

articulate beliefs and convictions remains, and Smith and Snell are rightly concerned about what this might mean for specific religious beliefs and traditions, and also for American society and culture more broadly.

There is much more in this book, indeed almost too much to take in on a first, or even second reading, and I suspect that each readers' particular interests will drive which issues dealt with in the book seem most salient. For example, it is quite revealing that contrary to what many people have written about the "millennial generation" being a generation that wants to serve others, it turns out that they like to talk about serving others, think that serving others is a good thing to do, but that they really don't *do* much in the way of service to others. This one example illustrates a particular strength of this book, that although the book is primarily about the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults, it successfully embeds those issues within the larger cultural context where they reside.

This book would be an excellent book for undergraduate courses or graduate seminars on religion and society, possibly paired with *Soul Searching*, as these offer excellent methodology, analysis, and theorizing. Finally, there has been much talk and effort within the American Sociological Association to make sociological research more publicly accessible. *Souls in Transition* is a fine example just such a study that connects with the general public, as well as with leaders in a variety of religious groups who are trying to figure out the worlds of young adults.

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## REFERENCE

Smith, Christian, and Melina Lundquist Denton. 2005. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of*

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*Words upon the Word*, by JAMES S. BIELO. New York: New York University Press, 2009, x + 187 pp.; \$20.00 USD (paper), \$65.00 USD (cloth).

James Bielo's *Words upon the Word* is a short, intelligent, and well-written analysis of what happens when Protestant Christians who live in the United States come together in small- and medium-sized groups to read the Bible. Scholars working in a number of different disciplines—anthropology, American studies, religious studies, women's studies, political science, and sociology, for example—have produced a rich scholarly literature on contemporary American Protestantism. A great many of the texts those scholars have written indicate that group Bible study plays a large role in shaping contemporary Protestantism in the United States. But few scholars have focused their attention on what Bible study groups are and on how they work.

Bielo's exploration of group Bible study is based on fieldwork in Lansing, Michigan, that he conducted in 2004 and 2005. Although he collected data on 19 groups, the evidence Bielo presents to support his arguments are drawn primarily on what he saw and heard while attending five study groups. One of those groups was associated with the restoration movement, three with a United Methodist Church, and one with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Quite generously, the women and men who participated in those groups allowed Bielo to tape record their study sessions. Recording and transcribing the conversations that took place in those study groups gave Bielo a

listening post from which he could gather data about American Protestants that is different from, and in some ways superior to, the data that can be gathered by using structured interviews or observations of congregational worship services. *Words upon the Word* is studded with long quotations that come directly from the participants in the groups that Bielo was studying. Those quotations sometimes interrupt the flow of Bielo's argument. But they also give the reader remarkable glimpses into the way that the participants in the study groups understood the world in which they live.

The men and women whom Bielo encountered while doing his fieldwork refused to read the Bible as an amalgamation of heterogeneous texts that were produced in a number of different social settings. Instead they read the Bible as "a collection of texts that tells a cohesive story about the nature of God" (64). And the members of the groups that Bielo studied do not seem to have been obsessed with analyzing "the semantic, stylistic or generic properties" (87) of Biblical texts. What they were chiefly concerned with, Bielo reports, was figuring out how they could apply the teachings of the Bible to their *own lives* and with creating *greater intimacy* between one another. Bielo argues that the participants in the group study believed that a good life is defined by "deep, spiritually rewarding, and intimate relationships" (92); they sought to create such relationships with one another, with other Christians, and with the Lord God. As Bielo tells the story, the Bible as the Bible is not always the focus of what goes on in Bible study groups. Bible study groups sometimes spend as much time talking about nonscriptural texts as about the Bible itself. The members of Bible study groups sometimes

spend less time discussing texts than they do praying for one another.

Most of Bielo's arguments about group Bible study seem helpful and plausible. Since the evidence he uses to support them comes from only five study groups, we cannot assume that Bielo's arguments would apply to all American Protestants. At times, Bielo's arguments seem to outpace his evidence. On the last page of *Words upon the Word*, for example, he asserts that "no other institution in Evangelical life is as crucial for sustaining and reflecting on the Evangelical imagination than is group Bible study" (168). Bielo provides no compelling evidence to support that claim and I am not entirely sure that it is true. It is entirely possible that Sunday morning worship services are no less crucial. It should also be noted that Bielo did not systematically explore a number of issues—such as how gender, race, and class influence the way that Protestants read the Bible—that are of enormous importance.

So Bielo has not spoken the final word on Bible study groups in the contemporary United States. But that was not his goal. He was, rather, trying to direct scholars' attention to the importance of understanding group Bible study and demonstrating how our understanding of contemporary American Protestantism can be deepened by carefully analyzing what goes on in such groups. In light of those aims, this book must be classified as a significant contribution to our understanding of Protestantism in the contemporary United States.

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