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David Harrington Watt. *Antifundamentalism in Modern America.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. 240 pp. $27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4827-0.

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I'm usually pretty good at writing these sorts of things because I tend to follow a set routine: read, digest, dissect, and compose. The purpose of my reading is to identify the most significant points and contributions of a given manuscript both in terms of content and scholarly argumentation. I begin by thoroughly examining the preface, acknowledgments, and table of contents before delving into the index and endnotes in hopes of finding an unheard of source or two. Lastly, I engage the main text from close range, as well as from the proverbial thirty thousand feet, in order to establish scholastic accomplishment (archives visited, historiographies cited, style utilized) and disciplinary vision (overarching argument, "So What?" contributions). In this manner, I am able to establish a text's place within a burgeoning field of research or illustrate its role in reinvigorating a worthwhile conversation from the recent past. Inexplicably, the text under consideration, historian of American religion David Harrington Watt's *Antifundamentalism in Modern America*, manages to accomplish both tasks without overburdening the reader with multiple levels of inaccessible scholarly argumentation. Instead, his prose is crisp and easily accessible from both popular and academic vantages. What's even more impressive is the fact that such a style embodies decades of nuanced thinking and discernment when it comes to the academic study of global fundamentalism. In these senses, Watt's work embodies what scholarly publishing is capable of in the early decades of the twenty-first century: engaging prose backed by dense networks of historiographic insight and archival density. My less-than-formal introductory paragraph is an attempted testament to this bold if not courageous style.

Following the methodological leads of anthropologist Susan Harding (*The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* [2000]), scholar of religion Jason Bivins (*Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* [2008]), and political scientist Michael Rogin (*Ronald Reagan the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* [1988]), Watt's investigation of what he calls "antifundamentalism" in modern America begins historically in the early part of the twentieth century, yet his primary period of analysis begins in the early 1980s and extends to the present. Watt starts his account of antifundamentalism by exploring how fundamentalism has been "put to work" by various commentators and scholars including popular author Karen Armstrong. Unlike more traditional accounts of American religion that depend solely on narrative to account for change over time, Watt first foregrounds *how* the term "fundamentalism"

has been used by various skeptics and supporters of the term. In this way, Watt gives us an account of not only its scholarly usages but also the ways in which the term has been naturalized or indigenized within larger frameworks of knowledge in contemporary America in a manner not unlike "religion" itself. For Watt, antifundamentalism is "a set of [shifting heterogeneous] conversations" that helps us understand how fundamentalism became understood as a global menace (p. xii).

Watt's hopes are that his readers come away from his text with four seminal conclusions about how fundamentalism has been used over time and how such deployments have changed the term's content at different moments in the twentieth century. The first conclusion is that analyses of fundamentalism often come from those who have the least amount of experience with fundamentalists themselves. Second, fundamentalism embodies both scholarly precision and moral commitment, the latter often times masquerading as the former. Third, fundamentalism as a term is better suited to particular times and places in the history of American Christianity. And lastly, those who study fundamentalists are not saints, and those who are called fundamentalists are not inherently evil (despite the term's connotations). In this way, Watt's analysis blends historical narrative with a keen sense for category formation and knowledge production. Watt combines a lived religion approach with the theoretical awareness of genealogy in order to illustrate how academic and popular conversations (or discourses) have produced fundamentalism as a term of both empirical description and academic allegiance to keeping the public square safe from those unfit to participate in civil deliberation.

The subsequent tone and execution of the manuscript reflect these analytical commitments in a manner that can only be described as elegant. After exploring how the term has been used by various academic and non-academic communities, Watt commences his historical treatment with the writings of ***The Fundamentals*** themselves in the early twentieth century. While this story is a somewhat familiar one, the clarity of Watt's description and prose makes this particular treatment ideal for both classroom settings and the larger public square. Watt's attention to historical detail and willingness to admit the less-than-precise character of his and others' analyses of fundamentalism establishes an academic tone that is at once confident yet willing to listen to different points of view and interpretation. Additionally, Watt is cautious with his own analyses and conclusions concerning antifundamentalism because of his awareness for how tenuous fundamentalism is as a term of academic analysis.

"By looking at the actual fundamentalists of the 1920s and 1930s," Watt argues, "we can guard against our tendency to treat the assertions of antifundamentalist polemicists as objective, accurate, and unbiased analyses." More importantly, "we can prepare ourselves to consider the possibility that the antifundamentalist polemicists are unreliable narrators" (p. 67). In this regard, to what extent has our primary source material on fundamentalism been a product of a set of larger conversations understood explicitly as ***anti***-fundamentalist in nature? To what degree has "the fundamentalist" been ***conjured*** into existence versus simply categorized as data for academic analysis? And lastly, to what degree have these two purposes worked in harmony on behalf of antifundamentalist purposes? Watt's point in exploring these questions is a simple if not critical one for both historians and scholars of religion to consider: to examine your scholastic presuppositions, you must first work to undo what had previously been assumed, even if it is your primary subject of investigation. For those versed in the methods of genealogy as a form of critical theory, this should be a familiar move of analysis. As Watt aptly demonstrates, categorical negation, understood as the practice of identifying the structural instability of scholarly categories, is the first step toward cultivating a renewed appreciation for

category formation and the subsequent shifts of meaning as an act of historical analysis.

Each chapter is a product of admirable research and careful delineation of source material. In particular, Watt relies on a series of cultural productions, ranging from movies and novels to academic manuscripts, to narrate his history of antifundamentalism from the earliest days of the Scopes Trial to the present. Watt's story includes many of the usual suspects, including Harry Emerson Fosdick, Reuben Torrey, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Richard Hofstadter, but it also includes a rich array of characters not often included in histories of American fundamentalism—at least to this historiographic point. Additionally, Watt utilizes more common figures for less than common ends. For example, Watt explores how pastor and journalist Curtis Lee Laws invented the term "fundamentalist" while commenting on a meeting of the National Baptist Convention during the 1920s. In addition, while Niebuhr is a household name in the study of American Christianity, his writings on fundamentalism in the ***Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*** are perhaps less well known than his ***Christ and Culture*** (1951) or ***Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*** (1960).

This analytical eclecticism is made possible by Watt's usage of genealogical method in that his primary subject of analysis is not a walking, talking person per se, but instead resembles more of a historically contingent communications network of conversations that have a common discursive thread: the *anti* of antifundamentalism. In this sense, the composition of Watt's fifth chapter reflects the organizational logic of the manuscript as a whole. In this particular chapter, titled "Ratification" (Watt's chapter-based typology for studying antifundamentalism is itself worth the price of admission), Watt relies on the writings of the aforementioned Niebuhr in addition to the writings of sociologist Talcott Parsons and neo-evangelical intellectual Carl F. H. Henry, to examine the state of antifundamentalism in the 1930s and 1940s. "During these decades," Watt writes, "antifundamentalism embedded itself in standard reference works in a way that suggested that it was a simple truth, not one side of a controversy" (p. 87). In this sense, Watt's examination is interested in both moments in time and change over time when it comes to the study of fundamentalism as an application of various antifundamentalist assumptions over the course of the twentieth century.

By the time antifundamentalism made its way to post-World War II America, much had changed in regard to its content and applicable uses in the public square by various religious actors, both progressive and conservative. Between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s, Watt argues, fundamentalism began to apply to a greater diversity of social phenomena beyond those strictly associated with the Christian tradition. In fact, by this time "fundamentalist" could be used to identify something that posed a significant threat to American civil liberties, Christian or otherwise. In this sense, Watt's analysis not only tracks the content of a given period of time that informed the categorical usage of "fundamentalist" but also illustrates the history of the category itself, thereby blending theoretical awareness with a stern fidelity to the historical record through an admirably clear writing style.

While some chapters rely on more traditional sources exclusively, including books and novels, others utilize newspaper articles, congressional hearings, and movies in order to portray less of an individualized subject and more of a dense network of communication, articulation, and description otherwise identified as "Antifundamentalism" proper. One of the most influential yet understudied sources associated with the history of fundamentalism and its study is The Fundamentalism Project directed by R. Scott Appleby and Martin E. Marty. Not only did the publications of this project shape academic and public conceptions about what exactly fundamentalism ***meant***,

but Marty also added his own line of interpretation that tended to resurrect sociological analyses first applied by Parsons in the 1940s. For Watt, Marty spearheaded a great deal when it came to the study of fundamentalism, but by doing so he unknowingly contributed to a larger social formation: namely, antifundamentalism itself.

Watt concludes his treatment of antifundamentalism in modern America by noting that between 1985 and the present, a period marking the birth of what has been referred to as America's Culture Wars, the notion of fundamentalism itself changed yet again. Unlike previous periods, this one produced a reinvented concept of fundamentalism, one that "was made far less specific and far more elastic" than previous versions. In fact, fundamentalism "was transformed into a category that was broad enough to accommodate movements that could be found in many different religious traditions" (p. 143). As eclectic as ever in its source selection, Watt's "Zenith" chapter uses the writings of scholars Bernard Lewis and Bruce Lawrence, in addition to journalist Bill Moyers, to illustrate how antifundamentalist purposes shaped the degree to which fundamentalism as a category reflected simply Christian investments or those of other traditions. The fact that Watt's subject is a set of heterogeneous conversations *about* fundamentalists rather than fundamentalists themselves allows him to deploy an evidentiary base that is not beholden to historical narration. As a result, Watt is able to compare Moyers's claims to those made initially by Fosdick as part of a larger tradition of social analysis, or in this case, as part of a general theory of fundamentalism. Like Fosdick, Moyers also contended that fundamentalists were out to topple America's First Amendment rights by compromising the separation of church and state. Watt concludes that fundamentalism has become "a concept that Americans used to talk about what happened when religion turned toxic and about how dangerous religion could be once it had gone bad" (p. 162). In other words, how one categorized a fundamentalist had as much to do with empirical observation as it did with how the term functioned and for what purposes. For Watt, such articulations aptly demonstrate a rhetorical tradition of description and interpellation understood simply as antifundamentalism.

In short, ***Antifundamentalism in Modern America*** is a significant contribution to at least three separate but interrelated fields of academic inquiry: American religious history, religious studies, and American history. For historians writ large, Watt's text offers a well-supported argument through the use of multiple archives and close readings of primary source material. He also illustrates how narrative can be combined with more subtle, thematic means of deciphering the recent past through genealogy. As scholar of religion Finbarr Curtis has argued, this type of methodological interest in category formation indicates the extent to which the study of religion has shaped the study and execution of American religious history over the past two decades.[1] Compared to other texts in the field, Watt's is driven less by an inclusivist impulse to include the "left out" fundamentalist, and more by a desire to identify the overlooked gaps between one's data and subsequent academic categorization of it. In my estimation, Watt's text should be and will be understood as a ***path-clearing*** text: one that has opened conceptual space for others to conduct their respective, ***ground-breaking*** investigations of fundamentalism as both subject and product of larger social forces. If I were to critique Watt's academically supported, yet popularly written text, I would say that the emergence of the "New Christian Right" played a much more significant role in exposing American audiences to "fundamentalists" and their beliefs, thereby reinforcing the power of antifundamentalist hermeneutics. This period also produced a great deal of antifundamentalist polemics authored by both liberal and conservative authors, including the likes of television producer Norman Lear and ***National Review*** publisher William Rusher. Besides this

point of clarification, Watt's text should nevertheless be required reading come this fall in courses engaging American religion, culture, and/or society from within both the humanities and social sciences.

Note

[1]. Finbarr Curtis, "The Study of American Religions: Critical Reflections on a Specialization," ***Religion*** 42, no. 3 (2012): 355-372.