
Probably no area of American religious history has received as much attention from professional historians as evangelicalism in the post-World War II and, especially, post-1970, era. Miller’s study ranks among the finest. To begin with the most obvious feature, the book is fluidly written, brimming with memorable turns of phrase, and a wicked-eye for the choice quotation that illuminates a broad landscape in a few words. The book is mercifully free of intruding theory, or what Miller modestly calls “fancy ingredients.”

Miller does not tell us where he himself stands in relation to the movement—which is fine, for that is a matter of individual taste—but he writes from a perspective that might be called warm-hearted objectivity. He consistently tries to give evangelicals a fair shake, seeing the world as they see it, without suggesting that he himself necessarily endorses all of their objectives. People often handled roughly by professional historians—Charles Colson and Rick Warren, for example—receive respectful treatment for the good they tried to accomplish rather than disparagement for what they failed to do.

The argument is clear and simple. We should not picture evangelicalism as a sharply demarcated, let alone isolated, movement. Rather it is best understood as an age, almost an ambience, hovering above a vast stretch of recent American history. That being said, Miller takes care to distinguish among internal varieties of evangelicalism, especially the mainline tradition of Billy Graham and friends, the Christian Right of Jerry Falwell and friends, and the Evangelical Left of Jim Wallis and friends. Although Miller argues for the ubiquity of the movement, he also takes care to show opposition to it too—the foils that helped define the tradition and give it inner tensile strength. A good example was Michael Weisskopf’s *Washington Post* judgment that the Christian Right was “largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command.” Miller’s own wit is on full display in his gloss on Weisskopf: “The Christian Right would feast on the quote for years to come.”

The sheer range of “stuff” that Miller places in historical context is comprehensive without turning into a meaningless laundry list. A
A selective list of core players includes: institutions (National Association of Evangelicals); parachurch organizations (InterVarsity and Cru—formerly Campus Crusade for Christ); political groups (Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition); schools (Bob Jones University and Wheaton College), along with fellow-traveller schools (University of Notre Dame); and magazines (*Christianity Today*, of course, and also *Sojourners*).

Besides these core figures and institutions stand others, not quite in the center, but close to it. They include celebrity converts (Johnny Cash) and sometime converts (Eldridge Cleaver and Bob Dylan); “thoughtful evangelicals” (Nathan Hatch, Mark Noll, and George Marsden), and close fellow-travellers (Yale Law professor Stephen Carter and renowned scientist Francis Collins); icons of popular culture (eHarmony, ID [Intelligent Design], and Thomas Kinkade’s paintings); funding agencies (The Pew Charitable Trusts); high profile terms and concepts (“naked public square,” “culture wars”); influential sex therapists (Marabel Morgan, and Tim and Beverly LaHaye); and culture warriors (Francis Schaeffer and Randall Terry).

One gains a sense here that Miller picked up the subject of recent evangelicalism, rolled it around in his hand for a while, looked at it from various angles, and then successfully showed how they all fit together. It is not exactly clear what threads bind these disparate people and entities into a web that should be labelled evangelical. Unlike most books about the topic, Miller does not try to offer a theological definition. He evidently feels that frequent association in the media and in the popular mind is sufficient. For the most part, I agree; you know them when you see them. Still, if one were to ask individual evangelicals what makes them part of the network, I suspect that all or virtually all would start with a theological affirmation along the lines of biblical authority, personal conversion, and mandate to evangelize.

Miller gives the lion’s share of his attention to the relationship between evangelicals and politics, especially presidents. He pays comparatively little mind to Nixon, Ford, and Bush I, but lots to Carter, Reagan, Bush II, and Obama. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Carter did win nearly a majority of evangelical vote in 1976—though he disappointed evangelicals by failing to secure the public policy initiatives evangelicals wanted. Reagan was, as Miller astutely notes,
less of an evangelical president than an evangelicals’ president. He talked their language, but, like Carter, he did not secure the public policy changes they wanted. In Miller’s rendering, Bush II came closest. He talked their language and worked hard for faith-based initiatives, but at the end of the day, he too failed to secure (or even seek) the more radical demands of the Christian Right. Perhaps the largest surprise of the book is the remarkable number of evangelical-like gestures that President Obama made. Neither Miller nor Obama pretends that he is evangelical, at least not in the conventional meaning of the term, but the forty-fourth president has gone out of his way to affirm his adult choice Christian commitments.

Miller argues that the rise of the evangelical movement as a pervasive force was not foreordained in the 1960s. Rather, a contingent coalescence of events and people, especially the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, gave the impulse both traction and credibility. Yet evangelicalism’s survival as a definable tradition should not be taken for granted either. Breadth is not necessarily depth, and popularity may be purchased at the price of a loss of clear identity. The lesson is clear. The springs of renewal require intentional cultivation lest they dissipate themselves in the euphoria of success.

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