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### The unraveling of the private consensus

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## **The unraveling of the private consensus**

By Justin K.H. Tse

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<https://asianamericanchristian.org/2014/01/28/justin-tse-the-unraveling-of-the-private-consensus-open-letter>

The Asian American Open Letter to the Evangelical Church was a key moment in the unraveling of the private consensus in American evangelicalism in 2013. Let me explain.

What I call the “private consensus” is an implied agreement among evangelical Protestants in America that churches, parachurch organizations, and religious institutions should conduct matters privately. In fact, it might go as far as to say that individual Christians should act in private, away from the public eye, especially the media. When Christian matters become public, so the argument goes, they become distorted. Consequently, Christians are encouraged to operate at a “direct and personal” level, which translates into staying within a private sphere of action where personal dealings are in camera (which, as you know, means “off-camera”), off-record (or, at least, with sealed records), and without public participation.

The Open Letter challenged that private consensus. The letter argued that it was precisely because matters have been conducted privately in evangelical Protestant circles that race is consistently and effectively swept under the rug. Few know that race is a problem in evangelicalism; even fewer can identify Asian Americans as an invisible population within evangelicalism.

In fact, the critical issue was that people like Rick Warren and the organizers of the Exponential Conference seemed completely unaware that using oriental stereotypes suggests that Asian Americans do not really belong in the evangelical community. This ignorance—despite a decade of activism since LifeWay’s Rickshaw Rally VBS fiasco in 2004—indicates that such matters have been kept under wraps by the private consensus. However, the Open Letter forced the issue into the open.

The private consensus continued to rear its ugly head throughout the promotion of the Open Letter. The promoters of the Open Letter were accused of violating Jesus’ instruction to approach people who might have offended us directly and personally. From the critics’ perspective, “direct and personal” were the opposite of “public.”

However, the signatories of the Open Letter had a different view of “direct and personal.” Challenging the private consensus, they pointed out that the use of oriental stereotypes in evangelical Christianity—like Rickshaw Rally, the Mee Maw skit, the Deadly Viper book, Rick Warren’s Red Guard photo, and the Exponential skit—all started out publicly. What starts public ought to stay public.

By the same token, it is absolutely possible to engage our offenders directly and personally in the public sphere. Indeed, the public sphere is the best arena for such discourse because the fact that people said they just didn’t know about Asian American struggles in American evangelicalism means that the private consensus has done more harm than good.

The private consensus resulted in stifling conversation. The new evangelical public discourse promoted by the Open Letter signatories reopens dialogue.

To be sure, the Open Letter was only one part of the unraveling of the private consensus in 2013. Throughout the year, scandals surrounding evangelical celebrities have been picked up by evangelical media outlets and religion news sources and discussed thoroughly in the public sphere. These journalistic efforts signal that the private consensus is unraveling among evangelicals. The further episodes in this series of events will be fascinating to watch.

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*Justin’s research focuses on how Asian American, Asian Canadian, and Asia-Pacific Protestants engage and construct public spheres.*