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Kelly M. Sauskojus
Clemson University, ksausko@clemson.edu

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Cope, Emily M. *Evangelical Writing in a Secular Imaginary: The Academic Writing of Christian Undergraduates at a Public University*. Routledge, 2024, 184 pages.

Kelly Morgan Sauskojus
Clemson University

Emily Murphy Cope's *Evangelical Writing in a Secular Imaginary: The Academic Writing of Christian Undergraduates at a Public University* (2024) empirically considers how evangelical students negotiate their identities in their academic writing. Cope's project contributes to a long conversation about how composition teachers ought to respond when religion shows up in undergraduate student writing, particularly when it is evangelical or otherwise-conservative Christian rhetoric that has the potential to be disruptive or harmful (Dively; Rand; Thomson-Bunn; Vander Lei). Much of that early teacher research is highly anecdotal and considers it as axiomatic there is no place for religious rhetoric in academic writing or speech; however, a more recent strain of argument has countered that evangelical and otherwise religious students can and do productively use their faith as a rhetorical resource in academic writing and beyond (Pugh; Ringer, Vernacular; Ringer, Working). Despite that pre-Trump optimism, though, there is still an ongoing need to address legitimate concerns over the rhetoric of evangelical students, as well as calls for pedagogical practices accounting for their backgrounds (Mannon and Pivott), at least in part because evangelicals and evangelical rhetoric are at new levels of public visibility and power under Trump's second term.

First, Cope's study represents an enormous methodological contribution to the study of religion in undergraduate student writing. In a field perhaps overpopulated with anecdotes, counter-anecdotes, and small case studies, Cope approaches her research with empirical excellence, explaining with detail her data collection, coding practices, and how she arrived at final themes (an early excerpt from this research appeared in the methodologically-demanding *Research in the Teaching of English*). By positioning herself as a "Christian researcher," allowing the students she interviews to self-select as evangelical, and getting a much larger group of participants than past studies, Cope produces findings remarkable for their depth and diversity. Furthermore, this study makes a methodological contribution by offering a nuanced and productive way of considering undergraduate identity; social identity complexity theory creates a framework for how socially-constructed identities like "evangelical" or "academic" "are experienced by students and how they "constrain or capacitate academic writing and rhetorical development" (23). Given that religion as an identity category has not been theorized as robustly as, say, gender or race in writing studies, I anticipate

that this theorization will be productive for researchers working on any religious community.

Cope presents longitudinal findings on how evangelical students work “within the constraints (as they perceived them) of academic writing—obscuring, compartmentalizing, and integrating faith” (5). She shows how all three of these approaches are shaped by the secular imaginary, a term she deploys from Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor to describe the culture young evangelicals share with other college students, where religion is positioned as a private and personal choice and where public, communal action and discourse assume “supernatural phenomena do not exist or are irrelevant” (14). In this framework, both evangelical students and their college writing appear “secular-while-religious”.

One group of students she interviewed takes the obscuring approach, often writing about hot-button political issues that they perceive as grounded in their faith while playing by the “rules of the secular imaginary,” avoiding explicitly grounding their arguments in religion (61). Many such students see the research and writing process as a way to proclaim mainstream evangelical positions on issues like abortion, recycle research from past projects, or mimic the legal and scientific rationalizations that larger conservative political organizations use, while often unsuccessfully hiding the evangelical roots of their positions.

The second group of students takes the compartmentalizing approach to negotiating academic and evangelical identities. Even though most evangelicals theoretically argue against the bifurcation of religious discourse and public/academic discourse, many students, in their everyday writing, accept it, “experiencing their faith as either relevant or appropriate only in specific domains of life” (71). Some students report writing in favor of positions they do not actually hold because they just want to succeed at the academic writing game; other students who have to write about issues like evolution rhetorically distance themselves from their findings, like the student who consistently wrote that “scientists believe” certain evolutionary facts (86).

The final writing trend that Cope identifies in undergraduate students (and this was, significantly and perhaps surprisingly, the largest group of students represented) is students who take the integrating approach to academic and evangelical identities. They see their academic writing as working toward values and goals that are shared across their evangelical and academic communities, like pursuing a career in psychology to help fight mental illness; and prioritize enacting faith values in their writing rather than explicitly naming them. For example, a cis het white male evangelical student reports that for him being a Christian means enacting love wherever he goes, and so he repeatedly uses his academic writing to learn about and disrupt Christian-led discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community on his campus. Because so many researchers expect to identify evangelical student writing by explicit mentions of faith or departure from academic

norms, students in this third group have remained “largely invisible” in scholarship on the typical Christian college writing student (148). I find this last finding to be particularly indicative of the need for empirical research directly centering student perspectives and motivations for their writing, rather than relying on what is made obvious in student work or classroom interactions.

Cope concludes by offering several useful takeaways from this research, not least of which are the habits or mindsets that make it easier for evangelical undergraduates to enact integrating approaches: identifying commonalities between themselves and non-evangelicals, and seeing their faith-based activism as about meeting material needs and not just evangelism or “culture wars” issues. She also writes that despite the possible and legitimate risks of inviting religious discourse into the composition classroom, they are necessary risks “if we truly want to support students’ development of rhetorical skills and attitudes that contribute to civil discourse” (157). If writing teachers do not take up this challenge, we delegate evangelical students’ rhetorical education exclusively to forces like the National Right to Life Commission. Cope also offers several practical ways for teachers to productively engage evangelical students, including assigning inquiry-oriented research and writing that will not allow them to recycle already-known research and talking points, and connecting the norms of academic writing to disciplinary goals and values.

Any acknowledgment of this book’s broader value has to start by saying that I had already begun writing this book review when I got the news that Emily Cope had passed away very unexpectedly in the spring of this year; her students, colleagues, and extended community are grieving the loss of a teacher-scholar responsible for such fabulous work, work that addresses lots of my own curiosities and concerns about how (as a progressive, sometimes-visibly-queer religious person) I can interact productively with my evangelical undergraduates at the large southern public universities I’ve been teaching in for the past seven years (including the one at which, years apart, Cope and I both completed our doctoral research, which for her was the foundation of this project). I often find myself enacting compartmentalization in the classroom, sometimes speaking of my identities in ways that resonate—to use DePalma et al.’s term—with my Roman Catholic or Mormon students, and other times in ways that resonate with my queer religiously-deconstructed students. The work of integration is difficult, and requires time and attention to writing, to community, and to changing beliefs and values. In light of Cope’s encouraging findings about how rhetorical education contributes to productive identity integration, I find that this text productively contributes to ongoing disciplinary conversations about the value of actually doing the writing and the research work yourself in the age of AI shortcuts. I am most encouraged, though, by how this research centers students’ own explorations of their academic and evangelical lives. Despite researcher-led

calls to reconsider queer and religious discourses in the classroom and public life (Cavallaro; Geiger), it hits different in 2025 to watch a young white cishet male student use multiple years of his academic research and writing to explore how his evangelical Christian identity compels him to figure out how to make the church less harmful and more welcoming to his queer neighbors.

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