The New Evangelical Social Engagement, edited by Brian Steensland and Philip Goff

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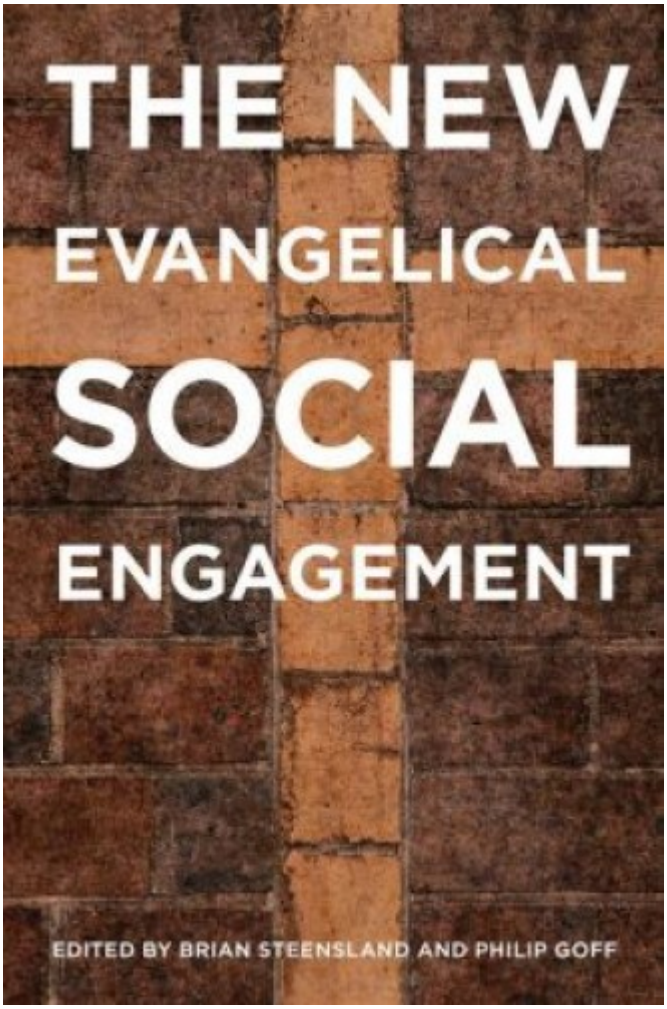

The New Evangelical Social Engagement

Edited by Brian Steensland and Philip Goff
Oxford University Press

Recently an academic friend whose views and worship practices meet all the usual criteria of evangelical told me he no longer owns the label. When I asked why, he answered simply, “When I tell people I am an evangelical, they automatically

assume I want America to bomb Guatemala.”

This valuable anthology addresses a topic that usually flies under the media’s radar: “new” evangelicals’ progressive social engagement in the past quarter century. Other works, such as David R. Swartz’s *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, Brantley W. Gasaway’s *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, and Heather Curtis’s forthcoming *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid*, tread some of this ground. *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, edited by distinguished scholars of American religion at Indiana University/Purdue University, amplifies these works with deeply researched historical and sociological case studies.

The chapters document the impressive range of new evangelicals’ efforts. Their endeavors include sustained attention to war, disease, racism, patriarchy, homelessness, hunger, corruption, poverty, illiteracy, environment, urban renewal, economic development, human trafficking, HIV/

AIDS, religious repression, and abortion on demand. In an elegantly crafted introduction, the editors place that work in historical context. The seeds of new evangelicals’ concerns appeared in 18th-century revivals, germinated in antebellum reform societies, flowered in midcentury abolitionism, and fully bloomed in perfectionistic crusades against many social abuses in the closing years of the 19th century. Though evangelicals never totally abandoned social reform, the middle decades of the 20th century saw fewer such efforts and occasionally sharp criticism of them. Social reform purportedly distracted from the church’s primary job of spreading the gospel.

By the 1970s, however, a small but vocal contingent of evangelicals were trying to reverse that trend and return the movement to the expansive social vision of the 19th century. Fifty leaders produced the landmark Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern in 1973. It addressed not only personal and social suffering but also the structural conditions that foster it. These voices remained through the 1980s and 1990s, but the cacophony of the religious right and the ensuing culture wars drowned them out, especially in the ears of the mainstream media. By the 1990s and 2000s, though, a new breed of evangelicals had joined the chorus. Insisting that authentic Christian faith must look out as well as up, these activists unhesitatingly coupled personal salvation with social justice. Though they were preponderantly young, white, urban, and highly educated, they found

themselves united less by demographics, region, or partisan political affiliation than by resistance to the religious right.

The contributors to this volume offer focused descriptions and analyses of different aspects of this new—or at least newish—evangelical social witness. James S. Bielo describes emerging evangelicals' resistance to epistemic modernism, megachurches, and church growth ideologies, in favor of simplicity, community, prayer, study, work, service, hospitality, justice, holiness, and celebration—all ideally centered in the local community. The fruits of collaboration mark the studies by John Schmalzbauer and Omri Elisha. Schmalzbauer focuses on the 2006 national meeting of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, where the prefix *multi* seemed the new byword: multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, and multinational. Using Mike Huckabee's 2012 quip "We are all Catholics now" as a springboard, Elisha shows how new evangelicals drew inspiration from progressive Catholics, who share many of their concerns. Though he is careful not to claim causal linkages between Catholic and new evangelical strategies, he traces affinities in their compassion efforts.

David R. Swartz shines light on new evangelicals' efforts to alleviate suffering internationally, especially their attention to HIV/AIDS, human trafficking, climate change, and unequal distribution of resources. The international reach of many NGOs claims the attention of Amy Reynolds and Stephen Offutt. Moving beyond disaster relief since the 1950s, such NGOs have increasingly turned to community building and long-term economic development. Will Samson explores the new monasticism, a widespread effort to find resources for personal, social, and material renewal at home, in grassroots settings, and often in communal living arrangements such as Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina.

Detailed fieldwork defines the chapters by Adriane Bilous and John C. Green. Bilous tracks the work of activist, millennial, evangelical women in New York City. Though many of these women avoid the label evangelical, they espouse a distinctly evangelical form of servant ministry, stressing volunteer work and mutual submission in place of patriarchy. Green presents a detailed demographic and political portrait of four distinguishable subgroups among the new evangelicals: populists as well as the traditional left, right, and center. The populists distinguish themselves by their engagement with "old issues" such as abortion and "new issues" such as human trafficking.

Environmental degradation and racial justice occupy chapters by Laurel Kearns and by Gerardo Marti and Michael O. Emerson. Kearns explores both liberal and conservative forms of green evangelicalism. The former, especially in the case of the Evangelical Environmental Network, emphasizes “creation care,” while the latter, as exemplified by the Cornwall Alliance, emphasizes “stewardship of creation.” Marti and Emerson consider new evangelicals’ efforts to prompt churches to diversify racially, especially by drawing on the advice of diversity experts. The authors chastise such experts for perpetuating stereotypes and ignoring larger issues of structural discrimination.

Finally, Daniel K. Williams traces new evangelicals’ “lonely” attempt to preserve unborn life in the context of the kinds of issues traditionally spearheaded by the secular left. New evangelicals’ solicitude for unborn life differs from the religious right’s allegedly similar concerns. The religious right cultivates criminalizing legislative solutions while appealing to culture war shibboleths. New evangelicals, in contrast, root their efforts in the “seamless garment” of a consistent pro-life ethic that challenges militarism and capital punishment and seeks expanded social services for families.

Reflections by historian Joel Carpenter, sociologist R. Stephen Warner, and the late ethicist Glen Harold Stassen wrap up the volume. Carpenter and Warner analyze the continuities and discontinuities between the older and newer forms of evangelical social witness, while Stassen’s commentary urges new evangelicals to find deep spiritual resources in his own Anabaptist tradition.

The New Evangelical Social Engagement offers a treasure of resources. Contributors discuss the work of movement pioneers such as Fuller Seminary president Richard Mouw, *Christianity Today* editor David Neff, and *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallis. The endeavors of current leaders, such as New York City pastor Tim Keller and author Shane Claiborne, also receive extended treatment. Crucial statements like the 1973 Chicago Declaration, the 1994 Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation, and the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act win close scrutiny, too.

A number of themes recur. Perhaps the most conspicuous is new evangelicals’ refusal to be pegged politically. They all define their mission horizontally, as an effort to engage, reform, and redeem the external cultural, social, and natural environment, but they differ on the best political means for doing so. Also striking is how often new evangelicals have cooperated with Catholics and sometimes Jews as

coworkers in their causes.

To be sure, ironies abound. The voluntary poverty that some new evangelicals practice is not the same as involuntary poverty, and skipping a meal is not the same as going without one. Many partisans are acutely aware of those tensions even if they do not know how to resolve them. Women seem curiously absent from the leadership of a movement committed to repairing historic injustices. And many of the most salient social concerns of the era—immigration, imprisonment, obesity, substance abuse, and the humane treatment of animals—do not make the roster, at least in this study.

That being said, this timely volume offers a powerful corrective to the myth, pervasive in the media and among many academics, that all evangelicals are culture warriors. Evangelicals have much to account for, including foot-dragging on civil rights in the 1960s, perennial misogyny, and uncritical flag waving ever since World War II. But they also have much to be proud of. The massive presence of groups such as World Vision and Samaritan’s Purse—most recently on the front lines of the Ebola crisis in West Africa—are but two of countless cases in point. For millions of evangelicals, heaven above and heaven below are not so different after all.