

This review appeared *Evangelicals Now*, April 2018.

Political and Religious Identities of British Evangelicals

Andrea Hatcher

Palgrave Macmillan

264 pp

£89.50 (E-book) or £112.00 (hardback)

ISBN 978-3319562810

Andrea Hatcher is known to British evangelicals as co-author of the 2013 study, published by think-tank Theos, on the British Religious Right. With Andy Walton, she showed that this movement – centred on the Christian Institute and Christian Concern – exercised influence through its relationship with the right-wing media, notably the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph. Now Dr Hatcher has returned with this study contrasting the political attitudes of British evangelicals with their white American counterparts. British evangelicals, she finds, are ‘highly interested in politics and manifest a particular concern for social justice issues’ but express this in ‘community organising rather than electioneering’. When we vote, she finds we are ‘just as likely to be on the left as right or centre.’ We are slightly more likely to vote Labour than Tory, we value state services and social equality, and unlike Americans we ‘do not exhibit in-group/out-group feelings’ in politics.

The evidence comes from group discussion with 81 people from 10 churches. Thoroughly documented, these show a series of affable and well informed conversations. These 81 Christians sound like people I would enjoy meeting. But though I like Dr Hatcher’s picture of British evangelicals, I am sceptical of her claims. She gained access to her sample through one source, a worker for Evangelical Alliance UK called ‘James’ - a pseudonym for someone who helped on condition of anonymity. ‘James’ introduced Dr Hatcher to the churches and helped with contacts; participants were then self-selecting. There is nothing to suggest they were a representative sample. Most denied being ‘evangelical’ even when prompted with the word: Dr Hatcher insists that they were in fact evangelicals but does not show how she reached that judgment.

Dr Hatcher reaches an intriguing conclusion. There is, she says, ‘no Religious Right in Britain.’ However, evangelicals feel constrained about joining public discussion because of ‘media portrayals which focus on extremists.’ It is ‘the media who have marginalised British evangelicals ... to the detriment of British politics and society.’ She puts this down to ‘religious illiteracy.’ The problem with this analysis is that – as Dr Hatcher herself showed in the Theos study – the Religious Right sets this media agenda, mainly through its campaigning around legal cases.

And no, there is no mistake in the prices above. Increasingly publishers are pricing books purely for purchase by a handful of academic libraries is disturbing; a trend that, I feel, Christian scholars should resist.

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