

Matthew Avery Sutton. *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014. 480 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04836-2.



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Commissioned by Bobby L. Smiley (Vanderbilt University)

Christian fundamentalists have taken seriously Jesus's instructions "occupy till I come" for much of the twentieth century, seeking to transform society and purge the United States of its sins while preaching imminent apocalypse (Luke 19:13). That, at least, is the central thesis of Matthew Avery Sutton's masterful history of the rise of American Christian fundamentalism. In *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, Sutton argues that since the late nineteenth century what he calls "radical evangelicals" and later fundamentalists have been primarily animated by the doctrine of premillennialism, the belief that the end of the world is coming and that the world's destruction will bring about Jesus's return (p. x).

Sutton is the Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor of History at Washington State University and his work differs from earlier historians on two counts. In contrast to George Marsden, who depicted the development of fundamentalism as primarily an antimodernist and antievolutionary

phenomena with premillennialist undercurrents in his *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980), Sutton gives priority to fundamentalists' obsession with the world's oncoming end. He also challenges the commonplace rise-fall-rise again narrative that has become prevalent throughout the academy. This narrative turns the 1925 Scopes trial into a pivot point with fundamentalism growing in the years before it and all but collapsing in its wake, only to rise anew in the 1950s. Sutton upends the familiar story by placing greater emphasis on the role World War I played in the movement's development, arguing that William Jennings Bryan—the prosecutor in the Scopes case—was no fundamentalist, and, perhaps most important, tracing how premillennialists influenced American culture during the interwar period. The protagonists of Sutton's history never really lose momentum. They opposed the 1928 presidential candidacy of the Democrat and Catholic Al Smith; organized opposition to the New Deal; and, confident that God was on their side, advocated for US involvement in World War II.

In his revision of the history of fundamentalism, Sutton draws on a wide range of sources. He combines careful attention to the decades-long trajectories of fundamentalist periodicals, such as the *King's Business* and *Christianity Today*, with the institutional histories of important evangelical training grounds, like the Moody Bible Institute, Fuller Seminary, and the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. He further bolsters his recasting by showing, through numerous citations to personal correspondence and diaries, that the fundamentalists' public statements about the world's nearing demise matched their own private beliefs.

The synchronicity between the public and private is highlighted by the book's structure. Most chapters begin with an often humorous or poignant anecdote pulled from the personal papers of a radical evangelical. Obscure radical evangelical Philip Mauro boarded the *Carpathia*, witnessed the sinking of the *Titanic*, and proclaimed that "the hand of God is most manifestly appearing in the affairs of men" (p. 2). Influential Seattle preacher Mark Matthews inflated his self importance, dispensed advice to Woodrow Wilson, and urged Adolf Hitler to abdicate office, telegraphing the führer, "If you will ... send me a telegram of agreement. I think I can organize forces which will immediately begin working to present that promise and agreement to the world" (p. 228). In the wake of the Soviet Union's 1949 atomic bomb test, Billy Graham pronounced "time is desperately short!" (p. 326).

Graham's proclamation highlights the way in which fundamentalists have interpreted present events to presage the end of history. World War I, the New Deal, the rise of Benito Mussolini and Hitler, the start of World War II and the Cold War, and economic stagnation are all variously read, incorrectly, as signs that the last days have arrived. In the wake of each of these failures, Sutton shows how fundamentalists kept reading evidence of current events and the onrushing end in the pages of the Bible. The Chicago real estate de-

veloper and funder of many evangelical causes, William Blackstone, for instance, predicted imminent doom in his 1876 *Jesus Is Coming* and again foresaw signs of the world's demise in the early twentieth-century rise of Zionism.

Blackstone himself provides an almost perfect case for Sutton's thesis that fundamentalists' premillennialism prompts them toward political action. Blackstone believed that the return of Jews to Palestine was a necessary precondition for Jesus's reappearance. Rather than wait for the event spontaneously to occur, he became a major advocate of Zionism and befriended the Jewish Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis, even creating a trust for Brandeis to use on Zionism's behalf in case Blackstone was taken up to heaven in the rapture.

In describing fundamentalism's political history, Sutton explicitly casts the movement as primarily white and male. In doing so, he shows how, despite's fundamentalists' often rhetorical unease with American culture, the movement has most often served as a buttress for reactionary economics, patriarchal forms of social organization, and implicitly white supremacist racial policies.

If fault must be found with *American Apocalypse* it is that Sutton's work does not place twentieth-century American premillennialism within the context of the much longer history of Christian millennialism. A brief engagement with the work of nineteenth-century American historian Robert Abzug, medieval historian Norman Cohn, or feminist process theologian Catherine Keller would have helped readers understand that millennialism is not just an obsession of twentieth-century fundamentalists; it is something that has animated Christian social movements for centuries. This minor blemish aside, Sutton's book is exactly what its author intended it to be: the sort of history of Christian fundamentalism that will stand for a generation.

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