

Molly Worthen: Evangelical Impact

Donald Trump won the presidency with the backing of more than eight in 10 white evangelical voters. That stark fact — that a thrice-married candidate who has been recorded making crude comments about women and has no public history of regular churchgoing managed to earn the overwhelming support of born-again Christians — has launched a thousand op-eds and endless hand-wringing among political pundits and theologians. It remains one of the enduring storylines of the 2016 election.

But it came as no surprise to Molly Worthen, an assistant history professor and a scholar of American religious traditions.

“I chose to specialize for the last few years on evangelical thought and politics because it’s of such enduring importance to the direction of the country,” Worthen said. “I think they are going to continue having outsized, disproportionate political influence for a very long time.”

The sources of that influence, and the tension it provokes within Christian communities and in the larger culture, hold deep fascination for Worthen.

In her 2014 book, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, she made a prescient observation about the struggle of Christian leaders to balance faith and engagement in a more secular public sphere.

“Evangelicals are idealists, yes. They are also pragmatists,” she wrote. “Conservative evangelicals are not holed away in a cloistered subculture. They are embedded in and shaping the policies of mainstream institutions ranging from local school boards to Walmart.”

A self-described agnostic, Worthen was struck more than a decade ago by the lack of attention in mainstream secular culture to the rich theological traditions that inform so much modern thought. Her academic career has been aimed at filling that gap.

She studied American religious history at Yale, earning a master’s of philosophy and a doctorate. She considered journalism but was drawn to academic life and the

space for reflection. “To be able to understand contemporary American religion, you have to do your homework in many, many centuries prior. So I opted to spend time reading books and learning scriptural tradition — trying to fill that well.”

Now, with a teaching schedule that includes major surveys like “History of Religion in North America” and a new Great Courses class covering Christianity since the Reformation, Worthen is bringing that deep well of history to a broader audience.

Her regular opinion pieces for *The New York Times* tackle everything from the role of religion in immigration reform to the lack of email etiquette among undergraduates. One of her most-commented-on columns was a defense of traditional academic lectures as “essential for teaching the humanities’ most basic skills: comprehension and reasoning, skills whose value extends beyond the classroom to the essential demands of working life and citizenship.”

The research and reporting for her newspaper work often means reaching out to people who are unlikely subjects for the *Times* — church leaders, evangelical activists and college students with deep religious faith. “A lot of readers aren’t very well connected to these communities. I like to [bring to the] foreground voices that don’t always find their way into mainstream newspapers.”

Her effort appears to attract a diverse audience. A piece on celibate, gay evangelicals earned Worthen a kind note from Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the archbishop of New York. An article calling for more great books classes in American universities prompted an encouraging letter from California Gov. Jerry Brown.

Her writing also sparks lively debate within religious circles. A nuanced November essay that delved into the schisms over evangelical support for Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore was picked up by Rod Dreher, an influential Christian thinker who writes for *The American Conservative*.

Dreher advocates for what he calls “the Benedict Option,” the withdrawal of prac-

ticing Christians into like-minded communities. Worthen emphasizes the value of deeper ties between the religious and secular worlds, especially at a time when information bubbles and ideological sorting are fraying the social fabric. She sees her scholarly work and public writing as a way of opening that dialogue.

“I’m not naive about the limitations of journalism, especially today, to change minds,” Worthen said. But given the erosion of resources for deep reporting, she sees engagement

by scholars as an important way of informing debate and bridging divides.

“So much of what passes for serious reporting now is basically glorified blogging. And I feel a greater burden to do this more public work because we’re at a public university.”

Worthen worries about the erosion of religious knowledge and the loss of community-building in a secularized culture.

“Secularization is about the decline of institutions and the erosion of these flesh-and-blood, face-to-face bonds with other humans and the replacement of that with digital illusions. I do have some nostalgia for the systematic engagement with questions around the meaning of life. I think our students hunger for it. But they have to seek it out — it’s not something we insist they do anymore.”

One student wrote in a fairly typical online review, “One of the smartest professors I’ve ever had, but also the hardest classes I’ve ever had. Be ready to write long papers and read a lot of material.”

—Eric Johnson ’08

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