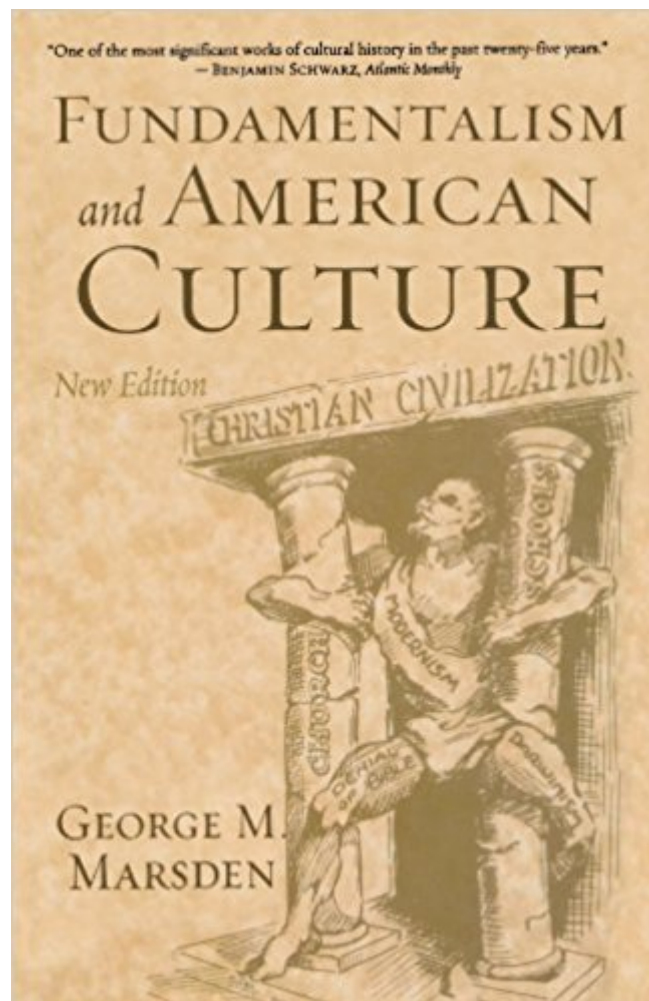




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Fundamentalism And American Culture (New Edition)



Synopsis

Many Americans today are taking note of the surprisingly strong political force that is the religious right. Controversial decisions by the government are met with hundreds of lobbyists, millions of dollars of advertising spending, and a powerful grassroots response. How has the fundamentalist movement managed to resist the pressures of the scientific community and the draw of modern popular culture to hold on to their ultra-conservative Christian views? Understanding the movement's history is key to answering this question. *Fundamentalism and American Culture* has long been considered a classic in religious history, and to this day remains unsurpassed. Now available in a new edition, this highly regarded analysis takes us through the full history of the origin and direction of one of America's most influential religious movements. For Marsden, fundamentalists are not just religious conservatives; they are conservatives who are willing to take a stand and to fight. In Marsden's words (borrowed by Jerry Falwell), "a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something." In the late nineteenth century American Protestantism was gradually dividing between liberals who were accepting new scientific and higher critical views that contradicted the Bible and defenders of the more traditional evangelicalism. By the 1920s a full-fledged "fundamentalist" movement had developed in protest against theological changes in the churches and changing mores in the culture. Building on networks of evangelists, Bible conferences, Bible institutes, and missions agencies, fundamentalists coalesced into a major protest movement that proved to have remarkable staying power. For this new edition, a major new chapter compares fundamentalism since the 1970s to the fundamentalism of the 1920s, looking particularly at the extraordinary growth in political emphasis and power of the more recent movement. Never has it been more important to understand the history of fundamentalism in our rapidly polarizing nation. Marsden's carefully researched and engrossing work remains the best way to do just that.

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Customer Reviews

"Marsden reveals a great deal of history, showing the origins, development and growth of evangelicalism and fundamentalism. His is a focused yet broad scholarly work that has stood the test of time, a worthwhile history resource on fundamentalism in America."--Congregational Libraries Today

George M. Marsden is the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*.

Some years ago, I learned in college about the Scopes Monkey Trial. That incident, more than any before (or possibly since), tarred the reputation of conservative Christianity in America. George Marsden helps readers to understand "the rest of the story". As the author makes clear, American fundamentalism was not originally a southern phenomenon. Nor is evangelical fundamentalism closely related to the "fundamentalism" found in the Middle East and various parts of Asia. There was nothing mean-spirited or even anti-intellectual about its earliest leaders, who held to a logical, Newtonian approach to science and were frequently well-educated. However, outside events gradually caused many of them to feel under siege and to overreact against cultural changes they couldn't control. I found this work invaluable in understanding the present state of American Christianity. Some of the excesses of 1920s fundamentalism subsided in time. Due to that, a much more respectable evangelicalism is predominant today (though even it is frequently misconstrued as a political movement). In the meantime, denominations which rejected historical, biblical theology have continued to decrease in influence and overall vitality. Given that fact, it's little wonder that Christians who hold to the exclusivity of Christ and other traditional beliefs tend to send the most missionaries abroad. One additional insight I gleaned from reading this concerns why a great cultural divide exists between rural and urban America today. News coverage for the Scopes Trial spurred stereotypes of rural dwellers (especially southerners) as uneducated hillbillies who reject all modern innovations. In turn, it caused those from rural areas to be distrustful of the people and ideas of the big cities (particularly in the Northeast). One hopes this division will lessen in the future, though

there are indications that this will not be the case.

Over the course of the twentieth century, fundamentalism has existed as a counterpoint to the excesses of modernity in the United States. After five decades of growth, fundamentalism reached its zenith during the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, TN. The Scopes trial served to highlight the inherent flaws in fundamentalist ideology, and as a result the fundamentalist cause became synonymous with rural backwardness. It is this fifty-year period prior to the infamous Scopes trial that George Marsden examines in his book, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

Marsden's book not only gives readers an insight into the roots and influences of fundamentalism, but also expands the historical view of American culture in general. Marsden's analysis of the intellectual roots of fundamentalist ideology builds on previous historians' attempts to explain the phenomenon. While the Scopes trial portrayed fundamentalism as a belief system built on anti-intellectualism and anti-scientific backwardness, Marsden argues that the ideological roots of fundamentalism stem from "an intellectual tradition that had the highest regard for one understanding of true scientific method and proper rationality." In this sense, Marsden is building on the works of Ernst Sandeen, George W. Dollard, and C. Allyn Russell, who rejected social explanations of fundamentalism in favor of examining the movement as an important element of American religious and cultural history. While Marsden agrees with Sandeen's conclusions that dispensational premillennialism and conservative Princeton theology were the precursors to fundamentalist ideology, he also emphasizes the influence of nineteenth-century revivalism, the holiness movement, "Scottish Common Sense Realism," Calvinism, and the ideas of the seventeenth century philosopher, Francis Bacon. His analysis of these early influences led Marsden to define the fundamentalism which emerged after World War I as "militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism." By examining the lives and works of many individuals within the early fundamentalist movement, Marsden seamlessly weaves this intellectual history of fundamentalism with a social history of American culture. Marsden underscores the contributions of Henry Ward Beecher, Charles Blanchard, Dwight L. Moody, Arthur T. Pierson, and Nathaniel West, among others, in order to personalize the various intellectual influences of the movement. This methodology works well for Marsden's book, for it allows his overall argument to flow so smoothly that even readers with no academic background would be able to digest the complex theological and intellectual characteristics of the fundamentalist movement.

Marsden's analysis of the role of fundamentalism in American culture not only distinguishes this book from previous scholarly attempts to define and historicize the movement, but it also reveals the periodization of the book. As Marsden explains, this particular Protestant response to modernity is almost uniquely American. Although Marsden points to social, intellectual, and religious-cultural explanations, he holds to the contention that fundamentalism should be understood as a "sub-species of American revivalism." This may be a flaw of the book, since it limits the scope and influence of the fundamentalist movement to America. However, this is likely due to the timing of the publication. Marsden's book was first published in 1980, at the beginning of resurgence in American fundamentalism. Since then, similar religious movements (in particular, the rise and spread of Pentecostalism, which Marsden acknowledges as a close cousin of fundamentalism) have risen in other parts of the world which now merit scholarly attention. In particular, the militant, anti-modern aspect of fundamentalism remains to be fully evaluated in the light of 21st century events. Marsden's analysis nonetheless provides the foundation for future research in the study of fundamentalism in other contexts. By placing fundamentalism within a broader American historical context, Marsden is able to illuminate the background of contemporary American evangelicals "whose common identity is substantially grounded in the fundamentalist experience of an earlier era." Not only has Marsden rectified the relative lack of scholarship on an aspect of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American religious movement, he has also illuminated the cultural, intellectual, and theological roots of contemporary fundamentalism within American culture.

Marsden masterfully recounts the development of fundamentalism, convincingly arguing that this anti-intellectual movement found its beginnings in tandem with dispensationalism's growth. Marsden reminds us that fundamentalism was a militant movement meant to control and champion Christian culture in the public square. A helpful correction for Christians is to find a way to be prophetic publicly while being convictionally civil and charitable as well.

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