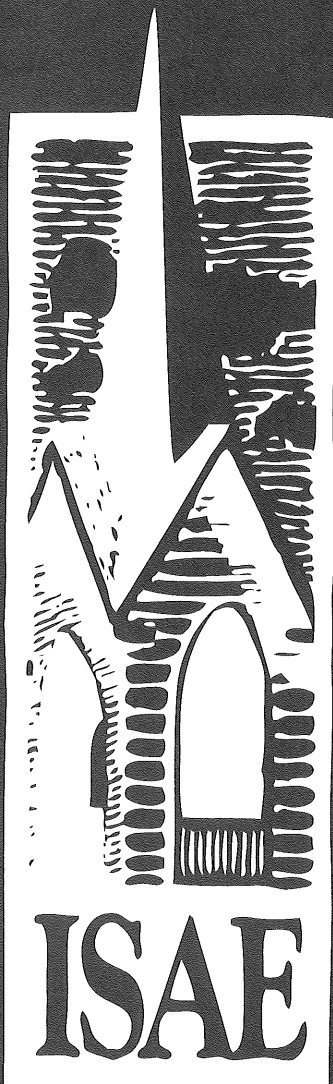


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The Political Road Not Taken

David R. Swartz. *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism: Politics and Culture in Modern America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 376 pp, \$47.50.

Over the last few years, a spate of authors has offered both fresh insights into under-researched aspects of American evangelicalism and re-interpretations of the standard historiography of twentieth-century evangelicalism. Works such as T.M. Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back* (Knopf, 2012) fall into the first category while Darren Dochuk's *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* (Norton, 2010) remains the best example of the latter. David Swartz's *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* does both. Swartz, Assistant Professor of History at Asbury University, investigates the progressive evangelical movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Like Dochuk, Swartz offers an alternative to what has become the accepted historiography in academic treatments of post-war evangelicalism. Rather than viewing the decades prior to the 1980s as "the Reagan Revolution-in-waiting (3)," he discerns significant left-wing political activity among evangelicals during the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, he provides the first book-length treatment of the evangelical left, filling an important gap in the scholarship.

For Swartz, *Moral Minority* is a tragedy: a tale of what could have been, an opportunity lost for the left wing of evangelicalism. Just as various elements of "progressive evangelicalism" were coalescing in the early 1970s, identity politics fractured the movement. Even so, progressive evangelicals successfully expanded evangelicalism's "conception of morality from the personal to the social," ironically catalyzing millions of conservative evangelicals to mobilize, leading Ronald J. Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, to comment, "We called for social and political action, [and] we got eight years of Ronald Reagan (232)." True to form, the protagonists helped bring about the very thing they sought to avoid: a rightward political turn among evangelicals.

In addition to investigating a heretofore understudied historical topic, *Moral Minority* displays tidy organization, impeccable sourcing, and precise prose. With a penchant for storytelling, Swartz brings Mark Hatfield, Tom Skinner, Samuel Escobar, Doris Longacre and dozens of others to life without losing sight of the larger project. Further, all of

this comes in the type of aesthetically pleasing product we have come to expect from Penn Press. These factors combine to make *Moral Minority* the most enjoyable non-fiction book I have read in several years.

Swartz divides *Moral Minority* into three parts. Part I sets the stage, highlighting “the emerging evangelical left” of the 1960s. Swartz very briefly traces the origins of the evangelical left to the 1940s and 1950s, when neo-evangelical ideas regarding greater social engagement began to percolate in evangelical circles. As a result, a younger generation of evangelicals rejected the ostensibly apolitical “passive conservatism” of yesteryear, becoming activists. Tom Skinner and others crusaded against racial inequality, the Post-Americans protested the Vietnam War, the Christian World Liberation Front (CWLF) and the Sojourners embraced radical egalitarian communal living, and Mark Hatfield served God through progressive politics. All of these were disparate parts of a “larger groundswell” that began to form a discernible coalition in the late 1960s.

Part II describes the “broadening” of the progressive evangelical coalition, which reached its pinnacle in 1973. As disparate impulses coalesced in the 1960s, “non-Anglo ethnic groups” began to shape the developing evangelical left (113). Through fellowship in groups like the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), third-world evangelicals gave evangelicalism a global perspective in its criticisms of inequality, consumption, and exploitation of the weak. At the same time, the culture-transforming impulse of the Dutch Reformed tradition began to spur others towards progressive political efforts while those in the Anabaptist tradition exhorted evangelicals to restrain their own consumption in order to assist others.

In Swartz’s telling, the climax of the movement came in 1973 as these disparate elements of the

evangelical left gathered for a Thanksgiving meeting in Chicago. Through diligent effort and significant compromise, participants crafted a document that stated their mutual concerns, critiques, and convictions. To this day, the *Chicago Declaration* represents the high mark of cooperation among progressive evangelicals. At the same time, it also revealed the fault lines of the nascent movement. Pacifists and non-pacifists struggled towards agreement while others clashed over racial and gender questions. Eventually, disagreements were subsumed in the face of “common enemies: racism, Nixon, unchecked capitalism, and theological liberalism (180),” but internal conflicts were merely papered over, not eliminated.

Part III tells the story of the movement’s fragmentation due to “identity politics.” Attempting to head off fragmentation, the Thanksgiving Workshop adopted a caucus approach in 1974. It proved to be a Trojan horse, undercutting “individual investment in the overall vision (188),” by exacerbating the differences between various sub-identities. Although the candidacy of Jimmy Carter briefly stayed this fragmentation as members of the evangelical left rallied to his support, by 1975, the movement had essentially fragmented into interest groups.

As president, Jimmy Carter pleased no one. Discomfiture with Carter’s progressive stances funneled conservative evangelicals—many of whom had voted for Carter—into the Reagan Revolution while secular Democrats cringed at his religiosity and progressive evangelicals disdained his economic conservatism and “failures” on human rights. By the end of the Carter presidency, the hope that had surrounded the Thanksgiving Workshop of 1973 had died. The moral minority watched their conservative coreligionists help sweep Ronald Reagan into office and their progressive political allies systematically exclude them from influence in the Democratic Party by implementing a

system of superdelegates. Thus, they traversed the 1980s as sojourners—frustrated, fragmented, and reduced to protesting the efforts of the right.

An epilogue brings the story up to date, describing the “legacy” of the evangelical left. Overall, their ill-fated efforts succeeded in injecting a sense of responsibility for the society into evangelicalism—even if evangelicals did not agree regarding what “the public good looked like.” Thinly disguising his hope that the reign of the religious right in evangelicalism is coming to an end, Swartz assesses that “by the dawn of the twenty-first century more evangelicals on more points of the political spectrum were engaging in public debate (266).”

Without a doubt, Swartz has correctly assessed the current mood of evangelicals regarding political involvement. No longer does the Christ-Against-Culture paradigm seem like a legitimate option to many evangelicals. Even so, in a two-party system, evangelicals are forced to select one of two options in the voting booth. Often, they find both discomfiting for different reasons. This is something to which Swartz himself alludes as he narrates the story of the moral minority, describing how progressive evangelicals were often caught in the middle of two positions. For example, racial justice advocates such as William Pannell and William Bentley were too progressive for establishment evangelicals but too theologically conservative to comfortably embrace the radical direction the Civil Rights movement and the Democratic Party took in the late 1960s. Similarly, the Post-Americans made common cause with those who



opposed American technocracy and militarism, but their vocal condemnation of Stalinism and Maoism distanced them from their New Left cobelligerents while their prayers and their spiritual language frightened them.

When considered alongside one another, the trajectory of both the progressive evangelicals of the 1960s and 1970s and Reagan revolution evangelicals highlight the hegemony of the American two-party political system that virtually guarantees that politically involved persons—even those with ostensibly foundational religious commitments—will

find themselves firmly entrenched within one of the two major parties over time. Although some, such as Ron Sider and Richard Mouw, attempt to hold the middle ground, they only succeed in making themselves targets for both the left and the right. Over time, most religious people simply accommodate themselves to the contemporary political orthodoxies of the left or right.

The path on the right is well-known. Drawn in by moral issues—particularly abortion and concerns related to the “traditional” family—in the late 1970s and early 1980s, theologically and socially conservative evangelicals gradually abandoned lingering discomfiture with the *laissez faire* rhetoric of secular conservatism. By the time Newt Gingrich rolled out the *Contract with America* in 1994, they embraced it as part and parcel of the conservative Republican political platform. Thus, whereas in the 1960s Samuel Escobar had complained that American evangelicals ignored the exploitation inherent in a consumption-driven emerging global economy, by 2009, many

embraced unfettered corporatism and Randian objectivism, justifying such exploitation as necessary to the expansion of wealth—a worthy goal that helped everyone “in the long run.” In so doing, they betrayed the humanitarian aspects of the conservative “new evangelicals” of the 1940s and 1950s who had founded World Relief, World Vision, and Compassion International, finding justification to embrace the conservative political platform *en toto*.

This pattern was replicated on the left, as their progressive impulses shaped them into predictable supporters of the secular left by the twenty-first century, gradually abandoning many aspects of evangelical piety that they considered non-negotiable in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the Sojourners soon became solid supporters of the Democratic Party, actively embracing an administration that surged troops in Afghanistan and expanded drone strikes across the globe in the War on Terror—the type of militarism that younger versions of themselves would have condemned as “sin (64).” Further, while in the 1970s, the *Post-American* blamed “consumer culture and big business” for the plight of the poor (57), newly-minted Democratic Party insider Jim Wallis endorsed the Obama Administration’s efforts to perpetuate a consumption-driven economy by acting as the Keynesian “spender of last resort” via the “stimulus package” of 2009.” Finally, by the 2008 presidential election, the politics of the secular left eroded the pro-life perspectives of many leftwing evangelicals in practice if not in theory. Sadly, progressive evangelicals either capitulated to the “impulse in the Democratic Party towards secularism and libertinism (219)” in order to remain in the post-Carter progressive coalition or they simply left the party. With the publication of *Moral Minority*, a more complete picture emerges of just how strongly the two-party system affects religious movements in America, transforming them as it funnels them into one of two

disparate secular political blocs.

Although an excellent work, *Moral Minority* deserves critique in a few areas. First, Swartz assiduously avoids defining evangelicalism, a practice common among younger historians uninterested in rehashing the definitional battle of yesteryear. While I sympathize with his discomfiture, historians must make such definitional decisions. Their goal in doing so should not be to provide a historical basis for theological boundary-keeping but to clearly identify the proper subjects of study. Embracing such definitions keeps historians honest while avoiding them runs the risk of missing important aspects of the history related to change and self-identity.

Second, I remain unconvinced that the broader historical record supports Swartz’s contention that the efforts of the evangelical left injected political and social concern into the wider swath of evangelicalism. (Alex Schäfer argues a similar point in his dense, highly interpretive, social movement theory-driven work from Wisconsin Press (2011), *Countercultural Conservatives*.) Social concern and political involvement emerged right after World War II. As early as 1944, the nascent NAE had opened a Political Affairs Office headed by Clyde Taylor in Washington, DC. Known as “Mr. Evangelical,” he lobbied on behalf of evangelical political concerns with some degree of success. Further, in her recent Cole Lectures at Vanderbilt University in October 2012, Anthea Butler argued that the origins of the Religious Right are found in the 1950s. In addition, my own research suggests that the roots of late twentieth-century social action are to be found in the 1940s and 1950s. Carl Henry’s advocacy for a more socially conscious evangelicalism is more of a thermometer of the movement than a thermostat. All this suggests that the period prior to the 1960s deserves more attention as the foundational period for evangelical action in later decades.

Finally, Swartz unduly amplifies the possibility that the political inclinations of the evangelical left might have “won the day” in evangelicalism. In reality, even at its peak, the movement remained small. Even in the turbulent 1960s, the conservative trajectory of American evangelicalism—which had formed in the 1940s and 1950s—remained dominant. Even so, these quibbles do no lasting damage to Swartz’s thesis. Instead, they invite further discussion and research.

In *Moral Minority*, David Swartz has provided us with an exemplary work of contemporary religious history. He has researched an understudied movement and provided a lucid, engaging account that brings his subjects to life. Further, he comfortably situates his work among the existing scholarship in the field in such a manner that it should become standard reading for courses on twentieth-century evangelicalism, politics and religion classes, and contemporary American history. Finally, *Moral Minority* raises interpretive questions and highlights avenues for new research that provide interested scholars with work for years to come. What more could we ask for?

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BOOK NOTE

Douglas H. Shantz, *Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 490 pp, \$35.00.

German Pietism is a topic that will be familiar to many readers of this *Bulletin*. However not all individuals might be aware of the critical connection between German Pietism and Evangelicalism. It was the assessment of W.R. Ward, the highly respected

British scholar of Evangelicalism, that the womb of the movement was not England but central Europe (p. 279). Therefore this book creates a critical foundation for grasping many of the significant influences on transatlantic Evangelicalism. Douglas Shantz, a Canadian and highly respected scholar of Pietism, is well qualified to write this volume. He asserts there are two specific factors that validate the relevance of this present work. First, limited scholarship has appeared in the last forty years in English to narrate the fascinating history of German Pietism. Second, due to the abundance of ground breaking research in German (p. 2) it is possible to revise numerous outdated perceptions in this field and thereby provide a more accurate and illuminating introduction to this often misunderstood movement of Christianity. More fully Shantz declares his goal for the book: “It will have achieved its purpose if it provides some ideas of the conflicts and debates, hopes and fears, of the Pietists as they lived, worked, prayed, and suffered together in the fellowship of the reborn and in the hope of worldly vindication” (p. 10).

This highly readable and engaging study begins with a review of four commonly used definitions of Pietism. These range from the narrow and most exclusive version that essentially limits Pietism to Germany as it began in 1670, to a larger definition that includes its broad and expansive presence in the Netherlands, other central European countries, and in larger transatlantic connections. Shantz favors this latter more comprehensive definition as best capturing the dynamic breadth and depth of German Pietism and that awareness provides the structure for this study.

Chapter one frames the discussion of German Pietism by exploring both the radical nature of Pietism as well as the efforts of Orthodox Lutheran reform. This chapter alone is worth the price of this volume. Both here and throughout this book Shantz reveals