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Abstract for Russell Sage Foundation project on Evangelicalism

"Evangelicals and Religious Dissenters: Seculars, Agnostics, and Atheists."

In the discourse of contemporary Protestant Evangelicalism, there is an interesting set of claims. The first claim is that the United States, is and has been since its inception, a "Christian nation." This idea has been used to justify many "majoritarian" public policies, such as prayer in public schools, which might make members of religious minorities uncomfortable or put them at a disadvantage. On the other hand, evangelicalism often claims that contemporary American society and culture are dominated by a secular, and sometimes even "anti-religious," elite that makes Christians themselves an embattled minority. How, one might ask, can one be an embattled minority in a country founded by and remaining overwhelmingly Christian? Particularly as evangelical religious expressions have become ever-more popular in public American culture, and the ruling politicians in the dominant political party proudly display their evangelical faith? It is tempting to dismiss this as the mobilizing rhetoric employed for public purposes – and perhaps even used cynically in such occasions. No doubt that is sometimes true. But it also reveals some deeper truths about evangelical culture and worldview that is relevant to understanding its public postures.

One way to understand the evangelical worldview (as with any worldview) is to view it as a collection of symbolic boundaries that serve to distinguish those within the group (or subculture) from those outside it. For evangelical Protestants, most of whom are the religious descendants of Calvinists or Anabaptist Pietists, in-group and out-group distinctions are crucial because they are so easily theologized as the differences between the "elect" and the non-elect (for Calvinists) and the "saved" and the "unregenerate" (for pietists). The boundaries separating these groups are always tenuous, and those within always in peril of backsliding from the narrow path. Thus, even more than followers of rival religious traditions, those who have slipped away from the faith are a threat to the religious community. And if one begins with the assumption that America is a Christian nation, those who are secular or agnostics/atheists are, at least figuratively, back-sliders. In addition, evangelicals take "the word" seriously – they believe in the potentially transformative power of messages. If cultural messages do not reflect Christian ideas and values, they can have seriously negative effects on those hearing them. Thus, if a culture has too many secular messages – and those who control cultural industries are not "people of faith" – the damage can be substantial.

Using a variety of data – from interviews to public documents – from a variety of projects, I explore the relationship between Evangelical Protestants and 'religious' others such as secularists, agnostics, and atheists. I explore how the symbolic boundaries are theologized and politicized, and the implications for evangelicalism's approach to public political and cultural life.