

*The New Evangelicals and the Future of the
United States of America*

Adrian Pabst

Marcia Pally, *The "New Evangelicals": Expanding the Vision of the Common Good*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011. Pp. xix + 268.

The United States remains the only global superpower, but domestic division linked to partisan politics and the “culture wars” opposing secular liberals to religious conservatives is undermining the strength upon which U.S. supremacy ultimately rests. Recent decades have witnessed the failure of mainstream political traditions to craft a common vision around which the country can rally in order to flourish at home and act as a force for good abroad. The neoconservative dream of turning the Religious Right from a “moral majority” into a permanent political hegemony failed amid the ruins of military adventures and the worst economic crisis since 1929–32. But neither Clinton nor Obama managed to offer a genuine alternative to the Republican-inspired settlement that was first ushered in by Nixon and then developed by Reagan, i.e., foreign military intervention and the complicit convergence of “big government” with “big business”—whose twin failure is now manifest for all to see.¹

In the United States and the rest of the world, there is still a common misperception that Democrats are progressive while Republicans are conservative. While there might be some truth to this, it is arguably the case that both are fundamentally liberal. Beginning with the 1960s, they have progressively embraced social-cultural and economic-political liberalism. Neocons, Tea Party militants, and conservative Democrats will strenuously deny this characterization and profess their traditionalist credentials. But both the Republican and the Democratic establishment have implemented policies of liberalization, notably the extension of commercial contracts into hitherto non-monetized areas of human activity and

1. Whatever the Republican rhetoric on “small government,” the fact is that expanding the military consolidates the joint warfare and welfare state, as the U.S. military is a welfare state within the welfare state. Likewise, extending the “free market” gives the federal government more regulatory and other power, leaving the weight of the state in the economy fundamentally unchanged compared with the proportion since the New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

an increasingly aggressive individual rights culture, that have left U.S. society simultaneously more atomized and interdependent.

Instead of contesting the liberal consensus that has defined U.S. politics for the past forty years or so, Democrats and Republicans use the “culture wars” to deflect from the growing disconnect between the governing elites and the people, condemning the United States to partisan paralysis and an institutional stalemate that merely perpetuate the settlement that both sides secretly support.²

Lasting political change will only come from genuine cultural renaissance and religious renewal. Sustained Catholic immigration from Central and Latin America has already transformed the demographic landscape, with the traditionally dominant WASP population now in a numerical minority that has so far prevented an intellectual revival and instead reinforced a siege mentality—the so-called “angry white men” in the Midwest on whose support the GOP has relied for too long.

But perhaps even more important than the growing Catholic influence linked to the Hispanics is the emergence of the “new evangelicals,” as Professor Marcia Pally shows in her eponymous book. Indeed, large sections of U.S. evangelicals are developing a kind of post-liberal vision that seeks to transform modern secular politics and economics. Until the First World War and again during the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and the 1960s, they were in fact politically progressive. As Pally argues, evangelicalism has nearly always been anti-elitist, anti-authoritarian, economically more egalitarian (against corporate banking and wealthy landlords), and socially interventionist on behalf of the common good—running social programs for the poor, vastly expanding popular institutions like the U.S. Postal Service, and providing some of the earliest critique of *laissez-faire* capitalism (while being committed to a free market economy).

Pally’s brilliant book is both a *tour d’horizon* and a *tour de force*. She provides not just the best analytical overview of the vast and complex evangelical landscape across the United States but also links this to some of the most important U.S. debates on politics and religion, notably the myth that the Religious Right speaks for America’s evangelicals—championing neoliberalism, militarism, and theocracy. Her argument that the “new evangelicals” break away from this association and renew their own progressive tradition suggests that U.S. evangelicalism cannot be mapped on the secular spectrum of the liberal left vs. the conservative right. Thus, the “new evangelical” blending of greater economic egalitarianism with a new social conservatism illustrates how post-liberal politics straddles the divide between the purely religious and the exclusively secular in the direction of the common good.

2. On the foundations and meaning of the “culture wars,” see my debate with Luciano Pellicani in *Telos* 162 (Spring 2013), pp. 151–63 and 164–76.

The book features a series of interviews with grassroots' activists and the leadership of the "new evangelicals." These structured conversations frame the narrative and also anchor the argument in really existing communities that operate largely outside partisan politics and the obscurity of much academic discourse. This, coupled with Pally's impressive interdisciplinary scholarship, produces an account of compelling clarity and prescience.

The prologue that consists of fascinating interviews with two "ordinary" evangelicals sets the tone of the whole book. One of the great merits of Pally's book is that it accurately reflects the reality on the ground and lets the "new evangelicals" speak for themselves. From the outset, this approach is able to dispel several myths about the evangelical tradition—whether an obsession with individual salvation that distracts from the practice of charity vis-à-vis people of all faiths and none or a simplistic moralism of good vs. evil that fuels the crusade of the Religious Right in the name of some imagined "Moral Majority."

As Pally indicates, the term "new evangelicals" was first coined by Richard Cizik, the former vice president at the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), who refers to those "evangelicals whose priorities have broadened from those associated with the Religious Right—a broadening toward an anti-militarist, anti-consumerist focus on poverty relief, immigration reform, and environmental protection" (17). Instead of "bible-bashing" proselytism, these evangelicals seek to defend the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom for all believers while also accepting the political framework of liberal democracy in relation to people of no faith at all. As such, they are committed to a politics of the common good that upholds "human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and peacemaking, including peace and respect among the world's religions" (19). Far from imposing a theocratic system through the back door, the "new evangelicals" support pluralism, economic justice, and the constitutional rule of liberal-democratic government.

In the introduction, Pally addresses head-on the key question of what prompted the evangelical breakaway from the Religious Right and suggests three factors: first, generational shifts that have led young evangelicals to reject their parents' right-wing politics and the "prosperity gospel" that legitimated neoliberalism; second, cultural and attitudinal changes connected with personal morality (including sex), global poverty, and climate change; third, communal conscience and the realization (long before the 2008 Republican defeat) that the Religious Right betrayed most of the fundamental principles such as love of others, service to the community, and a universal covenant beyond class, culture, and even creed. For these and other reasons, "new evangelicalism" marks a return to a progressive tradition.

Part one, covering chapters one to five, focuses on the complex ties between Church and State in the evangelical tradition. Pally traces evangelicalism to its roots in the movement of the dissenters who defended the twin principles

of freedom of conscience and state-church separation, not forced conversion or theocracy. So from the outset, evangelicals tended to be “individualist, anti-authoritarian, and suspicious of government” (46), which based on their European experience they associated with ecclesial subordination to the sovereign and state religion (*cuius regio eius religio*).

Over time, this doctrinal commitment to freedom of conscience and state-church separation favored the disestablishment of religion at the state level and the emergence of evangelical associations, which became the backbone of America’s civil society and inspired a whole host of socioeconomic activities—including extending free public education, opposing slavery (in the North), and building the country’s infrastructure (such as the U.S. Postal Service). In turn, Pally’s book shows—more than any other existing account—that this evolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave rise to the evangelical championing of civil society as the primary locus of religion, politics, and the economy—an alternative to the growing divide between privatized apolitical faith, on the one hand, and theocratic flirtations with state religion and absolute power, on the other hand.

The early twentieth century saw a move away from the Social Gospel in the direction of the “prosperity gospel” that wrongly equated the elect with the rich and legitimated the secular pursuit of both power and wealth. At the same time, other strands of evangelicalism (such as millenarians, dispensationalists, and the adherents of the so-called Holiness doctrine) inaugurated a shift from a this-worldly concern with society (in particular the poor and excluded) to an otherworldly obsession with individual salvation and the Kingdom of God in heaven.

But as the forces of secular modernity tightened their grip over U.S. society, evangelicals who had been part of a progressive tradition found themselves increasingly on the reactionary side of the new divide opposing conservatives to the permissive culture of “hippies and yippies” (57). Hence the success of figures such as Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham. Faced with the ever-expanding federal government and central intrusion in the private sphere, evangelicals felt that their spirit of individualist, anti-authoritarian self-reliance was under threat and so was the very foundation of the U.S. Constitution. That sealed the alliance between the evangelicals and the Republicans to form the New Right in the 1970s: “from the 1980s on, the Religious Right sought government support for religious practice—such as prayers in the schools—in public institutions. It relied on the state to institutionalize religious values, such as teaching creationism in public schools, and thus it invited some church intermingling—which is forbidden in order to protect freedom of religion” (93).

By contrast, the “new evangelicals” reject this politicization of faith and the Religious Right’s theocratic outlook that informed much of neoconservatism. The alternative they promote is “robust religion within liberal democracy”—the title of the book’s second part, which covers chapters six to nine. Based

on her interview with Richard Cizik, Pally reports one of the key findings of her research—namely, that the “new evangelicalism” marks a rupture with the divisive and angry approach of the Religious Right in favor of a loving, healing partnership that refuses to serve partisan politics. For example, on abortion, maternal health, and teenage pregnancy, he advocates a shift from a punitive to a restorative approach that protects the dignity of the person and is in line with the common good. Linked to this is a broadening of evangelical concerns from abortion, civil partnerships (though not gay marriage), electoral wins, and Christian fundamentalism to poverty relief, immigration reform, environmental stewardship, and inter-faith engagement. This is evinced by various initiatives to reduce third world debt, support diplomatic solutions to conflict, and build bridges with the Muslim world.

Interestingly, the “new evangelicals” bring together figures from across the religious and political spectrum—from the more progressive Jim Wallis (founder of Sojourners) via the moderate Leith Anderson (president of the National Association of Evangelicals) to the more conservative Rick Warren (pastor at the influential Saddleback Church, with over 100,000 members, who gave the invocation at Obama’s first presidential inauguration). What binds them and the countless other evangelicals leaders and members together is a shared belief in the prophetic role of the church (“speaking truth to power”) and ecclesial involvement in economic, social, cultural, and environmental issues.

Family planning and abortion is a case in point: instead of being judgmental and condemning individual behavior as immoral, the “new evangelicals” are pragmatic about contraception and offer pre- and post-natal support for young women who are “pregnant, broke, and scared not to have an abortion” (141). So the aim is to reduce both the number of unwanted pregnancies and the cases of abortion by forging partnerships between churches and other organizations that can provide universal, unconditional support.

Whether with or without state involvement, the “new evangelicals” have not just abandoned the “prosperity gospel” but have also developed the meaning of the Social Gospel by extending church involvement: ministries run by evangelical pastors such as the Minnesota-based Gregory Boyd include “food and clothing for the poor, job-skills development, job-transition help, emergency financial grants, English as a second language, substance abuse programs, gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender support, counseling, youth programs, making life more Jesus-like, and aid to local immigrants” (153). In this manner, evangelical churches increasingly fill the void that is left by both state and market—especially in the wake of the economic crisis and the new age of austerity.

Crucially, the “new evangelicals” do not subscribe to the binary logic of being either with or against government but instead engage on a policy-by-policy basis—closer to the Republicans on abortion and fiscal conservatism but

opposed to them on war and their climate-change skepticism, while siding with the Democrats on poverty relief, free public education, and gay civil partnerships or even unions but rejecting federal government support for abortion and ruling out the redefinition of traditional marriage. As the foundation of civil society, the churches are extra-state and extra-market, leaving government and business to rule over secular affairs while the fellowship of believers prepares—and imperfectly embodies—the Kingdom of God on earth.

By combining greater economic egalitarianism with a new, updated form of social conservatism, the “new evangelicals” are a distinct part of a wider post-liberal movement that is beginning to take shape and redefine politics in the West.

Many questions remain over certain tensions or even contradictions within the evangelical tradition and its relation to U.S. politics: how do the “new evangelicals” square their commitment to market individualism with the primacy of the person and human association, starting with the family? What explains their progressive conservatism and qualified support for modernization (e.g., the influence of the Methodist tradition), which contrasts sharply with the hyper-modern stance of many Puritans and Calvinists? How does the social relate to the sacramental? Is the commitment to the common good affected by the evangelical ecclesiology that privileges a personal relationship with Jesus and individual salvation over a communal Trinitarian vision and the anticipation of God’s kingdom within the universal Church?

The great merit of Pally’s work is that she sheds new light on these and other questions. Her book is a stunning achievement. It creatively combines fascinating interviews with a sharp analysis of history, principles, and policies. It also overcomes the false divide between theology and religious studies, and shows how the critical study of religion and politics resists the easy categorization of secularization vs. de-secularization. The book confirms Pally as one of the most significant contemporary scholars in the field of politics and religion. Her work is prescient and lays the foundation for further significant research that she is currently undertaking on theologies of relationality and the modern tension of “separability” versus “situatedness.” This conceptual innovation will undoubtedly transform our understanding of political religion and religious politics.