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Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity

Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity by James S. Bielo

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Two main arguments emerge from Gribben's excellent historical study. First, though the dispensationalist narrative provides the common structure to all prophecy fiction, the main topic of each novel varies according to pressing anxieties and concerns of the evangelical audiences during the eras in which the individual authors wrote. As such, prophecy fiction functions "as a palimpsest upon which the tensions and conflicts of the last century have been inscribed" (24) – from the sudden influx of immigrants to America in the early twentieth century, to the anxieties surrounding the rise of Communism and the European Union in the mid-twentieth century, to the suspected Satanism and New Age conspiracies of the 1980s.

The second main argument of *Writing the Rapture* pertains to the place of prophecy fiction in mainstream American society. Gribben argues that with the commercial success of the Left Behind novels and the subsequent mainstreaming of the production and consumption of prophecy novels, a key tenet of dispensational cultural theory – the increasing marginality of believers in the last days – has been undermined. Ironically, as "prophecy novels enact the movement of dispensationalism from the evangelical subculture to the cultural mainstream" (25) the hopes for the rapture that the novels depict "have been denied by the success of the fiction that sought to represent it" (170).

While *Writing the Rapture* would benefit from a more precise articulation why prophecy fiction qualifies as a "mode" but not a "genre" of literature, and while the title of the book probably is slightly misleading (the novels Gribben analyzes do not all depict a rapture, nor do they all emerge from an evangelical milieu), *Writing the Rapture* is a must read for anyone with a scholarly interest in prophecy fiction, with the evolution of dispensationalism, or with the history of American evangelicalism, in general.

Dan Mathewson, Wofford College

*Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity.* By James S. Bielo. New York University Press, 2011. 256 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

Over the course of the past decade, an increasing number of anthropologists have turned their attention to a subject long regarded by the disciplinary mainstream as demystified, unproblematic, and known: Christianity. While the majority of these anthropologists have conducted field research in the sort of exoticized, non-Western locales for which the discipline is famous, more than a few have published ethnographies of Western Christian communities in recent years as well. James Bielo's *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity*—

based primarily upon the author's extensive fieldwork with Emerging Evangelicals in Michigan and Ohio but also supplemented by his command of the relevant primary literature—represents a lively and illuminating instance of the latter.

Customarily described as *the emerging church* by insiders, Emerging Evangelicalism coalesced as a movement in the second half of the 1990s among pastors, church planters, church consultants, concerned laity, and others (a disproportionate share of them members of Generation X) who had become disillusioned with the norms, priorities, and practices of conservative Evangelicalism in America, particularly the conservative Evangelicalism of the predominantly white, predominantly affluent suburban megachurch. At the level of the movement, then, Emerging Evangelicalism has enacted the perennial Christian theme (especially prominent in American history, as Bielo notes) of breaking with churches and traditions that come to be seen as stale, corrupt, or otherwise flawed. At the level of the individual, as Bielo illustrates through a series of poignant vignettes, most Emerging Evangelicals have come to the movement after having undergone a wrenching process of *deconversion* from conservative Evangelicalism. The demographics of the movement continue to betray this genealogy. Of Bielo's ninety *consultants* (the term he prefers to the more traditional *informants*), all are "solidly middle-class" and a mere two are people of color (23).

Taking the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin as his preferred theoretical lens, Bielo argues that the critique of conservative Evangelicalism has, in addition to driving schism, also structured the development of Emerging Evangelicalism as an autonomous Protestant tradition. The seven-chapter ethnographic core of the book is devoted to showing that, on one point after another, Emerging Evangelicals have consistently opted for forms of Christian belief and practice that, from their perspective, address the shortcomings of conservative Evangelicalism. Being aware, for example, that the fallacies of philosophical modernism honeycomb conservative theology, Emerging Evangelicals focus on experiencing God in the present rather than assenting to particular doctrines. And being eager to experience God as fully as possible, they often, contra conservative custom, burn incense, light candles, perform rituals, recite Roman Catholic prayers, mobilize silence, and even appropriate nominally secular objects in their ongoing effort to privilege forms of worship that entail multisensory engagement. Some Emerging Evangelicals, longing for genuine relationships rather than megachurch spectacle, pursue the calling of an urban missionary. Others, seeking a faith more clearly at odds with mainstream secular culture, practice what is called *the new monasticism*. The in-depth description of these and other features of Emerging Evangelicalism represents one of the great strengths of the book.

Bielo's most ambitious argument follows from the observation that certain dispositions characteristic of both modernity and late modernity

manifest, in appropriately Christian form, within Emerging Evangelicalism. On the one hand, for example, Emerging Evangelicals evince the modernist yearning for authenticity in their return to small church communities as well as the modernist preoccupation with mapping and quantification in their approach to urban mission fields. On the other, however, they also demonstrate an entrepreneurial-like zeal for church planting, a commitment to place in an age of deracination, and a penchant for irony and self-deprecation—hallmarks of late modernity all. On the basis of these and other correlations between the general conditions of the epoch and Emerging Evangelicalism as a particular expression of Christian religiosity, Bielo concludes that the latter is a form of religious subjectivity that exhibits both modern and late modern characteristics.

Given that Bielo's focus lies with Emerging Evangelicalism as it is practiced by individuals and small communities, other issues that arise in the course of the book necessarily receive treatment as subordinate themes. The transnational character of Emerging Evangelicalism is one of these. The same is true for the question of whether and to what degree Emerging Evangelicalism, rather than being a disparate collection of believers and churches animated by similar discontents, is truly constituted as a movement by conferences, texts, and other factors. On these and a few similar points, Bielo's text provides a rich ethnographic platform from which to launch future research projects. With respect to the book's main arguments, however, Bielo offers an illuminating, cogently organized interpretation of Emerging Evangelicalism in America as well as a provocative model for linking subjectivity and structure through ethnographic data. For these reasons, *Emerging Evangelicalism* contains much of value to advanced scholars of Christianity, scholars of American Protestantism most of all. As a generally lucid and energetic treatment of its subject, the book also provides non-specialists such as graduate students with an accessible introduction to many of the leading themes in the anthropology of Christianity.

Michael J. Boyle, CUNY Graduate Center

*The Visual Culture of Chabad.* By Maya Balakirsky Katz. Cambridge University Press, 2010. 260 pages. \$98.00 cloth.

Anyone who's spent time with Lubavitcher (Chabad) Hasidim has noticed their rich, distinctive visual culture. In Crown Heights, Brooklyn, their headquarters, portraits of their Rebbe (head rabbi) Menachem Mendel Schneerson—deceased since 1994 but still mightily revered—are everywhere: in houses, stores, posters, books, magazines, and more. Lubavitch homes often feature portraits of earlier Rebbes as well,