

Book Review

*Power, Politics and the Fragmentation of Evangelicalism:
From the Scopes Trial to the Obama Administration*

Kenneth J. Collins

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Many public intellectuals are opining about the future of evangelical Christianity in the United States. The post-WWII leaders who built the evangelical infrastructure are departing the public scene and their successors are fragmented. Evangelical influence upon culture is at an impasse at best, waning at worst. The current polarizations between Left and Right within evangelical Christianity illustrate tensions that reflect a century of conflict. Collins' work is an important historical analysis of the complex relationship between American evangelicalism and political power from the 1920s to the present. He offers a Wesleyan perspective that allows critique of both the Religious Right and the evangelical Left that have emerged out of the struggles of the past century.

Collins' does more than review events and offer cursory analysis. Each chapter opens a door of understanding that takes the reader beyond the timeworn clichés and, in the process, hope for the future emerges. At the heart of the book is the tragic reduction of evangelical influence as both Left and Right create political power narratives instead of discerning broader and deeper influences that arise when the church is not captive to ideology and the quest for power.

Chapter 1 examines the cultural shifts highlighted by the celebrated Scopes Trial of

1925. The author offers a solid overview of the eighteenth and nineteenth century revivals that seamlessly integrated personal conversion and calls for social improvement. The tragedy of Civil War, rise of dispensational eschatology, and industrialization/urbanization in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century along with the schisms in denominations and seminaries over Darwinism and Higher Criticism in theological study all contributed to the polarization of the 1920s and the retreat of fundamentalists from the public sphere.

The progressive religious and secular opponents of fundamentalist Christianity created an artificial narrative. William Jennings Bryan, three-time Democratic candidate for President, a thoughtful evangelical, and social progressive, is portrayed as an ignorant Bible-thumper. Clarence Darrow, ACLU lawyer and skeptic, is honored as the champion of intellectual progress. This said, the retreat of the fundamentalists from cultural and political power continued and the progressive-secular leaders, though not a majority of the American populace, gained the upper hand in academic, cultural, media, and political circles.

Chapter 2 charts the rise of Evangelical alternatives to 1920s fundamentalism, with

particular focus on the founding of the NAE in 1942-1943 and the rise of major evangelical ministries in the 1950s, including Billy Graham, Fuller Seminary, and *Christianity Today* magazine. While retaining conservative approaches to biblical study and confessional orthodoxy, these “neo-Evangelicals” sought a more irenic tone and nuanced understanding of Christian influence in American life. Collins portrays these developments with sympathy, while critiquing the marriage of these ministries with Cold War American values.

Chapter 3 highlights the rise of the Religious Right in the 1970s and 1980s, as an understandable response to upheavals in culture and politics, especially the Great Society initiatives and the tragedies of Vietnam and Watergate. In the midst of these social changes, America experienced radical shifts in cultural mores; secular progressives fostered policies and values upsetting to evangelicals. All the while, mainline Protestants continued their decline in membership and influence. The deep disappointments of Vietnam and Watergate caused soul-searching among leaders such as Billy Graham. The momentary euphoria surrounding Jimmy Carter’s born-again presidency ended quickly with economic stagnation, the Iranian hostage crisis, and a lack of inspirational leadership. The rise of Ronald Reagan and the Religious Right, however, did not yield the culture-shaping influences sought by evangelicals. By the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, the hubris of the early 1980s was gone.

Into this historical vortex, Collins spends an entire chapter (Ch. 4: “Evolution, Intelligent Design and the Transformation of Culture?”) on the Intelligent Design (ID) movement as an example of how difficult it is for any group—religious or not—to challenge the secular domination of the public square. The ID movement is not

young-earth creationism in disguise, nor is it sectarian. Any challenge to Darwinian naturalistic orthodoxy now has a bevy of academic and legal barriers. Collins’ answer for this opposition to Christian thoughtfulness is insightful: “[Christians] must raise up a new generation of well-educated evangelical youth, those who can rightly balance both heart and mind, theology and science, and continue to ask the tough and at times embarrassing questions that their ancestors have been asking for decades ... This is not for the faint of heart or thin-skinned ... They must learn to think critically and fairly, following the hard evidence where it leads, comforted by the basic intuition that all truth is God’s truth” (p. 169).

Chapter 5 charts the emergence of the evangelical Left, from nascent counter-cultural voices in the 1960s and 1970s to the current “Red Letter Christians” and other progressive movements of the early twenty-first century. The author focuses on the ideas and actions of key leaders such as Tony Campolo, Ron Sider, and Jim Wallis. At first glance, these groups seem to offer an alternative to the uneasy marriage of conservatism and evangelicalism exemplified by the Moral Majority and its successors, such as the Christian Coalition. But the captivity of the Left to current progressive ideologies and radical redistributionist policies fails to account for the deep concerns evangelicals have concerning abortion, marriage and family, and legitimate reward for hard work. Collins does an excellent job exposing the ambiguities of progressives, including the inconsistent subjectivities of leaders such as Brian McLaren. The author forthrightly critiques Wallis’ policies as little more than current political planks of the Democratic Party rather than a third way or prophetic alternative.

In his final chapter, Collins' offers ways forward for Evangelicals who embrace Wesleyan and Pentecostal modes of spiritual vitality and loving action. While not rejecting intellectual arguments or political involvement, Collins calls on believers to embrace the work of the Holy Spirit and the call to love as a far better way of influence and impact. Genuine transcendence empowered by the Spirit empowers people to get out of themselves, bearing effective witness to Christ and making ordinary women and men remarkably beautiful and holy as they help others flourish.

For Pentecostals, the way of love empowered by the Spirit call forth transforming power and wisdom that can

move individuals, communities, and nations beyond ideological and political stagnation to creative and flourishing lives. Collins call for fresh experience is inspiring: "There is no greater power than holy love ... This was the same power and presence that toppled the walls of race at Azusa Street ... 'the color line was washed away in the blood.' Here then, there is wisdom and power in abundance" (p. 260).

This is an important work for understanding the currents of contemporary evangelical life and the contribution that Spirit-empowered believers can make as the gospel of reconciliation is proclaimed and practiced.