

Redeeming Freedom: Evangelicals and Democracy, Around the World and Across Time

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ERIK OWENS: There's broad confusion among Americans and others about the distinction between the terms evangelical, Pentecostal and fundamentalist. Could you speak a bit about how you use the terms and whether this confusion exists or matters outside of the American context?

TIMOTHY SAMUEL SHAH: That's a common source of confusion. I use the term evangelicalism to refer to those Protestants who are revivalistic and biblicist. They have a belief in personal conversion, they have a strong belief in the authority of the Bible and they also believe in a kind of urgent duty to share the good news of Christ with others through various means.

Pentecostals, you could say are "evangelicals plus." They're also evangelicals. They believe those things I just mentioned. But in addition, they believe that it is an essential mark of being a Christian to have an infilling of the Holy Spirit, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. Some Pentecostals believe that as evidence of that, you have to speak in tongues, but not all Pentecostals believe that. So, Pentecostals are "evangelicals plus," sort of Spirit-filled evangelicals.

The meaning of "fundamentalists" is a little bit less clear. It's generally a term I try to avoid because I think it doesn't have a lot of conceptual clarity to it. It's often used to refer to groups that are specifically anti-modern in some sense, politically or theologically. Peter Berger has usefully defined fundamentalists as people who want to restore the "taken-for-granted status" of religion. In other words, they want to restore the status quo ante, the situation that existed in a variety of civilizations before the onset of modernity, where people essentially took for granted the veracity and the authority of the religious communities and traditions that they were raised in. There was no kind of competitive pluralism; people just took for granted the truth of their religious tradition. Berger says fundamentalists are people who want to go back to this taken-for-granted status of religion, either by creating authoritative subcultures, like the Amish sealed off from everybody else, or

imposing a kind of authoritative religious superstructure on society, like in Saudi Arabia.

EO: Do these terms carry the same freights abroad as they do in the U.S.?

TSS: They don't exactly, and this creates challenges. For example, in Latin America, the term *evangélico*, which is a literal translation of our term "evangelical," doesn't mean what we mean by evangelical or what I just said I meant by it. It really just means all Protestants. I know actually a lot of countries in the world where the term "evangelical" or "evangelical church" really just means all Protestants, not what we mean by more theologically conservative or revivalist Protestants. So, that does pose challenges.

EO: Going back a bit to Peter Berger, who defines fundamentalism as an urge to reclaim the status quo ante, could the same be said about evangelicals in the sense of trying to restore Christianity's take-for-grantedness, though not the forcefulness by which that is undertaken?

TSS: This is challenging because I think there are some evangelicals who could be called fundamentalists. For example, Bob Jones University is without question a fundamentalist university. It's also evangelical. There are parts of American evangelicalism and parts of world evangelicalism that are fundamentalist. They think that there should be some effort, either to create a kind of subculture that's sealed off from the rest of society or to impose a kind of neo-Christendom on society. But in every society that I've looked at, the fundamentalist wing of evangelicalism is very much a minority. Most American evangelicals and most evangelicals around the world do not have this kind of fundamentalist aspiration.

EO: But if you believe in restoring Christianity's taken-for-grantedness in addition to the other tenets of evangelicalism, you're a fundamentalist?

TSS: Yes, that's right. In other words, a fundamentalist evangelical would be an evangelical that's fundamentally uncomfortable with the kind of existential condition of modernity where we have to make choices. We have to decide what religion we will be. No matter how strongly we ourselves are committed to our particular faith, there's always that lurking sense that I'm still making a choice, and an uncertainty about what my children will choose. Evangelicals generally accept this and are reasonably comfortable with it. Fundamentalists are people who are not comfortable with it, who really do want to somehow create conditions that are essentially incompatible with modernity.

EO: Why do you think evangelicals in the United States are commonly, though usually mistakenly, understood to be theocrats? Is that view warranted historically?

TSS: In general, no. I think one of the striking findings in research I've done both historically and on contemporary evangelicalism is that you have very few cases of

a theocratic program. This is true in America and around the world. By theocracy, if one takes the term seriously, one means an imposition of a Christian legal or political system on society to make the entire society Christian in some robust sense.

There have been very few evangelicals who have actually seriously entertained such projects and even fewer who have made any political progress in actually advancing them. The one group that's often referred to in this context is the group led by people who are more kind of extreme Calvinists than evangelicals. R.J. Rushdoony and Gary North were a group that led a project with the wonderful name of Theonomic Reconstructionism, which was a serious theocratic project, but few evangelicals could tell you what theonomic reconstructionism is, much less actually got on board that particular campaign.

EO: Broadening the question a bit, what kind of inherent relationship do you see between evangelicals or evangelicalism and democratic movements or movements toward popular sovereignty?

TSS: I think there are a lot different kinds of affinities. One, I think there's just a deep affinity rooted in evangelical theology. As I said, one of the leading characteristics of evangelicalism is the belief that you have to have a personal conversion, you have to be born again. In other words, people are not born Christians. They can't inherit their faith from their parents or their church just because perhaps they've been baptized in the church. You can't take for granted that you are a Christian. Evangelicalism in a sense is an insistent call even to people who claim that they're Christians: Are you really a Christian and have you really made that choice?

To that extent, evangelicalism is an almost perfectly modern, voluntaristic faith that has a deep affinity with modernity. It's no accident that, historically speaking, evangelicals and modernity are essentially coextensive. There was no evangelical Christianity prior to the 17th century or the 16th century. Modernity and evangelicalism were born together, both emphasizing choice over fate, voluntaristic association over organic community. They're both comfortable with societies that are based on choice, based on contracts freely entered into, based on the idea that associations are freely chosen and they're not just taken for granted. In all these ways, there are affinities.

EO: What do you see across the world, particularly in the Global South, which is the core of your most recent work, in terms of evangelically inclined political actors? What's the landscape look like around the world?

TSS: The landscape is very, very diverse. You mainly have three different patterns of evangelical political activism. One is evangelicals creating their own political parties and expressly evangelical political movements, or they are creating "Christian" movements that when you dig beneath the surface really are essentially evangelical. Another pattern is evangelical church leaders not forming their own

political structures or parties but very actively getting involved in party politics and endorsing politicians. Then you have a third pattern of grassroots evangelical activism – a building up of civil society organizations, creating NGOs, creating spaces where the poor and marginalized are empowered.

So you have different kinds of patterns with different kinds of consequences for democratic politics. I would say the first pattern of the evangelical construction of political parties has been astonishingly incompetent and unsuccessful. The efforts to create evangelical parties or movements have, generally speaking, been a great failure. They haven't generated much evangelical support, let alone support of others.

The second pattern, evangelical church leaders working with existing political parties, has been somewhat more successful. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil, for example, has been very sophisticated in building relationships with existing political parties. They forged an alliance with the current Brazilian President, President Lula, successfully.

The third pattern, I would say, has been the most successful. In a sense, evangelicals have the greatest impact on politics when they don't get directly involved in politics, when they're not focused on high politics and electoral activity and relationships with politicians. When they are building up civil society, creating contexts where otherwise marginalized people are included and can participate and can learn civic skills, I think this is where evangelicals play a significant and positive role in building up the kind of social foundations for democracy.

EO: What does it mean that the geographic center of evangelicalism has shifted far away from Anglo-America and what kind of impact has that had in the Global South's relationship to the West? I'm thinking about the global Southern evangelicals looking at America as a mission field almost, but also sort of the responses to Islam and how that's impacted things around the world.

TSS: Those are great questions. Clearly, there has been a demographic shift. At the beginning of the 20th century, Protestantism was an almost exclusively North Atlantic phenomenon. It was restricted demographically to North Atlantic societies – Britain, United States, Northern Germany and Holland. There were very few Protestants outside of those places.

But by the end of the 20th century, the situation was different. You had large Protestant communities in Latin America, in Africa and even in Asia. There was a dramatic shift, and this has had very important consequences. One consequence is that the world picture that western evangelicals tend to have is now very, very different. Instead of seeing places like Africa and Latin America as culturally distant, as sort of dark continents, there are many more networks and connections that bring American evangelicals and say, African evangelicals, close together. This has all kinds of impacts. It has an impact on policy. It was one of the reasons

that Americans were aware of the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, because of these connections. It's one of the reasons that American and western Christians in general are aware of religious persecution as a problem in many of these places.

In other words, Protestant communities are a kind of barometer in many countries, as far as the West is concerned, for the state of religious and other kinds of freedom. We tend to hear as American Christians about issues of religious freedom because of the way our co-religionists are being affected. In general, Americans are not good at following what's happening in places like Sri Lanka. Our news doesn't give us much opportunity to learn about the latest developments in places like Belize or Cote d'Ivoire.

For churchgoing American evangelicals, one of the ways that their world has sort of opened up is through networks and connections with evangelical co-religionists. They hear how their missionaries are doing and what their missionaries are seeing. They read missionary newsletters. They read *Voice of the Martyrs*, a publication which talks about the persecution of evangelicals in different parts of the world. So they learn about issues that they wouldn't otherwise probably learn about.

EO: How have American or North Atlantic evangelicals been challenged on the flip side in their own faith by evangelicals around the world?

TSS: I think evangelicals are being challenged as many of them visit places like Africa. Something like a million and a half Americans went on short-term mission trips last summer. Upwards of a million Americans take short-term mission trips every summer. Not all of those are evangelicals, but many of them are. And my experience is that invariably people are challenged to look again at their materialistic lifestyles, to look again at the choices they make with their money.

They are also confronted often with the narrowness of their politics. In their politics, conservative evangelicals tend to be very much oriented to social or moral issues like abortion and homosexuality. This has changed to some extent in recent years, but I'm convinced that the exposure to the situation that our fellow evangelicals face in other parts of the world has caused many evangelicals to broaden their sense of what's important in terms of public policy. Should we be spending more on foreign aid? Shouldn't we be spending more on fighting malaria and HIV/AIDS? Shouldn't we be promoting micro-enterprise development in places like Africa? These contacts have actually helped make American evangelicals a major constituency for increasing American foreign aid, which American evangelicals were not in the past. That was usually what left wing groups did, not what American evangelicals did.

EO: How has the enormous vitality of the Pentecostal movement impacted other Protestant and Catholic and non-Christian movements, both grass roots and political movements, around the world as you've seen it?

TSS: I think there have been two main strategies. One is the “if you can’t beat them, join them” strategy. Many kinds of Christian churches have become Pentecostalized as a consequence of Pentecostal success. They’ve kind of adopted features of Pentecostal worship, not necessarily Pentecostal theology about speaking in tongues, but they’ve adopted more charismatic worship styles. I have visited Anglican cathedrals in Africa, and they’re charismatic and sort of Pentecostalized.

Then there’s the violent reaction strategy, which is to react against and try to restrict Pentecostal activity. There’s a lot of concern in South Asia, where I spent a lot of time last year, about Pentecostal evangelism and the planting of churches, and this has led to greater pressure to legislatively try to restrict conversion. Usually, this is in response to Pentecostal groups, like the Assemblies of God. In Sri Lanka, before the national parliament, there is now a draconian bill to punish religious conversion, which is mainly a response to Pentecostal evangelistic activity in Sri Lanka. That’s the second response. A lot of people and groups, and even some Christian churches, like the Catholic Church in many parts of the world, are opposed to what they see as aggressive Pentecostal evangelism.