



BOOK REVIEW

Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite.
By D. Michael Lindsay. Oxford University Press, 2007. 332 pages.
\$24.95.

In *Faith in the Halls of Power*, sociologist D. Michael Lindsay takes a novel approach to understanding what America's most influential evangelicals are thinking: he asks them. The method has been tried before, of course, in works such as Nancy Ammerman's classic *Bible Believers* (1987) and R. Marie Griffith's sensitive *God's Daughters* (1997), the latter of which Lindsay cites as a model. Most of this ethnographic work, though, has concentrated on ordinary Christians whose rich local cultures often contrasted with the sharp rhetoric of the New Christian Right's national leaders. Critics who wish to unmask evangelicalism as a dire threat to the Republic, an approach most recently exemplified in Kevin Phillips's *American Theocracy* (2006) and Michelle Goldberg's *Kingdom Coming* (2006), have usually paid more attention to the leaders and the rhetoric. Like Phillips and Goldberg, Lindsay is interested in national religious leadership, but, unlike them, he proposes to employ Griffith's notion of "critical empathy" in studying it (xiii). The result is a clear-eyed, evenhanded analysis of evangelical influence that dispenses with overheated fears of theocracy to present a complex and nuanced portrait.

The heart of Lindsay's project is the interviews he conducted with powerful evangelicals across the country. These came in two types. He talked with 157 figures in the religious world, ranging from New Christian Right media mogul Pat Robertson to left-leaning preacher Tony Campolo. At the end of these interviews, Lindsay asked for recommendations of other influential evangelicals that he could question. Here things got more interesting, as those recommendations led him to interview 203 elites who were "public leaders" known primarily for something other than their evangelical faith. The list includes former presidents Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush, religion scholars Joel Carpenter and Mark Noll, business executives from J. P. Morgan Chase and Chick-fil-A, and two-time National Football League MVP Kurt Warner. This

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second group, consisting of evangelicals with prominent positions in “secular” spheres, is the main focus of the study.

The book’s multifaceted understanding of power is one of its great strengths. “The evangelical vision,” Lindsay notes, “is sweeping and significantly more comprehensive than outside observers realize,” encompassing “much more than a campaign to win the White House or a call for Hollywood to produce family-friendly entertainment” (3). The first section of *Faith in the Halls of Power* deals with the well-worn subject of national politics, but after that Lindsay has sections on the academy, arts and entertainment, and business. He describes powerful evangelicals’ ideas about their authority while simultaneously uncovering the social networks, Bible study groups, foundations, and conferences that they create. Most admirable is his attempt to blaze some trails through the thickets of American corporate culture. Observers of evangelicalism may know a lot about the apocalyptic *Left Behind* novels and the late Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University, but what about the Intel Christian Bible Network or the National Institute of Business and Industrial Chaplains (175–76)? Lindsay does not provide much depth on these organizations, but that is less a criticism of his book than a challenge to scholars who have written so extensively about the religion of Capitol Hill while ignoring the religion of Wall Street and Silicon Valley.

In more excitable hands (see Phillips and Goldberg), Lindsay’s material would be highly amenable to conspiracy theories, with the list of interviewees in the back of the book serving as Christ’s own “Red network” infiltrating every corner of American life. The example of a Washington, DC group called “the Fellowship” will undoubtedly set certain imaginations running wild. Emerging during the early Cold War, this organization brings the capital’s political elites together for prayer and Bible study, while also maintaining a network of evangelicals overseas. More than one of Lindsay’s subjects call it an “underground State Department,” but he sees a more modest role. The Fellowship has been involved in “occasional diplomatic efforts,” he writes, but mostly it “provides much-needed social lubrication for an increasingly partisan Washington” (36). Both Republicans and Democrats participate in the organization, which refrains from taking sides on abortion and other controversial issues. This is Lindsay’s model of evangelical powerbrokers: they are influential, but the effects of their influence are diffuse and multidirectional.

Indeed, the vaunted New Christian Right has a surprisingly diminished place in this depiction of the evangelical landscape. Lindsay’s elites tend to admire the politically amorphous minister Rick Warren rather than strident reactionaries such as James Dobson, the head of the media and lobbying organization Focus on the Family. Dobson, grumbles one evangelical political leader, cannot “focus on the family because he’s always focusing on someone else’s business” (58). Lindsay refuses to see his subjects as a theocratic menace because he thinks that they are too divided to rule. The evangelical outlook can provide a “shared language” (52), he argues, but “in terms of actual policies ... religious faith has played a relatively small role in governance” (51). These leaders may wish to “bring faith into every sphere of ... life” (3), but

that project means wildly different things to different people. At times the book may underestimate the conservative allegiances of evangelicals. When Lindsay begins a chapter on politics with the Democrat Jimmy Carter and one on the arts with the abstract painter Makoto Fujimura, a kind of spiritual affirmative action seems to be at work, pushing the most liberal and cosmopolitan figures to the front of the picture.

This moderate, worldly face of evangelicalism is much more than a narrative trick, though. The public leaders in the “halls of power” differ from both ordinary evangelicals and popular mobilizers such as Dobson. Lindsay argues for a distinction between “cosmopolitan” and “populist” evangelicalism. This is one of his most important assertions, though he waits until the book’s conclusion to lay it out explicitly (a case of hiding one’s light under a bushel, to put it in evangelical terms). “Populist” evangelicalism encompasses the alternative world of Christian books, music, film, and political protest, the “evangelical subculture” expertly analyzed in Randall Balmer’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (2006) and Susan Harding’s *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (2000).

Lindsay, on the other hand, is not looking primarily at the subculture. His subjects work in the mainstream, and “whereas converting one’s opponent (in religious, political, and social terms) is usually the principal goal of populist evangelicalism, the cosmopolitan brand is more concerned with legitimacy,” with making Christianity respectable in the public square (220). The reaction of these “cosmopolitans” to the practices of their “populist” coreligionists is often chilly. “People went out of their way,” Lindsay notes, “to say they had never read *Left Behind* or purchased a painting by Thomas Kinkade,” the Christian artist known for his sentimental depictions of churches, cottages, and landscapes. One of these sophisticates mentions Fujimura’s experimental abstractions instead, while a business leader tells Lindsay that “he prefers to read Leo Tolstoy or Dorothy Sayers rather than the ‘evangelical kitsch’ at his local Christian bookstore” (219). Nobody in this study has much to say about the Rapture, Israel’s role in end-time prophecy, or various other extravagant claims of “populist” theology.

The “cosmopolitans” have social differences as well. They are more likely than evangelicals as a whole to be adult converts, a status that may help explain their distance from the flows of Christian popular culture. Then, too, many of Lindsay’s subjects are put off by the vagaries of local congregations. “I never had the time to become part of the workings of a church,” former attorney general C. Everett Koop admits, while television host Art Linkletter calls himself a “floating Christian,” unmoored from any specific church home (222). These elites, especially those in the corporate world, focus their energies instead on parachurch groups that aspire to businesslike efficiency.

What does all this portend? Lindsay is not altogether sure. At times he seems to suggest an incipient secularization. “Evangelicals in Hollywood differ little from others in the entertainment industry” (130), he writes, while most business executives in his study “tend to bracket off their faith from decisions about purchases” (192). Nonetheless, he concludes that these leaders “remain

very different from other leaders, and the reason is their faith,” even if that faith lacks the exuberance of its “populist” counterpart (226). Perhaps, then, evangelicals are forming an unofficial “Protestant Establishment,” as the main-line denominations did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Again, Lindsay dissents, pointing out that evangelicals are still a minority group among the nation’s political, cultural, and economic decision-makers. *Faith in the Halls of Power* provides an extraordinary map of faith and power today, but its author is not interested in predicting the future, so readers may wish for a bit more when they reach the end of the book. Then again, in a time when secular polemics forecast nothing less than an impending “American theocracy,” a little reluctance to prophesy may not be such a bad thing.

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