BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by: Shawn David Young, York College of Pennsylvania, USA. E-mail: syoung23@ycp.edu

In *The Jesus People Movement: A Story of Spiritual Revolution Among the Hippies*, Richard Bustraan offers a look into the enigmatic Jesus Movement, a youth revival of evangelical Christianity throughout the 1960s and 1970s. To a certain extent, this book is a contribution to a growing field of study, one that seeks to examine the prickly relationship between evangelicalism and American culture. But why is Bustraan (like so many others) dazzled by this specific movement?

Some scholars of American religious history, sociology, and cultural theory have diligently poured over history and theory, hoping to discover the true reason George W. Bush garnered such a following from these “evangelicals”. More pressing, they enjoy certain traction when one considers the so-called culture war. But the simple question is this: Why have mainline, liberal denominations been on the decline, while conservative congregations have been on the rise and, even more surprising, are attracting young people in droves? Like many others, Bustraan examines a history that began with the Jesus People Movement (and the often quixotic “Jesus freak”), which later gave rise to the Religious Right, the megachurch movement and Christian rock music. But his study takes us beyond the movement’s connection to morose doomsday communes or quirky street preachers. Instead, Bustraan offers us a story that places Jesus freaks firmly within the family and historical continuum of American Pentecostalism … and rightly so.

Throughout the first pages Bustraan provides for us ample historical context of American Pentecostalism, evangelical Christianity, and the countercultural Jesus People Movement. And, of course, the histories of Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity are well-worn paths. But for him, this offshoot of “hippiedom” has not only been ignored as a valued expression of varying forms of the faith. It has largely been undervalued for its far-reaching cultural influence, while historians and theorists continue to puzzle over the “whys and hows” associated with a global hegemony that is uniquely evangelical, Pentecostal, countercultural, and American.

Throughout, Bustraan insists that the Jesus Movement’s connection to Pentecostal Christianity is worthy of study. But he also challenges the dominant assumption (which is not really *that* dominant) that the larger movement had
a singular point and place of emergence. But these young converts, he argues, were more “preoccupied with carving out their own independent identity” which, consequently, complicates the historians task of accurately placing the movement. In fact, the Jesus Movement is both a product of evangelical Christianity (despite the charismatic renewal within the Catholic Church) and a direct consequence of American democracy and pluralism. “This collection of movements”, he writes, was “loosely drawn together and classified under one broad umbrella” (i.e. the Jesus Movement), but it cross-pollinated “with nearly every denomination of Christianity in America” (p. 29).

To a certain extent, Bustraan appears to focus on the way the Jesus Movement intersected with evangelicalism, Pentecostalism and, to a lesser extent, Catholicism. But his work also appears to suggest that these umbrella expressions of the faith (somehow) orbited the movement, absorbing its unique, culturally appropriate tools, ever plumbing its depths in search of the freshly vernacular. And this is quite true. However, while evangelicalism and Catholicism adopted softer forms of Pentecostal Christianity through the enigmatic Charismatic movement, it also laid the groundwork for the Religious Right, blunting efforts of the socially progressive evangelical and Catholic Left.

Bustraan outlines for us the many churches, leaders and musical expressions (especially those associate with the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements) that emerged out of the movement and still enjoy significant influence. But despite the movement’s former ubiquity and present legacy, even the historiography of Pentecostalism has strangely minimized its impact, according to the author (p. 105). But perhaps this curious omission is simply a by-product of the historian’s inability to take serious what was seemingly ephemeral. For Bustraan, that Jesus freaks were often viewed as subaltern merely continues a tradition that is uniquely evangelical and American. Forging its own “subcultural identity”, the Jesus Movement was a moving target, never fully identifying with fundamentalists, conservatives, or liberals (pp. 109, 115).

Perhaps one of the more lasting legacies of the Jesus Movement involves the evolution of “Jesus music”, which gave rise to Christian rock music, contemporary worship music, and a host of other styles and sub-styles. In fact, “Christian festivals”, he says, “remain one of the most enduring contributions to American Christianity” (p. 132). But I would point out that one discussed, the Cornerstone Festival, is not, as Bustraan states, “still vibrantly operational” (p. 67), and is in fact no longer in operation. He rightly counts the festival’s sponsor, Jesus People USA (JPUSA), as “one of the most iconic and intact examples of the JPM [Jesus People Movement] communal church” (p. 67). Indeed, the community is still quite active, despite the festival’s demise. And while the author credits JPUSA with a certain amount of legitimacy, I would argue that they deserved greater attention than what Bustraan affords, particularly since in its heyday, the commune’s Cornerstone Festival virtually changed the way the music industry understands and defines contemporary Christian music.1

In the end, Bustraan’s claim is compelling; the Jesus Movement “should be located as a subculture that is part of but unique within the family of movements that constitute American Pentecostalism” (p. 133). But what is more compelling is how he attempts to disentangle the movement from fundamentalism, arguing that it gave rise to new forms of media and ecclesiastical structures that adopted a posture that “embattled” culture, and absorbed it (p. 134). And he does this by way of historian Donald Miller, who reasoned that new paradigm churches emerged out of the movement as a “revolution” similar to the Protestant reformation (p. 207f.). The church is always reforming. And American society seems ever-willing to update itself.