

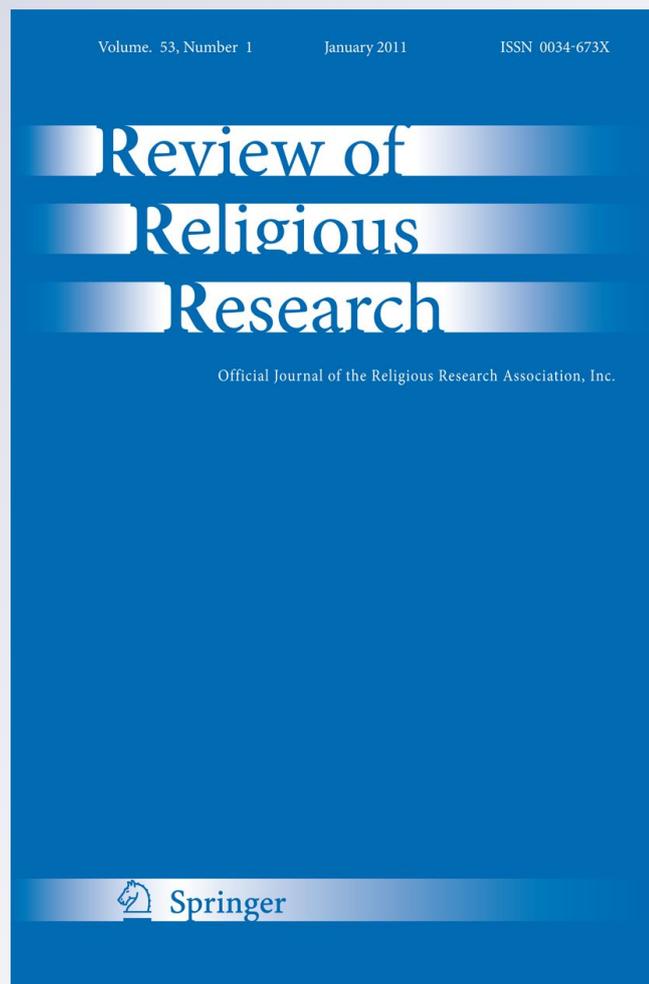
# *James S. Bielo, Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Bible Study*

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**James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Bible Study*****New York University Press, New York and London, 2009,  
1–186 pp, Paper****Hillary Kaell**Received: 6 December 2011 / Accepted: 8 December 2011  
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*Words Upon the Word* is a slim volume that tackles an important subject about which surprisingly little has been written: American evangelical Bible study. As author James Bielo points out, this is a practice that engages some 30 million Americans evangelicals every week and yet remains essentially absent in the growing scholarly literature on US Christianity. For this reason alone, Bielo provides an invaluable contribution.

Although Bielo's target audience is sociologists and anthropologists of religion, any scholar with an interest in contemporary US Christianity will find this book useful reading. Well-written with easy-to-follow theoretical models, *Words Upon the Word* is based on over 19 months of fieldwork beginning in 2004, during which time Bielo recorded, indexed and catalogued hundreds of hours of Bible study conversation in Lansing, Michigan. Through case studies of five congregations, Bielo shows how American evangelicals interpret the Bible and apply it in everyday decision-making. He describes biblical literalism as a signifier of identity, rather than a method of exegesis. In other words, the Bible is not the stand-alone text conservatives may make it out to be; "Bible study" groups spend as much, if not more, time reading other books and apply scripture reading methods widely beyond the Word itself. None of these insights is new, as Bielo makes clear (p. 49–50). Yet what this book adds is an in-depth view of Bible study as it is occurring and thus an analysis of evangelical "culture in action," as the author puts it. Bielo notes that his research method – real – time recordings – is an important supplement to the usual participant observation and interviews. He quotes at length from his transcripts in order to show how believers read together and negotiate mutual understandings.

The first chapter, devoted to "being reflexive" (p. 22) as a Christian ethnographer, is a discussion no doubt of interest to anthropologists but a bit long for others like me. Chapter 3 is excellent; the author theorizes notions of intimacy

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and connects this to the Protestant “problem of presence” (Engelke, 2007) – the spiritual work of maintaining a relationship with a God that is, paradoxically, present spiritually and absent materially (p. 75). Equally interesting is Bielo’s analysis of witnessing in Chapter 5 where he frames Bible study as “preparatory discourse” for encounters with non-believers (akin to Goffman’s backstage encounters) (p. 115–7) (Goffman 1961). Also welcome is the author’s intervention regarding the postdenominationalism thesis. This is a rebuttal of Robert Wuthnow’s *Sharing the Journey* (Wuthnow 1994), thus far the only major scholarly work to take seriously Bible study, which Wuthnow sees as part of a trend towards parachurch and post-denominational organization (p. 35–7, 153). Although Bielo did not shake my faith in this general conclusion, he reminds us that this trend is not universal; the Lutherans in his study, for example, still view denomination as a fundamental identity marker.

Where Bielo is weakest is in his attempt to explain why Bible study has proliferated recently. The fact that he includes any discussion at all is admirable and his historical contextualization provides an important rejoinder to scholarship that focuses exclusively on late capitalist alienation. However, the discussion gets short shrift; one paragraph on post-Reformation history is not enough to be convincing (p. 92). Another (small) complaint is that, since Bielo draws broad conclusions about US evangelicalism, I would have benefited from an explanation about how or how not representative is Lansing, Michigan specifically.

Bielo describes his book as beginning a conversation. This rich ethnography generates a number of avenues for future research (certainly, scholars of post-Vatican II Catholicism will find interesting comparisons here and scholars of gender have much to mine about women’s participation and leadership). Bielo concludes by pointing out that, “no other institution in Evangelical life is as crucial for sustaining and reflecting on the Evangelical imagination as is group Bible study” (p. 168). By giving us the groundwork to begin fuller theorizations, *Words Upon the Word* does scholars an indispensable service.

## References

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