
Evangelical. White supremacist. Republican. Fundamentalist. Trump supporter. In the progressive or left-leaning American imagination in the year 2020, these five terms, among many even more politically-charged ones, have effectively blurred together as one coterminous identifier of the facet of Americans responsible for the election and continued support of right-wing President Donald J. Trump. In an era where political and religious discourse seek to further simplify the American evangelical meta-narrative, Andrea Smith's *Unreconciled: From Racial Reconciliation to Racial Justice in Christian Evangelicalism* (2019) is a project that complexifies this narrative of American evangelicalism and its relationship to race. Smith's book, which lies at the intersection of religious studies and critical ethnic studies, by no means disavows—nor does it condone—American evangelicalism's investment in white supremacy, Islamophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments. Rather, her book urges its readers to not consider American evangelicalism as a racial or ideological monolith, and to not dismiss the rising multiculturalism within American evangelicalism as unworthy of analysis via the lens of critical race theory. Smith suggest that, in the end, the racial reconciliation movement within Christian evangelicalism has led to the unintended consequence of the beginning of a transformative redefinition of evangelicalism itself.

Smith's eight chapter-long book sets out to give a holistic account of racial discrimination and racial justice organizing within Christian evangelicalism from the late 1980s to the 2016 election. In the introductory chapter, Smith grounds the book through the framework of critical ethnic studies, specifically, the field's previous lack of literature on how multicultural evangelical movements fit into a critical ethnic studies frame. Smith traces through a brief legacy of race within Christian evangelicalism, including its defense of slavery and racial hierarchies, and reminds her audience that the rise of modern evangelicalism (marked by the Moral Majority movement, etc.) is a direct response of desegregation movements in the United States. From there, she paints a picture of the racial reconciliation movement, which emerged within white evangelicalism in the 1990s as members of predominantly-white evangelical churches gradually realized the need for both ecclesial diversity and racial justice.

The book progresses both chronologically and topically. Chapter 1 devotes itself to discussing the phenomenon known as multiculturalism movements within evangelical Christianity. These are movements within evangelicalism aimed at promoting interracial friendships and diversifying church space, and
the chapter impressively covered a wide range of these movements, including many led by evangelical women of color. While many critical ethnic studies are quick to dismiss these movements as “simply a tool of neoliberalism and white supremacy” (p. 39) because of their politically moderate stance and their social location within evangelical Christian structures, Smith urges readers to consider the transformative effects these movements may have in re-establishing categories of inclusion within evangelical spaces and ideologies.

Chapter two discusses the theological, spiritual, and ideological underpinnings of racial injustice and racial progress within evangelicalism. Smith highlights that a dominant view within evangelicalism is that racism is constructed as a spiritual or personal sin, with “aggressive evangelism and intense prayer alone as the solution” (p. 55), rather than a social or structural issue to be confronted with social action. This view is reflected in the evangelical language of racism as “not a skin problem, but a sin problem” (p. 53). While Smith critiques this individual sin-centric logic, she nonetheless acknowledges that the reality of sin is important to integrate into racial reconciliation organizing strategies.

Chapter three summarizes common evangelical views on various racial and ethnic groups: Black and African-Americans, Muslim and Arab populations, Latino populations, indigenous populations, etc. The chapter analyzes historical, theological, ideological, and sociopolitical developments that inform these views. Smith points out that the logics of white supremacy and Christian supremacy is upheld in mainstream evangelical views on all these aforementioned populations, and that Christian racial reconciliation can only move forward via a path of decentering whiteness. With each white-centric view, Smith includes counternarratives that multicultural evangelical communities use to resist these dominant views. The global focus of chapter three continues in chapter four, which problematizes the theologies of martyrdom and persecution within contemporary evangelicalism. Evangelical spiritual emphasis on the persecution of Christians in Muslim or communist countries have constructed a theology of Christian and American exceptionalism at the expense of genuine lament for the lives of the persecuted.

The fifth chapter covers two topics that are already widely studied by scholars of evangelical Christianity: Islamophobia and Christian Zionism. Smith adds to this existing scholarship by highlighting contemporary evangelical opposition to these ideologies: from Christianity Today articles that supported the plight of Palestinian Christians under Israeli occupation, to grassroots activism of evangelical leaders of color to combat Islamophobia. Chapter six echoes Smith’s previous work on indigenous decolonial movements within evangelical Christian indigenous spaces, and challenges the dominant view that decolonization or indigenization must occur in a non-Christian space.
Chapter seven traces through shifts within evangelical perspectives on race, gender, and partisan politics throughout the election process of Barack Obama. Here, the subject of analysis centered as much on white evangelical’s race-motivated resistance against Obama as it did Black evangelical’s complex views on Obama’s platform. The racial divide in American Christian evangelicalism becomes even more schismatic in light of the 2008 and succeeding elections, as evangelicals began diverging—often along racial lines, but not exclusively—on their views on contemporary issues such as abortion, LGB T rights, mass incarceration, and immigration.

The book’s final chapter covers activism and scholarship done by evangelical women of color, a demographic rarely otherwise centered in scholarship on Christian evangelicalism. The chapter devotes a few paragraphs to each of the groundbreaking women that Smith identified who brings intersectional issues of race and gender to the attention of the evangelical community through their writings and activism. In its short conclusion chapter, Smith briefly discusses how the Black Lives Matter movement and the election of Donald Trump continues to shape Christian evangelicalism’s relationship to race by fostering some racial reconciliation dialogues while polarizing many others who oppose the racial reconciliation movement.

Overall, the 390-page long book excels at painting a complex picture of racial injustice and racial reconciliation within Christian evangelism. The book avoids the common pitfall of painting racial justice as a black versus white issue (thereby ignoring other races, ethnicities, or intersectional identities), and instead attends to a diverse range of races and identities reflective of contemporary evangelical church demographics. A wide range of U.S. and global issues—and internally diverse evangelical theologies surrounding them—are densely packed into the book, accompanied with complex analysis on each issue.

Reading the book as a student of theology, I am particularly fascinated by the author’s accurate portrayal of the theological and ideological underpinnings of white supremacy and Christian supremacy in Christian evangelicalism. The book’s observation of the problems of using personal sin as a frame for racial justice discussion and the harmful theologies of persecution and martyrdom is keen.

Reading the book from my personal background as a formerly evangelical Christian of Chinese descent, Unreconciled gave voice to my own experiences of being raised in a multiracial Christian church that had a complex relationship to cultural heritage, racial justice, and partisan political dialogue. The book did not shy away from unpacking this tension, and continuously challenged the popular imagery of Christian evangelicalism as a white monolith. Instead, it
centered multicultural and anti-racist voices within evangelicalism by holding them in tension with dominant evangelical theology, affirming that a multitude of voices exist within—and contest—the structure of evangelicalism.

Given the multiracial focus of the book, the book could have strengthened its focus from American evangelical Christianity to global evangelical movements as they relate to racial reconciliation and decolonization efforts. A more substantial comparison between evangelicals of color within the United States and evangelicals of the Global South would have been a good addition to this already-comprehensive book. Overall, *Unreconciled* is an informative read for scholars of contemporary religion, critical ethnic studies, and evangelical theology alike. In light of the global Black Lives Matter movements of 2020 and the rising interest in conversations on race and religion, the book’s in-depth coverage of a wide variety of racial injustice and racial reconciliation ideologies and movements within contemporary Christian evangelicalism is both urgent and informative.

*Flora X. Tang*
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA
*xtang3@nd.edu*