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On Oprah and Rob Bell as Experiments in Incarnation

A Response to James Wellman

Justin K.H. Tse

James Wellman has done it. Critiquing academic analyses that examine only the message without the medium and the reception, Wellman asks us to journey with him to field work with Rob Bell. This is a risky proposition because it invites the scholars who read Wellman to consider how scholarship is not just a set of ideas to be picked apart, but to be embodied.

Indeed, an emphasis on embodiment is becoming a conspicuously noticeable hallmark of Wellman's research. Granted, in books like *The Gold Coast City and the Ghetto* and *Evangelical vs. Liberal*, Wellman had already insisted on being immersed in the communities that he was studying, always open to being surprised by how the empirical research challenges one's ideologies. Wellman thus problematized the narrative of mainline decline in his first book and re-examined the ideology that frames evangelicals as privatizing conservatives in the second. But this emphasis has intensified in his work on Rob Bell.

I think I have a hunch as to why. Over the last year during which I have come to know Wellman as a person and not as a walking set of ideas, he has also become increasingly fond of his predecessor at the University of Washington, Eugene Webb. The classic refrain he repeats in talk after talk is a line that Webb said to him over a recent lunch: "Jim, the whole world is an experiment in incarnation. God doesn't blame us for his failures, he just keeps trying."¹ The world that we inhabit, in other words, is a theological exercise in being embodied, being present,

¹ James Wellman, "Anxiety and Incarnation: Advice to Graduates," *James Wellman on American Religion, Patheos Progressive Channel* (accessed 1 October 2014, from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jameswellman/2014/06/anxiety-and-incarnation-advice-to-graduates/>).

being empirical from a very situated place. If that's true about the world, Wellman argues, then it must be true of the way we do our scholarly work in the study of religion. Wellman is requiring more of us, pushing us to do empirical research so that we can get at what I have called "grounded theologies," that is, how theological narratives are performed by actors in their everyday lives to create geographical realities.² To pretend that we are scholars of religion otherwise is, as Wellman suggests, to fool ourselves.

"The Oprahfication of Rob Bell" is Wellman's way of putting Webb to work in the exploration of grounded theologies. Wellman asks us to consider what we don't know when we don't conduct radically embodied empirical research. He does this by positing that Rob Bell's new association with Oprah Winfrey is an easy target for criticism, if read on the surface. Indeed, there is a book, Wellman suggests, that could perform this easy critique: Kathryn Lofton's *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* argues that everything Oprah says and does in the public sphere can be reduced to a sort of commercialization.³

Not so fast, Wellman says. We may know that Rob Bell's *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* critiques the American nation-state with the "cry of the oppressed," excoriating those who put their privatized visions of Christian life ahead of solidarity with the poor and thus behave in what Bell calls "anti-kingdom" ways. But it takes going to Mars Hill Bible Church to understand the tension that Bell's embrace of liberation theology caused in the church: people left because he condemned the Iraq War, staff who loved him as a person rejected the book, members were upset when he refused to renovate the church building, Bell refuses to see those who disagree with him as enemies. These are the grounded realities that simply reading *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*

² Justin K.H. Tse, "Grounded theologies: 'religion' and the 'secular' in human geography," *Progress in Human Geography*, 38, no. 2 (2014): 201-220.

³ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

will not tell the researcher; it takes embodied research to unfurl how this text is actually put to work in the life of Mars Hill Bible Church. Indeed, when Wellman tells of Bell's move into a racialized inner city, Wellman poignantly states, "I hadn't come across the fact that the Bell's had made this move into inner city –it wasn't in his sermons or his writings. I only heard about it inadvertently as I interviewed his friends and associates."⁴ One only can only know that Bell moved into the inner city by actually physically going to see where Bell lives.

For Wellman, the Oprahfication critique comes off shallow because it fails to take into account Oprah's own embodied life, much less the very incarnate history that led Bell to the point where he was going on tour with Oprah. If Oprah Winfrey and Rob Bell are embodied persons, it follows that research on them and the institutions that have grown among them must also be treated as experiments in incarnation. That Wellman is using this Bell's journey toward the Oprah tour as a critique of Lofton is instructive for the rest of us listening in: if scholarship is about getting to know persons in the flesh, then that changes how scholarship is postured. If Lofton is looking down from above to critique Oprah, Wellman stands beside Bell as a person. The walls between academics and practitioners, scholars and celebrities, researchers and persons all break down. The study of religion and culture must take as its mandate an initiative to abolish the myth of the academic elite because the radically empirical work that Wellman calls on all academics to do simply cannot be elitist. We, like those we research, are part of an experiment in incarnation. The only place we can possibly stand is alongside each other as colleagues, coworkers, and co-heirs of this experimental world.

⁴ James Wellman, "The Oprahfication of Rob Bell? The Question of Desire, Resistance, and the Megachurch Culture of Celebrity," p. 20.