

CHURCH AS NATION

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The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local churches and partisan divides in the United States and Canada

Lydia Bean

Princeton University Press, Woodstock (UK)

Xv+316pp including index

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President Donald Trump's power rests on backing from white, evangelical Christians. Around three-quarters of this group of Americans voted for him: four out of five continue to approve his Presidency. This support is much greater than the President enjoys among 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 Trump¹. Evangelicals comprise about a quarter of the US population, and over three-quarters of these are white². 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?

Though written well before Trump's triumphant assault began, Dr Lydia Bean's book offers an answer. She grew up both in Canada and 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 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 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.

Dr Bean found Canadian and US congregations sharing similar thinking on the bible and how it should apply to daily life. But - as Andrea Hatcher also finds in England³ - evangelicals outside the USA do not vote 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

¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/26/among-white-evangelicals-regular-churchgoers-are-the-most-supportive-of-trump/>

² <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

³ Andrea Hatcher, *Political and religious identities of British evangelicals*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

significant). It is embedded in congregational culture as part of the Christian 'identity.' White evangelicals observe a sharp frontier between themselves, conceived 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.

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.

NO RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN THE UK?

This review appeared in [Evangelicals Now](#) in April 2018.

Political and Religious Identities of British Evangelicals

Andrea Hatcher

Palgrave Macmillan

264 pp

£89.50 (E-book) or £112.00 (hardback)

ISBN 978-3319562810

Andrea Hatcher is known to British evangelicals as co-author of the 2013 study, published by think-tank Theos, on the British Religious Right. With Andy Walton, she showed that this movement – centred on the Christian Institute and Christian Concern – exercised influence through its relationship with the right-wing media, notably the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph. Now Dr Hatcher has returned with this study contrasting the political attitudes of British evangelicals with their white American counterparts. British evangelicals, she finds, are ‘highly interested in politics and manifest a particular concern for social justice issues’ but express this in ‘community organising rather than electioneering’. When we vote, she finds we are ‘just as likely to be on the left as right or centre.’ We are slightly more likely to vote Labour than Tory, we value state services and social equality, and unlike Americans we ‘do not exhibit in-group/out-group feelings’ in politics.

The evidence comes from group discussion with 81 people from 10 churches. Thoroughly documented, these show a series of affable and well informed conversations. These 81 Christians sound like people I would enjoy meeting. But though I like Dr Hatcher’s picture of British evangelicals, I am sceptical of her claims. She gained access to her sample through one source, a worker for Evangelical Alliance UK called ‘James’ - a pseudonym for someone who helped on condition of anonymity. ‘James’ introduced Dr Hatcher to the churches and helped with contacts; participants were then self-selecting. There is nothing to suggest they were a representative sample. Most denied being ‘evangelical’ even when prompted with the word: Dr Hatcher insists that they were in fact evangelicals but does not show how she reached that judgment.

Dr Hatcher reaches an intriguing conclusion. There is, she says, ‘no Religious Right in Britain.’ However, evangelicals feel constrained about joining public discussion because of ‘media portrayals which focus on extremists.’ It is ‘the media who have marginalised British evangelicals ... to the detriment of British politics and society.’ She puts this down to ‘religious illiteracy.’ The problem with this analysis is that – as Dr Hatcher herself showed in the Theos study – the Religious Right sets this media agenda, mainly through its campaigning around legal cases.

And no, there is no mistake in the prices above. Increasingly publishers are pricing books purely for purchase by a handful of academic libraries is disturbing; a trend that, I feel, Christian scholars should resist.