A Portrait of Evangelical Christian Students in College

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Evangelical movements on college campuses today are visible manifestations of students' internalized faith and sense of spiritual purpose.[1] They reflect a complex convergence of beliefs and behavior that are at times counter to campus norms and the perspectives and practices of the student body as a whole. As an increasingly viable and vocal evangelical presence has taken shape in higher education—and not only within private, religious education—efforts to understand evangelical Christian students, their subculture, and the contribution they make to the pluralistic college environment are vital in promoting a healthy campus climate for students from multiple backgrounds and traditions. This essay considers the characteristics of evangelical students in terms of their social, political, and theological beliefs, their experiences on campus, and the patterns of spiritual development they exhibit. The concepts presented are based on an in-depth case study of a prototypical evangelical movement on a public university campus in 2004. The case study involved observations of group activities and interviews with student participants and staff.

Defining Evangelical

The term "evangelical" is a loaded construct with numerous associations in the political and social framework of American society. I will address those associations in time, but first a word about the essential beliefs that mark the foundation of the evangelical mindset. Although they are diverse in their denominational affiliations and exhibit a range of practices and theological views, evangelicals share in common four basic principles: (1) adherence to the authority and inerrancy of the Bible, (2) emphasis on the importance of sharing their faith with others (i.e., evangelizing), (3) belief in the significance of personal conversion when one is "born again," and (4) belief that salvation is based in the redemption provided through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Balmer, 2004).[2] Beyond these essential principles, evangelicals elude simple definition, yet my conversations with these students have resulted in a number of general themes on matters of conservatism, classroom and campus experiences, and spiritual development.

Traits and Beliefs: Countercultural Conservatism

Among Christians, conservatives have tended to align with evangelical Protestantism and liberals

with mainline Protestantism. Of course, this is a loose generalization and should not be taken to mean that mainline Protestant denominations are bereft of evangelically-minded members, or that left-leaning individuals never affiliate with evangelical churches. This complexity makes it difficult to seamlessly characterize the political and social tone existing within these religious subcultures. Generally speaking, though, mainline Protestant churches tend to endorse a more liberal, less literal theology and emphasize values and actions that promote social justice in the nation and the world. Evangelical Protestants have tended to occupy the other end of the liberal-conservative spectrum in contemporary Protestant Christianity. Theologically conservative evangelical beliefs and practices—such as Biblical inerrancy, salvation through Christ alone, proselytizing and personal conversion—are often assumed to exist simultaneously with political conservatism and reticence to engage with "worldly" culture.

Nonetheless, conservatism, when applied generically, is not an adequate descriptor of the complex nature of evangelical students' deeply held perspectives on matters of politics, theology, morality, and spiritual expression. Because evangelical students are increasingly prone to identify as "non-denominational Christian," they accept the implications of a community comprised of diverse denominational affiliations and traditions—namely the disagreement that may exist on issues beyond the "core" beliefs of evangelical Christianity. Efforts to maintain group cohesion involve minimizing differences by appealing to the common bond established by these core theological beliefs.

On political matters, evangelical student organizations are decidedly quiet when it comes to specific stances on various issues so as to avoid fragmentation. Although evangelical students lean primarily in a conservative direction, some are disengaged politically (a trend also observed in the college student population at large), while others find that their campus religious organization has little bearing on their political attitudes. In any event, many evangelical students do not perceive themselves as Republicans or Democrats in the purest sense, and often hold both liberal and conservative attitudes simultaneously. Interviews with students demonstrate their tendency to report a personal political "average" to account for the discrepancies in their party affiliation. One student reported that she was "a moderate, because there are some issues that I feel very liberal about and others I feel very conservative about." Another expressed distaste for political labels: "I would say that I'm conservative, but I don't really like saying Republican or Democratic." Revealing their conservative side, evangelical students are predominately in favor of the pro-life agenda, whereas their liberal inclinations emphasize the importance of providing for the welfare of economically disadvantaged people, protecting the environment, implementing gun control, and abolishing the death penalty. These students are less definite in their views about gay and lesbian rights, such that those who approached the topic in interviews with me expressed significant conflict between their interpretation of biblical scriptures and their warm connections to gay or lesbian friends.

Notwithstanding the ambiguity of evangelical politics, when it comes to personal morality, the conservatism of these students is more readily apparent. The evangelical students I interviewed were virtually unanimous in their disapproval of sex outside of marriage, immodest dress, and excessive drug and alcohol use—factors which may lead to conflicts with the larger peer culture on

their campus. As this student suggests: "In the dorms, you're kind of forced [to be] with a group of people....I look back now, and I just don't keep in contact with too many of them because they all have different lifestyles. You know, their idea of a good time was getting a room and just drinking, and that wasn't my cup of tea." Many evangelical students also approach their personal relationships with the opposite sex using a traditional framework for understanding gendered realties and roles. By and large, leadership opportunities in religious contexts and dating and marriage relationships are girded by beliefs in essential, God-ordained gender differences and guided by the complementarian perspective, which maintains that men should be the initiators and primary leaders in the dual realms of church and home, while women occupy the submissive, "helping" roles in relation to male religious leaders and, in marriage, to their husbands.

Yet again, traditionalism falls by the wayside when we consider the spiritual expressiveness of evangelical students. The evangelical movement both on campus and beyond has taken strides to communicate the Christian faith to spiritual seekers through culturally relevant, "postmodern" approaches. Some authors have coined the phrase "new paradigm" churches to reflect evangelical congregations that meet in a casual and celebratory atmosphere and use sophisticated technology to create an "engaging multimedia worship experience" (Shibley, 1998, p. 75).[3] Miller (1998)[4] comments on the irony of theologically conservative evangelicals defying traditional worship environments at the same time that theologically liberal mainline Protestants maintain those traditions:

> Liberals modernized the message of Christianity, but they left relatively untouched the medium through which the message was being communicated.... In contrast, conservatives—and particularly the new paradigm churches—modernized (and continue to reinvent on a weekly basis) the medium, but they have refused to tinker with the supernaturalism inherent in the New Testament narratives (p. 209).

In the same way, evangelical students' efforts to follow a "straight and narrow" path in areas of personal morality and lifestyle do not translate into a joyless existence. Rather, evangelical students party with their friends, dance, appreciate the arts, and incorporate their lively musical tastes and media-savvy inclinations into their religious worship practices. Their social events are attuned to the moral boundaries they seek to maintain, but are enjoyed to the fullest nonetheless. As such, they resist the solemn conventions of "traditional" religion and have established new patterns of celebration and worship similar to those observed in new paradigm churches.

A *Los Angeles Times* writer described the mindset of this generation of evangelicals as one that "reconciles science and the Bible, body and soul; opposes both war and abortion;...and leapfrogs the two-party political divide. All the while refusing to renounce its conservative evangelical flag" (Rifkin, p. 24).[5] In other words, in a statement that mirrors findings from empirical research, Rifkin identifies young, educated evangelicals as uncompromising when it comes to Christian doctrine at the same time that they embrace ideologies encompassing a broad array of stances that cannot be defined as solely conservative or solely liberal. Indeed, a simplistic labeling of evangelical students as "conservative" is plainly unjustified. An alternative interpretation, which

I've deemed "countercultural conservatism," acknowledges their relatively conservative views, but distinguishes their beliefs and behaviors from classic Republicanism, the moral permissiveness they encounter on campus, and conventional religious practice. Politically speaking, students lean toward the right, but do not hesitate to embrace "liberal" positions that better accommodate their commitment—often derived from their Christian faith—to alleviating social problems such as poverty. Because of their conservative positions on morality, evangelical students are "countercultural" in the sense that they break quite a few of the norms governing the social aspects of campus life. Finally, spiritual practices are shaped by contemporary elements and freedom of expression that are in many ways counter to the conventionality of other religious groups and some church congregations (particularly those of mainline Protestants).

Encountering the Campus: In the Classroom and Beyond

Academic experiences for evangelical students on non-sectarian campuses are potential sites of conflict and discomfort for them, especially in classroom contexts where students' faith and intellect are confronted in numerous ways. Campuses that are prone to a basic division between the sciences and humanities/social sciences present multiple epistemologies with which students must contend. A student who had experienced both in his research university described:

> The science people [are] always very interested in evolution and scientific arguments. And then with my friends [on the other side of campus], it's more like they want to discuss problems with evil and stuff like that. More like philosophical issues associated with that.

Because the sciences are inclined toward a naturalistic (rather than a theistic) orientation, science classes in particular may be challenging for these students to navigate. Feeling uninformed on matters within the scientific realm make the possibility of debate in science settings less feasible for some students. Others encounter professors who respond negatively to students' personal metaphysical beliefs about the origins of life. On the other hand, the humanities and social sciences present another set of challenges in their emphasis on cultural relativism and rejection of grand narratives and absolute truth.

Given potential encounters with frameworks and worldviews that are misaligned with their own—whether in science or non-science disciplines—evangelical students may feel the need to "sell-out" in order to succeed in their classes. A first-year student who reported feeling troubled by this reality had this to say:

> To get the "A," you've got to repeat what the teacher tells you, regurgitate it, get your "A," and get out—even though you might not believe in it. I mean, to me, the irony of it all is that I have to play the part of somebody that is not true to himself.

In managing the conflict, students may develop a dichotomous approach—one in which their beliefs and their classroom learning exist in separate camps—in order to further their academic selves and simultaneously maintain their faith. One individual described it this way, "I kind of separate my faith from my school work just because this is what you're learning, and you have to

know *their* way just to succeed." Other students—those with greater confidence in challenging their faculty—may become defensive of their faith, speaking out against theories and philosophies with which they disagree.

Feeling the need to sell-out and/or defend in the classroom are not the sole elements of evangelical student experiences. Indeed, it is possible, given the right environment, for a student's religious identity (whether evangelical or otherwise) to serve not as a liability, but as one perspective among many in the ongoing classroom dialogue. Professors who encourage an open forum establish an atmosphere conducive to free expression. According to evangelical students with whom I have interacted, these open forums are most often encountered in religious studies courses where faculty are sensitive to the plurality of beliefs in the classroom and strive to incorporate multiple viewpoints.

Moreover, the notion of being challenged by professors and peers can be framed by evangelical students as a positive aspect of their academic lives. Although the concepts presented in college may not align harmoniously with their personal ideals, there is value in using observed incongruities as constructive opportunities for growth. A first-year reported in an interview, "In classes and things I found massive contradictions in my faith, which has caused me to make my faith more intellectual. It has not changed [the] things that I believe, but allowed me to solidify [them]."

To understand how Christian students with counterculturally conservative inclinations interact with the pluralistic campus at large, we must first recognize the commitment on the part of these students to the concept of absolute truth, which exists within a framework of openness to questions and intellectual honesty, but is absolutist in nature nonetheless. The second characteristic key to understanding the evangelical response to pluralism is the heightened sensitivity these students exhibit with respect to negative stereotypes that Christians are judgmental and unintelligent.

Whether truth exists beyond the social and cultural constructions of reality, and beyond that, whether one truth claim is more valid than its counterparts, are hotly contested questions in a society with multiple voices. The suggestion that one truth supercedes all others is met with criticism in our pluralistic world. In college and university settings that are in essence a microcosm of society, evangelical students are keenly aware of the consequences they face in making their convictions known. One student attributed the "bad press" Christians receive to the perception "that we're very condemning of other lifestyles, that we're very judgmental, that we reject people because they don't agree with us." Another spoke directly to the widely held opinions about evangelicals she observed on her campus. "Christians are sort of...stereotyped as bigots and just very unwilling to change their mind and to move on certain issues.... They're kind of seen as simple and not very intelligent." Regardless of the validity of these opinions, evangelical students more often than not assume truth to be absolute—while admitting that they do not comprehend truth's mysteries in full—and are also cognizant of the fact that it is this very characteristic that others around them find offensive. These paradoxical realities are a critical backdrop for making sense of students' experiences with otherness, to which I now turn.

One of the basic tenets of evangelical Christianity is that followers should do what the name implies: evangelize. In talking with evangelical students, I observed a handful of individuals who were, for the most part, comfortable with evangelism, but another substantial proportion of the students I interviewed expressed a great deal of ambivalence for a variety of reasons, one of which had to do with their desire to avoid classic stereotypes about Christians. Among those expressing more discomfort with respect to evangelizing strangers or evangelizing at all, the vast majority were first-year students. Conversely, students who had progressed beyond their first year of college exhibited greater confidence and conviction in the appropriateness of their evangelistic efforts. Thus, it is likely that adapting to the evangelistic expectations of campus evangelical organizations is predicated on exposure and adjustment to group norms over time.

The intricate web of associations among students' countercultural conservatism, assertions about truth, sensitivity to Christian stereotypes, and collective ambivalence toward evangelism begs the question: How do they relate to the "other" in their everyday lives?

Do they befriend and reach out? Do they retreat? It is difficult to account for the range of responses that transpired when I talked with students about what it was like to be a Christian on a public university campus. Most were hesitant to characterize their experience as filled with persecution or tremendous difficulty, and a number were even relatively content in their surroundings. Yet, the experience for the majority, I would venture, can best be summarized in one word: Unease – a sentiment that is understandable given the negative stereotypes evangelical students absorb about Christians from those around them.

One of the primary contributors to the unease they feel centers on the fact that their stance on moral absolutes can serve to distance evangelical students from their peers on campus. This disconnect from peers is in many ways an issue of differential preferences for social activities. Because the majority of these "counterculturally" conservative students are not engaged in the college-drinking scene and make lifestyle choices that differ from their peers, they often find themselves locked out of one of the principal means to social integration in college.

Although evangelical students may clash with their peers on issues of morality and personal behavior, religious and ideological diversity can be enriching components of the college experience. In diverse campus settings, evangelical students have numerous opportunities to interact with peers whose worldviews are unlike their own and show genuine interest in understanding the belief systems of others. Certainly there is heightened vulnerability in cross-group dialogue concerning religion. Students from all faith traditions are fearful of being stereotyped and misunderstood when engaging in these conversations. In desiring to avoid conflictual interactions with their peers, students are tempted to retreat to the safety of a like-minded peer group. Evangelical students report a sense of "instant intimacy" with their Christian peers, and find safe haven within the boundaries of their campus organizations. Nonetheless, students enjoy substantial rewards when they take risks, step beyond the ideological borders they have established, and approach others in a spirit of openness. Friends holding to other faith traditions and worldviews can provide the impetus for evangelical students to evaluate the practices and beliefs that they often take for granted. What's more, taking the time to reflect with

peers helps to clarify students' understanding of their own spiritual tradition. In the interest of creating a more livable and compassionate society, cross-group interactions serve a more global purpose as well: As a first-year student suggested, coming across a "diversity of opinions" encouraged "listening to other people with the attitude, not necessarily to refute them, but to understand them."

Spiritual Development: Truth Seeking and Crisis

Young adulthood represents a defining moment in the development of an authentic, self-authored faith or worldview. For evangelical students, the process of faith development involves probing the universality of the truth claims that their tradition embraces and undergoing points of crisis and struggle. The college years represent a unique period of exposure to contexts that challenge, disorient, and problematize absolutes, and as such prime students for the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual struggles that may serve as the precursors to a faith that is deliberately constructed and owned.

As indicated earlier, the notion of truth and its absoluteness is a central feature of the evangelical mindset. In interviews, most students shared reflections similar to this one: "There is something out there, whether or not I possess it, that is the truth no matter what. It doesn't change. It's not a variable...There's something there that is *it*, that is the end of everything...It doesn't matter what you do to it.... All that matters [is that] it's there, it exists, it's truth, with a capital 'T'."

Seeking truth through questions is a normative practice among evangelical students during young adulthood—particularly when exposed to a diverse ideological landscape in college. The process of seeking answers is in part born out of students' realization of the impact of having been raised in a Christian culture. They seek a faith that is not simply obligatory or handed down, but that is the consequence of conscious choice. They recognize that it is imperative to deal straightforwardly with any spiritual or doctrinal dilemma because without full confidence in their faith, the major impetus behind their life goals and sense of meaning loses credibility. In academic cultures, where high premium it placed on intellectualism, evangelical students are well aware that to be taken seriously in the marketplace of ideas, they must embrace academically valid means of truth-seeking; and many do. Moreover, there is much humility in realizing that they have not yet arrived and in the willingness to forgo certainty for the sake of questing. For most evangelical students, this humility not only provides an opportunity to grow in their faith, but it also gives them pause in listening to the truth claims of others.

Beyond the more cerebral endeavor of asking and seeking answers to their spiritual questions, evangelical students endure numerous challenges in their personal and spiritual lives. Crises emerge when spiritual questions became psychologically distressing. In addition to crises of faith and belief, students also face personal problems ranging from negative self-image and eating disorders, to broken relationships with parents, to disappointments over lost opportunities, to loneliness and depression. It is in these moments of crisis that students turn to their campus religious communities to aid them as they persevere through painful points in their spiritual journey. Such communities enable students to feel connected to something larger, at home while

away from their families, supported by empathic friends, and "known" in a vast, anonymous campus environment. Evangelical students also acknowledge the relevance of crisis points for their own growth. Buried beneath the intellectual journey of faith are personal and spiritual struggles that demand not just resolution—but a refinement of the self, a deepening of character, and entry into an authentic and truthful spiritual maturity.

Conclusion

All told, a complete portrait of evangelical students necessarily incorporates the multifaceted—sometimes contradictory—aspects of their beliefs, practices, experiences, and spiritual development. As countercultural conservatives, these students develop a unique conglomerate of political and social perspectives, swim against secular peer group expectations, and celebrate their faith in nontraditional ways. In encountering the campus, the evangelical response is at once resistant, acclimating, and engaging—depending on the situation and context at hand. Finally, as evangelical students strive to make sense of their worldview and overcome spiritual crisis, they derive solace from their campus religious communities and are determined as they struggle to enlighten and solidify their chosen spiritual path.

Endnotes

[1] Portions of this essay were published as part of the article, "Evangelicals on campus: An exploration of culture, faith, and college life," in A. N. Bryant, *Religion and Education*, 32 (2005), 1-30.

[2] R. Balmer, *Encyclopedia of evangelicalism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004).

[3] M. A. Shibley, "Contemporary evangelicals: Born-again and world affirming" in *Americans and religions in the twenty-first century: Vol. 55. The annals of the American academy of political and social science*, A. W. Heston and N. A. Weiner, series eds, W. C. Roof, vol. ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Periodicals Press, 1998) 67-87.

[4] D. E. Miller, "Postdenominational Christianity in the twenty-first century" in *Americans and religions in the twenty-first century: Vol. 558, The annals of the American academy of political and social science*, A. W. Heston and N. A. Weiner, series eds, W. C. Roof, vol ed (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Periodicals Press, 1998) 196-210.

[5] A. Rifkin, "Jesus with a Genius Grant," *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (November 23, 2003), 22-25, 38-40.