

What factor best explains the changes in evangelicalism between the periods 1920-...

[Technology](#), [Development](#)



Introduction:

The Evangelical movement has been seen as a partner with other American religions up to the 1970's when things slowly began to change and the Evangelicals have been seen as alien to other American religions and culture. Hart's book traces the development of the Evangelical movement between the early to mid-20th century whilst in the latter part, he also focuses intensely on the change which has dominated the religious movement in America. The book has been described as an excellent synthesis and interpretation of what was going on in the heartland of American evangelisation and other religious movements. In fact evangelism developed quite singularly over the twentieth century culminating in its tacit support for the Civil Rights movement which made it cross swords with the religious Right.

The factor that best explains the rise and fall and rise again of evangelicalism is the dearth of and identity in American society which saw the evangelicals pounce on with great effect. Their infiltration of the political sphere is also important. This quote from Hart's book basically sums up how the Evangelical religion is perceived by many:

" For many evangelicals, the way they thought of their own quest for holiness was also the way that they ended up thinking about society

The moral strenuousness of evangelical piety ordinarily invites born-again Protestants to demand of society the same sort of righteousness they expect from one another. [However] To conclude that Tim LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, the Moral Majority, or the Christian Coalition represent[s] the political views of all evangelicals would be a mistake." (Hart, p. 169).

Evangelism developed quite a bad reputation in recent years as the religion which collects money on TV and blasting the Right for its misdeeds. Although this is not entirely untrue, Evangelism was quite an important part of the American social fabric as Hart skilfully unravels the story from its earliest days. In fact Evangelicals were actually on a par with Protestants in the early years of the century although they quickly departed from their original partnership by embarking on an aggressive stance for the conversion of new souls to their beliefs. This quote is interesting as it confirms the quirky moral ground on which Evangelism appeared to be based and which partly explains the decline of Evangelism in the years preceding 1960:

" Yet at Fuller's opening exercises, students, faculty, and well-wishers heard more about the wretched state of Western civilization and the need for Christian thinking than they did about the condition of American churches and the importance of well-trained pastors". (Hart, p. 115)

Personally I do not have much truck with the Evangelical movement. They are a loud mouthed rabble and although Hart appears to be apologetic towards them, doubtless due to his association with them, they have been an influence for the bad in American society. Rabble rousing and bigotry is part of their makeup and some of them go to excesses almost on a regular basis.

However one incident which defined Evangelicals was the fundamentalist controversy which took place in the 1920's and which effectively marginalized them as a religious sect. Hart explains that the Protestants gained far wider currency in the years post 1920 up to the 1960's when things seemed to change for the better in the US for the Evangelicals largely

through the evident decline in Protestantism. The marginalization of Evangelicals in America lasted almost 40 years as the Protestants took sway and dominated religious influence and thought for four decades. They had a much better network of churches and activists with the Evangelicals appearing quite marginalized. The same could be said for the Baptists who also ended up quite marginalized and were only highly active in Black communities especially those in the Deep South. However the Evangelical community also went into what one can term as self-imposed exile between the years of 1920 to 1960 when they withdrew from active public participation in an almost ghetto like condition. The Evangelists decided to separate themselves from contemporary American culture and thus were out of touch with what was happening around them. However they were to come back with a vengeance in the 1960's as Hart amply demonstrates. Many have observed that Evangelical Protestantism has grown and become far more vital as it has invaded the political sphere much to the alarm of secular America. This situation began with the rise of such fire eaters as Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for the 1964 General Election and the pastor Billy Graham who to this day extorts considerable influence over several millions. The most common observation is that a seemingly rather insignificant and essentially backward group of people had suddenly seized the reigns of political influence and power. Although this view may be seen as a myopic one, the re-emergence of the Evangelicals in modern times especially through their influence in the Republican Tea Party faction definitely has an element of truth in it. Hart observes that the Evangelicals have re-emerged from their self-imposed withdrawal and are now hell bent

on their attempt to redraw the ground of Christian culture and their ideals as perceived by them. Hart states that Evangelicalism is certainly not some rural backwater but has become a strong force in American society with several prominent politicians using the methods which have become so popular. The second part of the book covers this religious and intellectual battle for dominance in society which is up to a point backed up by those conservative Republicans.

" In other words, evangelicals seem to be inherently inconsistent, striking a pose at once adaptable and rigid, progressive and conservative, modern and old fashioned, at ease and at odds with American ideals" (Hart p 215)

The fact that Evangelism was once dominant and then lost its position perhaps says something about the resilience of this religion in American society. And the inherent inconsistency of the evangelicals is perhaps part of their considerable success in reaching out since they will appeal to several factions of society in different ways.

Another aspect which is discussed by Hart is the manner in which evangelicals view their social position. Since they were once the dominant force in American politics and culture, they are not coming to terms with their loss of importance which makes them retreat into their own shell.

Evangelism has also suffered a crisis in its theological aspect however Hart is an excellent self-analyser since he himself converted to Evangelicalism and thus can see the box from within instead of from without. With Evangelism now reaching a crossroads, hart asks some pertinent questions about its sustainability in the future. In a way he seems to imply that evangelism cannot move forward without first taking stock of its past which is in any

case, rich and important in several ways. There are of course several defects in the structure of evangelism which include compromises on popularity as well as theology. The rise of naked religious populism such as that embodied by Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann appears abhorrent to Hart who is at pains to point out that evangelism is not all about extremism.

“ The result of these apparent anomalies is a religion that on Sunday is comfortable with the church looking like the world (such as CCM) and throughout the rest of the week insists that the world look like the church (as in family values).” (Hart p 215)

Theological considerations:

The Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God who came to live among his followers and who died for them so that they would be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus sacrificed His life for us so that He would open the doors of heaven enabling His followers to go to heaven. The spirituality of the American Indian is often derided or lambasted but the last few years has seen a considerable resurgence in the interest of white women in the topic. However Hart argues that Indian spirituality is not for sale as the relationship with the Earth is perhaps the most important part of all this and its proceedings. Notwithstanding the difficulties created by those who wish to contain Indians to reservations and other areas where they cannot talk about themselves or practise their own religion in public, the Americans are finally realizing that the Indian has a lot to offer in this respect. Some Indians have even converted to Evangelism.

Conclusion:

D G Hart's book is an excellent appraisal of the state of affairs currently prevailing in the Evangelical sphere of today. With his detailed study of the past he also brings out important questions on the nature of evangelism today which confirm its importance in American religious heritage.

I found the book entertaining and informative since it shed new light on the Evangelical movement by someone who is right in the middle of it. However he still did not convince me that Evangelicalism is a force for good and my opinion did not change in this respect.

Works Cited:

Hart D G; That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century (American Ways Series), 2003 Print