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Evangelicals and American Foreign Policy [Review]

Lauren Frances Turek
Trinity University, lturek@trinity.edu

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Evangelicals and American Foreign Policy. By Mark R. Amstutz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 272 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

Lauren Frances Turek

University of Virginia

In *Evangelicals and American Foreign Policy*, Mark Amstutz seeks to respond to the recent efflorescence of scholarly work on the role that American evangelical Christians have played in shaping international affairs in the twentieth century. Written from an evangelical perspective, the book sets out to dispel what Amstutz terms “prevalent misconceptions” about the nature and underlying motivations for evangelical political participation and engagement abroad (5). He includes among these the dynamics of evangelical support for Israel as well as conventional periodizations which locate the beginning of serious evangelical political involvement in the post-World War II era. The book is above all a call to action for evangelical Christians to develop and articulate a coherent approach to their global policy objectives. This latter aim sets the tone and structure of the book, and indicates its intended audience.

After a brief introduction, which summarizes the major issues that Amstutz takes with current scholarship on evangelicals, the volume is divided into two parts. The first part, consisting of four chapters, provides a cursory historical overview of the emergence of an internationalist evangelical outlook with an emphasis on the specific religious beliefs that shape evangelical perspectives on world issues. It also addresses the significance of overseas missionary work in encouraging evangelical engagement with and in other countries. This is useful in providing insider insight into the worldview of at least some evangelicals, though the chapters offer more synthesis of secondary work and anecdotal evidence than new analysis of the

historical and political shifts that have shaped evangelical engagement with global affairs and influence on policymaking.

Indeed, in his opening chapters, Amstutz covers familiar territory on the nature of the American civil religion and on the rise of evangelicals as a political force in the United States, referencing Robert Bellah and Michael Lindsay, among others, and rejecting realist interpretations of international relations. In explaining the theoretical basis for the core argument of the book, he states that religious faith can and has shaped foreign policy decisions because “norms, especially moral values, are an inescapable element of all human actions, whether individual or collective” (9). Rather than elaborating on this key assumption beyond a brief survey of secondary literature and a few historical examples, Amstutz instead offers readers a “Biblical framework on international affairs,” which, if followed by policy makers, he believes would foster a more just and peaceful world order. His framework emphasizes the theological basis for international human rights norms, the imperative of love and forgiveness, and the universality of human sin, which he suggests is the major impediment to progress toward achieving a more ideal global society. Here, as in other chapters, Amstutz uses select secondary references as a preface to his recommendations on how evangelicals should approach their current and future foreign policy advocacy.

Similarly, his chapter on the evangelical missionary movement recognizes the historical and political significance of the swell in evangelical missions that coincided with the ebb of mainline overseas involvement during the mid-twentieth century, and he draws important links between the missionary enterprise and the unofficial propagation of American foreign policy. Yet he presents his coverage of evangelical missionary work in an almost entirely uncritical manner, lauding missionaries for their efforts to “uplift indigenous peoples by liberating them

through education,” and for their “fundamental commitment to the dignity of human beings” (51). It seems to fair enough to assume, as Amstutz does, that most evangelicals enter into missionary work with good intentions. The assumption that evangelical missionary work always advances humanitarianism, democratic ideals, and “development” (a concept and goal that Amstutz neither defines nor questions) is hard to accept, given the historical record.

In the five chapters that make up the second part, Amstutz offers case studies of recent foreign policy issues which have attracted evangelical attention, including global poverty, human trafficking, and the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. He also addresses the dearth of effective evangelical engagement with the issue of climate change. Each case study provides a brief summary of evangelical advocacy, an assessment of the efficacy of their efforts, and suggestions for improvement. In his chapter on global poverty, for example, Amstutz describes and applauds the work of evangelical NGOs that provide disaster relief and humanitarian aid to alleviate poverty, then calls on evangelicals to focus more on promoting free enterprise and “modernization” in poor countries by instilling “the moral habits and values that are conducive to work, service, and personal integrity” in those to whom they minister (112). The case studies thus illuminate the beliefs—biblical as well as political—that shape at least some evangelical opinion about world affairs.

In the strongest chapter of the book, Amstutz uses his intimate understanding of the range and diversity of evangelical beliefs to challenge the idea that evangelical support for Israel rests largely on premillennial dispensationalism. He offers a clear and nuanced explanation of other, more prevalent theological interpretations (replacement theology and covenant theology), describes and assesses the three major strands of Christian Zionism, and adds an analysis of the core values and common national security interests that Israel and the United States share—and

why these resonate with evangelicals. Here, he successfully demonstrates that a complex blend of biblical principles, ideology, interest group politics, and historical conflicts in the Middle East, rather than one doomsday scenario, has led American evangelicals to back strong relations with Israel.

For the intended audience, this book will likely provide a compact and cautionary overview of evangelical overseas engagement and advocacy on key foreign policy issues, with a set of clear recommendations for the future. Scholars of religion, politics, and foreign policy may find that the case studies (which others have written on in much greater detail) do not break much new ground. While Amstutz offers a nuanced interpretation of some issues, there are a number of missed opportunities to combine this perspective with a deeper and more critical analysis of how the rise of evangelical political power and concurrent missionary expansion has shaped contemporary evangelical engagement with the world and with American foreign policymaking.