Saving the Protestant Ethic: Creative Class Evangelicalism and the Crisis of Work

By Andrew Lynn, Oxford University Press, 2023, 352 pages. $35.00

Reviewed by Jason M. Stansbury
Calvin University

Saving the Protestant Ethic is a sociological account of the Faith at Work Movement, a social movement among a subset of mostly white and mostly male Evangelical Christians whose living is made in professional, managerial, entrepreneurial, or creative work. That movement addresses a widespread sense among adherents that Evangelical religion does not value and does not meaningfully inform the work that so absorbs their energies and identities. It responds to that perception with the affirmation that "your work matters to God!" and often grounds that affirmation in a Kuyperian belief that "[t]here is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry 'Mine!'" (Bratt, 1998, p. 488).

Lynn's study is a painstaking examination of historical sources, participant observation, and interviews with leaders of the Faith at Work Movement, which situate it in a literature stream that includes Laura Nash's (1994) *Believers in Business*, Nash and McLennan's (2001) *Church on Sunday*, *Work on Monday*, David Miller's (2007) *God at Work*, and Lake Lambert's (2009) *Spirituality, Inc*. It is not a theological treatment like Jeff Van Duzer's (2010) *Why Business Matters to God*; Lynn's purpose is descriptive and interpretive rather than normative. It examines the Faith at Work Movement with academic impartiality, identifying ways that the movement and the institutions that fund and convene it have and have not reflected (upon) the historical and cultural forces that have shaped them and ways that they have and have not fulfilled their stated purposes, as explained below. Importantly, Lynn's account goes beyond earlier treatments by encompassing the manifold developments of the past 14 years, during which its number of adherents, supporting institutions, and organized events for popular audiences have boomed and increasingly demonstrated the movement's achievements and limitations.

Much like Miller (2007) and Lambert (2009), Lynn begins by situating the Faith at Work Movement in its historical foundations. However, Lynn's account begins not with early exemplars of Christian moral imagination in business but with the far-reaching influence of American Christian fundamentalism. Fundamentalism's primary concern—saving as many souls as possible before the final judgment at the impending end of history—powerfully shaped a set of supporting institutions that extended and reinforced its influence from the late 1800s onward, including publishing houses; schools, colleges, and seminaries; and para-church organizations. The fundamentalist worldview lent itself naturally to a belief in a hierarchy of occupations in which one's value to God and to others was directly proportional to one's involvement in soul-saving evangelism, leaving many businesspeople feeling discounted or even disparaged by the low status conferred by their "worldly" focus. This emphasis on the workplace as nothing other than a venue for proselytism endures today even among non-fundamentalist evangelicals, promulgated by prominent revivalists including Billy Graham and institutions like the Christian Business Men's Committee.

That feeling of disparagement has motivated the faith at work movement's affirmation that "your work matters to God" ever since evangelicalism emerged as a middle way between fundamentalism's rejection of mainstream American culture and institutions and modernism's accommodation to them in the early twentieth century. The Faith at Work Movement has answered the fundamentalist occupational hierarchy with accounts of business leaders consecrating their businesses for godly purposes and rivaling ministry professionals for status and influence; ordinary businesspeople "integrating" their faith into their work as a source of meaning, motivation,

and reassurance; and morally-imaginative businesspeople re-orienting their participation in business institutions (or even the business institutions that they control) toward purposes that transcend the logic of the market, whether for the common good or for ends like spiritual formation. (See, for an example of such re-orientations outside of Lynn's book, a study of faith-based impact investors reported in Smith et al., 2022).

Lynn traces the development of these alternative accounts of the meaning of work within an evangelical worldview and carefully describes the burgeoning set of endowed centers, think tanks, funders, and conferences that have been created over the decades (and especially over the past two decades) to support them. But the story is not only one of a growing movement; Lynn's participant observation, interviews, and interrogation of source documents furnish a nuanced account of contests for influence within the movement and of people subtly excluded. In particular, the financial and cultural resources of managers and professionals have drawn sustained attention from ministry leaders seeking to engage them and directed the Faith at Work Movement to address the concerns of those managers and professionals. The movement's focus on finding meaning within jobs that feature long but regular hours, significant autonomy, and considerable task identity serves mostly the "creative class" workers who have such jobs and not the disproportionately non-white and female workers whose work is irregular, unpaid, or programmed. Interestingly, there is a set of women thought leaders and participants in the Faith at Work Movement whose concerns feature role conflicts, but those concerns and the people who hold them are often relegated to separate "women's tracks" or even separate events. The movement leaders interviewed struggled to formulate accounts of the meaningfulness of work for non-creative-class workers, aside from a return to framing the workplace as a venue for proselytism.

Lynn's most interesting contribution is his interpretive account of the contest for normative hegemony within the movement. The dominant line of thinking in the movement appears to be "Kuyperianism," a neo-Calvinist theology that flattens the above-mentioned vocational hierarchy, to instead claim that all work has value to the extent that it participates in a productive order ordained by God. Kuyperianism originated at the turn of the twentieth century with the center-right Dutch prime minister after whom it is named, and it is actively promoted today by a number of churches and institutions in the Presbyterian and Reformed traditions. It has been appropriated by adherents of a variety of political persuasions, ranging from progressive to theocratic, making the specific content of the productive order in which Christians ought to participate somewhat uncertain. Therein lies the contest: several of the institutions that convene faith at work events and produce faith at work content are deeply committed to libertarian and free-market construals of business ethics, and some are apparently apolitical while the prophetic and liberationist traditions within Christian ethics have scant representation in the movement.

The state of the conversation that Lynn describes is not so much moral as spiritual; Faith at Work adherents seem most interested in experiencing their work as spiritually meaningful and thereby resolving the tension between the demands of their careers and those of their faith. In this way, the Faith at Work Movement fulfills its goal of highlighting the relevance of Christian faith for life outside of worship. But the prospects for the movement to expand its appeal to workers outside of its mostly white, mostly male, creative-class constituency and to engage contemporary work and its institutions with moral imagination remain open and uncertain. It would have been interesting to see a richer discussion of the reasons for the lack of attention among the movement's leaders and institutions to the prophetic and liberationist traditions within Christian ethics. It would also have been interesting to situate the weak engagement of the movement's adherents with the ethical traditions of Christianity within a discussion of the secularization that has overtaken evangelical Christianity within the past two decades.

Altogether, Lynn's book is a methodologically rigorous academic monograph. It includes a detailed appendix on research methods and primary sources and sixty pages' worth of endnotes, which furnish additional information that would be distracting and exhausting for the reader if they were incorporated into the monograph's prose itself but are helpful for readers who would like more background or explanation for any of the dozens of footnoted sentences throughout. It is scientifically evenhanded in its treatment of its subject matter with no discernible bias toward or against the faith at work or evangelical movements. It engages the existing literature aptly while extending beyond that literature with its mixed methods and its comprehension of the events of the past fifteen years in its domain. Its account of the status-based tension experienced by many evangelical businesspeople is a novel and interesting explanation of the development of the movement's arguments and

audiences. And its identification of both the limits of the movement's appeal beyond its core audience and the contest for normative influence that has yet to decisively win over that audience are practically important for recognizing the future prospects of biblical integration in business practice.

For an upper-division undergraduate or graduate course on organizational behavior at a faith-based institution, any of the first, fourth, and seventh chapters would make good introductions to the Faith at Work Movement while the fifth chapter identifies the influences of social class and gender upon participation in, and the content of, the movement. For an upper-division undergraduate or graduate course on economic history at a faith-based institution, the second chapter is a valuable introduction to the intersection of the fundamentalist movement with the economic life of industrializing America. I most highly recommend it for Christian business scholars who would like a current understanding of the state of faith integration within the evangelical movement, and whose future research builds upon the opportunities identified by Lynn.

REFERENCES

Kuyper, A. (1998). Sphere sovereignty. In J. D. Bratt (Ed.), *Abraham Kuyper: A centennial reader* (pp. 461-490). Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Lambert III, L. (2009). *Spirituality, Inc.: Religion in the American workplace.* New York University Press.

Miller, D. A. (2007). *God at work: The history and promise of the faith at work movement*. Oxford University Press.

Nash, L. L. (1994). *Believers in business: Resolving the tensions between Christian faith, business ethics, competition, and our definitions of success.* Thomas Nelson.

Nash, L., & McLennan, S. (2001). *Church on Sunday, work on Monday: The challenge of fusing Christian values with business life.* Jossey-Bass.

Smith, B. R., Lawson, A., Jones, J., Holcomb, T., & Minnich, A. (2022). Trying to serve two masters is easy, compared to three: Identity multiplicity work by Christian impact investors. *Journal of Business Ethics, 179*, 1053-1070. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05156-4

Van Duzer, J. (2010). *Why business matters to God (and what remains to be fixed)*. IVP Academic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Stansbury holds the James and Judith Chambery Chair for the Study of Ethics in Business at Calvin University. Jason works to convene Christian scholars in business, in business ethics, and in moral theology to explore and develop those resources and applications. A former executive director of the Society for Business Ethics, Jason also chairs the Jansma Series on Faith and Business, which convenes triennial symposia at the Calvin University School of Business on theological concepts in business ethics. He is a co-editor of the Journal of Religion and Business Ethics. His PhD is in organization studies from Vanderbilt University.