

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 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, Pentecostals and charismatics account for more than a third of the Christians. Christians constitute small minorities in Asian nations except South Korea (30 percent) and the Philippines (85 percent), but wherever there are Christians in Asia, evangelicals in general 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 (INFEMIT), has been led for many years by Vinay Samuel, an Indian theologian. INFEMIT operates the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, sponsors a geographically 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), organized 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.¹ 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

Joel Carpenter is director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity at Calvin College. With Lamin Sanneh he edited The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World (Oxford Univ. Press).

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“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 INFEMIT’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 Efraín Ríos 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 Presbyterians 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 relationship that make a broad definition of “evangelical” a living reality. They use the four-fold definition devised by

Books discussed in this essay:

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

David H. Lumsdaine, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Asia* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).

Terence O. Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).

the British historian, David Bebbington: evangelical Christianity emphasizes 1) the centrality of Christ's atoning death on the cross (crucicentrism), 2) the authority of the Bible and the centrality of Bible study for spiritual growth (biblicism), 3) the need for a personal and substantial life change (conversionism), and 4) a sense of urgency about practicing this faith in society and commending it to others (activism).

Applying this definition 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 evangelical, 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" category.

So, 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 countryside, 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, extortion, 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 expressions 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 "otherworldly," but today these movements show increasing civic engagement and political participation. In one of the most striking chapters of this series, Kim-Kwong Chan documents remarkable changes in officially atheist China: the election of Christian local officials among the Liso 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 powerfully when a "kairos moment" emerges, but they rarely succeed in sustaining a public presence. 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. Evangelicals led the way in forming "peasant patrols" to protect villagers from the guerillas, while the national evangelical council

led protests against human rights violations. Yet in spite of some initial success at electoral politics, Peruvian evangelicals have played a negligible role in government.

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 sustained, 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 permits for religious activities. In Brazil, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), the largest Pentecostal body, fielded slates of candidates and infiltrated the Liberal Party. Its initial aim was to get favorable consideration for radio and TV licenses. Other Brazilian churches backed candidates in order to assure that evangelicals got their share of government food vouchers. Lest U.S. evangelicals be too quick to judge here, they should recall that three of the stated reasons for founding the National Association of Evangelicals in the 1940s were to get favorable licensing for religious broadcasting, more military chaplaincies, and more army surplus 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, evangelicals in elective office have been co-opted, repeatedly, by the corrupt political machines. As author Roberto Zub sadly remarked in his chapter on Nicaragua, evangelicals' votes "were being used to negotiate benefits and not to increase space for democracy." Being an evangelical, he concluded, "was no antidote for corruption." Ditto for the continued corruption in Zambia under the Pentecostal president, Frederick Chiluba, and in Nigeria under the Baptist former general, Matthew Obasanjo.

4. Evangelical competition and proliferation nullify any idea of "evangelical blocs" or "new Christendoms." In many places, evangelical church growth gives rise to hopes that the movement can sweep "godly" candidates 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 Freston wryly points out that in Latin America, visions of evangelical unity have mainly led to "a plethora of would-be unifiers."

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 put it, a “new Christendom.” Even in Zambia, where the born-again president proclaimed the land a “Christian nation,” the main effect of that rubric was to fortify the opposition, which contrasted his regime’s shenanigans to that ideal.

5. There are some signs of political maturation and principled approaches among evangelical 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 evangelical attachments in politics were more about gaining legitimization from the rulers than about serving biblical norms. In the 1960s and 1970s, only the more liberal churches spoke out against repressive rule. But in the great “Democratic Struggle” of 1987, large numbers of the more conservative holiness and Presbyterian churches joined the democratic movement. The first democratically elected president, longtime dissident and reformer Kim Young-Sam, was an elder in a conservative 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 Committee for Economic Justice, have multiplied. 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 members have become more concerned with the needs of their poor urban constituents

and with government corruption and civil rights violations. Its members in the legislature started coming from community-serving ministries rather than from barber shops and the gospel music scene.

6. Lausanne and evangelical students promote democracy. 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 reform-minded NGOs that worked on behalf of the poor and the vulnerable, who spoke up for human rights and electoral reform and against corruption and autocratic rule came from two sources: student Christian movements, and the worldwide network of evangelical leaders affiliated with the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. Inter-Varsity 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 the members of Youth Alive, the evangelical student fellowship started in Soweto by Caesar Molebatsi, who drove the Concerned Evangelicals movement to resist apartheid in the 1980s. The Latin American Theological Fraternity, an evangelical network with strong ties to both the Lausanne Committee and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, figures prominently in pro-democratic evangelical work across Latin America.

INFEMIT itself is a product of this network, which might help explain these authors’ interest in highlighting this strain of evangelical thought and action. But it is indeed significant. Little could the Anglo-American founders of the Lausanne and campus ministry movements have imagined that their emphasis on thoughtful Bible study and a “whole gospel for the whole world” would help animate democratic movements around the globe. The irony would not be lost on Campus Crusade’s creator, the late Bill Bright, who was an early supporter of the Religious Right in the United States.

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 vulnerable workers, strengthening and encouraging 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 situations 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 misery; mere “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, advocacy, 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 perceived needs by creating new voluntary associations.

Evangelicals’ main deficit in support for democratization is their lack of principled political thought. Repeatedly, these studies 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 Korea chapter author put it, “evangelical democratic politics and social action need more developed and coherent theological foundations so that religious conviction supports freedom, justice, and peace, not political pre-conceptions or particularistic interests.”

This rich collection of cases can seem exotic at points to American readers. Can you imagine an Assemblies of God member 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 quest for religious authenticity. Evangelicals want *true* religion, *real* Christianity. The heart of evangelicalism, therefore, is neither theological, nor political, nor commercial, nor therapeutic. It tends to be personal first, then small-group communal second; it aims to make Christianity real to ordinary people. Calling evangelicals “other-worldly” never did capture the spirit of their outlook. They focus on personal character formation as well as on eternal salvation. They value being good and doing good, but they are more intent on changing themselves than on changing the world. Indeed, one classic evangelical social ethic that Noll identified and several of these studies’ authors found still current today is that the best way to change the world is through changing hearts, one at a time.

Even so, evangelicals can offer a prophetic social critique. Historian Andrew Walls argues that early evangelicalism was “a religion of protest against a Christian society that is not Christian enough.”³ But evangelicalism’s historic strength—its personalism—is its sociopolitical weakness. Its intent focus on personal salvation and spiritual formation can sap the movement’s resources away from

focused and disciplined thinking about responsible Christian living in the world. Evangelicals are inventive, resourceful, and opportunistic. But their proclivity for ad hoc creativity and activism often works against their valuing intellectual work, engaging traditions of Christian social and political thought, and developing principle-driven, long-term strategies. Personally being good and doing good, and expecting that God will bring sweeping social change by means of the next revival, are not promising ingredients for a sustained approach to social reform. These ideas do not fortify patient, principled service in politics and governance.⁴

If ever there was a time that evangelical Christians needed to develop lines of social and political thought, it is now. Around the world, as these studies dramatically show, evangelical movements and their leaders face a “now what?” moment. They have experienced personal transformation, and have shared this good news with many others. Signs and wonders have appeared, and hundreds of millions have responded in faith. Churches have arisen and grown. Many good works and the agencies to drive them have resulted. But 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 second half of their gospel mandate, after spreading the good news of personal salvation and baptizing those who accept it, is giving 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 development agencies, businesses, media outlets, health clinics, women’s associations, youth groups, and, indeed, political movements and parties. Yet this activism is very short on theory and principle. That is perhaps 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 writing were finished by the middle of 2002, but these books only now appear. For studies of such protean and even volatile 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 centers in the Global South and East.

2. R. Drew Smith, “Conclusion,” in Smith, ed., *Freedom’s Distant Shores: American Protestants and Post-Colonial Alliances with Africa* (Baylor Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 225-226.

3. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis Books, 1996), p. 81.

4. Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 232-33, 254-55, 261-62, identifies these traits in early evangelicalism. They continue to this day.

