

Understanding evangelicals

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 22, 1999](#) issue

Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America, by Randall Balmer

Thirty years ago Dial Press commissioned me to write a book on the Protestant experience in America (*Righteous Empire*) for its bicentennial series. I was asked to exclude the "evangelical" half of mainly white Protestantism, since William R. Taylor was to write about it. That his book never appeared does not matter so far as the 18th and 19th centuries are concerned, since Protestantism and evangelicalism were largely one and the same then. Only in the 20th century did the two diverge. Even so, I smuggled figures like Billy Graham and some other evangelicals into my account. The two stories cannot really be disentangled.

Still, in the course of the intervening 30 years, evangelicalism has prospered so much and become so visible that sociologists, political scientists, theologians and historians regularly make it their specialty. Barnard College professor Randall Balmer has been among the more prolific, adept and visible of these interpreters and observers—thanks in no small part to his having hosted the television documentary *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*.

Though Balmer's book is not truly "A History of Evangelicalism," it serves well as a reflection on some of evangelicals' main themes. The book explains many elements of American public life: the nostalgia and resentment that fuel the Religious Right; our complex attitudes toward feminism and femininity; the "sermonic" rhetoric of American politicians; the end-of-the-world language that used to be otherworldly but that now licenses a peculiar worldliness; and the prosperity of competing religious movements.

This kind of book cannot be original throughout, but it can be of service, since most of the public has little awareness of what is common stock in evangelical discourse. Balmer never fails to hold the reader's attention, to seize on the most memorable vignettes to make a point, or to write elegantly. History that helps to explain emergent America is not to be dismissed. And in one section Balmer does aspire to originality—though, I regret to say, with mixed success.

Balmer's attempt at originality has to do with the influence of Continental (Reformed, Lutheran, Dutch, German, etc.) "Pietism" on the evangelicalism that usually gets traced mainly to Puritanism. My hunch is that he comes from such stock, as does part of my own Lutheran heritage; it would be nice to know that our ancestors played a major part in a movement that contributed to the mainstream. While making his argument, Balmer shows how neglected the story of religion in the middle colonies—New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania—has been. New England Puritans and the Anglican South usually get the attention. Balmer's study complements those stories. One hopes he will write a full-length book someday on what here teases us in one chapter only.

The author stakes much on that thesis, however. One or two of the names of Pietists whom he considers influential on evangelicalism may be familiar: Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg and Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, for example. But only specialists will recognize any of the others. Balmer shows how Frelinghuysen influenced Gilbert Tennent, a mainstream evangelical. But he underestimates both the language and the ethnic barriers, since so much of the Pietist influence came in Dutch and German packaging—languages and cultures that did not count for much among those of English descent. Read Benjamin Franklin's sneers at the Palatinate Germans who were coming to Pennsylvania.

Balmer's choice of words shows that, Tennent aside, he mainly has to content himself with suggestions, teases, parallels and complementarities. Phrases like these dominate: English-speaking evangelicalism and continental Pietism each elaborated "themes associated" with those of the other, and spoke of them "at the same time"; there are "a few scattered references," but the literature is sparse. Even among German Reformed ministers "Pietist tendencies seem never to have been very pronounced; soon Continental Pietism as an identifiable movement within the colonies largely disappeared into the mainstream." It lives today among heirs of Dutch Seceders and in some Scandinavian flowings into the Evangelical Covenant Church and the Evangelical Free Church denominations. Some evangelical prayer meetings look "quite a lot like the Pietist conventicals"; the literature on the two "resemble" and "echo" each other; one "comes to mind" when one deals with the other; the ideas of one "would not be alien" to the other; and both "insisted on" similar themes about the warmed heart and signs of regeneration. If the case could be stronger, Balmer has not made it so here.

The book is rich in insights. For example, Balmer gives four reasons why evangelicals cherish apocalyptic "literalism." First, "it's a lot of fun" to be in a subculture that gives one license for guessing games about such things as the Antichrist and the end of the world. Second, it allows for flights of fancy about the shape of the new and perfect world. Apocalypticism puts evangelicals in control of history and lets them sound as if they know the mind of God. And, finally, it inspires impulses to convert others while there is still time.

Balmer ponders creatively the strange twist by which ascetic and world-denying evangelicalism came to be a main promoter of "prosperity theology" and worldliness. Nonevangelicals who still stereotype evangelicals as crabby world deniers have not looked lately at evangelism's accommodation and surrender to the market, consumerism and worldly goods.

Balmer's chapter on feminism and femininity shows why evangelicals have been nervous about feminism and have advocated female submission, and at the same time have been preoccupied with "a particular kind of idealization of women," especially those who stay at home and tend the hearth. (This idealization appears most frequently in writings by evangelical women who do not stay home and tend the hearth.)

Balmer shows how dualisms about God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist, "we" and "they" color evangelical political discourse. He explores the way nostalgia for a presumably lost hegemony deepens that coloring. "Loss of hegemony can be frightening, and it can provoke a number of responses, from resignation to resentment and condemnation, from anger to action." Mainstream Protestantism has been mainly resigned as it has lost such hegemony after the middle of the 20th century; evangelicalism has been more resentful and condemning, more angry and prone to action as it has lost the dominance it enjoyed in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The book's final pages are hurried, and the ending is abrupt. Balmer leaves us on the Duquesne and Notre Dame campuses with Catholic charismatics. That sudden end inspires many questions that Balmer himself is likely to take up in the future. Meanwhile, he has given us readers clues for doing our own fresh observing. Evangelicals should welcome his sympathetic portrait, while others can learn from and enjoy it.