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### Review Essay: Working evangelicalisms: Deploying fragmented theologies in secular space

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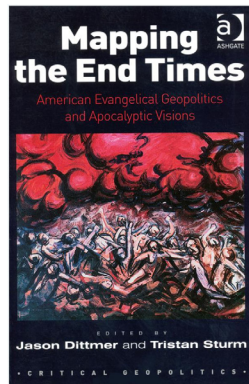
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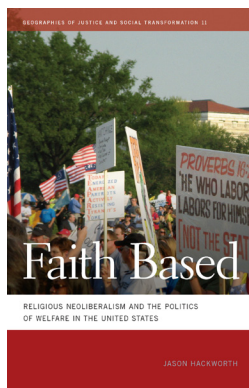
## REVIEW ESSAY

# Working Evangelicalisms: Deploying Fragmented Theologies in Secular Space

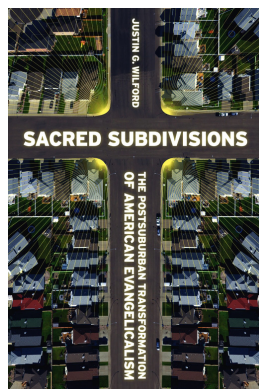
**Mapping the End Times: American Evangelical Geopolitics and Apocalyptic Visions.** Jason Dittmer and Tristan Sturm, eds. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2010. xvi and 261 pp., maps, diagrams, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$58.90 paper (ISBN 978-1409400837); \$58.36 electronic (ISBN 0754676013).



**Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States.** Jason Hackworth. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. xiii and 172 pp., photos, diagrams, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 cloth (ISBN 978-0-8203-4303-7); \$22.95 paper (ISBN 978-0-8203-4304-4); \$22.95 electronic (ISBN 978-0-8203-4372-3).



**Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism.** Justin G. Wilford. New York: New York University Press, 2012. xiii and 220 pp., photos, diagrams, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$79.00 cloth (ISBN 9780814725351); \$24.00 paper (ISBN 9780814770931); \$19.20 electronic (ISBN: 978081470309).



Over the last three years, three new important books have contributed to critical geographies of American evangelicalism: Jason Dittmer and Tristan Sturm's *Mapping the End Times*, Jason Hackworth's *Faith Based*, and Justin G. Wilford's *Sacred Subdivisions*. Demonstrating that evangelicals are ignored at geographers' peril in political, economic, and cultural geography, these new books each demonstrate that evangelical usages of space have contemporary salience in secular geopolitical formations, domestic economic policy, and the interpretation of cultural landscapes. Because these three books represent three different subfields in human geography (political, economic, and cultural geography), they can be taken together to critically interrogate the ways in which evangelicals use their theologies to exert secular power on a variety of modern spatial constructions. The strengths of each of these books are thus also their weakness, for although their critiques rightly interrogate the secular ends of some evangelical practices, the varieties of evangelical theologies are seldom explored, particularly in how contestations over the word *evangelical* shape the ways in which self-identifying evangelicals have made places.

Indeed, *evangelicalism* can refer to a range of theological positions within Protestant Christianity, and definitions of *evangelicalism* abound throughout the theological and religious studies literature. One of the most used is British historian David Bebbington's evangelical quadrilateral; that is, evangelical theology places a marked emphasis on four theological points: *conversionism*, *activism*, *biblicentrism*, and *crucicentrism*. Others, such as Mark Noll and D. G. Hart, prefer a

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historical explanation, tracing the rise of *neo-evangelicalism* as an internal protest to American fundamentalism's withdrawal from social and political engagement, seeking rather to engage civil society with what anthropologist Susan Harding terms a literalistic biblical script. In turn, social scientists like Donald Miller and Tanya Luhrmann have advanced the notion of a "new paradigm evangelicalism," an individualistic, therapeutic, and antiestablishmentarian practice of evangelical faith that revolves around a central personal relationship with God while sometimes relativizing civic engagement. The individualism generated by these new paradigms has been said to fragment the political, social, and theological unity of American evangelicals, making it at once difficult to pinpoint evangelicalism as a unitary movement while allowing for multiple theological strands to contest the meaning of evangelicalism. This fragmentation makes it extremely challenging, yet thoroughly rewarding, for these books to fulfill what they say that they intend to do: to demonstrate how evangelical theologies are worked into contemporary spatial formations. It is their success in capturing the range of evangelicals at work in modern geographies that this review assesses.

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We begin with political geography. Jason Dittmer and Tristan Sturm's contribution to critical geopolitics, *Mapping the End Times*, explores how *eschatology*, a theological conception of how the world will end, drives American evangelical conceptions of global geopolitics. On its face, the edited volume might first appear to be an unflinching critique of what political scientist William Connolly calls the "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine," an unholy alliance of evangelicals with "cowboy capitalists" determined to impose neoconservative hierarchies on contemporary spaces. Connolly's foreword, however, clarifies that although some evangelicals are complicit with capitalist power, both Connolly and the book's contributors claim to be aware of the multiple theological strands composing evangelicalism, including those working to construct egalitarian communities. The book in turn must be evaluated based on how successful it is in communicating that no single eschatological vision shapes the diverse fragments of American evangelical movements, much less their contributions to geopolitics. Although some of the contributors attempt to capture the internal contestations of evangelicalism, it is clearly tempting for many to focus on the more colorful evangelical characters.

In the first section, "Contesting the American Holy Land," the authors attempt to unravel the notion that there is a united evangelical conspiracy to leverage

eschatologies for American nation-building purposes. David Jansson argues that in the American South, a particular form of evangelicalism constructs American Southern geopolitics as a guardian of American moral landscapes against an apocalyptic national end that might be led by overly liberal Northern forces. This is different from Ethan Yorgason's consideration of Mormon eschatologies, theologies whose inclusion in an evangelical study are debatable because their alternative "prophetically led" church polities are often in tension with evangelical communities, which might make for weaker political linkages and different understandings of how eschatology informs contemporary politics. In turn, these views diverge from Jason Dittmer's exploration of how some paranoid evangelical readings of Barack Obama in the 2008 election framed him as a Muslim Antichrist. The key point of this section is that these three essays are about three specific strands of American evangelical eschatologies that frame America as a holy land, which suggests in turn that neither Southern nationalism, nor Mormon apocalypticism, nor Islamophobic eschatologies can speak for the whole of the American evangelical theological scene.

Contested as it is, though, the second section's interrogation of "American evangelical exceptionalism" suggests that there is a particular kind of American evangelical that fascinates these political geographers. The essays here by Simon Dalby, Michael Barkun, and Tristan Sturm assert that what must be critiqued in evangelical eschatologies are their propensities to appropriate secular neoconservative tactics to do theology, which in turn feed back into their nation-building strategies. Reading Tom Clancy's neoconservative spy fiction alongside an evangelical fictional counterpart, Dalby's demonstration that national security ideologies underwrite both secular and religious genres leads him to look for nonviolent evangelical counterexamples such as the Christian Peacemaking Teams as alternatives to Christian justifications of national exceptionalism. By contrast, Barkun's reading of John Hagee and Pat Robertson's "prophetic literature" suggests that it is currently normative for the vast majority of evangelicals to be on the lookout for events that confirm the approach of the Antichrist and a new world order. Likewise, Tristan Sturm introduces the term *dispensationalism*, an eschatological framework that holds that the world is temporally structured by divine dispensations of activity and that generally holds that believers will be "raptured" at the end of the current age. He argues from a reading of dispensationalist texts that some evangelical readings of the Bible extrapolate biblical place names and deploy them in contemporary geopolitics to construct others over against an exceptional America. In these last two essays, I would have appreciated a further discussion

of whether these dispensationalist framings remain normative in American evangelicalism, or, if as Dalby suggests, there might be alternative eschatologies contesting these readings of Scripture for American nation-building.

In the third part on “missionary geopolitics,” the chapters show how American missionary activity works out the eschatologically informed geopolitics sketched in the previous section in sites outside of the United States. Two essays here, written by Hannes Gerhardt and Ju Hui Judy Han, focus on the 10/40 window, an arbitrary geographic designation of the area between 10 and 40 degrees north latitude where the groups allegedly most “unreached” by the Christian Gospel are located, a discourse that in turn taps into a popularly conceived evangelical eschatological mandate to reach the entire world for Christ before Jesus returns to earth to bring about its end. Focusing on key texts by evangelical missiologists, these pieces follow the earlier chapters’ critiques of dubious *secular* social scientific claims that are currently integral to evangelical missionary practice. Under particular scrutiny here is the usage of outdated geographical concepts, such as people groups and the 10/40 window that prescribe a static reading of nations and borders that are uncritically preserved in missionary efforts. Han’s piece here is particularly useful, as she demonstrates that these efforts do not lie at the fringe of American missiology, but are at the center of the widely acclaimed Lausanne Movement and its mandate to do missionary work with cross-cultural sensitivity while bringing together moderate evangelicals to join a divine global mission. However, the claims that these geographical frameworks remain normative in missionary work are qualified by Carolyn Gallagher’s attempt to ground what she calls the “Middle East mission paradox” in the actual work of missionary agencies in the Middle East. She started out with a paradigm that saw exclusionary othering and inclusive approaches to evangelism as paradoxically intertwined, but her field work among missionaries in the Middle East demonstrated that these organizations actually had relatively little power to affect both geopolitics in the region and their home missionary organizations, finding that the ideologies with which they started were often inapplicable on the ground. Gallagher’s piece opens up the possibility that a fragmentation of evangelical ideologies happens because working evangelicals on the ground forces evangelical actors to confront realities that are asymmetrical with their ideologies.

My concern, then, is that although the volume does an excellent job in introducing a variety of basic evangelical eschatological concepts such as the Antichrist, the new world order, dispensationalism, and the 10/40 window,

its essays’ heavy dependence on evangelical texts does not ultimately capture the variety of evangelical eschatological visions at work on the ground simultaneously. The volume’s strength is that it critiques how eschatologies are deployed as a means to attain the secular ends of nation-building at the expense of nonexceptional others. In other words, it rightly sees that evangelical eschatological geopolitics are often problematic because theology is done in the service of secularity. What is strong about this critique, however, is also where the book is at its weakest: Evangelicalism is, as the volume repeatedly notes, a fragmented theological movement. More is needed, then, to bolster the initial qualifications of evangelical eschatologies as nonunitary, that as Connolly shows, some evangelical eschatologies do not depend on outmoded geographical norms. Although attention is rightly given to dispensationalist figures as well as evangelical missiologies that uncritically use geopolitical terms, one wonders if the initial claims of the volume that there are more expansive evangelical eschatologies can be found. For those in the know, progressive and moderate voices can be located, such as those associated with Jim Wallis’s *Sojourners Magazine*, young hipster evangelicals in Emergent Village and theOoze.net, the new evangelical consensus that scholars like Martha Pally and Omri Elisha observe employing “moral ambition” to care for their local communities, the neo-Reformed church-planting tribe that seeks to build “cities of God” to serve urban centers, the evangelical academics influenced by New Testament theologian N. T. Wright’s eschatological vision of a renewed heavens and earth, and the emerging consensus led by Soong-Chan Rah that American evangelicalism is undergoing a multicultural sea-change. As it is, this volume is more of a start of things, a reminder that evangelical eschatologies do contribute to American foreign policy and global geopolitics, but one whose qualifications about the nonunitary nature of evangelicals is not fully demonstrated in its contributions.

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Turning to economic geography, Jason Hackworth’s *Faith Based* contributes a critical exploration of odd evangelical alliances with secular neoliberal political economic ideologies in the United States. Arguing that academic neoliberal theories rarely thrive without parasitic attachment to ideologically driven groups, Hackworth demonstrates that religious neoliberalism, an evangelical parroting of neoliberal tropes, is composed of a fraught relationship between secular politicians and religious practitioners. Although Hackworth also employs a unitary understanding of evangelicalism, he is more self-conscious about

demonstrating that evangelical theologies of both radically conservative and moderate sorts can be co-opted to serve secular neoliberal purposes. Like the political geographers, then, what is under critique is not evangelical theology, per se, but the ways in which evangelical theologies are deployed for secular purposes. As with the previous book, my assessment is based on the degree to which Hackworth teases out the intraevangelical contestations over the extent to which their theologies should be allied with secular power.

Indeed, Hackworth's central argument is that *religious neoliberalism* is an effective but fraught coalition of two antistatist discursive communities: secular neoliberals and evangelicals who believe that churches and privately funded nonprofit organizations are a "force for greater good than government" because they are more effective than the welfare state in service provision. Reaching its apex with President George W. Bush's White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, neoliberal discourses emerged within evangelicalism from the work of conservative figures like Marvin Olasky and Gary North. These evangelical theorists decried the "failure" of the welfare state for failing to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor and thus made some people dependent on state welfare when they should have been given work. These discourses in turn are not limited to a neoconservative fringe; looking at the National Association of Evangelicals' (NAE) policy proposals and articles in *Christianity Today*, Hackworth finds that critiques of state-sponsored welfare are also present in these more moderate evangelical publications, insinuating that welfare makes citizens dependent on the state instead of helping them fulfill their ultimate purpose as working contributors to society.

Hackworth's argument is significant because it is an economic rejoinder to overly optimistic accounts in geographies of faith-based organizations (FBOs) that portray these institutions as filling a service gap left by neoliberal restructuring. Hackworth suggests that FBOs could be complicit in proliferating neoliberal ideologies at the same time that they are realistically unable to replace the service provisions of the welfare state. Drawing from Habitat for Humanity, Gospel rescue missions to the urban poor, and post-Katrina FBO relief in New Orleans, Hackworth argues that the thrust of American evangelical political economic theory has been antistatist, although unevenly applied across urban centers based on the relationship between rescue missions and state funding. For example, although Habitat for Humanity has been journalistically touted as a viable replacement to the state (even in its

own publications), its focus on a selective few who can afford a home (Olasky's "deserving poor") means that there are undeserving poor who are excluded from its services. Likewise, although many Gospel rescue missions refuse state funding to perform their charity activities, their ability to comprehensively serve the urban poor is often hampered by their own lack of material resources. So, too, religious neoliberalism has come under devastating contestation since Hurricane Katrina, for the failure of the Bush administration's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to act decisively with state-sponsored help was attributed to an attempt to let church-based charities replace the state in providing disaster relief. Because the actual limited resources of FBOs make it impossible for them to actually challenge the state except on an ideological level, Hackworth concludes that the alliances that make up religious neoliberalism have always been partial and might soon come apart, especially because some religious practitioners in the latter half of the Bush regime expressed discontent at having been coopted by Machiavellian neoconservative forces even as other evangelical superstars have been mired in their own scandals.

As I read Hackworth's very coherent account of religious neoliberalism, I found myself curious as to what extent some evangelical theologies might be themselves secularized, facilitating their usage for neoliberal ideologies. Drawing from conversations within theology and religious studies, radically orthodox theologian John Milbank positions his theological critique of secularization as a "heterodox and anti-theological theology in disguise." This exposé of the secular as theological is no conservative argument, however, for Milbank uses it to provide a Christian response against neoliberalism. For Milbank, evangelical actors are not strangely allied with neoliberal actors; their theologies themselves are secular and thus inherently complicit with state and market powers. In other words, to what extent is Olasky himself a secular theologian? To what extent might Habitat for Humanity's expressed mandate to provide a "hand up, not a handout" be itself an internalized secularization of its theological purposes? If some Gospel rescue missions refuse to accept state funding so that they can fulfill religious purposes, how many of those non-state-sponsored activities are actually informed by an orthodox theology?

Another question centers on Hackworth's implicit attack on antistatist ideologies: Does a theological appeal to charity as an alternative to the state automatically imply neoliberalism? Although Hackworth's examples in Habitat for Humanity, *Christianity Today*, and the NAE's policy proposals certainly demonstrate antistate alternatives

in FBOs by evangelical voices, I wondered how distinctively evangelical this framework might be. A Catholic counterexample that balances antistatism with antineoliberalism might be found in Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, in which the Pope Emeritus argues that charity organizations, not social justice revolutions, are appropriate practices of Christian theology. Benedict XVI can hardly be regarded as a neoliberal, however, for his third encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* advocates global financial regulation as a corollary of concern for justice and the common good in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown. Given this Catholic contrast, is the alliance of evangelicals with neoliberal ideologies a unique expression of evangelical theology? Although there are neoconservative Catholics like George Weigel, Michael Novak, the late Richard John Neuhaus, and (most notoriously) Paul Ryan who remain committed to neoliberal ideals, what distinguishes evangelicals from them? Are there other religious (if not, antistatist) voices advocating charity that could hardly be classified as neoliberal? In other words, whereas Hackworth defines evangelicals as a charitable, antistatist religious movement, my challenge is whether the coherence of this book is able to capture the economic debates that thrive among the theological and political diversity of people who identify as evangelical and the fellow nonevangelical Christians against whom they position themselves.

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Moving to cultural geography, then, Justin G. Wilford's *Sacred Subdivisions* grounds the foregoing discussion in how a large megachurch in Orange County, California, Saddleback Church, uses space. As a cultural geographer, Wilford demonstrates that the success of Saddleback is that it helps its members to reframe what he terms *post-suburbia*, a late modern configuration of suburban space that fragments life worlds among homes, workplaces, leisure spaces, and religious sites. Whereas some theologies might challenge postsuburban spatial fragmentation itself, Wilford argues that Saddleback actively attempts to reframe a Southern Californian postsuburban ennui and fragmentation into purpose-driven places. In doing so, Wilford provides a "brother's critique" of Saddleback, again suggesting that what is under scrutiny is not Saddleback's evangelical theology, per se, but the way that it understands, uses, and redefines its secular surroundings. Indeed, drawing from a previously published piece on geographies of secularization, Wilford frames his argument by drawing from classic secularization theory, showing that the differentiation and fragmentation of spheres in modern life has touched every aspect of contemporary

life worlds. In turn, Wilford suggests that what Saddleback does is to reframe this fragmentation as a purposeful means by which postsuburban residents can live out their full human potential, at least as defined by Rick Warren's best-selling *Purpose-Driven Life*.

Like the political and economic geographers, Wilford's "brother's critique" scrutinizes how Saddleback attempts to use secular space for its own theological ends. Wilford demonstrates that Pastor Rick Warren, the senior pastor at Saddleback, devised a concentric model in which Saddleback attendees would be drawn deeper into membership, only to be sent back out to bring the church to a fragmented postsuburban county. The center of Saddleback's spatial practices, then, is in small groups meeting in suburban homes. These gatherings function as sites from which Saddleback's church practice radiates. There, Wilford shows, members live out an evangelical script in which their everyday lives, fragmented across work, school, home, and church, are reframed as ways by which God gives them human purpose. The church's missionary practices are in turn read through these lenses. Saddleback's international PEACE plan, a humanitarian effort to draw the church into global missionary work in Africa, is in fact a method by which postsuburban residents are drawn out of their life worlds into mission, only to return to Southern California with a sense of renewed purpose. So, too, although the Saddleback Civil Forum appears to mix religion with secular politics by inviting politicians to speak about their agendas for global health, presidential elections (John McCain and Barack Obama were both invited to speak), and climate change, this, too, is an effort to evangelize to an Orange County community, using relevant civil society topics to help reframe postsuburban ennui with purpose.

Given the diversity and the multipolarity of the life worlds of Saddleback attendees, however, my question to Wilford also focuses on evangelical diversity: Where does Saddleback's use of space fit in the diverse evangelical constellation that comprises Southern Californian evangelicalism? Although Wilford provides tables and charts that demonstrate unequivocally that many postdenominational evangelical megachurches like Saddleback use small groups for church growth, is Saddleback's usage of them qualitatively normative? What about, say, other Southern Californian evangelical mass movements, such as the "third wave" Vineyard charismatic movement, the positive-thinking preaching of Robert Schuller at the Crystal Cathedral, the moralizing of Chuck Swindoll, the Pentecostalism of Jack Hayford at the Way Church in Van Nuys, the Jesus Movement hippie legacy of Calvary Chapel, the urban

churches that cater to Hollywood workers, the Korean and Chinese churches that speak of the “silent exodus” of their second generation and their fear of anti-Asian racism in the wake of the Rodney King riots, the second-generation Asian American churches like Newsong Church and Evergreen Church that focus on developing a distinctively hybrid racial and religious identity, the Latino evangelical churches contesting the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in their communities, and the African American churches that span the political spectrum? Is Saddleback’s approach to secular space contested or enhanced by the presence of such evangelical diversity in Southern California? Although it would be unfair to critique Wilford’s book as failing to encompass so much diversity in an ethnography of one congregation, it is a question for further research that points to where Wilford’s book might lead to a vibrant new mapping of this Southern Californian evangelical complexity.

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This review demonstrates that there remains much more work to be done in critical geographies of evangelicalism. Each of the books hints that evangelicalism is not a unitary movement, but much more needs to be done to show the fragmentations and contestations that make up contemporary evangelical movements. This, too, would be a geographical task, one worth pursuing because of the sustained impact of evangelicalism that these books show it has on global geopolitical formations, domestic economic

policy, and the making of cultural spaces. If *evangelicalism* is itself a contested term, what do these contestations look like on the ground? Are the geopolitics, economics, and cultural formations described in these books challenged by other evangelical strands, and if so, how are these alternative evangelicalisms grounded in relation to the spaces described in these texts? Are the divisions within evangelicalism shaped by theological conceptions of the transcendent or, as these books hint, by secular ideological entrenchments as some evangelical leaders deploy their theologies to expand their secular power? How do different kinds of evangelicals interact with non-evangelical Christians, such as mainline Protestant ecumenists, Roman Catholics, Orthodox practitioners, and neo-Marxist liberation theologians? Are there engagements and emerging solidarities with non-Christian religious practitioners in the face of secularization as well? This larger mapping of internal evangelical contestation and how this fragmentation interfaces with secular spatial formations indicates that these books’ descriptions are but starting points to understand the place of American evangelicalism in contemporary American geographies. They should point many geographers in turn to incorporate evangelicalism into their main research agendas to produce that larger map of evangelical contestation. When that more comprehensive geographical literature is produced, then the statement that evangelicals are integral to contemporary political, economic, and cultural geographies should finally come as no surprise.