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# Can Evangelicalism Resist Modernity?

## by Gary Scott Smith

*American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*
**by James D. Hunter (Rutgers University Press, 1983, 171 pp., $27.50).**

Social scientists have long contended that modernization, the process of economic and social change from a pre-industrial, agrarian society to an industrial, technological society, tends to make traditional religious beliefs less plausible and religious symbols less influential in the social structure and culture. How then, asks James Hunter, can conservative Christianity "survive and even thrive" in modern industrial America? Hunter argues that two factors explain why evangelicals—those who believe the Bible is God's inerrant word, that Christ is divine, and that individuals must accept Jesus as Lord and Savior—have prospered in America in recent years. On the one hand, they have remained relatively isolated from the forces of modernity, and, on the other, they have accommodated their world view, and especially their cultural practices, to modernity. Complaining that evangelicals are frequently stereotyped but rarely understood and that few scholars have seriously studied this movement, Hunter uses the results of the Gallup polls conducted for *Christianity Today* in 1978 and 1979 and recent literature written by evangelicals to analyze this movement.

Hunter insists that the collision of religion and modernity does not simply destroy religion. Rather, out of a sort of bargaining comes "mutual accommodation, mutual permutation, or even symbiotic growth" which occur at both the institutional level and the level of world views. Hunter's analysis, however, frequently contradicts this statement. In *American Evangelicalism* the influence flows only in one direction: from modernity to religion. Religion appears to be an inert substance which reacts and responds but rarely initiates or evokes. Religion is constantly being shaped by, accommodating itself to, modernity but seems to have little effect upon the modern world view or institutional structure.

Drawing upon the work of sociologist Peter Berger, Hunter attempts to show how the processes of rationalization, cultural pluralism and structural pluralism force religious world views to make accommodations. The rationalization process, which rests upon a naturalistic world view, undermines the credibility of religious assumptions about life and the universe and encourages people to see the world in mechanistic terms. Cultural pluralism divides society into subunits with distinct cultural traditions, thus challenging the universality of traditional religious views. Pluralistic societies deprive people of the constant social confirmation they need to sustain their beliefs about ultimate reality. Structural pluralism separates life into public and private spheres. It confines religious symbols and authority to private dimensions of life—church, family, and leisure—while public institutions and structures—politics, economics, education, media, and the like—come to rest upon secular values.

After providing a demographic profile of contemporary evangelicals and assessing their beliefs and practices, Hunter attempts to explain how evangelicals make concessions to rationalization, cultural pluralism, and structural pluralism. Although they have sharply resisted pressures to rationalize their theological doctrines, their world view has become highly formulated and systematized. In Hunter's view, evangelicalism has responded to modernity by "becoming packaged for easy, rapid and strain-free consumption." Both evangelism and spirituality have become highly structured and usually follow very precise methods.

The influence of cultural plurality, Hunter insists, has made contemporary evangelicals more tolerant than their forefathers ever were of conflicting views. Although the doctrinal core of evangelicals' world view remains essentially unchanged, he says, "it has been culturally edited to give it the qualities of sociability and gentility." The more offensive elements of evangelical faith, such as innate evil, sin, the wrath of God and eternal suffering in hell, are not frequently mentioned. Moreover, Hunter contends, most evangelicals today do not defend their faith as superior to other religions on the grounds that it is intellectually more cogent and plausible, but on the grounds that it provides more this-worldly benefits than other religions do.

Structural pluralism has also shaped contemporary evangelical character, Hunter argues. Its pressures to confine religion to the private sphere of life has prompted evangelicals to be more subjective and to emphasize how Christianity helps solve personal problems of worry, tension, depression, and loneliness. In Hunter's judgment, these accommodations have been purchased at a great price. Indeed, he is convinced that evangelicalism is being divested of the "energy and force necessary to sustain it over time."

Hunter concludes, then, that the current evangelical renaissance will be short-lived. Evangelicals have been able to resist modernity thus far chiefly because they are demographically most distant from its most powerful agents: university education, the higher socio-economic classes, urban culture, and the professions. Although evangelicals have been able to retain their doctrinal orthodoxy, their cultural style has become very different from (and implicitly inferior to) that which characterized their forefathers. Disagreeing with Jeremy Rifkin and other more optimistic seers, Hunter maintains that a third Great Awakening is "a virtual sociological, not to mention legal, impossibility under the present conditions of modernity." Hunter predicts that the popular support, socio-political strength, and ideological purity of evangelicalism will all diminish in the future as the pressures of modernity grow and evangelicals are more and more exposed to them.

While Hunter's analysis offers us many helpful insights, it has several weaknesses. The first is methodological. Hunter attempts to assess the emotional, psychological and spiritual development of the average evangelical principally by analyzing books on these subjects by the eight leading evangelical publishing houses. In my judgment, this source is too limited. To discover what the typical evangelical is taught and believes in these areas, is it not necessary to sample sermons of evangelical pastors, to examine major evangelical magazines such as *Christianity Today, Eternity, Moody Monthly,* and *Christian Life* and, even more significantly, to survey the attitudes and behaviors of evangelicals nationwide? Far too often when trying to portray typical evangelical attitudes, Hunter relies on Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye or others who speak for the fundamentalist right-wing of evangelicalism.

The second problem is theoretical. Hunter suggests repeatedly that religion, specifically evangelicalism, can do little to affect or alter American society. Secularization seems inevitable and almost irresistible. It is his belief that the forces of modernity will smash everything in their path which makes Hunter pessimistic about evangelicalism's future. Yet, it is possible, as Thomas O'Dea and others have shown, for religious movements such as evangelicalism to modify or even halt the advance of these processes. The recent history of several colleges, businesses, and even individual moral and social practices suggest as much.

Third, Hunter makes no distinction between accommodation and adaptation, between modifying one's message in response to alternative viewpoints and adapting one's message to changing cultural conditions. As cultural pluralism has replaced Protestantism's dominance over American culture, evangelicals obviously have been forced to adjust their cultural style. Throughout the Church's history Christians have sought to make the gospel message relevant to their time and place. Their basic message has remained remarkably stable while the focus and style of its presentation has changed. Yet, Hunter does not allow for a distinction between doctrinal and cultural capitulation and adjustments which allow Christians to speak more appropriately and effectively to their culture.

Finally, in contrasting present day evangelical attitudes and beliefs with those of their forefathers, Hunter tends to portray earlier evangelicals as much more monolithic about issues than they were. In my judgment, he exaggerates their emphasis upon hell, sin, and God's transcendence and minimizes the extent to which they stressed this-worldly benefits of Christian belief, the intimacy believers could enjoy with God, and God's immanence and involvement with His world.

In sum, Hunter's study sheds new and disturbing light upon contemporary American evangelicals. It clearly shows how modernity has modified evangelicalism's message and style in several significant and potentially enervating ways. But Hunter's assumption that religion has little power to resist modernity and reshape culture prevents him from investigating the possibility that evangelicals and the modern secular world have been engaged in a more genuinely mutual relationship.

***Hunter's study sheds new and disturbing light upon contemporary American evangelicals.***

*Gary Scott Smith is professor of sociology at Grove City College, Grove City, PA.*