Now What?

Revivalist Christianity and Global South Politics.

JOEL CARPENTER

Across three great regions of the world—sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and southern and eastern Asia—two trends are rearranging the social and political landscapes. One of these, the growth of democracy in civic life, politics, and governance, has attracted the attention of some of the most prominent scholars of public affairs. The late Samuel P. Huntington of Harvard famously called this movement “the third wave” of democratic revolutions in modern history. This trend is anything but inevitable, however. Despite dramatic advances, democracy in many lands is fragile, and there have been many setbacks, as any reader of the “world” section of the daily news can attest.

The other development, which until recently was nearly invisible to most scholars and pundits, is Christianity’s dynamic development in these regions, which is causing a seismic shift of the faith’s place and role in the world. Christianity, it turns out, is not just the fading tribal religion of the Europeans. The faith is practiced worldwide, in many more places and languages than any other religion. The great majority of Christians now live outside Europe and North America. Just as the nations of the Global South and East are the most interesting places to study democracy these days, so too the main questions about Christianity increasingly arise from its new heartlands in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

One of those questions, which has received surprisingly little attention, is what these two trends have to do with each other. A number of political scientists, including Huntington, have noted that a re-energized Roman Catholicism, with a new theological purchase on freedom, has been a critical force for democratization, especially in parts of Latin America. What about some of the other dynamic Christian movements, notably the Pente-costals and other evangelicals? By the year 2000, twelve percent of Latin Americans identified as Protestants, and two-thirds of them were Pentecostals. In Africa, where Christians now make up half of the continent’s total population, two-thirds of Latin Americans identified as Protestants, and two-thirds of them were Pentecostals. In Africa, where Christians now make up half of the continent’s total population, two-thirds of them were Pentecostals and other evangelicals? By the year 2000, twelve percent of Latin Americans identified as Protestants, and two-thirds of them were Pentecostals. In Africa, where Christians now make up half of the continent’s total population, two-thirds of them were Pentecostals. In Asia, evangelicals and Pentecostals in particular are on the rise. So what relationship do these religious movements have to the public life of these regions?

A cadre of evangelical intellectuals from the Global South and East decided to address this question. This group, known as the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMET), has been led for many years by Vinay Samuel, an Indian theologian. INFEMET operates the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, sponsors a geo graphically dispersed, interdisciplinary doctoral degree program, and publishes Transformation magazine. In 1997, its leaders conceived an ambitious, three-continent study, and Timothy Shah, an American political scientist of Indian descent (who is also Samuel’s son-in-law), orga nized and launched it two years later with major support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The results are finally in, and they constitute three volumes of essays, edited by eminent scholars and published this year by Oxford University Press. These works cover three continents and 16 nations, ranging from Brazil to Nigeria, from India and China. This project, Shah emphasizes, has been an exercise in

Illustration to come

“critical self-understanding,” sponsored by evangelicals and conducted by a healthy mixture of evangelical and non-evangelical scholars. It was prompted to a great extent by INFEMET’s concern that where evangelicals entered the political fray, the results have been mixed (to put it mildly). On the one hand, many of the Pentecostals in Guatemala backed the military dictatorship of Efrain Rios Montt in the 1980s. In Kenya, on the other hand, born-again leaders in the older, mission-founded churches were among the most vocal critics of the Kenyan autocrat, Daniel arap Moi, in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet Moi made moves to co-opt other evangelical leaders, including those of his home denomination, the Africa Inland Church. So what could evangelicals worldwide learn about themselves from a closer study of their political activity and impact? And what could those who study Global South politics and religion’s role therein learn from studying evangelicals? Plenty, on both counts, it turns out.

One of the continual reference points of these studies is the work in political science on the meaning and processes of democracy. The authors follow the turn in this field from a primary emphasis on the structures and systems of “electoral democracy” (elections, constitutions, and the balance of legislative, judicial and executive powers, etc.) to “liberal democracy,” with more attention to how the system works (accountability, transparency, honesty, and effective provision of basic services). Likewise, they extend attention from formal rights (speech, worship, assembly and association, arrest and trial constraints) toward democratic cultural values and creative social initiatives.

A common core of political theory lies behind these three books. Most prominent are the works of Robert Putnam and Gabriel Almond on “civil society,” the complex of non-governmental organizations (youth clubs, arts guilds, neighborhood improvement groups, churches, labor unions, and human rights agencies) that are expressions of initiative and creativity rising from the people. These agencies give citizens the space they need to address issues directly and they serve as foils to authoritarian rule. Civil society is the shaper of “civic culture,” the seedbed of leadership and organizational skills, advocacy, and care for one’s neighbors. Likewise, the authors regularly refer to studies of modern democratic movements in the Global South and East, notably Larry Diamond’s work on how fragile new democracies in Asia seek to consolidate their gains and build some staying power.

Equally central to these three books is a common definition of what it means to be an evangelical Christian. Here the contributors buck the current trend. Many American intellectuals find “evangelical” to be problematic these days, given the immense variety and fluidity of grassroots awakenings and revival movements in Christianity worldwide. Some openly express their dislike for it all, which can lead to impatience with definitions. If it cannot be defined, perhaps it has no permanence. Another tactic is simply to call them all “fundamentalists.”

Even for the more earnest classifier, evangelicals can be frustrating. They do not stay within the confines of denominations or traditions of doctrine and worship, and they produce some remarkable hybrids, such as Presbyte rians who cast out demons, and Orthodox adherents who speak in tongues. With the increasing dominance of this scene by Pentecostal and charismatic movements, scholars focusing on those two traditions often bristle at their being classed under an “evangelical” rubric, since the Pentecostals and charismatics now greatly outnumber the evangelicals who do not identify with them.

In contrast, and much to their credit, the editors and authors of this series see local and regional webs of relationships that make a broad definition of “evangelical” a living reality. They use the four-fold definition devised by

Books discussed in this essay:

Paul Reston, ed., Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America (Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).


In Indonesia, where 27 Churches (even the so-called African Independent, Zimbabwe, Isabella Mukonyora insists, newer Church of the Nazarene or the Anglican, Methodist, and cal, whether they are in the older, mission-ety and commending it to others (activism).

Applying this dearth to Christian groups in the Global South yields quite different results than in Europe and North America. In Kenya, for example, author John Karanja finds that all Protestants meet the four-fold definition of evangeli-cal, whether they are in the older, mission-founded Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, the somewhat newer Church of the Nazarene or the Assemblies of God, or the dozens of recently emerged Pentecostal groups. In Zimbabwe, Isabella Mukonyora insists, even the so-called African Independent Churches (AICs) fit the “evangelical” cate-gory.

S A, with a common understanding of what evangelical Christianity is, and what democracy looks like, what do the authors find? As the study’s sponsors expected, evangelicals’ roles in public affairs are quite diverse, but some general trends are emerging.

1. All over the world, evangelicals are now engaging civic life and public affairs. In many places, movements of the born-again and Spirit-filled began on society’s margins—among tribal peoples in India, among the urban poor in Brazil, among the Mayans of the Guatemalan countrside, and across rural Africa. In many such settings, church leaders have taught that personal conversion and discipleship are the greatest priorities, and that politics is too dirty for Christians. Indeed, in places where politicians practice bribery, extor-tion, and cronyism with impunity, going into politics has all the moral allure of joining the mafia. As revival movements grow and flourish, however, adherents gain some social stability, and new expres-sions attract the middle class. While it is natural for evangelicals on the margins to focus on changing themselves rather than changing society, evangelical movements experience growing social responsibility as they grow in salience. Twenty years ago social scientists were describing the East African revival, Brazilian Pentecostalism, and the house churches of China as “other-worldly,” but today these movements show increasing civic engagement and political participation. In one of the most striking chapters of this series, Kim-Kwong Chun documents remarkable changes in officially atheist China: the election of Christian local officials among the Lao people, who are now predominantly Christian, and the successful efforts of new and unregistered churches elsewhere to gain government recognition.

2. Evangelicals can mobilize quickly and power-fully when a “kairos moment” emerges, but they rarely succeed in sustaining a public presenc. These books contain powerful stories of evangelicals responding to crises. In Peru, civil order and human rights were deeply imperiled in the 1990s by the Shining Path communist guerilla uprising and by President Alberto Fujimori, who after being elected in 1990 began to dismantle the nation’s democratic institutions. Evang-elicals led the way in forming “peasant patrols” to protect villagers from the guerilla-las, while the national evangelical council led protests against human rights viola-tions. Yet in spite of some initial success at electoral politics, Peruvian evangelicals have played a negligible role in govern-ment.

The same might be said of evangelicals in the Philippines. During the “People Power” uprising against the Marcos regime in the mid-1980s, both the Philippines Council of Evangelical Churches and the Inter-Varsity student ministry mobilized alongside Catholic pro-democracy forces. They did it again in 2001, protesting the corruption and violence of the Estrada regime. Yet there was little by way of sus-tained, principled evangelical presence in the nation’s political structures.

3. Evangelical groups often enter public affairs for group-serving purposes, and they are not immune to bribery, cronyism, and influence-peddling. In Indonesia, where Christians are very much in the minority, several prominent Pentecostal pastors became active in President Suharto’s party in order to secure government permission to build new church buildings or obtain licenses. Other Brazilian churches backed candidates in order to assure that evangelicals got their share of government food vouchers. Last U.S. evangelicals be too quick to judge here, they should recall that three of the stated reasons for found-ing the National Association of Evangelicals in the 1940s were to get favorable licensing for religious broadcasting, more military chaplaincies, and more army sur-plus goods for their missionaries. Another common theme propelling evangelical political engagement in the Global South today is triumphalist, neo-Pentecostal “birthright” theology, all about being the people of destiny, born to have dominion, believing that “our time has come.” Without a broader vision of how Christianity serves the common good or undergirds and animates democracy, evan-gelicals in elective office have been co-opted, repeatedly, by the corrupt political machines. As author Roberto Zub sad remarked in his chapter on Nicaragua, evangelicals’ votes “were being used to negotiate benefits and not to increase space for democracy.” Being an evangeli-cal, he concluded, “was no antidote for corruption.” Ditto for the continued cor-ruption in Zambia under the Pentecostal president, Frederick Chiluba, and in Nige-ria under the Baptist former general, Matthew Obasanjo.

4. Evangelical competition and proliferation nullify any idea of “evangelical blocs” or “new Christendoms.” In many places, evang-elical church growth gives rise to hopes that the movement can sweep “godly” can-didates into office by means of a united evangelical electorate. These schemes do not work. Evangelical movements grow by proliferating and diversifying; they tend to increase religious diversity, choice, and competition. Such conditions work against attempts to get activists to work together, whether in religion or politics. Paul Fre-ston wryly points out that in Latin Ameri-ca, visions of evangelical unity have mainly led to “a plethora of would-be un-i-fiers.” Freston also insists that evangelical movements bubble up “from below,” as grassroots movements, not as some foreign export from the Religious Right in the United States, as many earlier studies claimed. Indeed, these books clearly falsify
the notion that there are new theocracies arising or, as Philip Jenkins puts it, a “new Christendom.” Even in Zambia, where the born-again president proclaimed the land a “Christian nation,” the main effect of that rhetoric was to fortify the opposition, which contrasted his regime’s shenanigans to that ideal.

5. There are some signs of political matura-
tion and principled approaches among evan-
gelical movements. In some nations where evangelicals’ engagement in politics has had time to ripen, authors saw a definite turn from more self-serving to principled approaches. In South Korea, early evangel-
ical attachments in politics were more about gaining legitimation from the rulers than about serving biblical norms. In the 1960s and 1970s, only the more lib-
eral churches spoke out against repressive rule. But in the great “Democratic Strug-
gle” of 1987, large numbers of the more conserva-
tive holiness and Presbyterian churches joined the democratic move-
ment. The first democratically elected president, longtime dissident and reformer Kim Young-Sam, was an elder in a conser-
vative Presbyterian church and schooled in Calvinist social thought. His regime had limited success in effecting reforms, but in the ensuing years evangelical citizens’ reform movements, such as the Christian Ethics Movement and the Citizens Com-
nittee for Economic Justice, have multi-
plied. These groups constitute some 70 percent of all the nation’s NGOs.

In Brazil, Alexandre Fonseca finds that the UCKG still dominates the Liberal Party and has a caucus of dozens of legislators, but its formal platform and practical action have changed considerably. While first preoccupied with gaining favors from the existing regime, the UCKG caucus mem-
bers have become more concerned with the needs of their poor urban constituents and with government corruption and civil rights violations. Its members in the legis-
slature started coming from community-
serving ministries rather than barbershop and the gospel music scene.

6. Lausanne and evangelical students promote democ-
ocracy. I saw a striking pattern in these books that the editors and authors did not mention: a distinct source for much of the more principled evangelical social and political engagement across the regions. Repeatedly, the leaders of parachurch ministries and political parties that worked on behalf of the poor and the vul-
nerable, who spoke up for human rights and electoral reform and against corrup-
tion and autocratic rule came from two streams of Christian movements, and the worldwide network of evangelical leaders affiliated with the Lausanne Commit-
tee for World Evangelization. Inter-Var-
sity Christian Fellowship joined the People Power movement in the Philippines, while Campus Crusade played a central role in the formation of the Citizens Committee for Economic Justice in South Korea. Likewise in South Africa, it was members of Youth Alive, the evangelical stu-
dent fellowship started in Soweto by Caesar Molechatsi, who drove the Con-
cerned Evangelicals movement to resist apartheid in the 1980s. The Latin Ameri-
can Theological Fraternity, an evangelical network with strong ties to both the Laus-
anne committee and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, figures prominently in pro-democratic evangelical work across Latin America.

7. Evangelicals are much better at social action than at electoral politics. These three books are filled with accounts of evangelicals founding churches (of course), but also starting schools, organizing poor and vul-
erable workers, strengthening and encour-
egaging fellowships of women, combating child abuse, starting loan cooperatives for small businesses, running health clinics, operating feeding programs and advocating for basic civil rights. Evangelicals have a natural affinity for plain and poor people. They also quickly apply their talents for organizing and managing projects, picking up on contemporary popular culture, and sensing how the Gospel relates to new situa-
tions and forces of change. But how does this activism promote democracy? One recent study disparaged evangelical social work as, at best, “indirect resistance” to social injustice and social mis-
functioning and “faith-based social service delivery” when what was truly needed was “direct resistance” in the form of protest and advocacy.2 What these three books show, however, is that simple responses to need very often lead to organizing, advoca-
cy, and even electoral campaigns. Indeed, one of the main arguments of the “civil society” school of democracy is that all of these grassroots initiatives have positive roles to play in the creation of democratic values; they are the seedbeds of new democratic political movements. Evangelicals’ main contribution to democratization worldwide is in their penchant, like the early Methodists, for getting “organized to beat the devil,” responding quickly to per-
cesses that are creating new voluntary associations.

Evangelicals’ main deficit in support for democratization is their lack of princi-
pled political thought. Repeatedly, these books showed, evangelicals have gone rushing into electoral politics without a firm set of political principles, or even some long-term political goals. One of the movement’s greatest needs, therefore, is to develop political theology and philosophy. As Young-gi Hong, the Korean author put it, “evangelical democratic poli-
tics and social action need more devel-
oped and coherent theological foundations so that religions conviction supports free-
dom, justice, and peace, not political pre-
conceptions or particularistic interests.”

This rich collection of cases can seem ex-
otic at points to American readers. Can you imagine an Assemblies of God mem-
bearing holding a cabinet post in a socialist government? Brazil’s Benedita da Silva is indeed a far remove from her Assemblies brother, John Ashcroft, in the United States. Even so, there is not one of the main trends listed above that does not apply to evangelicals in the United States. It is astonishing to see that evangelicals worldwide, with their enormous variety, have these broad family traits. As I read these studies, I was reminded repeatedly of some of the traits that Mark Noll found in early evangelicalism.

The most central trait, according to Noll, is a project for the world. For evangelicals worldwide are finding out.

Jesus has not come back yet. So now what? More of the same? That won’t do, evangelicals worldwide are finding out. They have a new salience and significance in societies where they were once marginal and nearly invisible. With new status comes new responsibilities. The sec-
ond half of their gospel mandate, after spreading the good news of personal salva-
tion and baptizing those who accept it, is giv-
ing witness to God’s justice, peace, and full flourishing, teaching the nations God’s larger plan of redemption.

So evangelicals are founding schools, seminaries, universities, community devel-
opment agencies, businesses, media out-
lts, health clinics, women’s associations, youth groups, and, indeed, political move-
ments and parties. Yet this activism is very short on theory and principle. That is per-
haps the greatest take-away lesson from these pioneering studies. Evangelicals have created new religious, social and political pluralism. But what do they think about that? How do they reckon with it? Now what?

1. According to Shah, the research and initial writ-
ing were finished by the mid-2000s, but these books only now appear. For studies of such prototypic and even revelatory settings, this lag-time is a serious problem. For Christian scholars, international work is urgent and essential. We simply must get better at sponsoring, organizing, and communicating it. One important solution, I think, is to strengthen study cen-
ters in the Global South and East.


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