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Exploring Evangelical Minds

'Intelligentsia' Study Seeks to Change Perceptions

By Jay Lindsay
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BOSTON -- For decades, Boston University sociologist Peter Berger says, American intellectuals have looked down on evangelicals.

Educated people have the notion that evangelicals are "barefoot people of Tobacco Road who, I don't know, sleep with their sisters or something," Berger says.

It's time that attitude changed, he says.

"That was probably never correct, but it's totally false now and I think the image should be corrected," Berger said in a recent interview.

His university's Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs is leading a two-year project that explores an "evangelical intelligentsia," which Berger says is growing and needs to be better understood given the large numbers of evangelicals and their influence.

"It's not good if a prejudiced view of this community prevails in the elite circles of society," said Berger, a self-described liberal Lutheran. "It's bad for democracy and it's wrong."

The study is being directed by Berger and Timothy Shah, an evangelical political scientist at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Shah is documenting the history of the evangelical movement, including its hostility to higher learning, a revival of scholarship, and the minds and ideas it has since produced.

Some aren't convinced that evangelical scholars have made as much progress as they think.

Boston College sociologist Alan Wolfe, who wrote an article in the Atlantic in 2000 called "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind," said despite the success of some evangelical scholars, many have retained an insularity and defensiveness that limits their effectiveness.

"There isn't enough mixing in the larger world of ideas," he said.

An estimated 75 million Americans are evangelicals, people who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and commit to spreading the message of salvation though his redemptive death.

Evangelicals say they often aren't well understood beyond their Bible-banging, evolution-hating caricature.

Many equate evangelicals with fundamentalists, an evangelical subset that interprets the Bible literally -- as in the six calendar days of creation -- and is home to ardent evolution opponents. But Shah said most evangelical scientists believe in evolution guided by God.

A quote from a 1993 Washington Post article, describing followers of two leading evangelists as "largely poor, uneducated and easy to command," remains infamous among evangelicals as an example of the bias they say they face. After President Bush won the 2004 election, New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd wrote that Bush had won the evangelical vote, in part, by appealing to their "fear of scientific progress."

Mark Noll, an evangelical and well-known historian at the University of Notre Dame, said the stereotype is perpetuated because both religious and secular thinkers have created an either-or choice between science and God.

"It's just false," Noll said. "You go back to [Isaac] Newton and [Johannes] Kepler; the founders of early modern science were theists of one sort or another."

Shah says a major split between evangelicals and popular culture came after the so-called Scopes monkey trial in 1925, in which a teacher was convicted of violating Tennessee's ban on teaching evolution -- a decision later overturned. Defense attorney Clarence Darrow told his opponent, William Jennings Bryan, that: "You insult every man of science and learning in the world because he does not believe in your fool religion."

Two years later, Sinclair Lewis's "Elmer Gantry" poked fun at the anti-intellectualism of leading evangelicals and cast them as corrupt frauds. At the same time, Shah said, the country's institutions of higher education were taken over by people hostile to Christian faith.

Evangelicals "felt totally besieged," Shah said. "They felt like the culture made fun of them."

Evangelicals began to emerge from "their self-imposed ghetto" in the 1950s and '60s after prodding from leaders such as Billy Graham,

who urged a new intellectual boldness, Shah said.

They also became more prosperous and better educated, and produced more scholars as a result, Berger said.

Notre Dame is home to several of the best-known evangelical thinkers besides Noll, including philosopher Alvin Plantinga, whose "free-will defense" takes on the logical problem of evil, and historian George Marsden, who won the prestigious Bancroft Prize for his book on colonial preacher Jonathan Edwards.

Other notables who identify themselves as evangelicals include federal judge Michael McConnell, a top constitutional law scholar, Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project, and Duke professor Peter Feaver, a former top director at the National Security Council.

Shah is conducting detailed interviews with top scholars as part of the ongoing research. In December, the project hosted a conference in Boston where evangelicals discussed how their faith informs their work and how to create more room for a religious perspective in various academic disciplines. The research will eventually be published in a book.

As evangelical scholars seek greater influence, Wolfe warns that getting respect is a two-way street. Evangelicals in the academy too often aren't open to truly engaging those who disagree, said Wolfe, who points to things like "faith statements" at evangelical colleges, which require professors to proclaim Christian belief. A prospering intellectual culture wouldn't make that requirement and shut other views out, he said.

"It's when you view your tradition with such confidence that you want to offer it to others . . . that's when you've made it," Wolfe said.

"I don't see evangelicals having that pride in their own tradition, yet."