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Christianity Transformed? An Important New Look

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Wolfe is Director of the Boisi Center for Religion in American Public Life at Boston College, and may be the most-quoted sociologist of religion in America. He is greatly respected in the media, because he tends to offer a reassuring promise that Americans are basically united and that the clash of worldviews is grossly overestimated. In his 1998 work, *One Nation, After All*, Wolfe argued that the culture wars dividing Americans on issues of morality—and especially sexuality—mask an underlying consensus that unites most Americans in a muddled middle.

His analysis is worth note. There can be no doubt that millions of Americans are basically disengaged from the issues of moral debate and do not live in the midst of ideological combat like that found on cable news programs. Nevertheless, the culture war is very real and the issues are urgently important. Wolfe tries to find assurance that the American social compact is still in tact. At times, this leads him to underplay the real conflict of worldviews.

Wolfe has now turned his attention to the tendency of organized religions to accommodate themselves to the culture of postmodern America. Though he considers Roman Catholicism and Judaism, the main thrust of his book is an analysis of the accommodationist impulse in American evangelicalism. As Wolfe sees it, there is very little distinctive Christianity remaining in evangelicalism.

Wolfe concludes that American evangelicals have negotiated their way into a completely new theology. As he explains, "More Americans than ever proclaim themselves born again in Christ, but the lord to whom they turn rarely gets angry and frequently strengthens self-esteem. Traditional forms of worship, from reliance on organ music to the mysteries of the liturgy, have given way to audience participation and contemporary tastes. Some believers are anxious to witness their faith to others, but they tend to avoid methods that would make them seem unfriendly or invasive." Wolfe adds: "If Jonathan Edwards were alive and well, he would likely be appalled; far from living in a world elsewhere, the faithful in the United States are remarkably like everyone else."

Wolfe is himself a secularist. As he explains, "Although raised to be proud of my Jewish ethnic heritage—I still remember the names of the Jewish major leaguers of my youth—I am not, and never have been, a person of faith. When it comes to religion, I hear no inner voices, am attracted to no supernatural explanations of everyday events, look neither upward to heaven nor downward to hell, identify with no particular tradition, and feel no guilt in having married a Christian (by birth, though not by conviction) and having, together with her, raised three children without benefit of confirmation or bar and bat mitzvahs."

That is not to say that Wolfe finds believers uninteresting. "I am attracted to religion and to religious people, out of a sense that one-way conversations with the like-minded are never very satisfying. Perhaps that is why my travels in the world of religion as well as my research into the sociology of religion have enabled me to cross paths with evangelical Protestants I have come to count among my friends."

In a very real sense, Wolfe is not writing to evangelicals, but about evangelicalism. His intended audience is not religious believers, but secularists worried about the threat posed by the “religious right.” As he sees it, conservative Christians are really not much of a threat. We offer more bark than bite, and have so accommodated ourselves and our faith to contemporary America, that we are really a harmless part of the mainstream.

In a penetrating analysis, Wolfe traces the pattern of cultural and theological accommodation. He begins with worship, noting that “Americans revere a God who is anything but distant, inscrutable, or angry. They are more likely to honor a God to whom they can pray in their own, self-chosen way. In the process they have substantially altered the faiths in which they believe.”

Wolfe traces the pattern of church-swapping and denomination-switching. This “circulation of the saints” is a pattern tied to consumerist religion. Worship is no longer dictated by theological conviction, but rather by personal taste. Heavily influenced by an entertainment culture, modern evangelicals are looking for worship that is experienced with the thrill and excitement of the latest musical styles and video technology.

Writing in a dispassionate style, Wolfe argues: “Generally speaking, preaching in evangelically oriented growth churches, however dynamic in delivery, has remarkably little actual content. Scripture is invariably cited but only as a launching pad to reinforce the message of the salvation that Jesus can offer. Rarely is the congregation challenged to do anything other than give itself over to Christ, and even the pursuit of that objective is not accompanied by any sense of complexity or difficulty.”

Wolfe takes particular shots at the “insipid music” often found in evangelical worship and the popularity of *The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson. “Whatever else one thinks of such dyed-in-the-wool religious conservatives, they at least ought to be people who take their Christianity seriously,” Wolfe argues. “And yet what is offered in Wilkinson’s book is a conception of religion so narcissistic that it makes prosperity theology look demanding by contrast.”

Wolfe also looks at the rise of small groups within church ministries, explaining that this is the result of an anti-institutional bias and a desire for intimacy. He also considers the rise of para-church movements and the mega-churches, arguing that both are effectively becoming substitutes for the historic denominations.

What about doctrine? Wolfe does acknowledge the deep doctrinal concerns that drive many conservative evangelicals. Nevertheless, he argues that most evangelicals are basically disinterested in doctrine and ignorant of even the most basic theology. Wolfe goes so far as to argue that “Evangelical believers are sometimes hard pressed to explain exactly what, doctrinally speaking, their faith is.”

“Conflict over doctrine is fast becoming a phenomenon of church history,” Wolfe argues. “Evangelicals have exchanged orthodoxy for popularity,” he explains, “and since American popular culture is one that puts more emphasis on feeling good than thinking right, these movement tend to be especially hostile to potentially divisive doctrinal controversy.”

In other words, many churches will do almost anything to avoid doctrinal controversy, even if this means avoiding doctrine all together.

Tradition is also a thing of the past. Without accountability to a doctrinal heritage, the issues of the contemporary culture displace the historic concerns of the church. Wolfe points to the predominance of therapeutic categories in evangelical church life and preaching. Sin has been replaced with the language of self-esteem.

Underlying all this, of course, is a fundamental shift in the concept of God. “America’s God has been domesticated,” argues Wolfe, “there to offer solace and to engage in dialogue with the understanding that, except under the most unusual circumstances, he will listen and commiserate.” And sin? “In a world governed by this more accessible God, sin still exists and atonement is still possible. But the sins are less numerous, less serious, and more forgivable.”

Wolfe even finds evangelicals confused about the gospel. Still committed to a conversionist theology, evangelicals seem to be uncertain of what conversion really requires. Furthermore, the influence of postmodern culture has brought a change in the way truth itself is conceived. The absolute truth claims of historic Christianity are, he claims, fast being

transformed into truths held to be something less than absolute.

In his attempt to find middle ground in the culture and in order to press his case that religion is not divisive factor in modern America, Wolfe turns his guns on those who would argue otherwise. In particular, he aims his critique at Christians who believe that truth claims are of fundamental importance.

He describes those who argue for the exclusivity of the Christian gospel as intolerant. The encounter of Christianity with Islam is one of Wolfe's particular concerns. He quotes me (correctly) as stating: "An Islam that settles for religious pluralism is not authentic Islam, and Christianity without zeal for conversion is not authentic Christianity."

So far, so good. But Wolfe goes on to argue, "If we believe, as Mohler does, that 'religions stand or fall on the validity of their truth claims,' there will inevitably be as many truths at war with each other as there are faiths." Of course, without truth claims, Christianity is reduced to a spirituality that offers no hope of salvation. Or, as Wolfe would prefer, a Christianity that poses no threat to unbelief.

Evangelical Christians should read Wolfe's book with great interest. His indictment of evangelicalism's accommodation to the culture is perceptive, even if unoriginal. Most thoughtful evangelicals have been concerned about these trends for some time and have documented the same patterns with greater insight. What Wolfe offers is an outsider's perspective with a fascinating angle. Evangelical Christians will read his account as a tragic loss demanding recovery, even as Wolfe finds assurance in the domestication of Christian belief.

Alan Wolfe wants to assure his fellow secularists that evangelical Christianity is not much of a threat. He provides a wealth of documentation and illustration in order to prove his point. While evangelical readers may find many points of disagreement with Wolfe, the basic thrust of his argument is difficult to deny. Cultural accommodation and surrender to the narcissistic culture of the self do indeed mark the transformation of American religion. Nevertheless, what Wolfe finds so culturally reassuring brings judgment upon American evangelicals.

Unless evangelicalism recovers its theological integrity and cognitive courage, American secularists will have every reason to believe that Alan Wolfe is right. We really are not much of a threat.

