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Taylor, Kevin M. (2006). *American Evangelicals and Religious Diversity: Subcultural Education, Theological Boundaries, and the Relativization of Tradition*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

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The 2004 presidential election, revealed a trend in American society, especially as reflected in the media, that focuses on the “culture wars,” characterized by sharp divisions between the Christian right, with their intolerance towards anyone who deviates from their set of moral norms, and irreligious liberals who espouse a pluralistic and relativistic society with no absolutes. With the 2008 presidential election approaching, there has been a renewed interest in discussion about how politicians’ faith and spiritual commitments impacts their personal lives and inform their views on policy and government. The result of these discussions has been that some of these divisions have begun to breakdown with greater understanding that religious does not always mean politically and socially conservative and secular not always imply a liberal perspective. Overcoming these characterizations and, at times, caricatures, can open up spaces for meaningful dialogue when encountering differing worldviews. Kevin Taylor’s book, *American Evangelicals and Religious Diversity: Subcultural Education, Theological Boundaries, and the Relativization of Tradition*, does precisely that: it moves beyond these broad sweeps and stereotypes to present a manifold and nuanced view of evangelical Christianity and its encounter with religious pluralism. He speaks to this issue both from a historical and a theological perspective, as well as through a detailed case study of students at an evangelical high school, thereby providing meaningful insight for American civil society in general and Christian education in particular.

In the beginning chapters, Taylor provides a solid background for understanding the particular case study in the later part of the book; he describes the American evangelical movement, its theological underpinnings, and its role in education. The author presents evangelical Christianity, not as a monolithic entity, but rather contrasts the fundamentalist and Pentecostal approaches that espouse a more separatist orientation from the “godless” outside world, with the neo-evangelical approach that believes in being “salt and light” in society, “in the world but not of the world.” (p. 32). In this way, Taylor cogently demonstrates the continual interplay between exclusion and inclusion, outgroups and ingroups in evangelicalism. From here, Taylor launches into what is at the heart of his study: the process of relativization of one’s faith tradition, which he defines as “the

recognition that one's taken-for-granted viewpoint is but one option among the plurality of options... result[ing] in the process of rethinking one's own tradition because of that recognition" (Campbell as cited in Taylor, 2006, p. 53). He then recounts the effects of this process on his students at Midwest Christian Academy as they studied Catholicism, Islam, and indigenous religions of Latin America as gathered from essays, collages, surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Rather than detailing each student's process, Taylor instead uses the method of purposive sampling, selecting three key students (or informants) who represent three differing reactions to the relativization process; these include a student most interested in defending her orthodox position, a student with the most interest in exploring unconventional ideas, and a student who finds himself wrestling with the issues raised by his encounter with different faith traditions. Finally, the book concludes with chapters that explore the implications of this study for civil society and Christian education, with Taylor's primary insight resting on the idea that the "balance between epistemological humility and the willingness to assert the truth of one's worldview should affect the way evangelicals and other Christians encounter the different subcultures of a pluralistic society" (p. 237). In this way, Taylor affirms the value of relativization without slipping into relativism, suggesting that spiritual growth comes from the loving encounter with those who are different.

American Evangelicals and Religious Diversity is a well-written and impeccably researched work on a topic important both to education and to society as a whole—the role of religious truth in an increasing pluralistic world. Perhaps its greatest strength lies in the unique perspective that Kevin Taylor is able to bring to the subject, as the teacher of the students studied but even more as one raised in the evangelical subculture, who is a "pilgrim with one leg still stuck in the tent" (Grant as cited in Taylor, 2006, p. 96)-- one who has undergone his own relativization process. I believe that because of this positionality, Taylor is able to draw a vivid portrait of the American Evangelical movement and, furthermore, by letting his student informants speak for themselves rather than focusing his work on representing them from his perspective, he adds greater depth to the understanding of the variation in the evangelical experience. Perhaps because of this same positionality, Taylor reveals some blind spots in his work. At one point, he makes the claim that educators, in effort to promote appreciation of the other, adopt an extreme multiculturalism that appears to mandate relativism, leaving no room for those students who are seeking to hold on to absolute truth. What he is speaking of here is not an extreme position but an uncritical one; critical multiculturalism seeks precisely not to homogenize experiences but rather to promote a dialogue in which all subject positions are encouraged to speak. Taylor draws conclusions from his study for Christian education but does not provide implications for public education; I believe there is much to be said, based upon his work, about how students in public schools might encounter religious pluralism. Perhaps Taylor will use the groundwork laid here to embark on a further study in this area and I have no doubt if he does, that it will be another insightful and detailed work that will deepen the understanding of diversity, religious pluralism, and education.

About the Reviewer

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