reviews

Church as a nation

THE POLITICS OF EVANGELICAL IDENTITY:
Local churches and partisan divides in the United States and Canada
By Lydia Bean
Princeton University Press, Woodstock (UK).
336 pages. £19.95
ISBN 978 0 691 173 702

President Donald Trump's power rests on backing from white, self-identifying evangelical Christians. Around three-quarters of this group of Americans voted for him: four out of five continue to approve his presidency.

Their support of the President is much greater than that from whites in other religious segments – he has a smaller lead among white Catholics and 'mainline' Protestants – and this in turn exceeds his support in the population as a whole. The great majority of Hispanic and black Christians, and of all Americans without religious affiliation, oppose Trump[1]. Evangelicals comprise about a quarter of the US population, and over three-quarters of these are white[2]. President Trump's support among white evangelicals is a political base of massive importance. For this segment to have delivered the White House to a man with no prior political experience, no popular majority and no record of Christian belief is a matter of wonder. The Trump Presidency is white American evangelicals' gift to the world. What made them do it?

Canada and US

Though written well before Trump's triumphant assault began, Dr Lydia Bean's book offers an answer. She grew up in Canada and in the southern USA, in a household that was vigorously evangelical and politically left-wing. She now leads a Texan Christian foundation working for economic and racial justice. Previously she was an academic sociologist in a Baptist university in Texas. For research towards her Harvard doctorate she participated in congregational life in four churches – two on each side of the border between Canada and the USA – taking care to ensure they were 'matched' so that comparison could be reliable. She observed, recorded and analysed what made congregations tick politically. This work took place between 2004 and 2008, during the second term of the George W. Bush presidency. By the time this book appeared, the USA was into President Obama's second term, and less attentive observers thought that the Religious Right was past its peak. Three years on, this book is of immediate contemporary interest.

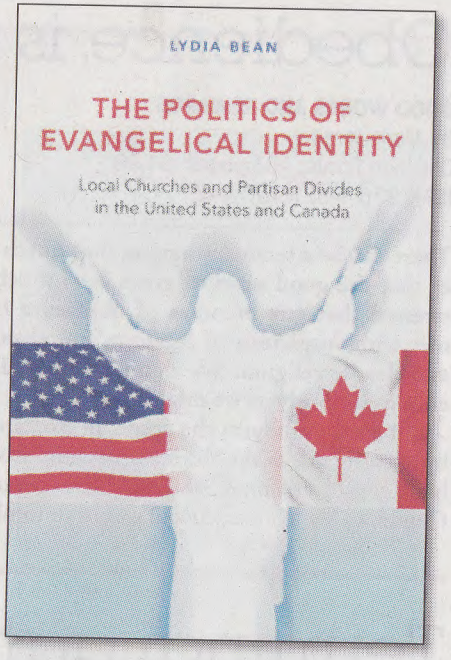
How we vote

Dr Bean found Canadian and US congregations shared similar thinking on the Bible and how it should apply to daily life. But – as Andrea Hatcher also finds in England[3] – evangelicals outside the USA do not vote on this ticket. They exercise their vote in much the same way as citizens generally – on the basis of, say, economics and social policy. By contrast, American evangelicals are overwhelmingly Republican because they see it as the Christian thing to be. Some are closer to the Democrats on such issues as health care, education, worker rights and equality, but they will not identify as Democrat. Strong, subtle pressures come from what Dr Bean calls 'culture war captains' in the congregations, who give out influential clues about voting behaviour. These 'captains' are not necessarily in positions of formal leadership.

Dr Bean provides an excellent summary of the well-known history of the Religious Right takeover of white evangelicalism in the 1970s, but warns against treating this background as currently relevant. Religious Right voting no longer results just from 'top down' alliances between pastors and party strategists (though these continue to be significant). It is embedded in congregational culture as part of the Christian 'identity'. White evangelicals observe a sharp frontier between themselves, as 'conservatives', and 'liberals' who are seen as anti-Christian. This is not considered 'political' – 'politics' is a dirty word – but as religious. Like Christians anywhere, they feel a duty to give practical support to the disadvantaged, but for Americans, this should be a church ministry to the unregenerate. Whereas Canadian believers see state welfare policy as a proper expression of community solidarity – something for Christians to be proud of – Americans see state welfare as a reproach to the church's failure to do its job. In short, they understand the church and the state to be in competition with each other.

Christian nation?

Dr Bean identifies 'religious nationalism' as the basis for all this. White American evangelicals see the 'nation' as properly Christian. Being part of the church is to be joined to a distinct nation, and growing the church is an act of nation-building. This belief is not articulated: its adherents do not reflect using the tools of political thought. It is absorbed into religious outlook and practice.



The attraction of the current President to white evangelicals is not explained by any reasoned biblical understanding of the church's relationship to the wider social order, but rather by this visceral nationalism.

James Paul Lusk, author of *The Jesus Candidate: Political religion in a secular age* (Ekklesia, 2017). He is a partner in Emmanuel Church, Canterbury

FOOTNOTES

1. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/26/among-white-evangelicals-regular-churchgoers-are-the-most-supportive-of-trump/
2. www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/
3. Andrea Hatcher, *Political and religious identities of British evangelicals*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017