the move. Thus, the struggle to save black children, even long dead ones, grinds on.

References

Finding Meaning in a Rough Country

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Robert Wuthnow’s *Rough Country* is an ambitious sociological account of how American religion interlaces with politics, economics, and racial and ethnic identities. It is also an original work of history, chronicling religious developments in Texas from the 1840s to the present. Because it is a book about Texas, evangelicals take center stage and Southern Baptists the leading role. This is not to suggest that other religious traditions are neglected. Wuthnow’s encyclopedic study covers an almost unfathomable range of events, houses of worship, civic organizations, and personalities, all meticulously documented in more than one hundred pages of endnotes, including thousands of citations.

The events described in *Rough Country* range from well-known pivots in history such as the 1916 “Waco horror”—the lynching of an innocent 18-year-old, Jesse Washington, burned alive under the watchful eyes of the city’s elites—to curious historical footnotes such as the 2010 attempt by Pastor David Grisham Jr.’s “Army of God” to burn a Quran in Amarillo, only to be foiled by a skateboarder who snatched the sacred text. Wuthnow’s book juxtaposes historical narratives of churches that courted mass audiences, like the First Baptist Church of Dallas, the largest Southern Baptist congregation for most of the twentieth century and a national center of influence for fundamentalism, with detailed accounts of smaller churches like the University Baptist Church of Austin that desegregated its worship services in 1948, ordained women in the 1970s, and ordained a gay deacon in 1990. *Rough Country* describes giant enterprises in civil society like the evangelical and charitable foundation formed by R. G. LeTourneau in the 1930s from the wealth he amassed producing earth-moving machines, but does not neglect operations run on a shoestring budget like the fledgling union of Mexican farmworkers organized in Crystal City that same decade by Father Charles

Taylor. The book also complements rich biographies of personalities as outsized as Rev. J. Frank Norris, once arraigned for killing a man in his own pastor’s chamber and made (in)famous by his public attacks on everyone from heretics at Baylor University to civil rights advocates who dared to claim blacks equal to whites, with glimpses into the religious lives of ordinary Texans drawn from their diaries and letters. In its empirical scope, the book is monumental; yet something feels missing.

Wuthnow argues that the “most neglected aspect of American religion occurs in the middle range at the level that bridges families and congregations with the nation” (p. 2). Rough Country is devoted to describing how religion extended through this middle range to “give meaning” to “the symbolic boundaries” shaping the politics, economics, and identity of the Lone Star State. It discusses theological developments and disputes, in particular the rise of “premillennial dispensationalism” and how it was shaped as a defense against German “higher criticism,” but these abstract dynamics of symbolic meaning-construction take a back seat to the pragmatics of building churches and seminaries. The book touches on the intimate meaning of religion, in particular the personal solace and security sacred myths and rituals provided Texans in the face of the disease, violence, and disorder of life on a rough frontier; but the practical relief and collective order created by religious charities and hospitals and the ritual sanctification of court and vigilante justice receive more attention.

Eschewing the abstract and the intimate for a middle-range empirical focus has a clear payoff. It reveals the organizational genius of evangelicals and, in particular, Southern Baptists. By the time evangelicals entered Texas, their leaders were already well practiced in the art of gathering a flock and sensitive to what communities would and would not support. Their social influence in the state stemmed from this practical art of building and expanding on a following. Preachers built on what they knew worked in congregations small and large to imagine new organizational forms, becoming trailblazers in megachurches, specialized parachurch organizations, and radio ministries.

Throughout the historical narrative, Wuthnow provides the reader a clear sense of the scale and proportion of organized religion in Texas. For each era, from the antebellum period to the present, he catalogues the number of churches and leaders by denomination and surveys the level and form of religious activities in education, social services, media, and politics. Wuthnow carefully grounds his analysis in material objectivity and value neutrality; but as with his earlier work, critics will undoubtedly see in it a flight from meaning into social structure (Kane 1991; Alexander and Smith 1993). Whether it is flight or oversight from his middle-range focus, I think something important is passed over.

Readers of Rough Country unversed in the early history of American evangelical Christianity might be surprised to learn that from its popular inception the evangelical movement went to war with the worldly orders of the communities it raided for converts. Max Weber argued that “an important fraction of all cases of prophetic and redemptory religions have lived not only in an acute but in a permanent state of tension in relation to the world and its orders . . . [and] the more religions have been true religions of salvation, the greater has this tension been” (1946:328). In Wuthnow’s account of white evangelicals in Texas, you get very little sense of tension with worldly orders. Only very late in the historical narrative, after the 1960s, do “embattled evangelicals”—to borrow Christian Smith’s (1998) term—really make an appearance.

Wuthnow describes how evangelical leaders sanctified the boundaries drawn by conservative white communities protecting racial privilege, patriarchal order, and the power of economic elites. From his account, white evangelicals do not appear to have experienced much tension with the worldly orders of class, race, and gender. Wuthnow’s exhaustive review of historical records does not give much voice to women, and this raises questions about the apparent lack of tension. That said, this apparent ease would seem to suggest that either evangelicals and, in particular, Southern Baptists sold out their religion of salvation or Weber was wrong to strongly identify prophetic and redemptory religion with tension toward
the material orders of the world. Many on the left believe the former, but they are poor ethnographers (and social historians). In *Rough Country*, I think Wuthnow implicitly supports the latter conclusion. I want to suggest an altogether different explanation: the tension only appears to be missing because Wuthnow’s middle range does not bring it into focus.

Whether Weber is right or wrong, it is puzzling how the emancipatory religion of the Great Awakening turned into a bulwark of racial, gender, and economic inequality in the South. The evangelical movement crossed into the South in the mid-eighteenth century led by Separatist Baptists from New England and “log college” Presbyterians from the middle colonies. By the end of the century, Methodists had joined and energized the movement. In their southern incursion, evangelicals rejected clerical authority and transgressed the social distinctions established around class, status, and even gender and race. Their movement resonated with a restless middling class of whites, but it also converted slaves and free blacks. It was resolutely anti-political—not because of a principle of church and state separation (that ideological stance would come later), but because politics was of this world. If it avoided politics, it rankled the Southern social order all the same. It drew fierce resistance from lower-class white males and elite gentry. Poor white men resisted its egalitarian spirit because it threatened the slim privilege they held in lording it over blacks and women. The gentry disdained the leveling spirit of the socially striving saints because they showed a dangerous disregard for the deference owed to their betters (Mathews 1977).

Beyond class and status, the movement irritated many because it demanded so much of them in terms of moral discipline of the body. Within their inward-turning communities of believers, evangelicals policed intemperance and sex with a passion that seemed indecent to elites and intrusive to plebeians. The original American evangelical movement was, in Weberian terms, broadly at war with the worldly order and its claims to secure social value and distinction—including the standing orders of politics, class, race, gender, and sex. Within little more than a generation, the movement eclipsed the influence of the Anglican Church for all but Southern elites and set the foundation for what we now call the Bible Belt.

By the time whites with their slaves started to flow into Texas, the point at which Wuthnow picks up the historical narrative, Southern evangelicals had foreclosed their egalitarian spirit with regard to racial and gender distinctions. Crossing the Sabine and Neches rivers did not soften their racism and sexism. The two forms of discrimination intertwined in the male Anglo’s anxious imagination, filling it with threats of black and Indian “outrages” against his women. Wuthnow devotes considerable space to these “outrages.” As some of their evangelical counterparts in the North turned against the sin of racism, white Texans became fluent in a racist theology of the community of saints. And while northern evangelicals moved to unleash the moral leadership of women, Texans demanded women to know their place for their own protection in a “rough country” of racialized scoundrels.

If Texas evangelicals had grown comfortable with the economic, gender, and racial order of the South, they still kept the authority structures of their religion at a safe distance from party politics. The separation from politics was honored in part out of fear, as religious leaders saw the treatment of evangelicals who dared to voice their abolitionist and, later, desegregationist sentiments. Wuthnow describes how during Reconstruction religious leaders who entered the political fray were attacked, verbally and physically, as carpetbaggers who did not share the good sense of Southern ministers to stay wide of politics. Becoming comfortable and adept at engaging institutional politics took considerable time even for those who did not imagine crossing the color line. Conservative evangelical leaders did not do so wholeheartedly until the 1970s and 1980s—not just because of the secular checks on them, but also because of long-standing religious convictions that the political was inherently of this world and corrupting.

Over the century prior to this political turn, if the evangelical war with the worldly persisted, as I think it did, it narrowed to the
tension with bodily pleasures. For evangelicals, sexual sin has always been deemed the most coercive of the sins. The sociology of religion underappreciates the agonistic dimension of the sexual probation of the "born again." The evangelical call to strict sexual discipline is made within the sublimated erotic power of the beloved community of saints. From the inception of the evangelical movement in the eighteenth century, its leaders thought and talked about the flesh as much as anything, save possibly salvation. Their style of worship was physical, almost lusty. They greeted brothers and sisters in Christ with a kiss, physically embraced during prayer, washed each other's feet, and shared the heart-breaking confession of personal failings (Mathews 1977). In the South, all this intimacy was encouraged and expressed in the face of a culture that enforced distance and coolness across the defining social distinctions of class, race, and gender. This spiritual tension with the sexual proved creative in the institution-building of evangelicals from the eighteenth century to the present. Strict churches pulsed with sexual tension and thrived. Even in the postmodern mega-church, this social sublimation of intimacy continues to prove powerfully popular. Describing the Rev. Criswell's First Southern Baptist Church in Dallas in the 1990s, Wuthnow quotes one of Criswell's pastoral assistants, who said this most famous mega-church represented for aspiring preachers "something in the spiritual realm akin to sexual lust in the fleshly" (p. 339).

It goes without saying that many evangelicals fail their sexual probation. In the 1980s a series of televangelists failed gloriously before a national congregation. Embarrassing as these scandals have been, I see no reason to think that the conservative religious struggle with "illicit" sex will somehow implode in the near future under the weight of hypocrisy or antiquatedness. The current culture war over the power of the erotic sphere will not abate. The struggle between a postmodern promise for the erotic sensation of "salvation" in a disenchanted world and the redemptive feast of the body and blood of Christ, as some evangelicals frame the war, has proven a great recruitment opportunity. It has also been a license for evangelicals to cross the church-state divide. Wuthnow’s book shows how this played out in Texas at the middle range of religion—even if it takes some reading between the lines. He chronicles how religious organizations gradually started to convey the intimate matters of evangelicals into the larger political dynamics of the state and nation. The first political issue to significantly "de-privatize" religion in Texas was the battle over drinking alcohol. The political contest between wet and dry Texans started to erase the bright line between church and state. In the 1911 referendum for state Prohibition, evangelical ministers took public stands for the political vindication of God’s law as they argued for abstinence and pitted the power of the church against the corrupting influence of the saloon. In the wake of national Prohibition, evangelical leaders mixed anti-Catholicism with the fear of a wet and tipsy future to justify their political intervention. In the 1928 presidential election, they sounded the alarm that papist designs and the liquor trade lurked behind the presidential campaign of Al Smith. A half-century later, facing another moral battle over the body, evangelicals would bury the hatchet with Catholics and join them in the political fight against abortion. In the early days of fighting to keep abortions illegal, the political issue for vocal evangelicals was mainly about sex. Evangelical leaders spoke about the loose morals of unwed mothers rather than the lives of unborn children. By the 1980s, conservative evangelical leaders added a host of "life politics" issues to their political agenda—including anti-homosexuality, resisting state intervention in child rearing and education, and controlling public-school curricula on sex, science, and religion—and started to court in earnest the Republican Party as their representative in the halls of power.

In Texas, demographic forces may soon challenge the political influence Southern Baptists gradually developed over the twentieth century. With the political rise of Mexican Americans, if evangelical leaders are to retain this influence they will have to look beyond the white communities that have been their wellspring. Wuthnow’s historical analysis of how conservative Southern Baptists became tightly interlaced with white
communities and white identity shows how difficult a task this will be. The power of the women’s movement and the movement for LGBTQ rights may also diminish evangelical influence over younger and future generations. But the evangelical war with “worldly” orders of sex will undoubtedly continue. And now that the lines between church and state and Protestants and Catholics have been crossed, the future political potency of this religious war in Texas and America should not be underestimated.

References