

David W Fletcher, April 2005

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GEORGE M. MARSDEN'S *FUNDAMENTALISM AND AMERICAN CULTURE:
THE SHAPING OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY EVANGELICALISM 1870-1925*¹

In *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century*

Evangelicalism 1870-1925, George Marsden, Professor of History of Christianity in America at Duke Divinity School, argues that the evangelical reaction to modernism in religious circles and the nation's intellectual culture should be viewed primarily as a religious phenomenon. He begins with the central premise of "genuine religious faith" to define fundamentalism as "a distinct version of evangelical Christianity uniquely shaped by the circumstances of America in the early twentieth century" (3). This, however, does not negate the fact that fundamentalism, in its evolution, underwent important cultural and social transformations that produced a peculiar type of evangelical Christianity in the American religious experience.

Marsden draws his composite sketch of the fundamentalist movement from writings, lectures, speeches, and sermons of well-known leaders such as revivalist Dwight L. Moody, scholar J. Gresham Machen, and politician William Jennings Bryan. Marsden balances his portrait nicely, since he includes popular millenarian exegetes like John Nelson Darby, William E. Blackstone, and Cyrus I. Scofield as well as early twentieth-century critics of modernist culture, or "millenarian organizers" as he calls them, William Bell Riley, Frank Norris, and John Roach Straton (5). Marsden also discusses the defining literature of the movement, *The*

¹New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980; 307 pages with preface, introduction, sixteen illustrations, afterword, notes, bibliographical indexes, and index.

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Fundamentals, sponsored by Lyman Stewart, an oil magnate from southern California, and first edited by A. C. Dixon, pastor of Moody Church in Chicago (118-123). Marsden examines this effusive data in light of classic studies such as Ernest R. Sandeen's *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (1970) and C. Allyn Russell's *Voices of American Fundamentalism* (1976). From his research, Marsden concludes that fundamentalists, like many "discontented intellectuals" in the early 1920s, believed that modernism and the theory of evolution had created a "spiritual and cultural crisis" and had sabotaged "the Biblical foundations of American civilization" (3).

Marsden traces this development through three historic phases: before fundamentalism (part one), the shaping of a coalition (part two), and the crucial years of 1917 to 1925 (part three). In his view, the era of Reconstruction witnessed a major split in evangelical Protestantism. The old order, which hinged on the correlation of "faith, science, the Bible, morality, and civilization" (17), succumbed to the influences of skepticism, rationalism, and, above all else, Darwinism. According to Marsden, the new science and its modern intellectual assumptions rendered invalid the Scottish Common Sense philosophy that drew heavily from Francis Bacon's empiricism and dominated thinking in nineteenth-century America. In this milieu, Marsden shows how Henry Ward Beecher charted the path toward theological liberalism, while Jonathan Blanchard set the course toward an antithetical fundamentalism. More significant for fundamentalism, however, was the work of D. L. Moody, who "built the new revivalist empire that was the base from which much of fundamentalism grew" (6).

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In his second phase (to World War I chronologically), Marsden looks at four definitive persuasions that united evangelicals as fundamentalists: (1) dispensational premillennial eschatology; (2) social reform through holiness or personal sanctification; (3) Bible-based apologetics; and (4) the priority and ultimate triumph of Christianity over secular culture. He recognizes that fundamentalism was “a mosaic of divergent and sometimes contradictory traditions and tendencies that could never be totally integrated . . . [a] pervasive ambivalence.” But the movement tended to subordinate “all other concerns” to a pragmatic Christianity that found its fulfillment in saving souls or evangelism (43). By 1917, Marsden sees two factors at work that solidified the fundamentalist coalition and brought about its “remarkable shift from moderation to militancy”—first, attacks on biblical Christianity and its supernatural *Weltanschauung* from Liberal churchmen and theologians; and, second, America’s involvement in World War I and the ensuing atrophy of social mores and values.

Marsden rightly judges the Great War as the historic divide. He notes, “Before World War I, the emerging fundamentalist coalition was largely quiescent. Few could have predicted the explosion that followed.” In his estimate:

The war intensified hopes and fears, and totally upset existing balances in American culture. It brought out an aggressive and idealistic theological modernism. It also revealed that the reaction against evangelicalism, which had been proceeding quietly for half a century, was far more general than had been thought. Moreover, the war raised the question of the survival of civilization and morality (6).

In the postwar atmosphere of panic and fear, fundamentalism found its niche. Fights broke out over basic Christian doctrines in major denominations and over the teaching of evolution in the

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nation's schools. The battles raged until the summer of 1925 and the infamous Scopes or "Monkey" trial in Dayton, Tennessee. Soon thereafter, fundamentalism, caricatured as backward and unenlightened by modernists like Henry L. Mencken, a Baltimore literary critic and journalist, experienced dislocation, relocation, and resurgence (Epilogue, 184-195). As a result, it "lost its position as a nationally influential coalition" (6).

Marsden plainly tells the captivating story of fundamentalism's rise and subsequent fall, and he leaves open the question of its late twentieth-century resurgence or the appearance of a "new post-fundamentalist coalition" (195). Throughout, his stress on fundamentalism as a comprehensive, even though religious, cultural phenomenon keeps a clear focus on three themes. First, fundamentalism's role as a "beleaguered minority with strong sectarian or separatist tendencies" as well as its status within circles of Protestant evangelicalism caused it to exhibit a paradoxical proclivity to identify at times with the "establishment" and at other times with "outsiders." In this sense, the movement fit sociological explanations of its origins. Second, in teachings about holiness and a bent "toward individualistic, culture-denying, soul-rescuing Christianity," fundamentalism certainly bore striking resemblance to its spiritual forebears, namely, revivalism and pietism. But the movement's ambivalence about the role of experience in religious life and Marsden's inclusion of Reformed notables in the fundamentalist family could be interpreted as continuation of the nineteenth-century debate between pietist and Calvinist traditions. Third, in its philosophical underpinnings, fundamentalism was guided strongly by the tenets of "careful observation and classification of facts" (à la Francis Bacon's

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empiricism) and Common Sense Realism. Fundamentalists, often thought to be anti-scientific and anti-intellectual, simply refused to accept the naturalistic postulates of modern science and its incredulous philosophy. As Marsden observes, they “stood in an intellectual tradition that had the highest regard for one understanding of true scientific method and proper rationality.” But in the early decades of the twentieth-century, because of Bible-based culture’s sharp divergence from a society that struggled to find its ideological moorings in a world enwrapped in modernist mentality, by the mid-1900s “the philosophical outlook that had graced America’s finest academic institutions came to be generally regarded as merely bizarre” (6-8).

In a closing section, Marsden overviews how fundamentalism has been interpreted variously as a social, a political, an intellectual, and an American phenomenon. He also offers an “Afterword” that briefly touches on the contribution of fundamentalism to the philosophy of history. One might quibble with Marsden about his omission of substantial evidence for the fundamentalist matrix, notably women and the common people. For a thoroughgoing cultural study, it could be argued that he needs to do more than just open the window on leading male figures and their intellectual contributions. But, considerably, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* leaves its mark as the standard work on the movement’s origin and its indelible stamp on American culture.