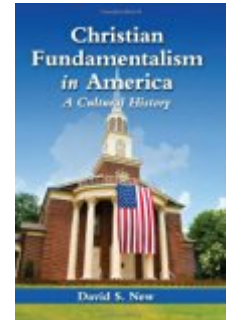


David S. New. *Christian Fundamentalism in America: A Cultural History.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2012. v + 259 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7058-7.



Reviewed by Alyson Dickson

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Commissioned by Tammy Heise (Florida State University)

David S. New seeks to ground contemporary political and social divides in historical religious context in his new book, *Christian Fundamentalism in America: A Cultural History*. He opens by describing a sharply divided America. Wholly adopting a “culture wars” view of America, New roots the bifurcation of America into what he calls “the ‘Reds’ and the ‘Blues’” in American religious thought, particularly millennialism (p. 1).

The book’s early chapters examine periods of American history typically omitted from analyses of fundamentalism. New begins with a brief survey of early English colonies, focusing on the Plymouth settlers and the Puritans. The chapter closes by insisting that scholars continue to underestimate the significance of millennialism in Puritan thought. Unfortunately, New only offers readers a modest explanation to support this argument, seemingly integral to his larger argument. The book then turns to the First and Second Great Awakenings, recounting them primarily through the lens of key figures, such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Charles Finney. In the lat-

er part of this section, New dedicates an entire chapter to the links between millennialism, revivalism, and nationalism. Overall, these early chapters follow a standard (if limited) recounting of religion in America’s colonial and revolutionary eras.

In chapter 6, New offers readers a twist. He positions William Miller as the lynchpin for the unfolding of American millennialism. Despite other apocalyptic and prophetic movements emerging during this period, New contends that Miller alone polarized Americans’ responses to apocalyptic thought: “Millerism drove a sharp wedge into the American religious soul, creating a divisiveness which has yet to heal” (p. 76). Again, readers can expect little additional explication of this claim.

New then turns to what might be considered the typical beginning to accounts of American fundamentalism: modern critical thought and its application to the Bible. He describes the rise of liberalism, the development of dispensationalism,

and the crystallization of fundamentalism by the early twentieth century, culminating in the Scopes trial. However, his presentation of millennialism during this period oversimplifies the multiplicity of strains within American Christianity. In addition to the amillennialism of Roman Catholicism and certain Reformed traditions omitted from this account, premillennialist thought encompassed more complexity than just dispensationalism.

The book skips ahead to the late twentieth century, and, in this section, New's work turns from oversimplification to overstatement. He blames mainline Protestant traditions' solidarity with social movements of the 1960s and 1970s for declining attendance. In contrast, "conservative"--a term used interchangeably with "fundamentalist" from this point forward--traditions and media grew. New implies that millennialism kept conservatism relevant and urgent, leading to its resurgence. Citing little evidence beyond a few articles in *The Christian Century*, New paints liberals and conservatives as sharply divided: "If men and women are from different planets, liberals and conservatives are from different galaxies.... They live in separate worlds, in separate cultures" (p. 155). He then takes a confusing trajectory, focusing on how millennial thought has gone awry, leading to violence. New contends that conservatives' beliefs leave them particularly "vulnerable to rogue apocalypticists, false prophets," describing the impact of David Koresh, Jim Jones, and Charles Manson (p. 175). The book closes with a short analysis of Revelation and a call for more conversation between the polarized "Reds" and "Blues."

New's project of emphasizing the impact of millennialism in American history and contemporary society is laudable. Moreover, the early chapters of this book are accessible and provide interesting details. However, the lack of citation for these details, including statistics, leaves readers uncertain as to their reliability. More important, New stumbles in his discussion regarding the con-

nection between millennialism and contemporary political and social divides; his judgmental tone and reductionist approach hinder his case.

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