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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Fundamentalism and American Culture* by George M. Marsden

Review by: J. William Frost

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Fundamentalism and American Culture. By GEORGE M. MARSDEN. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. xiv, 306 p. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$19.95.)

The stereotype of American Fundamentalism is of a movement largely Southern in origin, rural based, politically conservative, anti-intellectual, nativist, and atheological. Marsden argues that, before World War I, all of these images are false. He attempts to show how a congeries of beliefs held by the mainstream of evangelical Protestants in the 1870s evolved into the Fundamentalist movement. In this change individuals and institutions from the Delaware Valley took major roles: Robert Pearsall and Hannah Whitall Smith in the holiness movement, Russell Conwell and the Baptist Temple, Philadelphia Presbytery, Princeton Seminary, and, eventually, Westminster Seminary and J. Gresham Machen. What in 1870 had been respectable and influential attitudes in 1920 were not; when the rest of the culture evolved, the Fundamentalists stood still.

American Protestantism created and was then shaped by revivals. The revivalists emphasized individual piety and often, as in abolition and temperance, advocated political reform. Fundamentalists continued the stress upon personal piety and a Christian social order. A second influence upon conservative evangelicals was the combination of Baconian scientific thought and Scottish Common Sense philosophy, taught at Princeton, which stressed the facticity of normal experience and the necessity of induction as a method of determining truth. Science was composed of empirical facts, not theory; Newtonian physics (which left a place for divine intervention) was science, but Darwinism was an hypothesis without clear factual support. The belief in the reasonableness of creation, a mutuality of support between biblical and all other knowledge, was combined with a frank supernaturalism. Theology was a science resting upon an inerrant Bible, true in every detail because dictated by God. The Princeton theologians had discovered true Christianity, and any deviation was not only evil but unscientific. An evangelical conservative either could subscribe to pre- or post-millennialism (whether Christ was to return before or after a perfect society was created) and could be optimistic about the possibilities for social reform, or could be pessimistic about ever creating an ideal society. In summary, Marsden shows that theological conservatives before 1900 were very much like other Americans.

Fundamentalism, which came to fruition in the early twentieth century, was an intellectual and social movement designed to recapture and preserve an earlier moral Protestant civilization from new forces. Pluralism, Catholicism, secularism, historical criticism of the Bible, modernism in theology, divorce, alcohol, Christian Science, and immigrants were vaguely threatening and should be resisted. The conferences attended, tracts written, and sermons preached which defined the fundamentalist program came from Northern urbanites and were neither shrill nor pessimistic.

World War I changed everything. Like other Americans, Fundamentalists learned to hate in the war, but, unlike most, continued the hysteria into the twenties. Increasingly isolated from urban America, Fundamentalists engaged in a crusade which was simplified into a battle over the teaching of evolution in schools. Unable to

gain control of major Protestant denominations like Baptists and Presbyterians, the movement found a home in the South and rural America. After 1925, the Scopes trial, *Elmer Gantry*, and a host of excesses made the Fundamentalists look ridiculous. Virtually disappearing in the 1930s, a modified form of evangelical Fundamentalism appeared after World War II with Billy Graham as spokesman.

Marsden is successful in integrating his own research with the work of previous scholars into an informative and provocative account of one brand of Protestantism. The book is less successful in the last chapters in analyzing the political and social implications of the phenomena. I remain uncertain whether evangelism should be characterized as an intellectual and variegated movement because the sources cited (perhaps the only ones available) are from theologians, the clergy, and the religious press. The book never discusses lay components of the movement. Marsden provides no sense of what demands and consolation the laity found in the church services. Without the laity, one does not know whether the distinction between pre-and post-war Fundamentalism is accurate. Virtually all sociological surveys of religion in America from 1920 on, in the North as well as South, stress the ignorance of church members. Were only the Fundamentalists theologically literate? The contributions of the South are also slighted. Marsden credits the war and Scopes trial with bringing decisive changes in Fundamentalism, but his proof is terribly unsystematic. The credibility of the book finally rests on whether the events highlighted are really representative.

Religious history is particularly difficult to write because there is no agreed on methodology to assess the relationship of belief systems to daily life. Marsden's book is worth pondering because he makes a damaging case against conventional wisdom. And yet, the book is attempting to prove, to use a biblical metaphor, that the leopard not only can but did change its spots.

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J. WILLIAM FROST

A Pennsylvania Album: Picture Postcards, 1900-1930. By GEORGE MILLER.
(University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, Keystone Books,
1979. 160 p. Illustrations. cloth \$18.75, paper \$10.95.)

Two Russians peasants, it is told, had their fill of village life. Tempted by the prospect of looting their share of the world's riches, and travelling in the bargain, they joined the Czar's army. Years later they returned. And into the midst of resigned wives and near-starving children they hauled cases bulging with their prize. It was a magnificent collection of picture postcards.

The ideological descendants of these Russians, postcard collectors, have also amassed quantities with small change. And some of these collections are now worth small fortunes. George Miller's heavily illustrated book assembled from his and other private collections of photographic postcards helps promote this ephemera as more serious documentation. Miller's knowledge of Pennsylvania during this century's first three decades as represented in such postcards is extensive. He divided the material into chapters as one might organize a collection, with headings such as