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Review: Apostles of Reason, Part II

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Distinctly Catholic

Today, I continue my review of Molly Worthen's important book *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, focusing on the emergence of neo-evangelicals who started seminaries like Fuller Theological Seminary, formed the National Evangelical Association, and took to the pages of *Christianity Today* to articulate their concerns, most especially a concern to rehabilitate the idea of biblical inerrancy.

Worthen ably details the resistance to this neo-evangelical movement that emerged from within the evangelical community. For example, John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite scholar, wrote to Carl Henry, editor of *Christianity Today*, objecting to the idea that Henry's views were rooted in Christian theology rather than philosophy:

Your ultimate criteria are your ideas of reason, your judgment of metaphysical realities, your judgment of what is consistent and what contradictory. Those are all philosophical positions which may or may not be good philosophy, but in theology the chances are great that they will get in the way of Christ as the only source of knowledge.

Ouch. Yoder was defending the traditional Anabaptist heritage [that] emphasized the personal habits and local community through which God's word informed everyday life," as Worthen writes. The highly rationalistic focus of the neo-evangelicals did not sit well with many evangelicals who were accustomed to language about sanctification and sermons about living a holy life, not biblical inerrancy, and the Mennonite tradition specifically maintained an abiding commitment to pacifism that did not sit well with neo-evangelicals during the Cold War.

The Wesleyan Holiness churches were also concerned with the rise of neo-evangelical focus on biblical inerrancy as the touchstone of Christian faith. Rob Staples, a professor at Southern Nazarene University

wondered aloud if Nazarenes were really welcome at the Wesleyan Theological Society, which bought into the inerrancy campaign, seeing as his church's own creedal statement did not mention the issue. "A Wesleyan society should make Holiness its main point and not get involved in this fundamentalistic shibboleth of inerrancy," Staples told a WTS meeting. A host of Holiness scholars returned to the sources of their own tradition to nurture a totally different strand of evangelical commitment.

Evangelicals faced other challenges beyond intramural debate and self-criticism. In the post-WWII era, the GI bill made possible a new cultural focus on the importance of college education in American society. And, with that focus came the need for increased professionalization within the American academy. Professional accrediting institutions conferred the desired degree of respectability. Worthen tracks the ways evangelical schools tried to navigate this new professionalized environment, mindful that in exchange for taking steps to achieve public recognition for academic excellence, they would have to lighten the focus on the specifically Christian norms the school's founders and funders sought. In the rush to get students, schools that had once been seminaries discovered that many of their students had no intention of pursuing ministry.

Some Bible schools saw their enrollment numbers decline as a new generation of students flocked to expanding public colleges and universities. Worthen quotes Milton Wells, President of Assemblies of God school, the Eastern Bible Institute:

An overemphasis on education, both within and without the Pentecostal movement, is directing youths' vision away from the call of God to preach the Gospel. Higher education of any sort stimulates a keen desire for big earnings, positions of prominence, and a feeling of spiritual complacency? KNOWLEDGE PUFFETH UP?; it caters to the EGO! Calvary-love builds up and magnifies the Lord. Not a few are distressed that so many graduates of our Bible colleges are leaving ministry for other more lucrative vocations.

While Pastor Wells may have been crying in his, well, not his beer, in his iced tea then, others decided to play the game. The Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges was formed and, as Worthen writes, it "was not a weapon of the culture war. The association's founders sought inclusion and parity, not hostile resistance." More sophisticated evangelical colleges and universities were staffed with professors whose degrees came from Ivy League schools, European universities, and other colleges with an impeccable intellectual pedigree. Worthen's lists of prominent evangelical professors should banish the idea that evangelicals were mere bumpkins once and for all. And, the conclusion of her treatment of the professionalization of evangelical education is not only spot-on, it demonstrates, again, Worthen's ability to take the discrete facts she is examining and draw out the key point that furthers the narrative. She writes: "Yet what looked to critics like weak-kneed accommodation was, rather, the latest iteration of evangelicalism's pragmatic spirit—the adaptable temperament that allowed evangelicals to turn their anxiety about religious identity into a source of vigor, and to reposition their institutions to stand within a changing mainstream culture while holding the authority of that culture at arm's length."

Catholics make brief appearances in the book. The first generation of neo-evangelicals shared the generic Protestant hostility to Catholics. Worthen relates early tension between the editors of *Christianity Today*, who were convinced that Catholics were trying to block the magazine's tax-exempt status, and the magazine's principal funder, J. Howard Pew, who admired that Catholic Church's opposition to communism. Pew even offered to try and solicit an endorsement of the journal from the Vatican. Later, and after the Vatican itself embraced ecumenical efforts, some evangelicals became enamored of certain Catholic ideas and practices, drawing on the Church's liturgical and intellectual lineage, and crafting them for non-Catholics. And, the Pentecostal movement, especially in mission territories, embraced both Catholics and non-Catholics.

Worthen catalogues the gradual process by which many evangelical evangelicals came to a more nuanced understanding of biblical inspiration. She writes: *In Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical* (1974), Fuller professor Jack Rogers admitted that his efforts to write a conservative critique of the United Presbyterians' 1967 revision of the Westminster Confession led him to realize, "to his shock and surprise," that the original Westminster doctrine of biblical authority was more subtle than the Princeton theology he had inherited. Rogers was not alone and Worthen surmises that "[b]y the mid-1970s, there were reasons to believe that American evangelicals' fixation on inerrancy was fading and the happy vines of compromise had begun to grow over their internal divisions." Having registered the hope contained in the trajectory, she proceeds to blow it apart:

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The problem was this. The doctrine of inerrancy was a comforting gauze that concealed a great deal of ugliness. It disguised the compromise and confusion that are unavoidable when moderns try to live by an ancient and often obscure text. The doctrine of inerrancy had always been, in its essence, a means of managing the Bible's vulnerability to subjective judgment. Most inerrantists were not naïve about either the necessity or the peril of submitting those "God-breathed" words to mortal interpretation. The problem was not interpretation per se, but the presuppositions that so often lay beneath. Inerrancy provided a trump card to play whenever those presuppositions became threatening – a way of asserting that the only appropriate tools for interpreting a problematic verse were other verses in the same text, and that revelation itself provided evidence of its own perfect authority.

In sum, people worried about a "domino effect" – once you undermine this verse of Scripture, based on the latest biblical scholarship, what is to keep someone else from undermining another verse, one that you may consider essential. The stage was set for another battle royal in evangelical circles. The pulpits of the evangelical churches would again fall victim to the fight over inerrancy and, in 1979, the fundamentalists gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention and set about re-staffing its offices and seminaries with like-minded pastors.

These new fundamentalist pulpit holders availed themselves of modern technology as their forerunners had availed themselves of modern ideas about crafting a *weltanschauung*. Again and again in this book, Worthen convincingly makes the case that fundamentalism was not merely a stance of opposition to modernity but a stand buttressed by an acute familiarity with modern means of communication and organization. Soon, inevitably, the Rev. Jerry Falwell would launch the Moral Majority, the Rev. Pat Robertson would build his media empire and found Regent University, and a new generation of biblical inerrantists would come to dominate the landscape of evangelicalism. The neo-neo-evangelicals, like the preceding generation, were men of their time even if they spent much of their time railing against the times in which they lived.

Tomorrow: Vignettes and verdicts.

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