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“Resistance is [Almost] Futile,” or Rob Bell Gives Up in Grand Rapids

Jim Wellman is my friend. That’s not nearly as cool as claiming to be buddies with Rob Bell or Oprah, but it’s the best I can do. And, it’s important. Far from being sycophants, my best friends tell me the truth. And the truth I fear here is that Rob Bell has pulled the wool over Jim Wellman’s eyes a bit; charisma is a powerful persuader.

Wellman would have us believe that Rob Bell’s Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids was a “sociological miracle,” and that Bell’s departure from the church in 2012 was simply because Bell wasn’t interested in “sustaining” it. But I think Wellman’s own excellent evidence leads us to a rather different interpretation of Bell’s brief pastoral career (1999-2012), with only a slight wool-removal that sees Bell in historical context.

Evangelicalism is undoubtedly a tradition of charismatic preachers: Finney to Semple-McPherson to Graham—and beyond. Traditions—those largely unconscious “guiding patterns,” as Edward Shils taught us, dictate mass movements by acting a lot like the *Borg* in Star Trek: “resistance is [almost] futile.” More prosaically, traditions depend on continuity, and Bell’s beginning clearly continued the evangelical tradition of homiletical charisma, now with a hipster patina. Megachurches are today’s sawdust trails.

But traditions do change, following Shils again, through rationalization, through correction, and above all through the imagination. When Bell dropped hell from his evangelical imagination, and replaced it with heaven-on-earth, he was attempting to correct evangelicalism’s long and slavish (in several senses) devotion to Platonic dualism. But in doing so he was also riding a much larger historical wave. As Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang showed in their rich *Heaven: A History*, and as Kathryn Gin Lum has started to show for early America in her recent *Damned Nation*, conceptions of the afterlife are not exactly historically stable constructions. Indeed, I fully expect some intrepid historian will soon demonstrate that the hotter visions of Christian hell, Rev. Fred Phelps’ destination notwithstanding, have recently cooled considerably in the public imagination. It would be shocking—despite the “scandal of the evangelical mind,” as Mark Noll once put it, if the tradition was not catching up.

Bell’s experiments in evangelical social engagement—notably against the war in Iraq and on behalf of poverty-alleviation, also benefit from contextualization, and lose some of their luster. As Joel Carpenter suggested in *Revive Us Again*, evangelicals have tended to oscillate between a “custodial” or activist and an “apocalyptic” or separatist relationship to American culture. Activist evangelicalism—think of abolitionism for a vivid example, combines a selective “this-worldly” focus along with the traditional Platonic concern for “the soul.” On American empire Bell’s rhetoric was courageous, but it’s not like he was the first evangelical anti-imperialist (William Jennings Bryan notably made a nice career out of it).

Bell appears to have gained his social justice emphasis from the influence of Rob Golden—former director of *World Vision* (not World Relief, as Wellman has it), who joined the Mars Hill staff in 2005. Under Golden’s influence, Bell clearly sensed that success could be corrosive of character—so he sought to move his family into an impoverished area of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Wellman sees this as noble. Others might see it less charitably—and with good reason.

In 2007 and 2008, the years of Bell’s experiment in “urban living,” Grand Rapids residents experienced a total of 20 and 15 murders, respectively, for rates of 10.4 and 7.8 per 100,000, annually (see city-data, com). This compares, say, to nearby Detroit, where over the same years 394 and 306 murders were reported, for rates of 45.8 and 33.8 per 100,000. Bell’s move—which didn’t last, was at best a *gesture* in the direction of commitment to the poor. And

even then he and his family lived in a “renovated condo,” and apparently took a brief break for time away in Ireland. This is not exactly, by way of historical comparison, Millard Fuller’s dramatic choice to move to the intentional Christian community of Koinonia in Georgia, and then on to Zaire—which gave birth to Habitat for Humanity, no doubt the most prominent evangelically-inspired grass-roots social justice movement of the past four decades.

Given this sociology and comparative history, it is hardly shocking that Rob Bell has now collaborated with Oprah Winfrey. Charisma attracts charisma, perhaps, although Kathryn Lofton might also suggest that the two mega-stars were united together in commitment to what William James once presciently skewered as “the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess success.” Accountability for spiritual entrepreneurs has never been an easy matter, no matter how self-critical or “innately curious” they claim to be.

But Wellman’s and Bell’s counsel against easy judgment is also wise. Who knows how the Bell-Oprah mutual influence might develop? But Bell’s own words do not inspire confidence: Our desires and God’s desires for us [can] become the same thing. Incredible. What do you love to do that brings more and more heaven into God’s good world? What is it that makes your soul soar? What is it that you do, that your friends and community affirm, that taps you in to who you are made to be?

Such a gospel that conforms God to one’s own desires is, in fact, highly credible; one might even say it is the very font of credulity. And this version of the gospel signals a recurrent denouement among evangelicals in America--whether as fiscal or sexual scandal, or as mere absorption into the secular Borg. I sincerely hope that Bell’s engagement with both evangelicalism and social justice (e.g., the environment, LGBT rights) endures. But at present the answer to Wellman’s question about evangelical Christianity and economic desire, from his own narrative, would seem to bear out the conclusion: resistance is [almost] futile.