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POPULISTS OR INTERNATIONALISTS? EVANGELICAL TRIBES AND GLOBALIZATION

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Evangelical Tribes? Group Instinct And The Fate Of American Christianity Robert J. Joustra

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People form groups out of bonds of common fear. This is a kind of introduction to political realism that undergraduates across the country receive every fall – if not in the classroom, on whatever postapocalyptic prime time event will teach them the same lesson. *Groups* are not new to social scientific analysis, not even groups predicated on the basis of common anxiety, but Amy Chua, in her controversial new book [*Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*](#), says a blindness to groups is exactly America's problem. "In our foreign policy," she says, "we have been spectacularly blind to the power of tribal politics." These failures abroad are indicative of failures closer to home. What tribes are to power and politics in foreign affairs, they are only becoming more so in our backyard. And few groups have been more in the headlines as examples of tribal politics than white American evangelicals. In this little essay I want to wonder, alongside Richard Mouw's new book, [*Adventures in Evangelical Civility: A Lifelong Quest for Common Ground*](#), if Chua's language of tribes, groups and super-groups organizes or clarifies the battlegrounds of American evangelicalism. Are evangelicals a kind of tribe, and if so, what resources might there be for inter-tribal dialogue and politics?

Chua's definitions are, at times, frustratingly vague. We learn about tribes more by what they *do* than what they *are*. They are sources of joy and salvation. They bind identities, seek benefits for in-group mates, penalize outsiders, sacrifice, even kill and die for their members. Chua's cases, to be clear, are mainly outside the United States: Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Venezuela and so on. It is only in the final chapters of her book that she turns her tribal lens onto the United States and wonders whether tribal thinking might clarify the fault lines in American society.

A book of mainly foreign policy, *Political Tribes* does offer some correctives to somewhat disembodied, ahistorical tendencies in that field. *Tribes*, political and social loyalties that can build and break societies, are not always easily and theoretically abstracted. They have intangible aspects that are hard to measure: blood, history, loyalty or the kind of moral intuitions that Jonathan Haidt makes a longer point of in [The Righteous Mind](#). We are trapped, says Chua, in a model of thinking that imagines rational agents have coherent and materially self-interested codes of conduct, when most of the world is rational *on its own terms* of what it fears and what it loves. The social and political markers that manifest those fears and loves can seem innocuous or even irrelevant to outsiders to these emotions. However, inside the right context they are a matter of life and death. We have been shocked, says Chua, to discover this in other societies like Iraq and Afghanistan. But, in fact, it has always been as true at home as it was abroad.

What makes the United States special is that it is even capable of such blissful ignorance because of its inter-tribal nature. Writes Chua:

Alone among the major powers, America is what I will call a super-group. A super-group is first of all a group. It is not universal; it does not include all humanity. It has a “We” and an “Everyone Else.” But a super-group is a distinctive kind of group: one in which membership is open to individuals of all different backgrounds – ethnic, religious, racial, cultural. Even more fundamentally, a super-group does not require its members to shed or suppress their subgroup identities. On the contrary, it allows those subgroup identities to thrive, even as individuals are bound together by a strong, overarching collective identity.

America was not always a super-group, she hastens to add. Long, painful, ongoing struggles transformed its zero-sum political tribalism into an engine of democracy. It is, we can probably agree, a rather unfinished project. But what’s interesting to me about Chua’s argument is how this *thin band* of identity uniting overtop of thicker, underlying, tribal loyalties is such a profoundly liberal, and American, idea.

We forget, she argues, how unusual it is “to have both an extremely diverse, multiethnic population *and* a strong overarching national identity capable of binding people together.” She is certainly right that this is one of the exceptions, not the rule, in the history of global politics. Supergroups are rare. Tribes are not.

All of which makes one think about the state of Evangelicalism. To say that Evangelicals are a “tribe” has always struck me as wrong, if perhaps misleading. We see the sensational, if somewhat under analyzed statistics, about how white evangelicals vote (already a racial filter there). We also see very significant [moral minorities](#) within the movement and a remarkable split on the basis of race and social class. Chua lists “American tribes” in her final chapters. These include:

- Occupy Wallstreet;
- Sovereign Citizens;

- Street gangs and Narco Saints;
- The Prosperity Gospel;
- Nascar Nation;
- WWE and the Trump Phenomenon;
- America's Two White Tribes (where she argues white Americans usually hold their greatest disdain for other white Americans).

Evangelicals can be found in every one of these tribes, though I expect they are overrepresented in some over others. If evangelicals are to be found in every “tribe and nation” in the United States, then in what way can the *evangelicalism* of evangelicals be the causal factor in political and social loyalty? Is it, at best, a weak adjective, rather than a strong noun?

I wonder if it might be better to think about American evangelicalism in its context, as both uniquely American, in history and identity, and (small ‘L’) liberal in its approach. American evangelicalism would then best thought of as a kind of ecumenical super-group, a weak confederacy based on an overlapping consensus of a few key principles.

If evangelicalism is a kind of ecclesial movement modelled after the American political project, then it is really not a ‘tribe’ at all. The better metaphor would be an attempted supergroup. It would have no decent ‘thick’ account of a kind of life outside its narrow band of theological markers, and it would be odd to demand it. It would be like demanding the “American” view on food. Or art. Or sex. Or God. There is not *an American* view on these subjects; there are American *views*. And they are, it should be hastily added, hotly contested.

I think Richard Mouw would like this idea. He writes that “a theology that only features the shared evangelical convictions” leaves “a movement that can easily be blown about by every wind of doctrine.” So, too, a social and political theory that depends only on the thin virtues of liberal democracy lacks the kind of substantive account of social and political life that can sustain it. Liberal democracy, in the argument of Jonathan Chaplin, cannot sustain itself. It needs other sources. Is evangelicalism an identity of the same kind? It is a thin account of real, overlapping convictions, but not an identity that can sustain itself. It needs deeper sources.

Evangelicalism tried to do for ecumenical Christianity what the United States has labored to do for global politics: create a super-group ecumenicity, a common ground, into which sub-group identities are not only solicited but *necessary* to provide a fuller account of religion and politics. Such diversity is hard to maintain. Writes Mouw, “We need a negation not of cultural diversity as such but of the cultural diversity of Babel. Pentecost brings its own version of diversity.”

Mouw writes about a workshop in the 1970s at which he was asked to present “A _____ theological perspective on urban _____.” He presented on “Reformed” and “Politics” in this context but noted that the formula for the conference had a real variety of interpretations. Some were denominational or theological, but others had cross-cutting identities. “A black theological perspective on urban family” was one. Or a

“feminist theological perspective” or “An Asian American theological perspective.” Even theological labels were not diverse enough to address major social questions, and other labels cut across those very theological boxes, showing such diversity was necessarily intrinsic even to *thicker* theological accounts. What, after all, is a group? And what defines its life and boundaries?

The complaints about evangelicalism’s political diversity, complicity or so on, I think, misunderstand the nature of the project. As perhaps do [complaints about how scandalous an “Evangelical mind” \(or lack thereof\) may be](#). Such an ecumenical supergroup would never, by virtue of its very identity, have the thickness of its own resources to give a full picture of intellectual or institutional life. We would have to dive deep into the constituent parts of evangelicalism to find such thickness, into Baptist or Reformed theology and social thought. Given the nature of evangelicalism’s thin common ground, it is even a little surprising to expect more uniform political and social thought. An identity that cuts across class, race, denomination and more would need to be awfully thick, and very rigorously worked out, in order to provide coherence around such divisive social and political questions. That no such coherence is forthcoming is all to be expected.

Can a socialist, a liberal-democratic, a nationalist and so on sign up as evangelical? I think they could. The interesting question is not why are American evangelicals tearing each other apart politically, but why we ever imagined they would be a homogenous political block, or why we even thought such a block existed?

Evangelicalism is no tribe. It is a weak, ecumenical supergroup which *needs* the thickness of its many tribes. That the supergroup is in a moment of crisis is neither new nor novel: all supergroups are constantly in moments of reconstitution. Much to be preferred, argues Mouw, “is an evangelicalism that, sharing some fundamental convictions that are ignored or even explicitly denied in the larger Christian community, eagerly enters into a freewheeling discussion of what we can best draw upon from the ‘thick’ confessional traditions of the past in addressing urgent questions today about the church’s life and mission.”

Channeling Chua in the final analysis, we might say that’s not a bad model for American public life either. Much to be preferred is a kind of America that, sharing some fundamental convictions that are ignored or even explicitly denied in the larger global community, eagerly enters into a freewheeling discussion of what we can best draw upon from the “thick” confessional traditions of our past in addressing urgent questions today about the state’s life and mission.

It is hardly a model without its problems, but it is an American one with much to admire.

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