

Review: Apostles of Reason

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 11, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

Molly Worthen, an Assistant Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has written a truly important book. *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* is the kind of highly ambitious intellectual history that requires thorough familiarity with the sources, a keen eye for discerning intellectual undercurrents, a gift for telling a complicated, many faceted story, and, perhaps most importantly, an editorial aptitude for weaving it all together.

I say "most importantly" because Worthen has chosen not only a large topic but one that is usually the subject of various forms of intellectual reductionism or other forms of manipulation. The word "reason" yields many diverse meanings and can be employed in different ways to skew an argument. The adjective "American" is useful in delineating a geographic focus but not by much given the discrete subcultures that exist between North and South, and between LA and the Midwest, and between rural and urban anywhere in this great land. And, as anyone with even a vague familiarity with 20th century American religion knows, defining the noun "evangelicalism" has itself been a source of great controversy. Worthen lets none of this impede her work and the result is simply masterful.

Intellectual history can often be dry as burnt toast. It requires sharp writing as well as diligent thinking. Here is an example of Worthen at her best, drawn from a passage near the end of the book:

Fundamentalism is a paradox. Its partisans of any faith call for the return to an imagined arcadia in which God's voice boomed plainly from scripture. Yet as a historical phenomenon, fundamentalism is wholly modern. It is a set of reactions against the aftershocks of the Enlightenment and the evolution of global capitalism: the breach between faith and reason, the rise of the secular public square, and the collapse of traditional social hierarchies and ways of life. Creatures of modernity, fundamentalists have happily availed themselves of modern technology. Fundamentalists ranging from separatist Baptist preachers to Al Qaeda propagandists have demonstrated a genius for employing the latest media and political (or military) weaponry to spread their message and accomplish their aims. To fundamentalists, history, too, is a technology: a trove of data to be strategically deployed.

That is a very finely crafted paragraph and I could have cited, literally (pardon the adverb), dozens of other such examples from this book.

Worthen considers the many different ways that the issue of authority has dominated the intellectual landscape of modern American evangelicalism, but one issue is the most consistently prominent, the issue of Biblical inerrancy. "Inerrancy was not an esoteric doctrine. It was the essential claim that would, in one form or another, dog and divide American evangelicals for the rest of the twentieth century and beyond," she writes early in the text. The fundamentalist creed was born in opposition to the emergence of liberal theology in the late nineteenth century and, throughout the twentieth century, fundamentalism found itself at odds with other forms of conservative theology as well. She notes that in the pulpit wars and schisms of the two decades before World War II, a group of young scholars, most with roots in the Reformed tradition, reached the conclusion that "belief in the inerrant truth of the Bible was more than a doctrine. It was the clarifying lens necessary to perceive

reality, a biblical "world and life view." It was all well and good to mount a revival, but what the Church needed was an intellectual revival. In fact, in one of her most keen insights, she notes that what had been a variety of biblical interpretation, posited to be of ancient origin, was in fact that most modern of inventions, a *weltanschauung*.

It should not surprise that this worldview, fundamentalism, that most contemporary Americans associate with Southern Baptists, grew out of the Reformed tradition with its long tradition of ease with rationalistic argumentation. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary were in the vanguard. They were, in fact, deeply imbued with Common Sense Realism, an off-shoot of the Scottish Enlightenment even while they thought they were resurrecting the thinking patterns of the early Church. And, the Princeton theologians were serious scholars who allowed some variance in their understanding of the types of inerrancy found in the Bible. One suspects that some of them could have lived, as Worthen notes, with the Second Vatican Council's statement in *Dei Verbum* that scripture teaches "solidly, faithfully, and without error the truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation."

But, by the 1920s and 1930s, modernism seemed on the march and the defense of inerrancy ceased to be a method of Biblical interpretation. "Later fundamentalists, however, became polemicists rather than apologists," Worthen observes. "The difference is subtle but crucial. Winning the war against modernism became more important than illuminating orthodoxy." As fear of modernist theology and new science began to infect a wide range of Protestant churches, this new variety of fundamentalist deployed inerrancy as a simple shibboleth to separate the sheep from the goats. It was no longer a doctrine with historical roots or an ongoing debate among theologians. Inerrancy was common sense. It was difficult for this Roman Catholic to read that passage and not bring to mind a certain variety of episcopal leadership in our own time.

The disposition to yoke authority and inerrancy began to take institutional form. In 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals was founded. In 1947, Fuller Theological Seminary was started. And, in 1955, *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of the neo-evangelicals, funded largely by oil magnate J. Howard Pew, was launched.

Indeed, Worthen opens her book with the kind of vignette about *Christianity Today* that dots the text and leavens it. At a luncheon in 1962, the editor of *Christianity Today*, Carl Henry, encountered the great theologian Karl Barth. Henry introduced himself, including a mention of his editorial position at *Christianity Today*, and then posed this question: "The question, Dr. Barth, concerns the historical factuality of the resurrection of Jesus." Henry noted the reporters at the lunch and inquired if they would have reported the resurrection as news had they been reporters in first century Judea. "Was it news in the sense that the man in the street understands news?" Henry asked. Barth replied, "Did you say *Christianity Today* or *Christianity Yesterday*?" The room was convulsed in laughter. Of course, Barth was no liberal. The exchange highlights the degree to which anti-modern, Protestant Christian theologians diverged on essentials. The interchange at the luncheon was playful but much of the battle within the conservative theological community, to say nothing of their shared battle with liberal theologians, was far from pleasant.

Tomorrow, pushback, papists, professionalization and pulpits.