

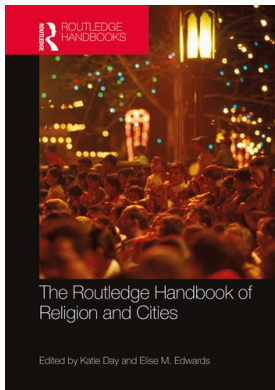
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9

FAITH IN THE SUBURBS

Evangelical Christian books about suburban life

*Brian J. Miller*¹

Introduction

In 1961, The University of Chicago professor Gibson Winter published a book titled *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis*. With postwar suburbanization well underway, Winter criticized the move of mainline Protestants out of the city: “The churches entered a period of suburban captivity, deserted the central city and aligned themselves with the status panic, becoming mere refuges for the fleeing middle classes.”² Gibson’s commentary built on earlier concerns regarding religion in the suburbs and was not the only book on the topic from the time period.³ For example, *Christian Century* noted the “sense of self-satisfaction” present in suburban churches and asked whether they were “parasite communities.”⁴ Catholic priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley published *The Church and the Suburbs* in 1959, and United Methodist minister and sociologist Frederick Shippey published *Protestantism in Suburban Life* in 1964.⁵ As religious adherents and congregations spread throughout metropolitan regions and transformed religious landscapes,⁶ how Christians could live out a vibrant faith amid the comfort and pressures of suburbia as well as exercise their responsibilities within metropolitan regions became recurring questions.

Today, many American Christians, including white evangelicals, live in suburbs. After multiple decades of suburban growth, just over 50% of all Americans reside in suburbs,⁷ and these communities outside cities are home to numerous churches and Christian organizations. It is easy for scholars to paint the evangelical movement as largely suburban and both religiously and politically conservative.⁸ Imagine a typical white evangelical, and the image in mind is likely to be of a person living in a suburb or small town (and these two places may be indistinguishable for some Americans).⁹

With evangelicals and other Christians firmly established in the suburbs, seven books written by evangelicals between 2003 and 2018, printed by evangelical publishers, and intended for an evangelical audience reveal how conservative Protestants view suburban life in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Their titles clearly address the suburban context: *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, *The Jesus of Suburbia*, *The Suburban Christian*, *Death by Suburb*, *Justice in the Burbs*, *Suburbianity*, and *Finding Holy in the Suburbs*.¹⁰ Three of the seven directly address living different suburban lives as Christians, three use the suburbs as a shorthand for understanding common

American issues or broader American society, and one uses the suburbs as a foil to promote New Urbanist living in a small big city. More broadly, these texts ask how evangelicals see the relationship between faith and place, and the connections between cities and suburbs. With life in the suburbs now well established among generations of evangelicals, these texts suggest evangelicals should view suburbs as an important and unique mission field or vocational setting, yet their solutions to suburban life do not fully acknowledge the structural realities of suburbs or consider “the moral responsibility of those with resources toward those without them.”¹¹

Evangelicals in the American suburbs

The issues raised by these seven texts rest on a set of historical and social forces that led to white evangelicals living in the suburbs. While suburbs have deep roots in American society, the quick growth of automobile-dependent mass suburbia in the decades after World War II¹² coincided with an uptick in religiosity in the United States.¹³ American evangelicals have a history of anti-urban bias¹⁴ within a country with strong anti-urban ideologies,¹⁵ even with the occasional positive re-emphasis on urban life among evangelicals.¹⁶ From English abolitionist and evangelical William Wilberforce moving out of corrupting London in the late 1700s,¹⁷ to the post-World War II religious revival and movement of religious groups to the suburbs,¹⁸ to *Christianity Today* leaving Washington DC, a move that, according to the *New York Times*, included “some talk of getting out of the amoral urban setting, into the real America,”¹⁹ evangelicals often eschew large cities, particularly those on the coasts.

Connected to anti-urban bias is the aspect of changing populations of major American cities. With the influx of African American residents to cities in the Northeast and Midwest in the twentieth century, government policies that provided suburban opportunities for whites, and substantial residential segregation, whites left cities for suburbs.²⁰ Some religious groups found it easier than others to move to the suburbs, such as those less tied to sacred places²¹ or those within less hierarchical Protestant denominations.²² Congregations might try to stay within changing neighborhoods, citing the ministry needs and a connection to the community, but leave after finding theological justification to follow congregants to the suburbs.²³ In the Chicago and Indianapolis regions, a wide variety of congregations moved to the suburbs as communities changed populations and suburbanization gained steam.²⁴

In addition to anti-urban views and moving to the suburbs to avoid changing urban populations, particularly growing black populations, a third factor connecting evangelicals to suburbs involves the cultural affinities between evangelical life and suburban culture. With the American suburbs emphasizing nuclear family life,²⁵ individualism, private spaces,²⁶ and middle-class meritocracy,²⁷ evangelicals fit right in with emphases on individual religious experiences,²⁸ color-blind approaches to race and ethnicity that emphasize the actions of prejudiced or self-interested individuals and overlook or deny structural reasons for disparate outcomes across racial and ethnic groups,²⁹ a high regard for family life,³⁰ and populism.³¹ Some evangelical congregations have thrived in suburbs by appealing to cars and middle-class whites³² or post-suburban settings where a single congregation can span an entire metropolitan region with hundreds of small groups and numerous worship services.³³

Key themes of the texts

The seven evangelical books contain similar themes regarding the issues suburbs present to evangelical Christians. Furthermore, these books suggest multiple common solutions to leading a richer or deeper Christian suburban life.

These texts do not insist suburbanites must go to cities, rural areas, or foreign locations to serve God fully. Instead, six of the seven authors want evangelicals to advance God's kingdom within their suburban contexts. Indeed, God's kingdom could even thrive in the suburbs. Hales sums up this perspective:

The suburbs—like any place—exhibit both the goodness of God's creative acts (in desiring to foster community, beauty, rest, hospitality, family) and sin (in focusing on image, materialism, and individualism to the exclusion of others). We cannot be quick to dismiss the suburbs out of hand.³⁴

The one book advocating urban life—Jacobsen's *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*—draws upon experiences in the small big city of Missoula, Montana (population just over 70,000) and promotes New Urbanist principles of urban planning that also could apply to suburban settings.³⁵

If evangelical Christians can stay in the suburbs and may even feel called to suburban living, these authors argue evangelicals should not ignore their mission. As Goetz argues repeatedly, it is easy to succumb to the thinner life rather than seeking the thicker life that God desires for his followers.³⁶ Moreover, all the authors suggest the American Dream is alluring with its promises of a home, family, and success. Yawn says, "I expect that most suburban Christians are like me, struggling to tell the difference between what is generally American and what is actually Christian."³⁷ Hales warns of the "happy ending" chased after in the suburbs: "When we cement over the cracks of sin in our hearts, lives, and neighborhoods, we cannot experience shalom in the suburbs."³⁸ Erre suggests this confusion can go further: "In short, much of the message of American Christianity presents Jesus as the purveyor of the American Dream."³⁹

Yet, the books argue, the suburban Christian cannot simply go with the cultural flow—they must daily attune themselves to God's desires for the suburbs rather than their own personal aspirations. To still live in the suburbs, yet stay awake to God's activity, these authors collectively prescribe two solutions: 1) spiritual practices and disciplines; and 2) clearer doctrine and understandings of who humans are. Two of the books in particular emphasize spiritual disciplines. In each chapter, Goetz discusses an element of the toxic suburban environment and then prescribes a spiritual discipline in response.⁴⁰ Similarly, Hales discusses hungers present in the suburbs and then suggests Christian counter-liturgies and practices at the conclusion of each chapter to sate those hungers. These practices would refocus attention on God and neighbor, rather than the pursuit of suburban success and goods.

In contrast to spiritual disciplines, the other authors point to Biblical truths and better understandings of the Christian faith. Jacobsen reminds readers of the Biblical path from garden to city.⁴¹ If Christians are going to end up in a city, why not work for their welfare now? Yawn provides a list of statements supported by Bible passages at the beginning and end of his text that refute maxims of Christian life in the American suburbs.⁴² Erre, Hsu, and Samson and Samson ask suburban Christians to live up to their callings as people who should be devoted the good of others and the flourishing of communities.⁴³

Across these books, the authors find some agreement about what virtues suburban conservative Protestants should practice. Hospitality is a common theme. While suburbanites generally follow a "moral minimalism" where community develops by leaving each other to their private realms,⁴⁴ the discussions of hospitality ask suburban Christian to expand their thoughts and actions beyond their single-family home and practice generosity and involvement with community life. Instead of hoarding goods (exhibited in ever-larger single-family homes, nice vehicles, vacations, and more), suburban Christians should share and give away. The single-family home

is a place to start as residents can welcome others for food and fellowship and build lasting relationships within the most comfortable and vulnerable suburban context.

These books suggest the calls for spiritual activity and better understandings of religious doctrine are enhanced by a grounding in Christian tradition as opposed to floating along with the relative newness of and the totalizing nature of suburbia. The American suburbs in their current form are roughly 100 years old—American suburban life began in the mid-1800s with the advent of railroads and streetcars yet did not take off into a form recognizable today until the widespread acquisition of automobiles⁴⁵—and are not guaranteed to last forever. In other words, Christians over the centuries, let alone the writers and characters of the Bible, had little to no experience with modern suburbs, and their experiences and truths transcend suburbia and other locations as well. Furthermore, the suburban lifestyle built around single-family homes, driving, and individual success can trap participants into thinking that this is the only way life can be lived. Samson and Samson present an alternative in a concluding section titled “A Final Blessing”:

By choosing to live justly in the suburbs, or in the city, or in the country—wherever God has led you—you are choosing to join with a whole line of people who, in their time, have sought to be faithful followers of God in the way of Jesus.⁴⁶

The regular appeals in these texts to Christian writings and tradition hint at a need suburbanites have to find a rootedness or home in the suburbs. Hales might be the most explicit about this:

‘We make our home by stories,’ it’s said that author Flannery O’Connor wrote. In my move to the suburbs, I knew I needed a new story to bring me back home. Daily, I need a new narrative to help me find both the holy in the suburbs and a story bigger and better than my cul-de-sac.⁴⁷

The other authors also discuss this. Americans are privatistic and geographically mobile in the postwar suburban era (though less so in recent years),⁴⁸ leading to difficulties developing community or even an understanding of the local community. If suburban evangelicals are also likely to be transient, they can at least root themselves in the Christian church and tradition that speaks across centuries and contexts.

Similarly, all of these books ask American Christians to counter the false narrative that the American Dream will provide fulfillment in life. These authors all suggest that this chasing of the American (suburban) Dream is ultimately not satisfying. It is hollow, incomplete, and perhaps impossible to truly achieve. Yawn explains the struggle:

I’ve come to realize over many years as a pastor in the suburbs that American ideals and Jesus’s teachings are locked in a constant battle for my devotion. Our hearts suffer the invariable upheaval of unrelenting coups. My Christian faith is forever being overthrown by my adoration of the American dream. I battle to pry the American part of me off of the Christian part of me. The suburbs wreak havoc on the Christian faith. They affect every essential aspect of Christianity, including how I understand the gospel, read my Bible, and view the church.⁴⁹

This is not an easy task, as all of the authors acknowledge. The allure of the American suburbs is strong as it offers an attractive alternative to God’s calling. As one South African pastor put it, “The suburbs are essentially an attempt to create an alternate Kingdom.”⁵⁰

This pursuit of the American Dream requires a devotion to individualism and consumerism, themes multiple texts address. The individualism promoted in suburbs, illustrated by limited social ties and individual suburbanites looking to acquire status symbols, is antithetical to Christian understandings of community and often limits spiritual growth and practices. The authors argue the acquisition of goods, including large homes, nice cars, and opportunities for children, for the purposes of finding fulfillment in acquiring them or in order to compare favorably to others—with Goetz arguing evangelicals should pursue “mortality symbols” rather than the concept of “immortality symbols” from psychologist Ernest Becker⁵¹—is not worthwhile. Samson and Samson explicitly connect consumerism to environmental degradation; pursuing goods and using too many resources will hurt others in God’s creation.⁵² These evangelical authors agree individualism and consumerism fail to deliver what, they argue, God offers.

Finally, these books ask suburban evangelicals to expand their views of the suburbs as well as of those who live in the suburbs. To start, this requires looking beyond the walls of one’s own single-family home and the relationships of the nuclear family. At a minimum, suburban people of faith should know their neighbors and participate in a congregation involved in the community. Several of the texts, such as *Justice in the Burbs* and *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, are more explicit about expanding the scope of social relations beyond neighborhood and church, and advocate for joining in local causes, sharing the burdens of others, and helping to improve the life of the larger community. According to these texts, suburban Christians should be able to see God at work in a broader context beyond their immediate family and home.

Together, the authors generally agree evangelicals need to pay attention to where they live; a fuller Christian life in the suburbs requires further community interactions and perspective on how they can understand God is working in the suburbs.

Missing aspects of suburban life

These seven books addressing evangelical life in the suburbs have several notable deficiencies. Underlying their exhortations are multiple issues, including not fully grappling with the deeper social structures of suburbs (such as the class-based, racialized, and gendered ways in which suburbs developed and exist today). Furthermore, the authors pay limited attention to participating in and leveraging suburban institutions. With the authors involved in churches, ministries, and evangelical organizations, and writing largely for evangelical audiences, the texts present particular points of view even as they are searching for a more robust theology connecting faith and place.

These seven texts exhibit varying levels of sophistication regarding their understanding of what made American suburbs what they are today. Jacobsen and Hsu contain the most references to scholarly work on the suburbs and community.⁵³ In the final chapter, Hsu combines an evangelical emphasis on sharing faith with participating in structures: “While we must never neglect the significant of evangelizing individuals, equally important is transforming societal, organizational and municipal structures.”⁵⁴ The rest more briefly address structural underpinnings to suburbia. A lack of understanding of how the American suburbs came to be or what sustains them might be the result of evangelicals’ anti-intellectualism⁵⁵ and emphasis on individual actions,⁵⁶ but this leaves a sizable blind spot in not accounting for more systemic practices in both suburban and evangelical life.

In at least three areas, these seven texts do not adequately address structural issues. First, there is an over-emphasis on private space in the suburbs. These private spaces and related activities, ranging from single-family homes and an emphasis on driving to limited community interactions, anchor suburban life. Acquiring the private “good life” in the suburbs⁵⁷ is a goal of

many Americans.⁵⁸ Jacobsen makes the most direct case against a private suburbia with a call for Christians to utilize the principles of New Urbanism to redesign the physical structure of communities.⁵⁹ New Urbanists argue the suburban life might provide Americans with the best private realm in the world, yet the physical arrangement of space is impoverishing for community life. Build neighborhoods in a more traditional style—marked by walkability, mixed uses, a broader range of housing options and incomes, homes closer to the street—and community is more likely to develop.⁶⁰

The other authors say little about physical design and instead focus on solutions like offering hospitality. While this could help build relationships, hospitality based on inviting people into a single-family home and then separating again may not be able to go far enough to erase the private structures of suburbia and the preference to leave each other alone.⁶¹ There are limitations in many places on creating more density in suburban neighborhoods, such as zoning that tends to protect single-family homes, and a cultural emphasis on seeing single-family homes as an investment to protect.⁶² This makes moving beyond hospitality into meaningful and sustained interaction more difficult.

The privacy of suburbia relates to another issue that receives limited attention in these books. Why did Americans seek such privacy? They were often looking to escape the “other,” including people of different racial and ethnic groups as well as lower social classes. From the suburban beginnings in the mid-1800s,⁶³ whites segregated suburbs with blacks relegated to their own communities.⁶⁴ During the development of mass suburbia from the early 1900s onward, government policies and cultural ideologies promoting suburbanization and homeownership systematically excluded black and other minority residents utilizing multiple tools, including redlining, blockbusting, restrictive covenants and deeds, and violence.⁶⁵ After a series of court cases and the 1968 Housing Act made housing discrimination by race and ethnicity illegal, suburbs resorted to other options to keep out “less desirable” residents, including a lack of enforcement of housing laws, exclusionary zoning practices, limiting certain kinds of development, and not welcoming new religious groups.⁶⁶ While the non-white population of the suburbs has increased significantly in recent decades, and a sizable minority of immigrants to the United States move directly to the suburbs,⁶⁷ different racial and ethnic groups do not necessarily live near each other in the suburbs. The suburbs did not develop as places available to all and this continues to be the case.

Hsu has the most explicit discussions of race and ethnicity while the others either touch on it briefly or say little.⁶⁸ The racialized nature of suburbia may be difficult for many white evangelicals to acknowledge. White evangelicals as a whole either cannot see or refuse to see structural components of race in the United States, particularly compared to their black evangelical counterparts who share many theological beliefs. When asked why disparities exist between racial groups, white evangelicals tend to explain the differences in terms of personal motivation and not taking advantage of opportunities rather than structural obstacles.⁶⁹ More broadly, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the 1968 Housing Act, white suburbanites downplayed racial motivations, instead emphasizing economic arguments and personal agency to explain disparate access to communities.⁷⁰

Related to ongoing issues of race and ethnicity, these texts (outside of Hsu) say little about social class, a social force closely tied in the United States to race and ethnicity, as well as the formation of the suburbs (and a primary emphasis of Winter though Fishman provides a reminder of the more rural and fundamentalist roots of suburban evangelical Christianity).⁷¹ From the beginning of suburbs, those with more financial resources have sought to live in wealthier communities. This is particularly clear in levels of wealth and homeownership:⁷² accessing nicer suburbs with higher property values, higher performing school districts, lower levels of crime, and numerous family friendly amenities require certain resources.

Hospitality in private homes as well as congregations open to all could help address these issues. However, hospitality is often extended to people in geographic proximity or within existing social networks. Whites have social networks that are 91% white, on average.⁷³ While the number of multiracial churches in the United States has increased (12% of Protestant congregations were multiracial in 2012 compared to 6.4% in 1998), roughly four of five church attendees go to a congregation where one racial or ethnic group makes up 80% or more of the congregation.⁷⁴ Together, race and class combine to stratify American metropolitan regions and congregations alike, echoing Winter's fears.⁷⁵

Additionally, these books sidestep issues of gender in the suburbs, even though gender has figured prominently from the beginning of evangelicals' involvement in suburbs. Historian Robert Fishman explains how English evangelicals saw the city as "not just crowded, dirty, and unhealthy; it was immoral" and developed a solution in suburban life with women and children in homes with the husband traveling back and forth to London.⁷⁶ Even as women have increasingly joined the workforce in recent decades, they often continue to bear the burden of caring for the family and children. Today's evangelicals can emphasize women's responsibility of caring for the family even as women regularly work outside the home.⁷⁷ All of this comes to a head in the suburbs, the context both regarded by many as the best for children and also a starting point for the feminist movement, as Betty Frieden wrote from her suburban experiences.⁷⁸ That men and women have different suburban experiences is not considered deeply here.

A third missing structural facet of these texts involves a lack of advice and attention devoted to contributing to and working through suburban institutions. Jacobsen discusses getting involved in urban planning at the community level and joining the New Urbanist movement.⁷⁹ Hales, Hsu, and Samson and Samson suggest suburban evangelicals should work for suburban *shalom*.⁸⁰ Yet, many of the proposed changes in the texts involve individuals, nuclear families and some interaction with neighbors, neighborhoods, and churches. That evangelicals should focus on personal actions and work out from there, influencing society from "the bottom up," is a common point of emphasis.⁸¹ The evangelist Billy Graham suggested social change begins with changed individual human hearts, which can then change families and broader groups.⁸² Similarly, evangelical author Andy Crouch promotes creating and sharing culture by starting within small circles of influence.⁸³ Ignoring or downplaying the role of institutions and structures compared to emphasizing individual piety may be a hallmark of American evangelicals,⁸⁴ but it downplays the role of powerful social forces shaping suburbia.

These small-scale approaches fail to either note the importance of organizations or leverage powerful groups already operating in communities. For example, school districts teach and socialize children, support property values (and benefit from property taxes connected to those same values), have the ability to bring together numerous members of a community, and can exclude others.⁸⁵ With the common American emphases on the power of education to transform lives and provide economic mobility, as well as improve property values and ensure a positive quality of life, local school systems provide unique opportunities for evangelicals and others to support the common good (instead of focusing on restoring prayer in school⁸⁶ or promoting homeschooling with estimates that evangelicals comprise roughly 80% of American homeschooled students).⁸⁷ Similarly, people of faith could work through or with local governments that provide goods and values for a broad range of neighbors. Suburban evangelicals could volunteer for local boards and commissions or run for local offices with a goal of welcoming others and utilizing local resources for all. Suburban congregations could also do much more in terms of addressing community needs. Much congregational activity focuses on building up attendees and the religious community. A majority of American congregations do contribute to human or social services, particularly regarding providing food and small teams of volunteers to

address particular needs.⁸⁸ Yet evangelical congregations could do more in areas like providing housing, creating jobs, and meeting community needs related to incarceration, addiction, mental health, and immigration.

The particular background of the authors and their intended audience may contribute to the blind spots of these texts regarding suburbs. The authors are often in careers in ministry or evangelical organizations and the books indicate they want to engage society.⁸⁹ The authors are educated, largely white (seven of eight authors), and mostly male (two of eight are female). Evangelical publishing houses, which helped develop and then participated in a largely white evangelical book culture in the twentieth century,⁹⁰ produced these seven texts. Their experiences may reflect a subset of American suburban experiences but say little about increasing non-white and poorer suburban populations. While Shippey noted the changing demographics of suburbs⁹¹ and the suburbs on the whole become increasingly non-white and poorer through the early decades of the twenty-first century (though there could be demographic differences within metropolitan regions, such as between suburbs closer to cities and those on the exurban edges),⁹² evangelical voices from these suburbanites are limited.

At their worst, these texts could be an exercise in privileged suburbanites rationalizing their own behavior. They want to find ways to be more Christian while still living in single-family homes within communities with a high quality of life. The struggling suburban worker in the service industry or navigating the gig economy, the immigrant family, the resident looking for decent yet affordable housing—their stories are not here.

At their best, these are suburban evangelicals who recognize some of the same issues raised by the postwar suburban jeremiads: they are caught in an environment that attempts to pull them away from God and neighbor through comfort and self-centeredness. These books are a gentle wake-up call for numerous suburban evangelical Christians who buy into the American Dream more than they do a life of sacrificial faith. Several of the texts include discussion questions or a reading guide at the end to help individuals or small groups continue a conversation. Addressing race and class may not be optimal or palatable for white evangelical audiences who can struggle to read these as gospel issues as opposed to American political battles. Instead, poking at the tensions between Christian faith and American suburban life could prompt needed reflection and action.

Finally, these texts generally argue that suburban life is worth addressing and that residents can live faithful evangelical lives there. Yet, these texts each try to provide a new answer to the same question: what is the relationship between evangelical faith and particular places? How do places affect faith and vice versa? Overall, American evangelicals have a fraught relationship with particular places. On one hand, evangelicals should be willing to go anywhere to spread their faith. On the other hand, evangelicals have largely rejected American big cities in favor of suburbs and areas that are more rural. When given a choice in the United States, many evangelicals have gravitated to particular locations, even as they might suggest God's word and activity is needed everywhere.⁹³ Historians and social scientists argue certain traits and theologies of religious groups can help tie congregations to a location, including seeing church space as sacred⁹⁴ and hierarchical denominational structures.⁹⁵ Yet, often operating in independent congregations and working with a theological perspective that looks forward to heaven as the ultimate place, evangelicals have little to tie them to particular communities.

A key source for all seven books are Biblical texts, stories, and themes, consistent with evangelicalism's emphasis on the Bible as an authoritative source.⁹⁶ *Suburbanity* regularly quotes the Bible, while other books draw on Bible passages, Christian themes, and evangelical theological works.⁹⁷ The texts differ on how much they draw on outside sources, with a range spanning from 5 footnotes (all evangelical texts) in *Suburbanity* to over 200 footnotes, a number of them

referencing scholarly texts, in *The Suburban Christian*. However, these seven books do not draw heavily upon works from Christian theologians and leaders that directly address the connection between faith and place⁹⁸ Across these texts, the theologians and pastors emphasize different connections between faith and place: viewing land as a gift from God, addressing the politics of land, seeing land as sacrament, and considering the emplacement of faith. Drawing upon a range of Biblical texts and evangelical books, but not theological resources that directly address the issues at hand, these seven suburban texts all struggle to connect an individualistic faith with a communal and spatialized existence.

Conclusion

These seven texts addressing evangelical life in the suburbs continue a conversation begun in the postwar era about how to connect faith with urban and suburban life. While numerous religious groups have considered how to practice faith in the suburbs,⁹⁹ the seven books examined here show how evangelical Protestants think about these issues at the start of the twenty-first century. Now firmly established in suburban settings, these books suggest evangelicals can stay in suburbs and live a vibrant faith if they wake up from the suburban dream and become more serious about their faith. Drawing from the suggestions of the seven books, an evangelical suburbanite could practice a number of spiritual disciplines, build relationships with neighbors, and have some commitment to a congregation. Yet, the ongoing emphasis on faith lived out as individuals, in neighborhoods, and in congregations restricts the ability of evangelical Protestants to engage fully with their contexts or address issues of injustice such as residential segregation and differential access to capital and resources across suburban locations. The recommendations for evangelicals in these texts do not push them to be involved with suburban institutions or consider institutions—such as local religious congregations, school districts, or municipal governments—as critical actors or influences within suburban settings.

Thus, these books suggest evangelicals acknowledge only part of suburban life. Even as they might embrace the notions that suburbanites “could maintain a home life attuned to the tranquility, beauty, and purity of nature and where families could thrive safely removed from the urban ills threatening the health and morals of youth,”¹⁰⁰ the American suburbs are not solely about privacy, nature, or successful family life. The suburbs are built on a foundation, and still often operate today, in a way that works to keep others out of neighborhoods. These texts present limited perspectives of suburbanites outside of white, educated, ministry-oriented evangelicals. The questions raised by the suburban jeremiads of the 1950s and 1960s¹⁰¹ are still prescient today: are suburban churches pursuing good on the level of the whole community and metropolitan region? Are suburban evangelicals addressing structural issues facing their neighbors such as discrimination, alienation, loneliness, underemployment, anxiety about status, and finding the American Dream lacking? Addressing the multiple dimensions of suburban life, from the individual to the structural, from the local community and congregation to the metropolitan region, from private spaces to broader conceptions of shared place, from hospitality in single-family homes to work with local institutions, would require deeper analysis and action by evangelical Protestants who desire to shape and influence society, even the suburbs.

Notes

- 1 The author thanks the Opus Vocation Scholars program leaders and participants at Wheaton College for funding and helpful feedback.
- 2 Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 34.

- 3 Charles H. Heimsath, "Asleep in a Suburban Zion." *Christian Century*, November 15, 1939, 1407–1409.; Simeon Stylites, "'Satan in the Suburbs,'" *Christian Century*, November 26, 1952, 1375; James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking For God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945–1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), pp. 183–184.
- 4 Christian Century, "Great Churches of America III The First Church of Christ (Congregational), West Hartford, CT." March 1950, p. 362.
- 5 Andrew M. Greeley, *The Church and the Suburbs* (Glen Rock, NJ: Deus Books, 1959); Frederick A. Shippey, *Protestantism in Suburban Life* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964).
- 6 Etan Diamond, *Souls of the City: Religion and the Search for Community in Postwar America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); Brian J. Miller, "Growing Suburbs, Relocating Churches: The Suburbanization of Protestant Churches in the Chicago Region, 1925–1990," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, No. 2 (2017): pp. 342–64.
- 7 In 1950, 23.3% of Americans lived in suburbs. US Census Bureau, "Demographic Trends in the 20th Century," 2002, www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf.
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