



Fundamentalism and American Culture

George M. Marsden

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Many Americans today are taking note of the surprisingly strong political force that is the religious right. Controversial decisions by the government are met with hundreds of lobbyists, millions of dollars of advertising spending, and a powerful grassroots response. How has the fundamentalist movement managed to resist the pressures of the scientific community and the draw of modern popular culture to hold on to their ultra-conservative Christian views? Understanding the movement's history is key to answering this question. *Fundamentalism and American Culture* has long been considered a classic in religious history, and to this day remains unsurpassed. Now available in a new edition, this highly regarded analysis takes us through the full history of the origin and direction of one of America's most influential religious movements.

For Marsden, fundamentalists are not just religious conservatives; they are conservatives who are willing to take a stand and to fight. In Marsden's words (borrowed by Jerry Falwell), "a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something." In the late nineteenth century American Protestantism was gradually dividing between liberals who were accepting new scientific and higher critical views that contradicted the Bible and defenders of the more traditional evangelicalism. By the 1920s a full-fledged "fundamentalist" movement had developed in protest against theological changes in the churches and changing mores in the culture. Building on networks of evangelists, Bible conferences, Bible institutes, and missions agencies, fundamentalists coalesced into a major protest movement that proved to have remarkable staying power.

For this new edition, a major new chapter compares fundamentalism since the 1970s to the fundamentalism of the 1920s, looking particularly at the extraordinary growth in political emphasis and power of the more recent movement. Never has it been more important to understand the history of fundamentalism in our rapidly polarizing nation. Marsden's carefully researched and engrossing work remains the best way to do just that.

Fundamentalism and American Culture Details

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From Reader Review Fundamentalism and American Culture for online ebook

Chuck Bonadies says

In Fundamentalism and American Culture, Marsden explores the influences of the fundamentalist movement. The author believes that Ernest Sandeen overstates his case, that fundamentalism is an outgrowth of the millenarian movement. With a much wider root system, fundamentalism was a militant evangelical movement that was fighting battles on two fronts. 1) They fought against theological liberalism as it made its way into mainline denominations. 2) They were opposing the alarming changes in the culture.

This book is a good explanation of the roots of fundamentalism.

CB

Thomas Reeves says

Important book for Recovering Fundamentalists...and Evangelicals.

Alex Stroshine says

A fundamental book for understanding American fundamentalism and, more broadly, American Christianity and its relationship to the broader culture. The original text covers mostly the period from 1870-1920s but the new expanded edition also offers insights into the evangelicalism and fundamentalism of the late 20th century.

Phillip says

An excellent discussion of the development of fundamentalism in the nineteenth century through the Scopes Trial of 1925. Not really intended as a popular history, it nevertheless is an approachable book, especially for anyone from one of the religious traditions that he traces, which include the battles and splits among the Presbyterians and Baptists, along with helpful discussions on Christian and Missionary Alliance, Missouri Synod Lutheranism, and the Evangelical Free church among many others.

The essay included at the end of the second edition on Fundamentalism as it developed after the Scopes Trial to become a major cultural and political force in the modern world is succinct and insightful. Written in 2005, it does a nice job of tracing the development of the "Moral Majority" in the 1980s while highlighting the important similarities and differences between the modern form of Fundamentalism and its 1920s antecedent.

The two-page discussion of the relationship between history and Christianity is too brief--I found it suggestive, but ultimately it raised many more questions than it answered. If you are interested in this topic, it is unlikely that you will leave satisfied with his discussion. Perhaps he addresses this in greater detail

elsewhere?

Over all, this is well worth your time if you have any interest in the topic.

James Ruley says

In this work, Marsden clearly and persuasively evaluates the development of fundamentalism at the turn of the 20th century. Marsden explains how fundamentalism and modernism battled over Christianity's response to cultural developments such as Darwinianism, the Social Gospel, and secularization. Marsden does a good job identifying the different strands of fundamentalism, while still presenting cohesive statements and arguments about the movement as a whole. His concluding remarks about fundamentalism throughout the rest of the century are also timely and helpful. An excellent resource.

BlackOxford says

It Must Be In the Water

In a previous review I put forward the suggestion that the evangelical movement in the United States is not comprehensible as a religious movement at all. (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) While maintaining the nominal title of 'Christian' the various sects which participate in this movement, from traditionalist Catholics to holiness Pentecostals, to Mormons have almost nothing in common theologically. Rather, the binding force among the participants is ethical and collective not doctrinal and personal; that is to say, it is political. The evangelical common cause is the execution of a political agenda which is headlined by their Big Four issues of abortion, gay sex and marriage, global warming, and evolution. Not all segments of the coalition adopt all four issues but endorsement of any one is sufficient for political alliance.

I further suggested that these issues were likely manifestations of more fundamental social sentiment, that the moral outrage expressed about each of the Big Four pointed not to social welfare as their aim but to their own political advantage. I put forward the hypothesis that the advantage they seek is the re-establishment of some sort of social equality. This equality is not simply a matter of legal standing or economics, but of a kind of general respectability which they feel has been denied them through a variety of social changes in the United States brought about by technology, immigration, global economics and what might be called a reduction in traditional reputational opportunities.

Marsden's classic history of *Fundamentalism and American Culture* is an important source for assessing whether my hypothesis has any validity. Marsden, like Jonathan Dudley of *Broken Words*, is an evangelical. He is also a widely respected historian. So, unlike mine, his motives are clean. Nonetheless, I think that even a sympathetic reading of *Fundamentalism and American Culture* confirms much of what I have suggested, namely that the evangelical movement from its origins was always primarily political rather than theological. It seeks to essentially reshape the legal structure of the country to eliminate what it considers Enlightenment errors. This is particularly clear from the 1870's onwards to the end of the century as the movement began to form its explicit political existence.

The Evangelicalism that Marsden documents has three distinctive characteristics which persist from the late 19th century through today: an anti-intellectualism which rejects the validity of scientific thought; a local communal attractiveness to those who are socially needy in the traditionally bleak socio-economic context of the United States; and a susceptibility to authoritarian leadership by what can only be called religious

hucksters. I will touch on each of these briefly.

Anti-Intellectualism

Marsden is very direct that “*a major element in the movement, well developed in nineteenth century revivalism, was the subordination of all other concerns—including concern for all but the simplest ideas—to soul-saving and practical Christianity.*” This aversion to rational thought and debate increased proportionately to the vulnerability of traditional biblical interpretations to the evidence generated by so-called higher criticism. That scriptural vulnerability was further increased by the difficulties presented by evolutionary theory. Even into the 21st century the resistance to otherwise uncontested facts of successive biblical redactions, alterations and historical interpretations carry no weight among evangelicals. Similarly, the findings of anthropological, archaeological and biological science are either ignored or explained as a sort of cosmic divine charade.

Fulfillment of Neurotic Social Need

Marsden is once again unsparing in his opinion: “*My conclusion, which finds expression in a variety of specific ways, is that fundamentalists experienced profound ambivalence toward the surrounding culture.*” I don’t think that it’s incorrect to imply from his remarks that this alienation a cause not a consequence for the growth of evangelicalism. The movement attracts a type. This may include those “*whose common identity is substantially grounded in the fundamentalist experience of an earlier era,*” as this more simple existence is eroded. But Marsden suggests a rather more complex psychology: “*These fundamentalist attitudes cannot be understood in terms of a consistent ideology. They make sense only in terms of the establishment-or-outsider paradox.*” On the one hand, the evangelical sentiment is one of being special, chosen, elected. But this is combined with feelings of inferiority among one’s fellow citizens. Thus there is a pattern with the movement despite its diversity: “*Every new evangelical movement of this entire era, through the rise of fundamentalism and including the holiness, pentecostal, and premillennial movements, had a base in some form of ‘social religious’ gathering.*”

Susceptibility to Authoritarian Leadership

“*For a substantial number of Americans, or American evangelicals, something in their outlook was conducive to the authoritarian and ideological character of dispensationalism as well as to the sentiment and activism more usually associated with American revivalism.*” Evangelicalism emerged from the long-standing revivalist tradition in America. The core of this tradition is the complete submission of the believer to the influence of the preacher within the context of a believing audience. In the late 19th this tradition evolved into an era of the celebrity preacher who didn’t just preach at irregular intervals. He organized and directed followers beyond a local congregation. He told these followers what to think and how to act through a network, first of publications, then of broadcast media, and most recently, of course, the internet. All rely on a charismatic personality cult with a particular skill in fund-raising rather than theology. This was a new ‘system’ of religion: “*This system encouraged personal empire-building which developed during Moody’s time... “It was a religion structured according to the free enterprise system.”**

Marsden all but admits that the these characteristics of the evangelical movement serve a primarily political purpose. “*Respectable ‘evangelicals’ in the 1870s, by the 1920s had become a laughingstock, ideological strangers in their own land.*” While this may be a shared feeling it is not yet political. But Marsden goes on: “*The fundamentalists’ most alarming experience was that of finding themselves living in a culture that by the 1920s was openly turning away from God.*” This is not personal; it is not even spiritual. It implies a straightforward political objective: not the salvation of souls but the re-formation of American society.

What is at stake for Evangelicals is a certain kind of politics, one that restores "*the Biblical foundations of American civilization*." The Dispensationalists among them, the dominant political force, say openly that their objective is to prepare for the 1000-year reign of Jesus by establishing a culture ready to receive him, including a theocratic government. I don't think it coincidental that this sounds remarkably like the last 1000-year Reich we are familiar with. A dangerous place this America.

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*The Chicago preacher Dwight Moody was arguably the first of these celebrity evangelists. Interestingly he too had his Big Four issues at the turn of the 20th century: "(1) the theater, (2) disregard of the Sabbath, (3) Sunday newspapers, and (4) atheistic teachings, including evolution." These were prosecuted with equal vigour to that employed on today's Big Four. Let us hope with equal effect.

Sarah Greene says

Marsden's overview of Christianity in American culture starting in the mid 1800s and spanning thru the 1920s is one of the best books I have read so far on the subject. If you want to understand not only some of the controversies surrounding fundamentalism but how in the world we got to where we are now, this is a great place to start. From Pietism, to Revivalism, to the Holiness movement, to fundamentalism and then the 20th century fall out, Marsden covers it all. He also includes a helpful understanding of the cultural shift from a majority post-millennial belief to the popularity of dispensational/pre-millennial beliefs, as well as the political underpinnings of those movements. I definitely recommend this book, especially editions with the 2005 essay "Fundamentalism Yesterday and Today" for more follow up info on Christian trends in the 20th century.

Sam Hoel says

Like many scholarly works, this book suffers from a bit of wordiness and a certain hesitancy to create a "big picture" narrative for fear of leaving something out. That can be frustrating if you aren't familiar with the subject (the fundamentalist clash with Christian liberalism from 1870-1925), but despite these shortcomings, this book has a lot to offer. It's a fascinating slice of American history that Marsden covers, and his deep and scholarly understanding of Protestant Christianity in America makes him the ideal interpreter. Importantly, Marsden often lets the sources talk for themselves. The voices of early 20th century leaders such as J. Gresham Machen ("The church is perishing today for the lack of thinking, not through an excess of it") or William Jennings Bryan ("if we will try to live up to that which we can understand, we will be kept so busy doing good that we will not have time to worry about the things we do not understand"), come through loud and clear, and as a result the book portrays the clash between liberalism and fundamentalism as it appeared to Christians at the time. The themes of the controversy were sweepingly dramatic: intellectualism versus anti-intellectualism, science versus religion, education versus ignorance, absolute truth versus social adjustment. It may come as a surprise to some that the battleground has shifted little in the past hundred years. For those on either side of the religious/secular divide, an understanding of the conflict's past cannot help but prove invaluable to an understanding of its future.

Jacob Aitken says

The thesis of this book parallels that of George Marsden's similar book on American culture, Religion and American Culture, that Fundamentalism shaped and was shaped by the surrounding culture. Marsden builds upon the work of earlier historians of Fundamentalism, namely that of Ernest Sandeen's book *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism*. Sandeen's thesis is that Fundamentalism is the outgrowth of the "millenarian" movement that developed in late nineteenth-century America, especially through Bible institutes and conferences concerning the interpretation of biblical prophecies. Sandeen's thesis, according to Marsden, has much to commend it in connecting millenarianism and Princeton theology to the movement; however, it does not deal adequately with the militant anti-modernistic slant of the movement. Fundamentalism can briefly be defined as militant anti-modernist Protestantism that took on its own identity as a patchwork coalition of representatives of other movements.

Overview of the Book

Marsden divides his book into three sections (these sections are different in intent than the above themes. Marsden uses these sections to expand on his themes), Evangelicalism before Fundamentalism, the Shaping of Fundamentalism as a Movement, and the Crucial Years in which it gained popularity and its subsequent exodus of public life. In understanding the rise of Fundamentalism at the end of the nineteenth-century one must understand the backdrop from which it arose-nineteenth-century evangelicalism.

Conclusion

Marsden concludes the book by re-emphasizing his definition of Fundamentalism as a militant anti-modernist conservative force. For Marsden this should be the starting point for defining the movement. Militant anti-modernism applies to all types of Fundamentalism and any definition that goes beyond this must have qualifiers so that false stereotypes are not applied to the wrong group. As an Evangelical I enjoyed this book as I saw where the mind-set of conservatives and liberals developed. I also learned to what extent my own beliefs were influenced by this movement. I suggest that this book be read alongside another book on the shaping of American Christianity for a full understanding. I would also like to see an analysis of Fundamentalism from a more mainline perspective, although I believe Marsden is objective in this work. My main qualm with this book is in Part Three. In discussing the peak and soon-to-come fall of Fundamentalism, Marsden tried to put too many ideas into too few words. To keep up with him I had to re-analyze several chapters. However, due to the length of the book already, I can understand his attempt to save space. I would recommend this book to people of all political and religious persuasions so that they may have a fair understanding of this branch of early twentieth-century American religion.

Michael says

Gives a good background to understand today's militant fundamentalist's. Special attention is given to social, political, intellectual and American Protestant movements. The so called war and has been going on for a long time to root out liberals from Protestant seminaries, churches and colleges. These folks are anti science, anti evolution and intolerant of any scriptural belief outside what they say you must believe to be a Christian. It's pretty black and white in their thinking. They really don't like Roman Catholics, Mormons and other religions. The book doesn't touch on it for today but you can add immigrants and homosexuals of things to be hated today. Liberals remain in their hatred and a liberal is anyone who doesn't believe like them, especially in regards to alcohol, sex, Sunday observance, church attendance, gambling, tobacco, etc.

Alan says

A fair look at the "history" of Fundamentalism in America. Tried to place in the cultural movements the rationales and sometimes failures of the Overall movement, it does give consideration for the whys as the whens.

I have seen reviewers question where is the culture part of the story. This book is steeped in culture as the players confront it.

Ample footnotes direct the reader to primary works for those who want to delve deeper into a larger study of the movements of evangelicalism and fundamentalism.

From a personal point of view, this book brought attention to my own religious heritage in evangelical fundamentalist primitive restorationist Christianity in a more expansive way. In a perspective to recent history, during Billy Graham's crusade heyday we would have been considered as exclusivists by not cooperating in those ministries even to the point of considering him apostate.

All in all, if I was teaching modern Church History I would consider this book as possible additional reading.

Jeremy Canipe says

In this important study, historian George Marsden provided a nuanced and complex explanation for the roots and rise of fundamentalism as a part of the spectrum of American evangelical Christianity in the years after World War I.

Marsden began by tracing the broad outlines of American Christianity in the 19th century. He considered both northern and southern white Protestant Christianity, ranging from Methodism, to Baptists, to Presbyterians, to German-rooted American Christian denominations. He also put these various traditions in their contexts alongside broader cultural and intellectual traditions. Most interesting perhaps to this reader was the identification of a view of science as being properly understood in line with the empirical and categorizing methods of Francis Bacon versus the theoretical ideas of Charles Darwin.

Marsden argued that fundamentalism was a sub-part of American evangelical Christianity which emerged in the urban north, not the rural south. The rub came from the impact of so-called "higher criticism" on orthodox views of the Bible in northern seminaries and the similar impact from the acceptance in some quarters of evolution. Still, those who rejected these new ideas still did not reject the idea of seeking to reform society. In this regard, I was interested in his suggestion that persons who held to a pre-millennial view of the end times were more likely to think that the character of American and human society was more perfectible, whereas he argued that the idea a pre-millennium rapture tended to produce a more negative view of human society, and thus a reluctance of focus on social conditions in addition to the crucial focus on evangelism and missions.

According to Marsden, the critical years occurred during and shortly after World War One. Those evangelicals who came to link German militarism with German's higher criticism of the Bible and more wide-spread acceptance of evolution, and who saw the impacts of these trends (which were only then hitting America's cultural shores) tended to become fundamentalists. In this time, this movement was more influential in rural America and in the American south.

A very thought-provoking book and well worth your time to read.

Jacob Aitken says

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American Culture, that Fundamentalism shaped and was shaped by the surrounding culture. Marsden builds upon the work of earlier historians of Fundamentalism, namely that of Ernest Sandeen's book *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism*. Sandeen's thesis is that Fundamentalism is the outgrowth of the "millenarian" movement that developed in late nineteenth-century American, especially through Bible institutes and conferences concerning the interpretation of biblical prophecies. Sandeen's thesis, according to Marsden, has much to commend it in connecting millenarianism and Princeton theology to the movement; however, it does not deal adequately with the militant anti-modernistic slant of the movement. Fundamentalism can briefly be defined as militant anti-modernist Protestantism that took on its own identity as a patchwork coalition of representatives of other movements.

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Scott says

Fantastic.

Steven Williams says

The book provides an historical look at fundamentalism starting from its roots in nineteenth century religious claims: premillennialism, the holiness tradition, evangelicalism (personal relationship with Jesus), and biblical inerrancy. Then it goes on to the forming of The Fundamentals and the attempt of the fundamentalist to take over the mainline churches, and their failure in that endeavor. Finally it provides a look at it's more recent development.

Marsden's approach is strictly from an historical viewpoint. He provides no actual examination of the truth of

the fundamentalist's claims. This has its benefits. One is that it provides a uncluttered presentation of fundamentalism's sources and development. Personally, I might have preferred a critical approach of fundamentalism's beliefs, but found that preference did not detract from the books usefulness in understanding the what and how of this most American religious belief system, even though some of the ideas were circling in England at the time, or previously.

I found the book to be of value in my understanding of fundamentalism. So, I recommend it for anybody wanting to understand this important movement of American religious culture.

An aside to this book is my belief that when people refer to religious fundamentalism and it's violence in religious terrorism, they really mean radicalism. For I also believe that most fundamentalist are not violent people, although they do pose real and damaging effects on society. This radicalism is seen in all religions. This includes christians (abortion clinic bombings) and buddhists (who are often claimed to be a peaceful bunch).
