

The Evangelical Student Today

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I. What Do Evangelical Students Believe?

We have had an opportunity to talk about evangelical students and colleges in regard to the NSSE studies already; I'd like to give a digest of some additional information, gleaned from a study by two of my colleagues, political scientists Corwin Smidt and James Penning. Their 2002 book, *Evangelicalism: The Next Generation*, replicates James Hunter's *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, 15 years earlier. In it Hunter argued that evangelical students of the 1980s were significantly less tied to traditional orthodox religious beliefs, moral values and political views than were evangelical students of the 1960s.

Why the change? Secularization, Hunter opined; the pressures of modernity. And more alarmingly, to some of us, at least, Hunter argued that the evangelical colleges, like other colleges and universities, were agents of secularization.

Smidt and Penning question both Hunter's methods and his results. Hunter's base data was gathered mostly from fundamentalist Bible colleges in the 1960s, not the more moderate evangelical colleges that are in his 1980s study, so it was not comparable. And secularization theory, we are discovering, has its problems. Replicating Hunter's questionnaire and his selection of schools, Smidt and Penning found that evangelical students of the late 1990s were remarkably unchanged in their theology, morality and social and political attitudes than their counterparts 15 years earlier. They were still highly orthodox in theological beliefs and traditional in their moral views, with the exception of a more egalitarian perspective on matters of gender. In their views of religion's social role, they were still largely individualistic. The best address to social issues, these students believed, was one that worked at the fundamental problem: human sinfulness. Spiritual rebirth was the answer, not social reconstruction. Among evangelical students, Smidt and Penning found, there has been only a modest increase in social justice concerns over the 15-year span.

So, it is good news for those who lead evangelical colleges that they are not abetting secularization, but is there any good news in this study for the broader realm of higher education regarding evangelical students? What about the political outlook of these students and the degree to which they adhere to American democratic values of tolerance, freedom of speech and political civility in a pluralistic society? Do they confirm the ACLU stereotypes of evangelicals being a threat to democracy? Are evangelical colleges the breeding grounds of a rising generation of Pat Robertsons? Here is what Smidt and Penning find out:

1. Evangelical students in recent years are more likely to self-ID as conservatives and as Republicans than 15 years ago. They mirror the partisan realignment that has happened among evangelical voters.

2. Evangelical students defy stereotyping, however. They simply will not conform to the Religious Right's public issues litmus tests. Let me cite some perhaps surprising evidence of their lack of issue consistency: While showing predictably conservative issue alignments on many items, the students also

- favor an Equal Rights Amendment,
- oppose backing Israel vs. Arab states,
- are 50-50 on banning all abortions,
- oppose increasing defense spending,
- oppose increasing tariffs to protect American jobs
- oppose increasing the generation of nuclear power
- favor registering all guns, and
- are 50-50 on favoring government programs to address poverty.

3. Evangelical students show no difference from the American population more generally in their support for free speech, opinion and belief. They commonly respect the rights of citizens to hold differing views and to live differently. In a recent survey including people in 5 groupings—white evangelical Protestants, white mainline Protestants, black Protestants, Catholics and secular people—there were no significant differences of opinion and attitudes toward a variety of controversial groups—extremists of the right, left, and religion.

So when thinking about what evangelical students bring to the campus forum, expect them to be more conservative and more Republican in self-ID, but expect also that they are not knee-jerk or straight-ticket on the Religious Right's entire issue agenda. Expect to encounter some thoughtful, earnest, interesting kids.

II. The Coloring of Campus Evangelicalism

But these are evangelical students on evangelical college campuses. They are more white and more suburban than evangelical students more generally. The other thing I want to put before you is that on your campuses, the evangelical students you see are much more likely to be students of color. One of the great current facts of American religious demography as well as demography of the nation in general is the "coloring" of the American people. This is at least as true for Christian evangelicals as for people of other traditions.

Most of you are probably aware of the main points of Philip Jenkins' recent book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (OUP, 2002). Jenkins tells of the rapid global shift of Christianity's numerical strength and emotional and institutional vigor to the south and to the east. Whereas 80 percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America in 1900, today, fewer than 40 percent of the Christians live in this North Atlantic quadrant of the globe. The vast majority lives in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Christianity that is growing in these regions is different as well; it is more like the faith we see in the New

Testament Book of the Acts or on the frescoes in medieval European churches; a faith of miracles, martyrdom and culture-forming potential in some deeply unsettled societies.

That's interesting, you say, but what does it have to do with evangelical students, and American higher education? Jenkins argues that one of the most profoundly influential events of the 1960s was the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which has opened America to a new migration of enormous proportions. Our new immigration is overwhelmingly from Asia and Latin America, and it now includes growing communities of Middle Easterners and Africans as well. While many of the leading voices for a new pluralism would have us assume that this means huge numbers of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists on our campuses, the new immigrants are still overwhelmingly Christian. Eighty percent of the Koreans in the U.S. are Christian. Half of the nation's Arab population is Christian. All of America's Christian churches are being reconfigured by the new immigration. In my suburban township outside Philadelphia in the 1990s, every Protestant congregation had a Korean church sharing its building. 3,500 Catholic parishes now offer Spanish services. But about 1 in 5 Latinos are Protestant and Pentecostal. I have a missionary living on my block in Grand Rapids; he's from the Dominican Republic, and he oversees three new Latino congregations in town.

So when you think "evangelical student," whether you are at an elite private university or one of the great state universities, you should not assume that your evangelicals all resemble Pat Robertson in skin tone.

26 percent of all the student participants in Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship nationwide are persons of color. African-American gospel choirs have become common features on all the East Coast elite campuses, and they hold huge regional and national competitions. Don't think we are here to entertain, the choirs tell audiences. We want you to know our Lord.

Asian Americans are rising rapidly as part of the campus Christian scene. Asian Americans in IVCF have increased nearly 300% in the past 15 years. At Yale, the local chapter of Campus Crusade for Christ was 100% white in the 1980s; today it is 90% Asian American. At UC Berkeley and UCLA, where 40% of the student body is Asian American, 80% of the students in the 50 evangelical Christian ministries on those campuses are Asian American.¹

The implications of this "coloring" of campus Christianity need some teasing out, but I will pose just one irony for you all to ponder. Today's campus evangelicalism, especially on secular university campuses, is to a large and growing extent, the product of the universities' promotion of multiculturalism and diversity.

¹ Rebecca Y. Kim, "Second-Generation Korean American Evangelicals: Ethnic, Multiethnic, or White Campus Ministries?" *Sociology of Religion* 65 (Spring, 2004):19-34