overarching

narrative, which is supplemented and enhanced by windows into specific moments in time. It would have been helpful to provide specific references for some of these sources, which are not consistently provided. This does not detract so much from the potency of the arguments made by Balmer, but would be useful for those wishing to explore similar lines of intellectual enquiry, particular students.

It is for these reasons that I would recommend this title for those wishing for a broad overview of American evangelicalism historically. However, the lack of up to date scholarship in parts, and the absence of overt discussions on some key arguments makes the monograph more suitable for either early stage undergraduate students whose reading can be supplemented by their teachers, or those at a more advanced stage in their academic career (i.e. those towards the end of their doctoral studies and beyond) who have a firmer grasp of the wider scholarship in this area.