

AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

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Institutional and Curricular context:

Queens College is part of the City University of New York (CUNY), a public university system with a mission to provide a quality college education, at relatively low cost, for students from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Located in “the most ethnically diverse county in America,” the college itself is extremely diverse, serving a population of roughly 18,000 students (approx. 14,000 undergrad) from all over the New York metro area. A significant number of our students are children of first- and second-generation immigrants, and many of them represent the first generation in their families to get a college education. It is a Queens College tradition that some of the city’s best and brightest who lack the resources to attend high-end colleges discover opportunities for intellectual and creative growth on our campus. At the same time, many are also struggling to make ends meet, working part-time jobs while maintaining full-time student status and, in some cases, supporting their own families.

My department is a “four-field” anthropology program (cultural, biological, archaeological, and linguistic). In addition to required courses for our cultural anthropology curriculum, I occasionally teach courses in the comparative and ethnographic study of religion. This class, a new addition to the program, would be the only class I teach focusing on a specific religious tradition (evangelicalism) in a specific geographic region (North America), though the purview expands somewhat over the length of the course. I have taught variations on this course before, but I have not yet tried out the thematic structure that is presented here.

The course is currently listed as an intermediate-level “Topics in Anthropology” seminar, and is designated as a Writing Intensive. Consequently, students who enroll are not all anthropology majors, but may be students looking to fulfill the college’s writing requirements. While I need to keep these factors in mind when I construct the syllabus – for example, setting aside time for students to read and critique drafts of each other’s written work before handing it in – I mostly intend for the course to contribute to the intellectual development of our majors. Accordingly, the range of topics/case studies featured is not meant to be comprehensive, in the sense of providing complete “coverage” of the history and diversity of American evangelicalism. My goal has been to structure the course around conceptual and analytical nodes that correspond with topics addressed in other anthropology courses (e.g., enculturation, gender, media, globalization, etc.), while also privileging ethnographic perspectives and other scholarly sources that can be read through anthropological lenses.

The course content isn’t built around a central thesis, but there are some core themes that definitely get emphasized, including notions of “lived religion” and “engaged orthodoxy.” While much of the course explores the cultural construction of evangelical selfhood, and tensions between freedom and moral determinism in the lives of evangelicals, I also provide a framework for thinking about the world-changing ethos of evangelical action, as demonstrated in revivalism, missionization, social engagement, mediatization, and cultural production. This emphasis reflects my longstanding interest in the aspirational nature of historical evangelicalism, not just in relation to personal salvation but in broader social terms as well. Most of my students have a familiar but inchoate understanding of evangelicalism (usually through family). If there’s one thing I’d really like them to come away with it is an ethnographically sensitive as well as critical grasp of the historical and cultural significance of evangelical renewalism as a complex and contested model of social, spiritual, and global transformation. This will be informative and

theoretically challenging, and may also offer students opportunities to think reflexively about their own worldly commitments and ideas of empowerment.

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ANTH 290W: Topics in Anthropology
Professor Omri Elisha

Evangelical Christianity is among the most powerful religious movements in the world today. Driven by the mandate to “bring new souls to Christ,” as well as the demands of born-again faith and biblical orthodoxy, evangelicals along with televangelists, revivalists, and missionaries, pursue a wide array of social, cultural, and even commercial enterprises, inspiring all manner of innovation, indoctrination, and controversy.

This course takes a serious look at evangelicalism from an anthropological perspective. Covering topics such as revivalism, Biblicism, contemporary Christian media, missionization, and gender ideology, we will consider multiple dimensions of evangelicalism as lived religion, and explore its active role in shaping many of the key cultural movements, debates, and historical transformations that have defined secular modernity, from confessional notions of self and society to conflicts over religion and science and the separation of church and state. Our aim will be neither to evaluate nor justify evangelical Christianity but rather to better understand the depth and complexity of its global influence in the contemporary moment.

Course Requirements and Grading:

1) Participation, 15%

The class will run as an interactive seminar. You must be present and participate regularly in discussions. Please come to class having completed all reading and/or writing assignments and prepared to contribute. You will not receive credit for participation if you only come to class and remain silent. Occasionally, I will assign short in-class and take-home exercises as well.

2) Two 1800-word essays, 50% (25% each)

The first essay is a midterm essay, the second is a final. Essay prompts will be distributed in class. For both essays you are required to submit a first draft for in-class peer review.

3) Eight Short Reading Responses, 20%

To assist you in your reading, and so I can assess your comprehension and writing skills, you must submit **EIGHT** reading responses before the end of the semester. Each response should be at least **500 words** in length. It is up to you which days to write a response, but you must submit at least three by midterm. Responses must be submitted to me by email no later than 8pm the night before the reading is discussed in class.

Response guidelines: Responses should be written clearly and grammatically, and should show that you are taking the material seriously. *Don't just summarize the readings*. I want you to engage with them in an intelligent way. This could mean raising questions or criticisms that come up for you, discussing a specific theme that you'd like to explore further, or assessing how well (or how poorly) an author justifies their argument. If you make a genuine and responsible effort, I will see it in your work. If not, I will see that as well. Please remember to proofread your responses before you submit them.

4) Digital Scrapbook: “Evangelicals in the News,” 15%

A blog has been created for this class that will serve as a “Digital Scrapbook,” where you will regularly post links to interesting news articles, opinion pieces, videos, etc., about evangelicals or any contemporary media topics in which evangelicals play some role. I will provide detailed instructions about this assignment early in the semester.

Units / Readings

Unit I. Roots and Reverberations

Day 1-2:

- “Defining Evangelicalism,” <http://www.wheaton.edu/ISAE/Defining-Evangelicalism> (Read the main article and all related subheadings.)
- Robert Woodberry and Christian Smith, “Fundamentalism et al: Conservative Protestants in America,” *Annual Review of Sociology* (1998)

Day 3:

- Leigh Eric Schmidt, “Sound Christians,” *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (2002)
- Susan Harding, “Speaking is Believing,” *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (2000)

Day 4:

- Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)
- Tanya Luhrmann, “Is That You, God?” from *When God Talks Back* (2012) (*There will be an in-class writing assignment comparing these two essays.)

Day 5:

- Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, “From Separate Pews to Separate Churches,” in *Divided by Faith* (2000)
- Jonathan Walton, “Standing on the Promises: Diversity and Change Within Contemporary Black Christian Practices,” in *Watch This!: Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (2009)

Day 6:

- Susan Harding, “Fundamentalist Exile,” *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (2000)
- Joel Carpenter, “Revival in Our Time,” in *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (1997)

Unit II. Practices and Pedagogies of Faith

Justification: This unit will look at processes of socialization and indoctrination in evangelical communities and institutions. Readings and discussions will focus on the role of situated disciplines and discourses in the construction of evangelical selfhood. How do evangelicals learn to assume the roles and moral dispositions that faith communities expect of them? How does the use of narrative reinforce the norms of biblical orthodoxy? How do individuals manage the tensions and ambiguities that arise in the relationship between religious ideals and the often less-than-ideal circumstances of daily life?

Most of the unit will be spent reading Hanna Rosin's *God's Harvard*, a book about the extremely ambitious and often conflicted students of Patrick Henry College. Although this is a work of literary journalism, with an explicit liberal bias, I use this text because it focuses on the lives of formerly homeschooled college students as they are primed to join the ranks of elite evangelicalism. I invite my students to compare themselves to the characters in Rosin's account, whom they might imagine as their contemporaries.

Day 7-10:

-Hanna Rosin, *God's Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America* (2008)

Day 11:

- James Bielo, "Reading the Bible," in *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (2009)

- Marla Frederick, "'But It's Bible': African American Women and Televangelism" in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora* (2006)

Day 12:

- R. Marie Griffith, "Submissive Wives, Wounded Daughters, & Female Soldiers," in *Lived Religion: Toward a History of Practice*, David Hall ed. (1997)

- Tanya Erzen, "New Creations" in *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (2006)

Unit III. Media and Mediation

Justification: The aim of this unit is two-fold: 1) to explore diverse and innovative ways that evangelicals use media technologies to achieve spiritual experiences and perform religious works; 2) to show how evangelical mediations, including sensory and material engagements, are also practices of re-signification, with larger cultural and political implications. We will address the entrepreneurial and creative impulses that define evangelical strategies of mediation, highlighting their affinities with the "spirit" of modern capitalism and popular culture but also the ways in which they appropriate/reclaim symbols and categories of secular society.

Day 13:

- Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies, and the Question of the Medium," *Social Anthropology* (2010)

- Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (2012)

Day 14:

- David Morgan, "Memory and the Sacred," in *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (1999)

- Hillary Kaell, "Feeling the Gospel: Evangelicals, Place, and Presence" in *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (2014)

Day 15:

- Heather Hendershot, "For Profit Prophets: Christian Cultural Products and the Selling of Jesus," in *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (2004)
- Heather Hendershot, "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?: Christian Music and the Secular Marketplace," in *Shaking the World for Jesus* (2004)

Day 16:

- Watch the film *Hell House* (2002)
- Ann Pellegrini, "Signaling Through the Flames: Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling," *American Quarterly* (2007)

Unit IV. Missionary Positions

Justification: This unit will focus on evangelical missions and missionary logics in the colonial and postcolonial eras. We will look at how traditional missionary narratives have evolved in recent decades and been transposed into a wide range of neocolonial projects and interventions, including the humanitarianism, international development, religious tourism, short-term missions, and spiritual warfare. Similar to Unit II, we will spend a chunk of time with Brian Howell's work on short-term missions, for the same reason that I think students might relate to and be intrigued by the expectations and experiences of Christian youth who sign up for trips that straddle the divides between missionization, tourism, and "life-changing" travel.

Day 17:

- Dana Robert, "Vernaculars and Volunteers," in *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (2009)
- Heather Curtis, "Depicting Distant Suffering: Evangelicals and the Politics of Pictorial Humanitarianism in the Age of American Empire," *Material Religion* (2012)

Day 18-21: (* includes in-class screening of *The Tailenders*)

- Brian Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* (2012)

Day 22:

- David King, "The New Internationalists: World Vision and the Revival of American Evangelical Humanitarianism," *Religions* (2012)
- Melani McAlister, "What is Your Heart For?: Affect and Internationalism in the Evangelical Public Sphere," *American Literary History* (2008)

Day 23:

- Elizabeth McAlister, "From Slave Revolt to a Blood Pact with Satan: The Evangelical Rewriting of Haitian History," *Studies in Religion* (2012)
(* in-class screening of scenes from George Otis Jr.'s *Transformations* films)

Unit V. Private Selves, Public Faith

Justification: This final unit will examine different ways that evangelical religiosity “goes public” in modern times, including revivalism, cultural production, and social engagement. We will think about how evangelical imperatives to challenge and transform the norms of public culture – either in the name of conservative morality or socially progressive models of “justice” – correspond with coinciding intensifications of born-again faith as a transformation of the interiorized individual. We will review evangelicalism’s ambiguous status vis-à-vis the secular, and delve into case studies that highlight different outcomes and assessments with regard to the deprivatization of religion.

Day 24:

- Jose Casanova, “Secularization, Enlightenment, and Modern Religion,” in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994)

- Excerpts from Charles G. Finney’s *Lectures on Revival*

Day 25:

- Michael McClymond, “Issues and Explanations in the Study of North American Revivalism,” in *Embodying the Spirit: New Perspectives on North American Revivalism* (2004)

Day 26:

- Excerpts from Francis Schaeffer’s *How Should We Then Live?* (1976)

- James Bielo, “Creationist History-Making: Producing a Heterodox Past,” in *Alternatives in Archaeology: Confronting Pseudoscience and Engaging Public Perceptions of the Past* (forthcoming edited volume)

Day 27:

- Omri Elisha, “Compassion Accounts,” in *Moral Ambition: Megachurches and Social Outreach in Evangelical Megachurches* (2011)

- Excerpts from Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1977)

Day 28:

- David Swartz, “Identity Politics and a Fragmenting Coalition,” in *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (2012)

- Elizabeth Castelli, “Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the ‘War on Christians,’” *differences* (2007)