

Elisha, Omri. *Moral Ambition: Mobilization and Social Outreach in Evangelical Megachurches*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Benjamin L. Hartley

This book was immediately appealing to me for two reasons. First, I was interested in learning more about the relatively new field of “anthropology of Christianity” which seeks to better understand the shape of Christianity as it takes shape in many diverse cultures. This book deepened my understanding in this regard but not for a culture most readers of *Prism* would find exotic. Omri Elisha studies Knoxville, Tennessee megachurches – specifically the people from two churches and their discourse about and involvement in social outreach ministry. The second reason for wanting to read this book was because the author self-describes as a “nonobservant secular Jew” from New York City. I was intrigued. What questions might such an anthropologist raise about the culture of Knoxville megachurches and evangelical social outreach more generally? I was not disappointed.

For the readers of *Prism* this book will be most valuable for the way Elisha unpacks Knoxville evangelicals’ complicated and sometimes contradictory thoughts, feelings, and actions with regard to social outreach toward the poor. Although clearly targeting an academic audience (this book is a revised dissertation), Elisha’s analysis of evangelical attitudes and actions with regard to materialism, race, compassion, accountability, suburban-urban partnerships, the Kingdom of God, and a number of other concepts will prompt many evangelical readers – including this one – to assess the extent to which one’s own efforts at social outreach among the poor correspond to that of Knoxville church members. Christians accustomed to thinking theologically about “holistic ministry,” “social justice,” and an assortment of other evangelical buzzwords will find this anthropological analysis to be most thought provoking. Megachurch members’ lived out “vernacular theology” of social justice is less soaring in its rhetorical flair than what is found in most evangelical books about social action, but such vernacular theologies and practices deserve more attention precisely because they are “messy.” Elisha should be commended for helping his readers better understand this richly textured but not always beautiful reality of a congregation’s social involvement.

For all of its strengths as an excellent anthropological study of megachurch social outreach efforts, this book is not without a few faults. The astute evangelical reader will note occasional examples of language use which signal that the author is an outsider to the evangelical movement (such as when he refers to systematic theology as “systemic theology”), but these missteps were rare and, for the most part, inconsequential. One also wonders if Elisha occasionally places too much emphasis on a particular theological concept his informants raise or seeks to make generalizations about evangelicals beyond the Knoxville context. For example, Elisha exaggerates the significance of an “exilic” frame of mind among his informants with regard to their engagement with the city as a place where they are “strangers in a strange land.” His insights are intriguing in this regard but not very well supported by ethnographic evidence. Elisha’s insights here also made me wonder why he chose to not examine these churches’ involvement in foreign mission efforts as an important dimension of their social outreach. He notes that the foreign mission budget for these churches is large, but gives no further information about it. Some attention to this aspect of the churches’ ministries would have strengthened the book.

Omri Elisha provides a wonderful invitation for his evangelical readers to assess their own “moral ambition” in new ways using the tools of anthropological analysis. I am convinced that our churches and ministries with the poor would benefit enormously if we had more pastors and Christian leaders who used anthropology to better understand the streets and the churches we serve. Elisha provides a rich showcase of what anthropology can offer, and for this I am grateful.