Introduction

American evangelicalism needs a good dose of demythologizing.

The headlines started appearing around 2007, and by 2013 they had reached a fever pitch. Dozens of online magazines and news websites were publishing exposé-type articles throwing light on what had become the latest American evangelical craze—adopting children, and not just one or two children, but as many children as possible. One author explained that “some families adopt as many as five or six new children,” declaring themselves “serial adopters” and wearing bracelets that say “orphan addict.” Another author described an “evangelical adoption boom,” in which “Bible-adhering Christians essentially collect children” and in which the corrupt, global adoption industry reaped billions from “coercion, racism and wannabe-do-gooders’ salvation complexes.” Headlines for these articles included provocative phrases like “The Evangelical Orphan Boom,” “Orphan Fever,” the “Evangelical Adoption Obsession,” an “Evangelical Adoption Crusade,” “Serial Adopters,” “Evangelicals Exploiting the Orphan Market,” “Preying on the Desperate,” “Evangelicals and the Fake-Orphan Racket,” and “How the Christian Right Perverts Adoption.” They thus seemed to be describing something both powerful and alarming, even potentially dangerous.

Most of these articles were either written by or using information and arguments from Kathryn Joyce, a free-lance journalist specializing in issues of religion, family, and gender. *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption* (Joyce 2013b) was the culmination of several years of attending evangelical conferences, interviewing key leaders, and reading literature by evangelicals on the topics of Christians and adoption. In the estimation of Joyce and other journalists or anti-adoption activists, the growing coordinated effort among American
evangelicals to promote compulsive adoption was not motivated by a
genuine love for children. Rather, evangelicals were adopting primar-
ily to proselytize the children of poor birth mothers, domestically or
abroad, and to promote the pro-life agenda, creating an (at times, coer-
cive) alternative to abortion for women with unplanned pregnancies.

These journalistic descriptions of the evangelical movement to pro-
mote Christian adoption, fostering, and orphan care do indeed capture some of the stated goals of its leaders (albeit ungenerously and superfi-
cially). However, there are at least three important, but questionable,
assumptions in their accounts. Each assumption builds on the previous
ones. The first is that American evangelicals have actually been success-
ful at accomplishing their objectives. That is, in describing an evangeli-
cal “adoption boom” or “orphan boom,” Joyce and others are assuming
that American evangelicals have been successful at mobilizing evangeli-
cal families to adopt or foster more than they have in the past—or more
than anyone else, for that matter. The second assumption is that the
proselytizing, pro-life, patriarchal ideology of the American evangelical
subculture is ultimately driving these efforts, making them successful.
Finally, building on the first two assumptions, and readily apparent from
the tone of the headlines, a major assumption of these treatments is that
American evangelical efforts at social engagement should be feared by
non-evangelical Americans. The not-so-implicit message is that Ameri-
can evangelicals are both so ideologically committed and effective at
social engagement, and their ideology is so at-odds with American
democratic values, that America and the world must take warning when
evangelicals get involved in particular social issues like the care of vul-
nenable children.

These assumptions about evangelical social engagement are not
new, nor are they limited to evangelical efforts to promote adoption
or fostering. In his book Christian America? What Evangelicals Really
Want, sociologist Christian Smith explains that “today, many journal-
ists, scholars, public leaders, and ordinary Americans are curious and
concerned—sometimes frightened—about who evangelicals are and
what they want.” Toward the end of his book, Smith concludes,

In the American media, in the popular imagination, and often in aca-
demic scholarship, American evangelicals are routinely cast as either
angels or demons. The angel myth is fostered by many religio-political conservative activists who posture American evangelicals as the country’s last bastion of righteousness in a decaying society, a mass constituency of morally upright and outraged citizens prepared to “take back America” for Christ. . . . Likewise, many liberal-leftist activists imagine American evangelicals as demons. They cast evangelicalism as an ominous resurgence of religious oppression, a movement of radical, intolerant, and coercive zealots determined to undermine basic American freedoms in the name of narrow religious supremacy. . . . In the so-called “culture wars” drama—played out mostly by small parties of activist cultural and political elites of both persuasions—American evangelicals are too often projected “larger than life” as angels or demons.9

Here Smith argues that journalists, American popular culture, and even academics caricature evangelicals in terms that exaggerate their social influence and ideological commitment and provoke unjustified concern among some Americans regarding their activistic efforts. These thoughts resonate in Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout’s book The Truth about Conservative Christians: What They Think and What They Believe. On the first page of their book, they explain that

insiders and outsiders alike misperceive, misrepresent, and stereotype this large and diverse segment of American culture. To insiders . . . Conservative Christians defend the core values of both America and Christianity against the onslaughts of a secular and vulgar culture that will, if unchecked, undo both nation and religion. . . . [To outsiders] Conservative Christians are a dangerous juggernaut bent on undoing liberty, equality, and the fraternity of nations. Power-mad hypocrites, they mask hate with love, a judgmental streak with pieties, exclusion with appeals to inclusion, and monoculture in the name of diversity. Neither the insider nor outsider portrait does justice to the variety, complexity, and subtlety of Conservative Christianity.10

Throughout both books, these authors demonstrate how dominant characterizations of American evangelicals and their social engagement, while in vogue, are misleading. While I am in agreement, the accounts of these scholars have been based on public opinion data and generalizations