
Book Review

Brad Vermurlen: Reformed Resurgence: The New Calvinist Movement and the Battle over American Evangelicalism

(Oxford: Oxford University Press) ISBN: 9780190073510, hbk, £64.00, pp304

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This is a fascinating in-depth sociological study of New Calvinism. Vermurlen, for several years emersed himself in the New Calvinist movement as part of his PhD at the University of Notre Dame. New Calvinism came to prominence with David Van Biema's 2009 claim in *Time* magazine that it was one of the "10 ideas changing the world right now".¹

Mark Driscoll, originally, one of the New Calvinists provides a good summary of it as follows:

Old Calvinism was fundamental or liberal and separated from or syncretized with culture. New Calvinism is missional and seeks to create and redeem culture.

Old Calvinism fled from the cities. New Calvinism is flooding into cities.

Old Calvinism was cessationistic and fearful of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. New Calvinism is continuationist and joyful in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Old Calvinism was fearful and suspicious of other Christians and burned bridges. New Calvinism loves all Christians and builds bridges between them.

He then went on to say:

The New Calvinists are committed to complementarianism in the home and church.

1 http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html [date of access 19 December 2020]

The research methods Vermurlen employed in this study included participant observation at Tim Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, John Piper's Bethlehem Baptist Church, and Mark Driscoll's Mars Hill Church, as well as interviews with most of the key actors both within New Calvinism and in the other strands of Evangelicalism.

He identifies several strands or tribes within newer forms of Evangelicalism. As well as New Calvinism, these include a progressive emergent strand, a neo-anabaptist strand and the mainstream. (Neo-Calvinism has a brief appearance, but only to show how it differs from New Calvinism.)

New Calvinism is not unique within these tribes in that they have also shown growth. The question posed and investigated by Vermurlen is in what sense can we think of the New Calvinism as a Reformed Resurgence, why does it have a "strength beyond numbers"? Its influence is greater than its numerical growth (which has only been relatively small). To answer this question, he develops a new form of strategic action theory – a sociological technique.

The first two chapters set the scene. Anyone unfamiliar with New Calvinism will find chapter 1 an excellent overview of its history, churches and leaders. In chapter 3 other stands of Evangelicalism are examined.

The secularization thesis as is popularly held is that religion is on its way out. Religion it seems did not get that memo! The resurgence of new strands within Evangelicalism appears to contradict this trend – so much so that some such as Peter Berger used the term "re-enchantment of the world".

Vermurlen outlines the strengths and weaknesses of five theoretical frameworks used to conceptualise and explain religious strength. The frameworks discussed are the following.

Sheltered enclave theory – religious movements distance themselves from cultural trends such as cultural pluralism, epistemically relativism, consumerism, scientism, and individualism.

Status discontent theory – a common perceived 'enemy' brings the religious groups together so they can fight for a seat at the table; they engage in "status politics".

Strict church theory – high demands are placed on the group members, demands such as time, money and behaviour expectations. This in turn produces strong commitment and therefore strength.

Religious economies or supply-side framework – religious practices, like any mass consumer product, is subject to the economic principles of supply and demand. "Market competition (i.e., religious pluralism)

cause entrepreneurs (i.e., religious leaders) to make and market stronger products (religious messages and experiences).”

Subcultural identity theory – modernity does not erode religious belief provided there is a “meaningful, morally orientating subculture and collective identity”. Conflict with the modern world does not subdue religious groups, they thrive on it.

Vermurlen finds “nuggets of truth” in each of these theories but sees them as inadequate to explain New Calvinism as a phenomenon. He develops a new form of field theory that builds on the insights of the above and subcultural theory in particular. The theory he develops builds on a field of force and of contestation, as well as three streams, neoinstitutionalism, bourdieusian cultural analysis, and strategic action fields.

New Calvinism is a voluntary organisation but it is also a social movement organisation. What is important, he maintains, is not “the extrinsic social and political issues so much as the intrinsic religious mission of the organisations — making disciples, planting churches, baptising new members, growing in maturity, and the like”. He draws upon, with some modifications, Fligstein and McAdam’s framework of strategic action fields. Their model focuses primarily on political movements and groups. Vermurlen thus modifies it to develop a model of religious strength with an emphasis on discourse rather than politics.

Fligstein and McAdam classify actors into two groups: *incumbents* who hold a disproportionate influence, and *challengers* who have a less privileged position and who hold little influence and yet give an alternative vision.

There can be jockeying for power and position between these groups during episodes of contention, i.e., when “the escalation of perceived uncertainty about the rules of the field and the power-relations governing the field”. In this period of infighting everything then becomes “up for grabs”. It is Vermurlen’s opinion that American Evangelicalism is in an episode of contention.

In an analogy with Newton’s second law of motion ($F = ma$), he suggests that New Calvinism’s force can be measured by the number involved (m) and its change in velocity – by which he means several other possible factors. Thus, its numbers alone do not account for its “impressive force”. Factors such as influence, debate, gatekeeping and boundary-marking, contextualisation, charismatic leaders, and a sense of self-certainty all play a part. He identifies 17 “mechanisms as social processes [which] together causally explain the New Calvinism movement and the battle happening in the field of American Evangelicalism”.

In Chapter 5 he provides a helpful analysis of the cultural backdrop and identifies three trends: the gender and sexual revolution, religious pluralism and the therapeutic culture. He also examines three “discursive opportunities”. The first of these events was the use of digital media, particularly the Internet, this created platforms and space for the New Calvinism. The second was the events of 9/11, which meant that the problem of evil raised its head, popular Evangelicalism’s platitudes no longer satisfied, it meant people dug into the Bible for answers as Vermurlen puts it: “Calvinist theology [with its emphasis on the sovereignty of God] scratched the cultural itch.” The third is the pressure to deal with postmodernism.

He argues that New Calvinism can be understood as both a reaction against and an alternative to the Emerging Church, and especially the progressive Emergent pocket of the Emerging Church. The cultural developments, particularly postmodernism resulted in an episode of contention (a period that lasted from 1997 to 2007) which provided the New Calvinists with an opportunity to present a conservative theological voice against those of the Emergents. This provides the “sociological substance of the Reformed resurgence”. They were able to emerge from the “exogenous shocks” and able to advance their interests.

The New Calvinists take up an *incumbent* position and are always on the conservative pole compared with the Emergent and Progressives.

He then discusses four basic dominant dispositions, the “first foot forward” of the four Evangelical expressions. These are ontology for the New Calvinists, epistemology for the progressive Emergent leaders, ethics for the new-Anabaptists, and pragmatism for the mainstream Evangelicals. He makes a pertinent observation regarding “seeker churches” as being a combination of pragmatism and therapeuticism.

The attitudes towards the Bible in these four groups illustrate why Evangelicalism is such a highly contested religious field. Each has different and sometimes contradictory views of what the Bible teaches. Another reason for the contested nature is that there is no one Evangelical voice, it is a “decentralised hodgepodge of an array of churches, leaders, colleges, associations, conferences, networks, ...”.

Another salient observation that Vermurlen makes is that the congregants, or religious adherents, are not fully aware of the Calvinistic beliefs of their leaders. A further factor is the rise of the “Religious Right” and the “entanglement of Evangelical religion with Republican Party politics ...”, but only inasmuch as to say “that is not us, that’s not what we are about”. Their message is apolitical

and non-partisan – this distances them from the Christian Right. They do not “pin their hopes on success in politics”. Even though the majority is pro-life, against gay marriage, socially conservative, and strong on religious liberty – New Calvinists claim these are not political issues but theological issues. The leaders have, however, expressed concerns regarding Trump.

New Calvinist leaders purport to have compelling clear-cut answers to the pressing contemporary questions. It provides firm ground under the shifting sands of today’s society. This is part of its appeal. This cut and dried, black-and-white approach is exemplified in the approach to gender roles. The New Calvinists promote a dogmatic traditional approach to gender with separated conjugal roles and a strong masculine bent, and an almost ideological adherence to complementarianism. This approach reflects a strict-church theory.

Yet another important factor Vermurlen identifies is the New Calvinist emphasis on history and tradition. They seek to revive and retrieve the conservative Reformed tradition, particularly Jonathon Edwards and the Puritans.

New Calvinism presents itself as an alternative to the contemporary cultural consensus of self-autonomy and individual free will. They also present themselves as taking a more serious approach to the Bible, God and theology than their “competitors”.

Vermurlen sees its focus on “‘culturally upstream’ urban centers” as being important. Urban areas provide access to the youth and to cultural elites.

The New Calvinist leaders are policing and drawing boundaries based on the “rules of the game”— they see themselves as gatekeepers for orthodoxy. They draw strict, symbolic boundaries around their form of Christianity. This Vermurlen supports by drawing on the examples of Rob Bell and World Vision. John Piper tweeted “Farewell, Rob Bell”, because of the assumption Bell was advocating universalism in a new book *Love Wins*. World Vision’s change in policy regarding the sexual activity of their employees was deemed as being a betrayal of the gospel. Previously the policy was that the employees could be married or if single abstain from sex. The policy now made it possible to employ those in same-sex marriages provided they were legal. The New Calvinist leaders were quick to criticise this policy. They were concerned that this was sacrificing the gospel for an unstable ‘togetherness’ and compromised the authority of Scripture. Echoing Piper, Denny Burk tweeted “Farewell, World Vision”. With such pressure and the loss of “several thousand” donors, World Vision reversed its decision.

The New Calvinist leaders also perform this gatekeeping role in the books they publish, for example, Don Carson and R. Scott Smith critiquing the Emerging Church and Brian McClaren; John Piper *et al.* and Bruce Ware on open theism as well as numerous volumes critiquing egalitarianism and LGBTQ theologies.

The celebrity pastor is another key factor. Piper, Driscoll, Keller and so on all have charisma, they are widely known and admired.

Contextualisation is yet another factor, according to Vermurlen – the New Calvinists “exegete the [local] culture”. They seek to avoid undercontextualisation (preaching the gospel in the same way without regard to the geographical context) and overcontextualisation (becoming a seeker-sensitive or watering down the gospel — becoming liberal).

In chapter 7 he discusses some criticism of the New Calvinism levelled at them by some of those in the other Evangelical streams. These complaints include isolationism, tribalism, egotism, a “thinly veiled ideology that white men can use to perpetuate elitism and racism”, they are neo-fundamentalists, and neo-Puritans.

He concludes that “the Reformed resurgence is best understood as a reaction to, not the cause of, Evangelicalism’s troubles in the United States. Instead, cultural entropy of the American Evangelical field is the result of a combination of its internal logic and dynamics along with broader external forces.” (248)

Most critiques of New Calvinism have been through a theological lens, this book is different in that it uses sociological tools. It provides a deeper and more thorough understanding of the movement. This volume then is indispensable not only for understanding New Calvinism but also for anyone desiring insight into sociological methodologies for understanding the newer strands of Evangelicalism.