

Nancy D. Wadsworth. *Ambivalent Miracles: Evangelicals and the Politics of Racial Healing*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014. 320 pp. (\$39.50 cloth).

In this volume, Nancy Wadsworth meticulously traces the rise and evolution of the Evangelical Racial Change Movement (ERC). She uncovers how the conservative evangelical tradition developed a passionate investment in racial transformation within their religious communities on the heels of a storied history with racism and white supremacy. This passion is juxtaposed to their political ambivalence toward efforts to unearth structures that undermine the very racial equality they seek. This work is timely, as Wadsworth mentions the push to limit the reach of the federal government and state-sponsored social policies by American neo-conservatism has recently peaked the interest of political scientists.

By carefully tracing the historical, political, and cultural contexts that shape ERC over two decades (1990-2010), this volume is the first of its kind in political science to use the intersections of race, religion and politics to provide a window into emerging political orientations within a social movement. *Ambivalent Miracles* challenges the discipline of political science to better understand how deeply these intersections matter to the construction of American politics and political allegiances.

This qualitative study draws from interviews and a survey with active ERC participants, content analysis of the evangelical flagship publication *Christianity Today*, participant observation and a three-year case study of a multiethnic congregation informed by the emerging field of political ethnography. A qualitative approach unearths cultural practices and assumptions that most participants take for granted yet remain vital to unlocking the paradoxical nature of the movement.

It is unlikely however, that discussions of race and religion surface without mention of the widely cited *Divided by Faith*, by sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith (2000). Wadsworth includes the first study to systematically capture racial attitudes in American evangelicalism. *Divided* exposed the cavernous divide between black and white evangelicals concerning their respective outlooks on race related issues. While her work stands on its own, Wadsworth uses this seminal study as a platform to gauge its influence on ERC.

In *Divided*, Emerson and Smith conclude that the ideological toolkits white evangelicals draw from renders them ill-equipped to make substantial changes to the problem of race in U.S. congregations. Wadsworth pushes further by featuring what she calls *epiphanal spaces* and *social etiquettes* to elucidate how Emerson and Smith's claim is limited. These conceptual tools are much more efficient in explaining how white conservative evangelicals express genuine interest in race relations, while avoiding and/or rejecting policy-based solutions to racial inequality. Wadsworth argues that rituals of admitting, trust building, and apology/forgiveness practices create epiphanal spaces that feel like "miracles" to reconcilers. Consequently, epiphanal spaces allow for the cultural mechanisms of social etiquettes (e.g. *customs* and *rituals*) to create meaning-making systems that render racial reconciliation efforts "a challenge cut out

for Evangelicals.” This *challenge* emphasizes relationship and spiritual intervention in place of politically oriented conversations and action.

Leaders of *Promise Keepers*, an evangelical organization at the helm of early reconciliation efforts, argue that secular systems fail because inherent racism is a *sin issue* and individuals rely on secular programs rather than their relationship with God. These sentiments result in political activity seen as threatening to reconcilers rather than an inherent next step. Wadsworth contends that even with exposure to more critical frameworks, the cultural context surrounding evangelicals, not just their intellectual toolkits, prevents active participation in progressive political agendas by members of ERC.

Wadsworth helps to confound the picture of political avoidance among ERC advocates by offering extensive attention to the reconciliation efforts a decade later. ERC transitioned to promote what they called the Multiethnic Church Movement (MEC). For ERC advocates, multiethnic congregations are the pinnacles of reconciliation efforts. In the final section of the book, Wadsworth provides observations from a three-year case study of a multiethnic congregation as well as a series of survey questions and interviews with ERC advocates, broadly centered on the question, *how do people who choose to join multiethnic faith-based communities think about power, politics and social change?*

Through a developing awareness of identity and power configurations, MEC reconcilers were more politically conversant on global poverty, social inequality and diversity within their own community than their predecessors. MEC reconcilers broke free of the politics-avoidant etiquette that was definitive of the 1990s. Conversely MEC participants had a wider range of non-white voices entering into the conversation. More inclusivity gave reconcilers a level of comfort with political conversations and activism absent in the decade prior. This produced a wider range of orientations to social justice and race politics visible in the content change of *Christianity Today*, ERC conferences and institutional efforts. However, Wadsworth cautions that while MEC’s are beginning to dislodge entrenched cultural habits within ERC, the political ambivalence at the very heart of ERC may persistently inhibit its potential for relevance and impact on a larger, political scale.

While Wadsworth makes outstanding efforts to gain leverage on this wave of racial change among the evangelical community, a more directed treatment of how contemporary *reconcilers of color* (ROC) operate in this movement would aid in further understanding why political ambivalence is endemic of ERC efforts. For example, the counter-framing of ROC in chapter six was rendered just two pages but explicated the frameworks ROC engage to make sense of the movement and its lack of political activism. A more robust treatment dedicated to the complexities of these processes from a marginalized perspective may unearth further implications for conservative bridge building across racial divides.

However, the success of the task Wadsworth set for herself is evident. Wadsworth took great care to provide a methodologically rigorous and comprehensive volume. She thoughtfully and compellingly argues for ERC to demand the attention of political scientists and those

interested in American politics more broadly such that they include the intersections of race and religion in their inquiries. Wadsworth masterfully argues that the evangelical tradition, their history with racism, and their current efforts towards reconciliation is a prime site not only to expand our context of American political culture but to also shed light on social change efforts as they unfold.

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Emerson, Michael O and Smith, Christian. 2000. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. Oxford University Press.