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BOOK REVIEW

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James Bielo. *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009. 208 pp.

The rise in interest in American evangelicalism on the part of scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals in recent years has been staggering. Although much new light has been shed on this vibrant religious subculture as a result, all too often the attention remains focused on its most public characteristics, including the political affinities and aspirations of evangelical elites, evangelical media production and consumption, and spectacles of corporate worship. The striking irony in all this is that the sites of social intimacy, where evangelical rituals of socialization and indoctrination are most potent, remain hidden from critical inquiry. James Bielo's *Words Upon the Word*, a richly detailed comparative ethnography of group Bible study, offers a welcome corrective to this surprising gap in the burgeoning literature on evangelicalism.

Having observed an impressive total of 324 Bible study meetings in six demographically varied but predominantly evangelical congregations in Lansing, Michigan, Bielo uses a smaller sample to support his analysis

while still being able to posit broad conclusions about these weekly gatherings attended by some 30 million Protestants nationwide. *Words Upon the Word* is an “ethnography of reading” that highlights the social dynamics and hermeneutic possibilities that emerge when like-minded people come together to engage with sacred texts (i.e., the Bible) and other devotional, historical, and instructional writings that are seen as conducive to one’s spiritual edification. Drawing data and theory together in a fluid and persuasive manner, Bielo describes the interactive frames, interpretive dilemmas, textual ideologies and practices, and discursive subtexts that make possible “processes of collective reading and intersubjective dialogue” (10) in religious settings where seemingly contradictory values of scriptural absolutism and reflexive, lay-driven intellectualism are enacted and negotiated.

Among the noteworthy contributions of Bielo’s ethnography is his prominent emphasis on group Bible study as a social institution in its own right. Rather than treat group Bible study as merely a corollary feature of congregational life, or confine it to a mixed bag of pop-culture trends such as book clubs and internet chat rooms (the relevance of which does not go unrecognized), Bielo stresses the uniqueness and deep historical roots of group Bible study among churchgoing evangelicals. His ethnography portrays Bible study as a form of ritual practice but also, and more significantly, as a site of knowledge production where the ideological and epistemological priorities of theologically conservative “Bible-believing” Protestants are continually encountered in contexts of carefully moderated face-to-face deliberation. For cynical non-evangelical readers inclined to dismiss Bible study as little more than the reification of blind faith, Bielo’s account—including lengthy transcripts of group discussions—reveals that the work of consensus-building, even among staunch biblical literalists, requires no small degree of intellectual effort, self-consciousness, and social diplomacy. At the same time it is equally apparent from his descriptions that consensus rather than dissonance is the desired outcome of evangelical Bible study, and that the ideal consensus is one that is neatly aligned with the authoritative fundamentalist doctrines of conservative Protestantism.

The heuristic tools of symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis provide much of the theoretical framework for this ethnography, helping to underscore the essentially interactive (or, as believers say, “relational”) aspects of evangelical Bible study. Notwithstanding the individualistic

overtones of conservative Protestant soteriology and core tenets such as “the priesthood of the believer,” the cultivation of religious subjectivity among American evangelicals is pursued through the medium of social relationships. While this includes relationships with non-believers as well as believers, the context of group Bible study provides the ideal setting for “intimate relational spirituality” (92), a key paradigm from which prevalent symbolic and linguistic cues are derived. In the process, the contours of evangelical identity take shape through performances of relational piety and the mobilization of gradated distinctions between self and other(s). This has clear implications for how participants carry themselves as actors in the world, influencing their methods of “witnessing” on behalf of the gospel beyond the familiar confines of Bible study.

Bielo’s case for the cultural distinctiveness and historical continuity of evangelical Bible study is a strong one. Yet the depth of his research lends itself to additional layers of analysis that are worth noting. For this reader, while evangelical Bible study upholds traditions of lay devotionism that have endured since the Reformation, it should also be seen as a contemporary cultural movement that poses an ideological challenge to modern institutions of *secular* knowledge production. Bielo’s subjects are hardly rigid sectarians; most of them appear to be fairly well educated and highly literate, not only in Christian terms but by almost any mainstream standard. Nonetheless, their conservative evangelical pedigrees are strong enough that one would be justified in interpreting this unique style of Christ-centered intellectualism as part of a larger set of institutional practices that provide religious conservatives with alternative modes of generating cultural capital. As they evaluate disparate texts according to their own “textual economies” (a wonderful concept that Bielo nicely employs), textually engaged evangelicals actively construct new literary canons that privilege biblical orthodoxy in response and opposition to a rapidly expanding marketplace of ideas and literary commodities.

Finally, *Words Upon the Word* is a model of ethnographic reflexivity and methodological transparency. Bielo devotes an entire chapter to issues of method, detailing the process through which his fieldwork took shape. He describes with courage and clarity the personal, practical, and ethical challenges that he encountered as a fieldworker for whom conventional notions of “participant-observation” were not entirely sufficient. Bielo’s reflections will be of much use to future scholars interested in studying American evangelicals from a closer vantage point than their computers

and television sets. For all the innovations that evangelicals have made in terms of mass-media production, many still consider “face-to-face” interactions to be the primary vehicle of religious socialization and indoctrination. Ethnographies like this one will remind everyone else that, to some extent, they may still be right.