

## *"The Cultural Capital of American Evangelicalism"*

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"What exactly is e-VAN-ge-LIST-ical-ism?" asked a sociologist at a recent colloquium about American religion and politics. The religious literacy of mainstream academics is appalling. They struggle with basic terminology ("you know, Father, Son, and whoever the other guy was") and hardly any are involved in religious congregations themselves. Thus, when social scientists emerge quadrennially to interpret the role of religion in national elections, it is not surprising that their arguments ring false. They imagine that conservative Protestantism can be understood as a mask for class interests, a mode of organization, or a tool of political operatives. They ignore the fact that conservative Protestantism is *religion*.

Nearly two decades have passed since I wrote *The Restructuring of American Religion*. In that book, based on national surveys, historical evidence, and numerous materials from religious leaders, I provided a multi-level interpretation of the emerging political influence of American evangelicalism. My interpretation was heavily cultural, but also emphasized the changing economic and institutional landscape of American religion. I argued that American Christianity has been particularly susceptible to changes in the social environment because of its this-worldliness and the manner in which it constructs its institutional memory, that the declining significance of denominationalism and the rise of special purpose groups were two preconditions for the emergence of a conservative-liberal split in American Christianity, that evangelicalism needed to be viewed in a synergistic relationship with mainline Protestantism, and that evangelical Protestantism had succeeded in becoming a political force by exercising a flexible repertoire of cultural resources, including a simplified and practical interpretation of biblical truth, an entrepreneurial definition of religious leadership, a populist style of religious participation, a new appreciation of the role of higher education, a remapping of attitudes about race, an emphasis on moral discipline, and a unifying understanding of American civil religion.

During the past fifteen years, I have conducted numerous national surveys, collected more than two thousand in-depth qualitative interviews with clergy and lay people, and written more than a dozen books about American religion. My chapter will draw on these and other data. It will update and amend my arguments about the cultural resources of evangelical Protestantism. I anticipate making the following arguments: (1) Evangelical Protestantism emphasizes a minimalist form of biblicism that serves as a common but highly adaptable point of reference, (2) evangelical Protestantism's mode of worship includes a rhetorical style that reinforces common beliefs and defines symbolic boundaries, (3) evangelical Protestantism appeals to the lifestyle demographics (early marriage and child-bearing) of its members, (4) the emphasis on moral values in evangelical Protestantism is closely linked to a therapeutic motif that renders this emphasis more culturally appealing, (5) evangelicalism has developed new sources of cultural capital by emphasizing emotions, experience, music, and the arts, (6) evangelical Protestantism has effectively connected an emphasis on the exclusive truth of Christianity with arguments about the virtue of maintaining America's identity as a "Christian