BOOK PROSPECTUS

“Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation” Revisited

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Nature of the Proposed Volume:

This volume assesses the religious beliefs, moral values, and political characteristics of evangelical college students today, and it does so in terms of a longitudinal analysis of how such religious beliefs, moral values, and political characteristics exhibit change and continuity over time. Analytically, the study is set broadly within the context of secularization theory and more narrowly in the context of a replication of a previous study conducted nearly two decades earlier—namely, James Davison Hunter’s Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation. This replication entailed using an identical instrument employed by Hunter and administered to students attending the same nine evangelical colleges he surveyed. In addition to comparisons of identical religious beliefs, moral values, and political attitudes of evangelical college students over time, comparisons of identical questions are made with evangelical adults in the mass public who have also had some college education. Thus, the thrust of the study is one that seeks to ascertain, first, the extent to which students attending these particular evangelical college either mirror or diverge from evangelical college students attending the same institutions nearly two decades ago and, second, the extent to which they either mirror or diverge from their older co-religionists in the mass public at the same point in time. In other words, is “the coming generation” of evangelicals distinctive in terms of their religious beliefs, moral values, and political characteristics, as Hunter suggested much earlier, or is “the coming generation” simply one that reflects continuity with the past and full integration within the larger evangelical subculture of today?

Potential Market for the Proposed Volume:

This volume is likely to have appeal to particular segments of the scholarly community as well as segments of educated church laity. First, this volume should be of considerable interest to those within the fields of sociology of religion and religious studies. Evangelicals are an important religious group within American society and within American religious life. In addition, since the volume addresses the extent to which change is evident over time, the volume should be of considerable interest to scholars concerned with the issue of how the process of secularization and growth of pluralism may shape religious beliefs and moral values over time. Second, since evangelicals constitute an important political segment within the American electorate and since this volume assesses the political characteristics of evangelical college students over time, this volume should also have some cross-over appeal to scholars interested in the relationship between religion and politics within the American electoral context. Finally, this volume should have considerable interest to administrators, faculty, and students who attend the nearly 100 colleges associated with the Council of Christian Colleges.
and Universities, an association of largely evangelical colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada.

The volume is written to be scholarly in nature, yet understandable for college students and educated laity. While volume employs analysis of data for comparative purposes, such analyses are largely descriptive in nature—based primarily the use of frequency distributions. As a result, we have written the volume to be highly accessible—one that is accessible to undergraduates, yet of theoretical and empirical significance to scholars and college administrators alike. Likewise, it is written to be accessible to educated church laity, yet of considerable interest to many clergy as well.

**Anticipated Completion of the Proposed Volume:**

The proposed volume is nearly completed. Polished drafts have been completed for five of the eight chapters. Basically, it is the introductory chapter and the concluding chapter that still need be refined and polished, as well as some work on the chapter on political civility and tolerance. It is anticipated that a completed draft of the manuscript should be ready no later than March 31, 2001.

**Projected Length and Illustrations:**

It is anticipated that the volume will be somewhere between 225 to 275 double-spaced pages in length. It will likely include somewhere around 35 tables.

**Background to the Volume:**

For much of this century, observers have predicted that American evangelicalism would wilt under pressure from the forces of secularization and modernity. In his award-winning book, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, James Davison Hunter examined changes in American Evangelicalism's identity and significance as a cultural system by focusing primarily on the attitudes of students at evangelical colleges. Hunter’s analysis was based almost exclusively on surveys conducted with a sample of students drawn from nine evangelical colleges. Hunter used purposive (rather than random) methods in selecting these nine colleges, in order to ensure that a broad range of Protestant evangelical colleges and their students were included in the study. With the assistance of cooperative administrators and faculty members at each of the nine colleges, questionnaires were then distributed to randomly-selected samples of students.

While Hunter contended that “one can only be amazed by the resilience of Protestant orthodoxy in its long encounter with the modern world order,” his examination of students attending evangelical colleges and seminaries raised disturbing questions about the future of American Evangelicalism. One reason for this was his assessment that higher education, including that at evangelical colleges, is playing a “significant role in the erosion of the symbolic boundaries of conservative Protestantism” (Hunter 1987, 206). Indeed, according to Hunter, education at evangelical colleges appeared to be having “counter-intentional” results, and, as a result, he concluded that “nearly everything reviewed” in his research “could provide reasonable grounds for pessimism” (Hunter 1987, 203).

For American Evangelicalism to retain its vitality, it (like any other faith tradition) must provide its adherents with cognitive and normative boundaries that help them make sense of
their lives and that serve to explain the meaning of life in ultimate terms. This is the source of religion's tremendous ability to stimulate loyalty and promote action. Religious orthodoxies that fail properly to maintain boundaries and provide such meaning risk alienating people and facing both a loss of member support and a decline in institutional vitality.

According to Hunter, American Evangelicalism today may be witnessing “an erosion of precisely the sort of symbolic boundaries that many have argued are necessary for the growth if not maintenance of its institutions and constituencies” (Hunter 1987, 204). This erosion has been gradual, and its more negative consequences may not be readily apparent in the short term. But Hunter argues that it is likely to have serious long-term consequences.

While Hunter's book was critically acclaimed, it suffers from several serious shortcomings. First, while Hunter intended to assess changes within American Evangelicalism over time, his study was largely based on “cross-sectional” data that can, at best, provide us with a picture of college students' attitudes at only a single point in time. Thus, while Hunter made assessments of changes within American Evangelicalism, his data really do not enable him to discern any real attitudinal changes among evangelical college students or to assess with any validity purported trends in such attitudes. Second, while Hunter was seeking to assess generational change among educated American evangelicals, he did not even compare, when possible, the attitudes of those students attending his nine evangelical with those evangelicals in the mass public who had attended some college. Certainly, if important changes were taking place among educated evangelicals, then such changes might well be evident had he compared at his one cross-section in time those college-educated evangelicals who were much older (e.g., those 50 years of age or older) with his sample of evangelical college students. But, Hunter never provided such comparisons either.

A new generation of evangelical college students is on the scene, and Hunter’s data, collected in 1982, are nearly two decades old. Our work is designed to replicate, update, and expand upon Hunter's important study. In our study, we utilize data from surveys of undergraduate students attending the same nine schools involved in Hunter's original analysis. Moreover, our surveys contained almost all of the same questions Hunter used in his study of evangelical college students conducted in the early 1980s. As a result, our replication of Hunter’s study permits us to assess change among evangelical college students over time as well as to compare those college students currently attending evangelical colleges with those older, college-educated, evangelicals found within American society today. We hope that by examining key attitudes of today's evangelical college students we may be better able to understand what, if any, important changes may be occurring within conservative Protestantism and whether or not conservative Protestantism has a future in the modern world.

References


1 The nine colleges are Bethel, George Fox, Gordon, Houghton, Messiah, Seattle Pacific, Taylor, Westmont, and Wheaton. Questionnaires were mailed to every third student listed in the respective student directories of these colleges. Out of a total of 5,257 questionnaires mailed, 2,677 were returned, producing a composite response rate of 50.9 percent for the nine colleges.
Outline of the Proposed Volume:

Chapter 1
When Morning Gilds the Sky? Evangelicalism in Contemporary Society

This introductory chapter begins by examining the nature and importance of evangelicalism in contemporary American society. It then discusses Hunter’s work on *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, including the structure of the study and its major findings. Finally, the chapter describes the purpose and structure of the present study.

Chapter 2
A Mighty Fortress is Our God? Secularization Theory and the Problem of Modernity

This chapter provides an analysis of secularization theory in its various forms (e.g., privatization and “post-modernism”). In particular, the chapter assesses the limitations of secularization theory and its relative value for understanding the nature of religious life among today’s evangelical students.

Chapter 3
How Firm a Foundation? The Theological Beliefs of Evangelical College Students

This chapter examines the nature of religious beliefs and practices among evangelical college students today. In particular, it seeks to address whether Hunter’s asserted erosion of evangelical faith over time is valid. Not only are comparisons made between evangelical college students today with those surveyed in the early 1980s, but comparisons are also made with regard to how evangelical college students today either mirror or depart from the religious beliefs and practices exhibited by older generations of American evangelicals. Are there important changes among evangelical college students over time or between younger and older generations of American evangelicals today? Our data provide substantial grounds for questioning Hunter’s conclusions.

Chapter 4
Living for Jesus? The Moral Boundaries of Evangelical College Students

This chapter examines the concept of “moral boundaries” as detailed by Durkheim and others and addresses whether or not changes are occurring in the moral boundaries that historically have helped to define American Evangelicalism. Matters related to the perceptions of moral propriety, gender roles, and the relative importance of self in relationship to others are first described and examined, and then assessed over time. Comparisons are made between the attitudes of evangelical college students today and the attitudes of those of students surveyed in the early 1980s as well as between the views of evangelical college students today with those exhibited by older generations of American evangelicals. In general, our data suggest that, although there have been some changes, the moral boundaries of evangelical college students have not substantially eroded or become more permeable over time.
Chapter 5
We’re Marching to Zion? The Social Theologies of Evangelical College Students

Social theology concerns the application of basic theological principles in concrete social situations. In this chapter we examine several aspects of the social theology of students attending evangelical colleges. We find that today’s students express views that reflect those historically associated with evangelicalism. They still largely adhere to an individualist worldview and believe that social problems are best solved by “changing hearts” rather than reforming social institutions. Yet, they also express doubts about the efficacy of such perspectives, suggesting perhaps and increased openness to structural solutions. The students examined tend to be somewhat critical of the institutional church, seeing it as too involved in organizational, rather than spiritual, matters.

Chapter 6
Who is on the Lord’s Side? The Politics of Evangelical College Students

This chapter focuses on the politics of evangelical college students today -- whether it has changed in its emphasis since the early days of the Reagan administration, and what appears to be its present direction. The chapter focuses on the partisanship, ideological perspectives, and public policy positions of evangelical students today. The data suggest, somewhat paradoxically, that while evangelical college students appear to have become more conservative and Republican over time, their positions on the issues have not moved in the same direction.

Chapter 7
Amazing Grace? Political Civility and Tolerance among Evangelical College Students

Critics have long associated evangelicalism with intolerance and bigotry. This chapter focuses on these charges by examining evangelical college students openness to change, perspectives on church-state relations, levels of tolerance, and degree of civility. Like Hunter, we find that, for the most part, evangelical students have bought into American values of tolerance and civility.

Chapter 8
In the Sweet By and Bye? Evangelical College Students in the New Millennium

This concluding chapter summarizes major findings with regard to the coming generation of American evangelicalism. In particular, it examines the relative level of continuity and change which is evident and discusses the implications of these findings for American Evangelicalism in the next millennium.