

Book Review

Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism

By Justin Wilford

New York University Press. 2012. 233 pages. \$26 paper.

Reviewer: Lydia Bean, *PICO National Network*

For the past three decades, sociologists have been mystified by the vitality of American evangelical megachurches. Culturally flexible and entrepreneurial megachurches have increased in numbers and influence, even as church attendance and other forms of religious practice have declined. In the sociology of religion, this debate has largely been cast in terms of the secularization paradigm and its alternative, the religious market model. These debates have assumed that evangelical megachurches thrive because they provide a more meaningful cultural package than their competitors. The only disagreement is over what this package is.

According to the religious market model, megachurches provide the best deal in otherworldly goods for the masses. According to cultural sociologists, megachurches excel at creating existential meaning or a morally orienting subcultural identity for their members. In *Sacred Subdivisions*, Justin G. Wilford argues that we have ignored the unique geographic setting in which these megachurches thrive. Instead of arguing over *what* megachurches provide, we should examine *where* they perform religion. Secularization affects how people do religion as they move through space, by fragmenting our experience of daily life. Trained as a geographer, Wilford argues that the success of the megachurch comes from its innovative use of scale in the postsuburban fringe of large cities.

Wilford argues that socio-spatial differentiation is a major factor for explaining why megachurches thrive while other religious congregations decline. Because postsuburban lifestyles are so fragmented, socio-spatial differentiation creates particular constraints and affordances for religious congregations. Diverse secularization theorists have identified differentiation as a core process of modernity, but sociologists of religion have underappreciated its geographic dimension. Socio-spatial differentiation makes it particularly difficult for religious traditions to create a sense of community that binds work, family, and civil society.

Thus, megachurch growth is not driven by “anti-modernist withdrawal, white-flight revanchism, or consumerist decadence. It is the fragmentation of daily life, experienced in a variety of ways” (12). Saddleback Church does

not thrive by creating a *gemeinschaftlich* (community-like) gathering bound by repetition, ritual, and homogeneity. Instead, Saddleback thrives by adapting to its surrounding postsuburban environment, and generating a “dispersed, multi-nodal, multi-scaled network through which individuals link up in varying degrees with other individuals” (13).

I recommend this book to cultural sociologists, sociologists of religion, and scholars interested in civic engagement and political socialization. Socio-spatial differentiation seems to be a major force behind a variety of cultural trends, and Wilford makes a valuable contribution by highlighting this common thread running through multiple literatures.

The case of megachurches also sheds light on a broader question: why some forms of civic life thrive, while traditional civic organizations decline. Robert Wuthnow and others have remarked that our fragmented experience of place may drive declining rates of civic participation among younger, postsuburban Americans, who have no geographic sense of “community” toward which to apply abstract notions of civic duty. Long-standing debates about social capital and civic engagement come into clearer focus when viewed through a geographic lens.

This book would be an excellent choice for graduate seminars and advanced undergraduate classes on religion or urban studies, in part because of its clear and multidisciplinary discussion of secularization and modernization debates. Most of the introductory chapters assume a broad working knowledge of sociological theory, which makes the book less accessible to well-informed laypeople and undergraduates. The book’s masterful discussion of theory is admirably concise and jargon free, but it does limit the book’s audience. For undergraduate classes, I recommend excerpting the more empirical chapters.

One of the book’s limitations is its rather thin description of religious practice at Saddleback Church. Wilford spends a great deal of time setting up Jeffrey Alexander’s performance theory as a lens on postsuburban megachurch life. But in the end, I did not learn as much as I had hoped to about why particular religious performances succeed or fail for postsuburban evangelicals. Following Alexander’s neo-Durkheimian approach, Wilford focuses on the social facts of Saddleback’s organizational life and downplays the first-person accounts of its participants. But if the book is explaining the popularity of megachurches, that implies an argument about why individuals participate more or less, based on how they experience the cultural performances that the megachurch environment affords. We learn a great deal about how Saddleback accomplishes multi-scalar performances of religion, but not about how individuals experience religious performance in terms of place.

In conclusion, this book has important strategic implications for practitioners in the field of civic engagement: civic leaders, philanthropists, and community organizers. If Wilford is right, then we need to be looking for organizational forms that do what the American megachurch does so well: create multi-nodal, multi-scaled networks that allow individuals to link up in multiple ways.

In particular, we need to fundamentally rethink traditional models of community organizing, which assume an older map of urban “community” served by

local congregations and civic organizations. Most Americans live in places that are more like Rick Warren's postsuburban Orange County than Saul Alinsky's Chicago. All organizers know that powerful movements require suburban allies. Yet, many civic engagement strategies are poorly adapted to low-density, post-suburban environments like Orange County. Wilford's book helped me understand why this is so—and what organizers can learn from megachurch pastors.

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