

# Journeys in Evangelical America

Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987. 247 pp .

James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987. 302 pp.

Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory; A Journey Into the Evangelical Subculture in America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. 246 pp.

Michael D'Antonio, *Fall From Grace: The Failed Crusade of the Christian Right*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989. 242 pp.

The resurgence of protestant Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism, and a new taste for political involvement among these conservative Christians, became a highly visible feature of the Reagan era.<sup>1</sup> Strongly encouraged by the new president's militant rhetoric, Fundamentalists entered the political battlefield demanding the return of prayer in public schools, a national ban on the right to abortion, a rejection of the teaching of evolution in public schools (or at least that biblical "creationism" be taught as well), as well as government protection of "the Christian family" against the feminist movement, gay rights activists, and other alleged threats. The notion that such issues were moral rather than political in nature, was skilfully used by conservative organizers to help Fundamentalists overcome their traditional resistance to involvement in "worldly affairs" and jump on the New Right bandwagon.

This sudden resurgence clearly caught most sociologists and political scientists off guard. A major reason was probably that it ran counter to the notion of secularization, which was so predominant in sociological thinking about religion. As sociologist Nancy T. Ammerman puts it, the idea that "the institutional differentiation of the modern world had created not only the separation of church and state but also the separation of church from everything else of consequence," simply made Fundamentalism appear as an anachronism.<sup>2</sup> The previous invisibility of evangelicals and

1 Fundamentalists and Evangelicals basically share the same body of religious beliefs, but represent differing degrees of orthodoxy. What most of all sets them apart is the question of separatism—the extent to which they are willing to acknowledge and cooperate with more liberal elements within their denominations. Due to their strict separatism, most Fundamentalist churches have broken away from these denominations and have become independent. Evangelical churches have traditionally belonged to the National Association of Evangelicals, while Fundamentalists have been organized in the American Council of Christian Churches. For an account of the religious doctrines of Fundamentalism, see George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991).

2 Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, p. 2.

Fundamentalists in public affairs had probably been further reinforced by the importance that these people themselves put on "separation from the world," and it helped promote the notion that they entered the political scene from out of nowhere.

Once they did, however, it triggered strong reactions, which was evidenced by a large number of alarmist books about the immense power of the Christian Right, its alleged threat to the American Way, and the possibility of an imminent breakdown of the separation between church and state. Titles such as *Holy Terror*, and *God's Bullies* were suggestive of this second wave of books on American Fundamentalism (the first wave being the mostly scholarly works on the rise and fall of the Fundamentalist movement in the first three decades of this century).<sup>3</sup>

By the late 1980s, however, it had become fairly clear that the political power of the movement had been vastly overrated. The poor support for Pat Robertson's presidential campaign in 1988, and the bankruptcy of the Moral Majority, which many had seen as the flagship of the movement, were among the clearest indicators of this. The decline of the New Christian Right as an allegedly important political factor was further helped along by a number of sexual scandals and charges of fraud which brought popular "televangelists" such as Oral Roberts, Jim and Tammy Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart in public disgrace. The growing interest for this intriguing subculture, which has been estimated to include between 13 and 60 million Americans, however, has not been stalled by its political demise, but the alarmist books have largely given way for a third wave of studies. Generally these books appear to be more intent on understanding the phenomenon on its own terms.<sup>4</sup> One such book is Nancy T. Ammerman's *Bible Believers*. The author, who is professor of sociology at Emory University, has attempted to go beyond official religious doctrine and study how everyday life is actually being lived among members of a small Fundamentalist congregation. For this purpose she was granted permission to participate in the social and religious life of a church in New England for a year. Her ability to overcome the traditional Fundamentalist distrust of humanist scholars in general (and sociologists in particular), was largely due to her own evangelical upbringing.

3 Flo Conway & Jerry Siegelman, *Holy Terror: The Fundamentalist War on America's Freedoms in Religion, Politics and Our Private Lives* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982); Perry Deane Young, *God's Bullies; Native Reflections on Preachers and Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982). The best account of the history of the Fundamentalist movement in America is probably George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

4 A few good studies of the Fundamentalist subculture were actually published in the early 1980s, most notably Frances FitzGerald's outstanding portrait of the Moral Majority, "Reporter at Large; a Disciplined Charging Army," *The New Yorker* (May 18, 1981), p. 52-54+; and Carol Flake's likewise excellent *Redemptorama; Culture Politics and the New Evangelicalism* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984), which includes a very interesting chapter on the attempt to create an evangelicalist alternative to the feminist movement. See also James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism; Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

Considering the crucial role that social status was usually given in older sociological studies of religious (as well as political) movements, Ammerman's study is particularly interesting. Her congregation is located in a suburban New England community, and its members are mostly middle-class. There are no significant differences in occupation, level of education, ethnic background, average age, etc. between them and the surrounding community. According to the author, this is not an exception. Her reading of demographic data from other studies lead her to argue that it is likely that "all Fundamentalists are demographically typical of their home cultures."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Ammerman's study clearly subscribes to the now predominant view that religious fundamentalism cannot be explained as a result of "status anxiety" or "powerlessness."<sup>6</sup>

A crucial question in evaluation of the study is of course whether the views found in the suburban New England congregation which the author has chosen is "typical" of American Fundamentalism. Wouldn't it have been more obvious, some might ask, to pick a rural community in the "Bible Belt" — the area in America which is traditionally associated with conservative Protestantism? Not according to Ammerman, who makes the important point that since Fundamentalism (partly in contrast to Evangelicalism) to a large extent is defined and invigorated by its opposition to the secular lifestyle of the surrounding society, it is also found its most vital form "on the growing edges of modernity," rather than in some remote rural area where religious orthodoxy is still widespread. As the author puts it, "only where traditional orthodoxy must defend itself against modernity does Fundamentalism truly emerge."<sup>7</sup>

By illuminating the dilemmas that Fundamentalists face when they confront the outside world, Ammerman's study also provides better understanding of their ambiguous feelings about political involvement. Once they enter the arena, a corrosion of their principles of faith invariably sets in. In the pursuit of their political goals they find that whether they like it or not they have become engaged in the sort of competition in the marketplace of ideas, which understandably is anathema to a faith built on the principle of biblical inerrancy. They also realize the necessity of compromising on the principles of separatism, in order to form coalitions with other conservative forces in society.<sup>8</sup> One ironic result, as Ammerman points out, has been that they most often have ended up in the dubious role as providers of biblical authority to the principles of laissez-faire capitalism, which probably more than any other factor have contributed to the development of modernity that Fundamentalism is a response

5 This of course implies that data concerning communities with large numbers of Fundamentalist migrants from the South might get distorted, since these migrants might differ in level of education from their new community, but still be typical of their home region. Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, p. 31.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 190-203.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

8 Fundamentalists, who earlier refused even to cooperate with more liberal elements within their own denominations, have in recent years occasionally joined forces with Catholics in their fight against abortion, with Mormons in their fight against the Equal Rights Amendment, and even with feminists in the fight against pornography.

to.<sup>9</sup> On the whole, Nancy Ammerman's gracefully written study is a most valuable contribution to the study of Fundamentalism in America.

Another highly recommendable book is James Davison Hunter's *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. The author, who is professor of sociology at University of Virginia, has previously published a study of the ambiguous relationship between Evangelicalism and modernity in America. In *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* he attempts to take a peek in the crystal ball and see where the movement is likely to head when the next generation takes over. The study is based on surveys made at nine Christian liberal arts colleges and seven Evangelical seminaries, and the views of students in these institutions are also being compared to those of a group of non-Evangelical students.<sup>10</sup>

The general trend in the study is that the Evangelical students tend to be more liberal and tolerant in most matters than the older generation. They are generally more willing to compromise on the principle of biblical inerrancy, (albeit not when it comes to events that are considered crucial to their faith). Almost half of them seem to be adopting to the idea of evolution by directing their attention to questions such as "how God works in evolution." Their moral standards are also changing. As one example, dancing is no longer considered "intrinsically wrong."<sup>11</sup>

In political matters the Evangelical students are as a whole more conservative than the non-Evangelical students, but nevertheless more liberal than the American population in general. If most of them stand firm on such issues as abortion and women's rights, they are on the other hand showing greater concern for matters of social justice. A majority of them also disapproves of organizations such as the Moral Majority, which they feel has overstepped the limits of political decorum by attempting to impose their values on an unwilling majority of the population.<sup>12</sup>

In general the crusading ambitions of the students clearly seem to be fading, and in full accordance with the spirit of the "me-generation," they are being replaced by a quest for "self-fulfilment." Only a minority of the Evangelical students have dreams about "christianizing" America. When it comes to views on the family and paternalistic authority, however, little seems to have changed. As Hunter notes, the private sphere appears to be the last battleground for conservative Protestantism, and the family has become the dominant symbol of moral virtue.

Hunter's basic idea that the future direction of American Evangelicalism can be assessed by looking at the generation which is now being educated in Evangelical institutions raises some crucial questions. One is whether the attitudes of these students are reliable indicators of a more permanent change in the cultural milieu of Evangelicalism, or whether they can simply be ascribed to youth, and be expected to harden as the students grow older. In the author's view "the knowledge one acquires and the changes which occur in one's value orientation during this formative period in higher education are, in large part, retained."<sup>13</sup> Hunter does not do

9 Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, p. 208.

10 Students from the Religious Studies department at UC, Santa Barbara.

11 *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, pp. 29 ff.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

much to substantiate this claim, however, considering how crucial it is to the basic idea of his study.

Another crucial question is whether students who have embarked on the road to higher education are representative of Evangelical youth in general. Considering the traditional role of intellectuals as questioners of authority, the erosion of orthodoxy is likely to be more evident at such institutions than among Evangelicals in general. As Hunter himself points out, the very idea of gaining intellectual credibility for Evangelicalism by attempting to provide rational answers for biblical "problems," seems to have become a major concern at the institutions that these students attend, and this may prove in the long run to be the most serious threat to Evangelical orthodoxy.

Perhaps the best book so far on the contemporary Evangelical subculture in America is Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. Although Balmer is a scholar of religious history at Columbia University, his book is not a strictly scholarly work, but a highly personal journey through the Evangelical subculture in America. It is Balmer's attempt "to show variations within a subculture generally regarded monolithic."<sup>14</sup> In other words, to break up the predominant stereotype image of American Evangelicalism, which has been reenforced by the rise (and in some cases fall) of televangelists and would-be politicians such as Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Oral Roberts, and Pat Robertson.

However, the book is also the author's explicit attempt to exorcise some personal demons and come to grips with his own evangelical background, and his ambivalent relationship with Evangelicalism makes him a perceptive observer. He is at the same time an outsider and an insider to the subculture. He maintains an outsider's curiosity about the more bizarre aspects of it, yet he also has an insiders knowledge which enables him to go beyond a scholarly treatment of the social and historical context of the various evangelical directions and give the reader a sense of the atmosphere, the rituals, and the semantics of the various strains of Evangelicalism. Although the doctrinal differences between the Fundamentalist, the Pentecostal, and the Charismatic believers within the subculture often seem marginal to the outside viewer, they are often decisive for the Evangelical's attitude to politics and other "worldly" matters.

Balmer's book does not just describe the doctrinal differences within the evangelical subculture, but also its regional and ethnic diversity. His journey brings him, among other events, to a laid-back sermon among disciples of the Jesus-movement in Southern California; to a Fundamentalist summer camp in New England where teenagers struggle hard to live up to their parent's expectations and get a "born-again" experience; and to the Dallas Theological Seminary, a fortress of Fundamentalist orthodoxy, where the students study evangelical eschatology, and join in prayer in order to locate a volleyball for the upcoming youth gathering. Along the way he finds a number of religious communities that strongly defy the common perception of American Evangelicalism, such as a native American community of Episcopalians, who are struggling to reconcile Evangelicalism with traditional Indian religion. However, Balmer's book is much more than a collection of peculiar episodes. It successfully conveys a sense of the continuing appeal of Evangelicalism in modern America.

14 Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, p.7.

Balmer's dedication of the book to his son is intriguing: "For Christian who in time, I trust, will find his place in the patchwork quilt of American evangelism." It remains in the open whether the author's own odyssey has ended. If Balmer's book is an insider-view of Evangelicalism, then journalist Michael D'Antonio's *Fall From Grace* is clearly an outsider-view. As the author readily admits, the book was originally intended as a warning about the threat from the Christian Right, but he had to change horses in the middle of the stream, when the political aspirations of the movement virtually collapsed while he was writing. D'Antonio's book is on the whole simplistic and full of sweeping generalizations, and his knowledge of the history of Fundamentalism in the United States is inadequate, to say the least. When he briefly mentions the Scopes-trial — probably the most crucial event in the history of Fundamentalism — it becomes evident that he has misunderstood the outcome of the trial, and assumes that the Fundamentalists lost the actual legal case, which they did not.

Unfortunately the author is not a perceptive observer of contemporary Fundamentalism either. It is obviously very hard for him to relate to the religious passion that he finds in the people he interviews. While recent scholarship on protestant Fundamentalism largely has agreed on the religious nature of the phenomenon, D'Antonio's book is a return to earlier socioeconomic interpretations of Fundamentalism, where it is largely viewed as a result of social displacement, rural backwardness, or just plain ignorance.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the author, who admittedly set out to write yet another book about the growing power and influence of the Christian Right in America, instead has ended up declaring the death of it as a serious political factor. However, since the author is to recognize the cultural and religious basis of Fundamentalism, he is also unable to convincingly explain its political demise. D'Antonio's obituary mostly sounds like a faint echo of those given the last time Fundamentalism vanished from the public scene, in the late 1920s. Once again the rumors of its death as a political factor may turn out to be highly exaggerated.

Niels Bjerre-Poulsen

Copenhagen Business School