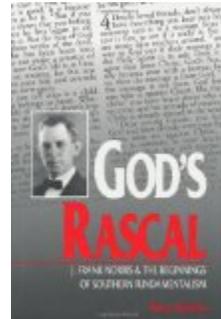


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barry Hankins. *God's Rascal: J. Frank Norris and the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. viii + 220 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1985-4.

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Frank Norris was called a great many things in his lifetime, many of them uncomplimentary. Barry Hankins' characterization of Norris as "one of the most controversial figures in the history of Christianity in America" (p. 1) is quite mild by comparison. No one familiar with the the subject would disagree. No one during Norris' lifetime (1877-1952), including Norris, would have disagreed.

Norris was also colorful. His life story has the makings of made for T.V. movie: born in a small town in Alabama, a Christian mother and a heavy-drinking father, an abusive childhood, a conversion experience in his teens, ordination to the Baptist ministry, and student years at Baylor (including a protest let by Norris which led to the resignation of the university's president, the issue of which was the president's tossing a dog out of a second floor window). These events take us only into Norris' early twenties. The rest of his life is even more colorful.

Hankins does not avoid these incidents, but neither does he dwell on them. His major focus is on Norris as the cleric who introduced Fundamentalism in the South, thus shaping much of the religious life of his region, and of fundamentalism generally. The book consists of an introduction which clearly sets the general argument, eight chapters which elaborate the argument through intensive analyses of various components of the career of this most controversial and colorful character, and a brief conclusion.

Hankins argues that Norris's identity as a Southern Baptist was a geographical happenstance, but his identity as a fundamentalist was central to his ministerial life. Indeed, Norris was a far more consistent fundamentalist

than Southern Baptist, or Baptist of any sort. Hankins demonstrates repeatedly that Norris sought to enforce creedal conformity. The creed was pure fundamentalism. The attempt to enforce conformity was most un-Baptist. Within the realm of fundamentalism, Hankins argues, Norris was normative. Within the Southern Baptist Convention of his time, Norris was an anomaly. As Hankins points out, "Norris would have felt much more at home with the conservatives who have taken control of the SBC since 1979 than he did with those who led the denomination in his own day" (p. 3).

The eight analytical chapters take us through the maze of Norris' development: The Making of a Populist Preacher, From Populist to Southern Fundamentalism, American Nativist, Dispensational Prophet, Motor City Man, Sphinx, Anticommunist, The Race Card. Hankins present a complex individual, about as different from the two-dimension stereotype of a Southern fundamentalist as one can imagine. To his great credit, Hankins never assumes that simply because Norris can be called a Populist, or a fundamentalist, or a nativist, or a racist, simply because he was a Southerner and a Southern Baptist. In each case the attribute is demonstrated—not simply invoked—and Hankins traces the historical development of these attributes by investigating the interaction between Norris and the culture in which Norris is housed. Throughout, Hankins avoids the fallacious ecological argument that Norris, as a Southerner, would just naturally manifest Southern attributes. The result is a well grounded and intelligently developed study that deserves serious attention.

One can quibble with Hankins treatment from time to time. The fifth Chapter, "Motor City Man," for exam-

ple, could have use a bit more grounding in the growing literature on religion in cities in American history. Admittedly, Hankins approach is that of an intellectual historian, but there is an important social context to Norris' activities in Detroit that could only have benefited from a consideration of that literature.

In the chapter outlining some of Norris' most notorious moments, "The Sphinx," we are given brief glimpses of Norris' murder trial and his often tempestuous relationships with associates. These, in conjunction with the 1912 charge of arson, and a number of other incidents which raise serious questions about Norris' character, are not really woven into the fabric of Hankins' analysis. They are something of a side-show.

But these quibbles should not detract from the fine achievement of this book. We finally have a very good study of this major character in twentieth-century American Christianity.

We also have a book which raises a number of inter-

esting problems to ponder. For this reviewer, the most interesting of these problems is the shift from religious Populism to an orthodox fundamentalism. The former is a social form of autonomy. The latter is pure theonomy. Autonomy is consistent and congruent with democracy, but antithetical to most forms of Christianity. Theonomy is foundational in historic Christianity, but difficult to reconcile with democracy. Norris was in both places at different times, and many American Christians have articulated some tension around this problem. As far as Norris may seem to be from most readers of this review, my guess is that all share some notion of that tension that was basic to his life, and which, as suggested in Hankins' conclusion, was never really resolved. Whatever else one might say about Norris, his was, in this regard, a most American Christian life.

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