

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Christian Fundamentalism in America: A Cultural History*, by David S. New.  
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### KEYWORDS

Fundamentalism, Christianity, Conservatives, Calvinism, Apocalypticism,  
Dispensationalism

In his work on Christian fundamentalism in America, New begins by laying out the statistics for modern religious identities in the United States. He sets out to look at the religious divide between US liberals and conservatives through the lens of religion beginning with the coming of the Puritans to North America and their language about settlement as a “holy commonwealth,” a “city on a hill,” a “new Jerusalem” (3–4). Nineteenth century revivals in the wake of the “Great Awakening” solidified conservative religious views in the country, making them more potent and politically a part of the United States’ DNA (4–5). As a reaction to the Enlightenment and the Bible coming under attack by intellectuals, Princeton Theological Seminary was founded. This institution promulgated two very innovative and new theological positions which have stayed with the fundamentalists to this day: first, that the Bible was dictated by god and second that the Bible was without error.

New divides his book into two sections. Chapters 1–8 cover the Puritans to the turn of the nineteenth century noting the contributions of Finney, Miller, Hodge, Kant, Rousseau, Schleiermacher, and others. Up to the point of Miller’s life, New concentrates on the apocalypticism inherent in the underpinnings of the colonists’ ethos along with how that affects later fundamentalists’ worldviews. While a great survey of the prominent figures during this period of US history, New’s analysis falls short on a number of levels. First, New does not define “fundamentalism” at any point in the book. He leaves the reader to figure out what that means as he tells the story of the founders of conservatism in the US. Second, he does not define “conservative” in light of Christian US understandings either. Sometimes, he seems to distinguish between the two terms but at others uses them interchangeably. This creates a lack of precision as one begins to read chapters 9 and following when the actual fundamentalist movement is discussed.

In chapters 9–14, New delineates the rise of the fundamentalist movement beginning with John Nelson Darby and the invention of dispensationalism.

John Nelson Darby reacts to the liberals with the invention of dispensationalism (105–106). With the rise of dispensationalism, the fundamentalist movement now had a central doctrine that would stay with it till the modern period. It was central to explaining away contradictions in the Bible while providing a means to read the text “literally” (111). In chapter 10, dispensationalism is noted to have gone into the mainstream of US culture. The premillennialists took World War 1 as a sign that German biblical scholarship was housed in German fascist ideology and, therefore, was an enemy of the US and Christianity, as if those two were synonymous (120).

This point of comparison with Germany highlights another weakness in New’s work. While fundamentalists attempted to link German critical scholarship of the Bible with the racism and brutality, as they saw it, the fundamentalists made claims about the US being a savior state. What New does not do in his volume is analyze the rhetoric surrounding the genocide of the first nations nor the later rhetoric surrounding segregation and racism (i.e., the KKK) when discussing fundamentalist cultural influence. It seems that, for New, fundamentalism is almost self-contained and separated from these cultural maladies. The connections between fundamentalism and nationalism are powerful and ought to be included in a cultural history of Christian fundamentalism in the country.

New’s last chapters are spent discussing the Branch Davidians, The Family (Charles Manson and his followers), and Jim Jones because of their emphasis on the apocalyptic. Rather than analyze greater cultural impacts of fundamentalism, or perhaps conservatism (it is hard to tell which of these New is emphasizing at different points in the book), here, New turns toward these three specific examples. In New’s concluding chapter, he notes that “the very idea of nation – held both by liberals and conservatives—involved the concept of the United States as God’s chosen nation.” While this statement is reflective of his analysis, it belies another structural issue with New’s argument. By dividing conservatives (fundamentalists?) and liberals, he lacks nuance in his conclusions because he creates two rather monolithic movements ignoring other ideological currents in the US at different periods in its history. Some nuance is given when discussing infighting among conservative movements, but those nuances are never used to understand larger cultural impacts in the US.

New’s analysis of Christian fundamentalism in America provides an interesting read that picks up on prominent figures throughout the history of the movement. While this is the case, the analysis is uneven and the connections between periods and movements muddled by a lack of clarity in definition and subject matter.