

An Emergent Threat: Christian Clergy Perceptions of the Emerging Church Movement

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Although there have been several attempts to study the dimensions of the Emerging Church movement (ECM) through close observation and survey data, we know little about its diffusion into American religious cultures. We undertook this project by attempting to capture whether Christian clergy thought about the movement and how consistently they considered it. Our analysis of survey data from several denominations suggests that the ECM is less well known among the clergy they are reacting against (evangelicals). Opinions turn not on partisan identity, but on religious authority, which is precisely the ground on which the ECM presents its challenge to evangelicalism. In this way, the ECM appears to be following a path paved by the decline of denominationalism.

Keywords: *Emerging Church movement, clergy.*

INTRODUCTION

Although there are many ways to measure the significance of a religious movement, one of the most effective may be to look at how much controversy and attention a movement generates. In the case of the Emerging Church movement (ECM), it is apparent that there are sizeable groups of opinion leaders who view the ECM¹ as important as well as threatening. There is no clearer example of the movement's rising national profile than the fact that two feature-length documentaries highly critical of the movement have been produced: *The Submerging Church* and *Now the End Begins*. The trailer for *The Submerging Church* intersperses quotes from movement leaders with biblical quotations, the first of which implores readers to “[w]atch out for false prophets” (Matthew 7:15). Additionally, visible ECM members have been called heretics by prominent evangelical leaders such as Franklin Graham (Warnock 2011) and “theologically disastrous” by Albert Mohler (Meacham 2011). While statements made by well-known religious leaders undoubtedly can have an impact on the views of both clergy and congregants at the local level, there has been no systematic investigation of how those opinions are dispersed across a large population. Thus, the purpose of this article is to analyze how Christian clergy view the ECM.

Opposition to the ECM has been both swift and vocal, with detractors attacking the movement on theological, political, and demographic grounds. To what degree is the movement known and opposed by religious conservatives, though? Until this point there has been no systematic attempt at assessing how well known the movement has become or how it is being perceived by the larger Christian community. What follows is a presentation of results from a survey of Christian clergy in the United States about the ECM, along with an attempt to assess whether some critical

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¹There are many different terms for the movement, including the “Emergent Church” or the “Emerging Church.” While they are often used interchangeably, we use both terms and the abbreviation ECM for consistency.

observations made about the movement by outside observers have empirical traction. The data result from a survey conducted via the Internet through the Qualtrics platform after clergy were invited by e-mail to participate.² We obtained responses from United Methodist (UMC), Southern Baptist (SBC), Reformed Church in America (RCA), Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), and Greek Orthodox clergy. The results of this analysis give readers a first and important glimpse into how well the ECM is known and how it is perceived by Christian pastors in the United States.

SALIENCE AND APPROVAL OF THE ECM

The survey asked clergy: “Do you approve or disapprove of the ‘Emergent Church’ Movement?” The respondents were given a Likert scale with a middle “neither” option as well as the option to select “I don’t know enough to rate the movement.” Of the 387 clergy who provided a valid response, the majority were either positive or ambivalent about the movement: 9.6 percent strongly approved, 28.7 percent approved, 9.3 percent disapproved, and just 3.6 percent strongly disapproved. However, almost half of the respondents were unwilling or unable to provide a directional opinion, with 34.9 percent saying they “Neither approve nor disapprove” and 14 percent saying that they did not have enough knowledge to rate the movement.³

Attitudes about the ECM vary along several dimensions. We will focus on two: denomination and theology. What is most striking from the data is Greek Orthodox clergy’s lack of knowledge of the ECM, with over half the small sample (60.9 percent) stating that they do not know enough to rate the movement. This percentage is especially high when compared to those in mainline Protestantism (RCA: 6.1 percent, PCUSA: 11.1 percent, UMC: 12.5 percent). Notably, Southern Baptist clergy had the lowest levels of awareness in the Protestant tradition, with 20 percent choosing the “don’t know enough” response option. When one considers that the leaders of the ECM are highly critical of evangelical denominations and many interviews with ECM congregants include stories of growing up in strict fundamentalist Christian households, it is odd that a significant number of Southern Baptist pastors are not even aware of the movement (Bielo 2011).

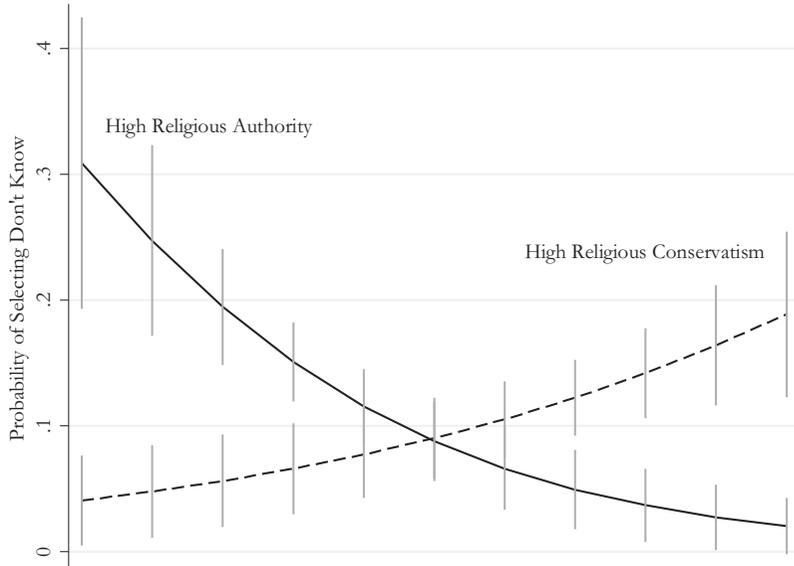
Considering the criticism the ECM has received from the theological right, one might suspect that salience would be higher among evangelicals who have consistently been criticized by movement leaders. Instead, we find that salience is greater among clergy who generally agree with the theological outlook of the ECM. We come to this conclusion through two different measures. In Figure 1, the probability of choosing the “don’t know” option is significantly greater among religious conservatives (nearly 20 percent at its apex).⁴ Choosing the “don’t know” option

²Clergy were contacted to participate via their listed office e-mail address. For the smaller denominations in our study (the Greek Orthodox Church and the RCA), addresses were culled from publicly available parish and denominational websites that list this individual-level contact information. PCUSA clergy contact information was provided to the authors by the denomination’s in-house research office. For the largest denominations in our study (the UMC and the SBC), we relied on a commercially generated e-mail list from the vendor Exact Data, which maintains current congregational lists for a variety of U.S. denominations. Each of the culling methods has drawbacks from the standpoint of representativeness, although it is not possible to determine exact sampling biases *a priori*. In each denominational case, we endeavored to use the total population of clergy with listed e-mail addresses, which is a subset of the total clergy population in each denomination. Given missing data, we received somewhere between 375 and 411 valid responses, depending on the question.

³Both choosing the middle option, such as this one, and choosing the “don’t know” option have been used in previous research as measures of opinionation (e.g., Krosnick and Milburn 1990).

⁴Our index of religious conservatism captures agreement with the following statements: The devil exists; The Bible is literally true; Jesus will return to earth in bodily form; Jesus was born of a virgin; There is an objective standard of right and wrong established by God’s Word; Men are given authority over women.

Figure 1
Salience of the ECM by religious conservatism and support for religious authority



is greater still among those most attached to religious authority,⁵ reaching nearly 30 percent among those who are most attached. Using the middle option of the scale as the measure of opinionation mostly reinforces these results, indicating that the ECM is simply not in the vernacular of clergy in the most religiously conservative and hierarchical traditions. More than 60 percent of those most attached to religious authority choose the middle option, compared to less than a sixth of the most supportive; religious conservatism is not related to choosing the middle option (data not shown).

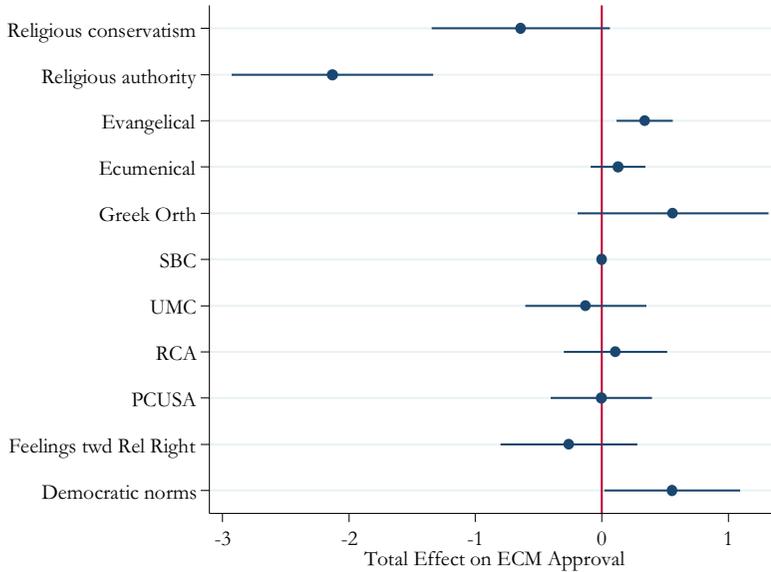
THEOLOGICAL CRITICISMS OF THE ECM

The central theological critique of those who oppose the ECM is that the movement does not adhere to a singular doctrine, but instead has an intentionally inclusive orientation toward those who are theologically curious and embracing doubts (Burge and Djupe 2014b; Carson 2005; Kimball 2003). Instead of believing that the church is the sole possessor of truth, the movement argues: “Truth is everywhere, and is available to everyone” (Bell 2011:78). While many members of the ECM have expressed that this openness is what attracted them to the movement (Bielo 2011; Chia 2011; Martí 2009), it also has left the ECM open to attack by theological conservatives. The most focused of these critiques are described in a book titled *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* (DeYoung and Kluck 2008). The principal critique of the ECM may accurately be summarized by one sentence on the back cover of the book: “Here’s the Truth—There *Is* Truth.” The authors take great care to contend that the doubt the ECM cultivates leaves its followers “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine” (DeYoung and Kluck 2008:51).

⁵This is an index composed of agreement with the following statements: The more clergy can step out of the way of the congregation the better; It is important for the congregation to construct their own salvation; The Gospel is what the congregation makes of it; The church must adapt to a postmodern culture in order to spread the Gospel; and I believe there are many valid interpretations of the Bible.

Figure 2

Estimated total effects on approval of the Emerging Church movement (OLS—90 percent CIS)
[Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Another dimension of the ECM that has been a significant point of criticism is its lack of recognized leadership (Worthen 2013). One social scientist observed that “[l]eadership in the Emerging Church has always been a rather tricky issue” (Chia 2011:390). Peter Rollins, a popular ECM thinker, once wrote that the most appropriate voices for the movement are “leaders who refuse to lead” (2008:1). Many who are well regarded in the movement believe that they are engaging in a conversation with others about faith, and these conversations are occurring on a level playing field without clear distinctions between clergy and laity (Jones 2011; Packard 2011). However, DeYoung and Kluck write: “the ‘we’re just in conversation’ mantra can become a shtick whereby emergent leaders are easy to listen to and impossible to pin down” (2008:17).

These criticisms of the ECM highlight the concern for preserving religious authority—both in text and in leadership. Our index of support for religious authority captures precisely these notions and finds empirical traction in our analysis reported in Figure 2, which shows the estimated total effect of variables of interest on approval of the movement. It is no surprise that strong investment in religious authority—theological and organizational hierarchy—is strongly linked to disapproval of the ECM. The full range of the religious authority variable drops support of the movement by 2.1 points (out of 4). In contrast, holding more conservative religious beliefs is insignificantly related to approval of the ECM, though the effect lies in the expected negative direction. Once we control for religious authority views, the included denominations do not differ on average. Instead, those with stronger democratic norms (negatively correlated with religious authority at $r = -.28$) approve of the ECM at greater levels. And, it is interesting to note that evangelicals have a net positive view of the ECM. In general, though, opposition to the ECM is aligned much more consistently with the importance of religious authority rather than the maintenance of any specific point of view.

POLITICAL CRITICISMS OF THE ECM

Undoubtedly, one of the most powerful historical forces that compelled the creation of the ECM was the dramatic rise to prominence of the Religious Right and its effort to wage a “culture

war” in the national political arena (Hunter 1992; Layman 2001). The Religious Right presented a radically different political posture from the previous evangelical stance because it engaged the broader culture at every possible turn instead of eschewing it (Armstrong 2010; Marty 1997). This new engagement allowed convenient access to new converts (Smith 1998), but it also helped to create a strong sense of belonging that separated evangelicals from religious outsiders (Patrikios 2008; Penning 2009) and may have pushed marginal affiliates to stop attending church entirely (Hout and Fischer 2002). Seen from this perspective, the ECM was well situated to serve as a refuge for individuals who wanted to maintain some attachment to religious tradition without having to accede to the increasingly conservative beliefs of many evangelical denominations (Martí and Ganiel 2014).

Many converts to the ECM tell stories of “deconversion” from evangelical Christianity and finding a welcoming place in the ECM (Bielo 2012; Chia 2011). Many of these narratives include individuals describing the ECM as an alternative to the conservative politics of the Religious Right. These anecdotes imply that the ECM is at least tolerant of political liberalism. This inclusive posture has led many to characterize the ECM as a rebranded form of liberal Christianity (Martí and Ganiel 2014). As one ECM leader was frequently told, “the emerging movement is [perceived to be] a latte-drinking, backpack-lugging, Birkenstock-wearing group of 21st-century, left-wing, hippie wannabes” (McKnight 2007:7). This description does find some empirical support, as many prominent ECM voices have publicly stated their support for Democratic candidates; for example, ECM leader Brian McLaren took part in an advertisement for Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign (McLaren 2008).

Not surprisingly, many critics of the ECM have keyed on the liberal positions of its leadership. DeYoung and Kluck note that the ECM has a strong focus on inclusivity, but they are not sure that this openness extends to those who vote for Republican candidates: “God may not be a Republican or a Democrat, but from reading the emergent literature, it sure seems like He votes Democrat” (2008:189; cf. Burge and Djupe 2014a, 2014b). There is some empirical support for this view in our survey data. Without theological controls, strong Republican clergy are 1.5 points less supportive of the ECM than are strong Democrats; with such controls, the gap shrinks to just .4 point ($p = .10$), suggesting that the movement is not especially likely to be viewed as a partisan vehicle.

DEMOGRAPHIC CRITICISMS OF THE ECM

Many observers have noted that the ECM does not look like a broad demographic slice of society. Instead, social scientists have noted that it often caters to those with an “anti-institutional” persuasion (Packard 2012:142): people who are overwhelmingly white, young, and well educated. Using a sample of ECM congregations collected by Jones (2011), Martí and Ganiel (2014) describe a movement that largely aligns with Packard’s (2012) assessment: three-quarters of respondents were college graduates and 25 percent of ECM adherents had graduate degrees. Nearly seven in 10 were under the age of 35 and more than two-thirds of the sample had no children (Martí and Ganiel 2014:21).

While there is nothing inherently wrong with a movement catering to a specific demographic, many observers have noted that this reality clashes with the ideal put forth by the ECM. Chia writes: “The point is that white, educated middle-class men symbolically represent a kind of elitism that the movement wishes to avoid.” (2011:240). While the data provided by Martí and Ganiel (2014) describe an even gender distribution, there is no doubt that most ECM leaders are highly educated, white, and male (but see Bolz-Weber 2013). The ECM has tried to respond to this inequity by organizing an event called Christianity 21, which consisted of sermons delivered by female speakers (Chia 2011:144–45).

Many demographics in our sample did not relate significantly to support for the ECM, including gender, geographic region of the country, or education level of the respondent. Of course, our data are from *clergy*, not congregants, so their applicability to the key demographics of the ECM is less than ideal. However, a few demographic variables were linked to higher levels of ECM support, including the number of years that a respondent has been a member of the clergy. A longer career was linked to *higher* approval for the ECM, which is quite counterintuitive given that the ECM is perceived as a youth-oriented movement (Martí and Ganiel 2014).

Moreover, pastors who serve in large cities (population of 250,000 or more) show higher levels of support for the ECM compared to rural clergy. While not all community size/types are statistically distinguishable in our data, suburban and urban pastors show more support for the ECM than do those in less densely populated regions. Finally, there was a weak and *negative* relationship between those who served higher-class congregations and support for the ECM. This finding presents the possibility that the ECM's focus on missional living might find opposition from individuals with greater financial resources.

IS THE ECM A THREAT?

To our knowledge, there has been no previous quantitative research about whether clergy are aware of the ECM or whether they support it. Our findings provide some initial direction for future research about how the movement is perceived; they also may be used as a benchmark for future social scientists who wish to assess how outsiders' views of the movement change as the ECM evolves. Support for the ECM primarily, but not exclusively, turns on religious considerations, although it is important to note that the salience of the ECM is higher among theological confederates. Given the depth of the critique the ECM presents, clergy who embrace an authoritative understanding of scripture and the clerical profession would stand opposed.

At its core, the Emergent critique of the Religious Right does not hinge on merely theological or political grounds but perhaps something much deeper: the concept of authority. The most recent movement in evangelical Christianity has been rooted largely in the idea that the Bible stands as the ultimate authority in a Christian's life, and the proper interpretation of the scriptures comes through the local pastor and national congregational leaders (Worthen 2013). The Emergent critique goes further than the typical argument regarding biblical literalism, but instead extends that skepticism toward church structure and pastoral authority as well. The movement offers a fundamentally different way of doing church, of conveying and building a faith. It democratizes the process of religion. Our results bear this out. The process considerations are captured by the religious authority and democratic norms variables that are most active in shaping views of the ECM. In this way, the ECM appears to be following a path paved by the decline of denominationalism. The ECM offers not just a different version of Christianity but a different type that leads us to ask questions about the place of formal institutions in religious life. What perhaps is most interesting about our research is that there are many practicing clergy in established denominations who appear quite willing to walk that path with the ECM.

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