

Scholarship and the Millennium:

A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Now that *black, chicano, women's*, and even *Oriental-American* histories have been "canonized" in the pages of university catalogues, it may be possible for another neglected American minority-in-search-of-its-identity to claim a place among the studies deemed worthy of pursuit. Christians in what has been called the *third force* (the first two being mainstream Protestantism and Roman Catholicism) have been poorly supplied with information about their own origins, a situation that opens the door to all kinds of paranoias. (The person who compared religion to sex in the range of its possibilities for good and for evil in the human personality was dead right.)

I

Jesus plainly stated that he would *return* to earth. He has not yet done so. The vast majority of Catholic, orthodox, and mainline Protestant Christians are willing to place the biblical statements about the Second Advent in the same category as the statements about "whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do" — that is, in the category of mysteries. Other Christians believe that this promise of Jesus constitutes man's only hope. Still others, going even further, claim that predictions are warranted as to the time when that return event will take place. The latter have been called millenarian because their doctrine places the Second Advent either before or after the thousand years mentioned in Revelation, the last book of the New Testament.

It used to be that one could ask a Protestant which denomination he be-

longed to and thereby get some fairly straightforward information about the person's beliefs. But this is often no longer the case. Most of the denomination-producing schisms resulted from nondoctrinal issues in the first place, and nearly all of the issues are of little significance today. To find out what a Protestant believes these days, one is much better advised to ask him whether he is a liberal, an evangelical, or a fundamentalist. In other words, the principal division of opinion is denominational only to the extent that denominations have aligned themselves with these three philosophical options. Included in most of the mainline groups are both clergymen and laymen whose convictions range across the spectrum.

The third-force groups tend to be at the conservative end. Fundamentalism has played an important role in American intellectual history, but we are still far from understanding its true character. Potential scholars in the third-force groups would naturally be best equipped for the work of clarification of the character and origin of fundamentalism. Few of them have taken on the job, however, for reasons that are explained later on. Ernest R. Sandeen¹ is an exception who has set a high standard in his contribution to a subject for which LeRoy E. Froom has laid the indispensable foundation.

Reared a fundamentalist, Sandeen attended Wheaton College (the Illinois school made famous by Billy Graham) and then went on to the University of Chicago. Here Sidney Mead suggested that he seek out the historical sources of fundamentalism. The result is the most important study since Froom's four-volume work of two decades ago.²

The study of grand aggregates such as "movements" does not admit, of course, of the kind of precise distinctions that are possible in other taxonomies, but the method must not be expected to yield neater results than the subject allows. Tidy minds shy away from the study of nebulae, but such studies are important nevertheless. Fundamentalism belongs to the class of nebulous phenomena.

Sandeen has combined exhaustive research after the model of Daumier with the boldness of a Toynbee to come up with a new and fruitful explanation for fundamentalism. It is the child of millenarianism, he says. Sandeen believes that the study of Bible prophecy and concern with the time and manner of the world's end is the "mysterious bond" that unified the many manifestations that were given the name fundamentalism in the 1920s.

This view comes as a surprise to most students, for millenarianism *as such* played a minor role, if any role at all, in such celebrated confrontations as the Scopes trial and the battle for the pulpit of the Riverside Church in New York City. If Sandeen is right — and I think he is — he deserves credit for

going behind the appearances to get at what is hidden. But how does it happen that the apogee of a movement could be so unrelated to its perigee?

The answer is that those who challenged fundamentalism in the 1920s were nonmillenarian; indeed, they were largely antibiblicist. Their objection to fundamentalism was not that it interpreted the books of Daniel and the Revelation in such and such a way; they saw it as an obstacle in the way of a "scientific education" for their children. Consequently, fundamentalists came before the public eye as the defenders of a certain view of the origin of the world rather than as what they had been conspicuous for previously: a certain view about the world's *demise*.

Neat minds will point out that some of the obvious progenitors of fundamentalism — such Princeton theologians, as Hodge, Warfield, and Machen, for instance — were either a-millenarian or antimillenarian. But Sandeen has an answer for this objection. He argues that (*a*) around the turn of the century millenarianism made an alliance with nonmillenarian Protestant orthodoxy in order to fight common enemies such as biblical criticism and evolutionary philosophy; (*b*) this alliance broke down during the 1920s as the fundamentalists lost every battle they joined; (*c*) fundamentalism-millenarianism went into a subsequent decline from which it did not recover until the appearance of the evangelicals in the early 1950s through such "ministries" associated with the name of Billy Graham as Fuller Theological Seminary in California and *Christianity Today*, the flourishing rival of the more liberal *Christian Century* religious newsmagazine. Sandeen does not say so, but there is evidence that in their new incarnation as evangelicals the fundamentalists have been winning battles and may soon reduce the influence of traditional liberalism to a position not much stronger than that of the fundamentalists during the 1930s and 1940s. If my speculation proves to be correct, Sandeen's book will come into its own.

II

Meanwhile, the nugatory distinctions between fundamentalist and evangelical, and between *cult* and *church*, continue to count for something in the pecking order of contemporary Protestantism. Millenarian is ranked very low — down with the people who still argue for the superiority of the *Textus Receptus* and the King James Version. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that scholars who have considered themselves evangelicals (or, with the movement of the same name in nineteenth-century England in mind, neo-evangelicals) do not relish being told that their spiritual forebears include the likes of Edward Irving, William Miller, and John Nelson Darby.

Some students try to make a case for tracing fundamentalism from the Princeton theologians. Marsden has argued that millenarianism, although it is *one* of the precursors of Protestantism, is not *the* common denominator of the movement.³ He says that opposition to liberal theology, anti-evolution, biblical literalism, revivalism, separateness of the church from the world, and individual moral purity (as seen in abstinence from dancing, cardplaying, and theatergoing) are features of fundamentalism with as much right to be considered central as the millenarian feature. An attitude of *antiworldliness* was the basis of all these “ism” phenomena, he says.

Alas, however, it is difficult to define antiworldliness — and even more difficult to isolate it in historical research. A better denominator than antiworldliness is needed. The possibility should be considered that *rejection of scientific method* may lie behind both millenarianism and the other features mentioned by Marsden. The millenarian frame of mind sees one, and only one, enterprise as worthy of human exertion: the proclamation of God’s kingdom in all the world. Its attitude toward “pure” research is akin to that of the ex-president of General Motors who, while United States Secretary of Defense, snorted about people who try to find “why grass is green.”

Undeniably, millenarian-fundamentalist groups have established scientific institutions of respectable caliber. Nevertheless, the moment scientific method is allowed to examine the postulates underlying millenarian thought is a critical one for fundamentalism. Like Sandeen, many a child of fundamentalists has arrived at that moment and been changed by it.

On the other hand, many youth of today are coming at millenarianism as if it were a new phenomenon on the face of the earth. To some extent the Jesus people are influenced by the views contained in Hal Lindsey’s vivid *The Late Great Planet Earth*⁴ and can be heard to predict that Jesus is sure to come within this decade. If any proof of Santayana’s maxim is needed — that those who refuse to learn from history are condemned to repeat it — here it is.

III

Why have we had to wait so long for a study like Sandeen’s?

Well, good scholarship is always scarce, but some communities encourage it more than others. Fundamentalist schools have high standards in some areas — higher than in more liberal schools on such matters as Greek and Hebrew, for instance — but in other sensitive areas there is little tolerance for new directions.

Wiebe (whose Mennonite forebears went through a millennialist phase

early in their history and have recently been heavily penetrated with the dispensational scheme of Darby) describes the situation as follows: "To have too much is to want more. New ideas, book learning, singing in several voices are unnecessary and dangerous. The desire for knowledge leads to pride and self-deception. To long for change is to fight one's destiny. Fighting one's destiny is rebellion against God. Man's duty is to obey, pray, work, and wait in terror for God's wrath."⁵

Froom is an example of a scholar who has made a contribution to the history of millennialism-fundamentalism from within the movement.⁶ In my opinion, his documentation was the necessary precondition for the Sandeen study. Coming to his material without the conventional biases of the academic historian, Froom brought to the attention of the tiny segment of the scholarly world interested in such things a vast amount of data that it seemed determined to ignore. Because Froom's purpose is apologetic, he displays biases. But do his biases blind him more seriously than the biases of conventionally trained historians who have bypassed such matters as the millennialism of Christopher Columbus?

Probably not. But we must insist that it would be better to have our history straight — without apologetic intent. The principal obstacle is one of the aspects of a fundamentalist's minority condition. The potential scholars in fundamentalist communities generally attend schools operated by their denominations, and usually these persons take employment in one of such schools. This practice is widely believed to restrict their freedom to come out with unpopular conclusions.

And what is to keep these scholars from pursuing their vocation elsewhere? It would be idle to deny that prejudice against a known fundamentalist exists in the academic world. So the mere getting of a job is not at all easy, even for the possessor of the proper credentials. Beyond this, there is the difficulty of making a midcourse adjustment (the hesitation of most people when facing a move that will bring the frown of relatives and colleagues, and even spouses and children) plus a host of other factors that lead the fundamentalist who contemplates "going outside" to feel rather like a patriot contemplating treason.

The fundamentalist school's nominal commitment to academic freedom notwithstanding — if a member of an accrediting association begins to snoop in this area, he must find a faculty member who has arrived at an unwelcome conclusion and has suffered for it. Such people are hard to find. They are in a position similar to that of the television newsman who claims to have felt the "chilling effect" of a governmental threat to withhold his

station's license. Either the investigations are not carried out or the conclusions are altered to fit the stomachs of the audience.

Along with obvious economic aspects, then, the principal motive for scholarship in fundamentalist schools is the concern to show that conventional conclusions are invalid and that the sect has been right all along. Given this situation, we are the more grateful to Sandeen for his contribution. We hope that it will stimulate further studies in social, psychological, economic, and theological history.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (The University of Chicago Press 1970).
- 2 LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, four volumes (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1950-1954).
- 3 George Marsden, An article defining "Fundamentalism," *Christian Scholar's Review*, pp. 141-151 (Winter 1971).
- 4 Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House 1970).
- 5 Rudy H. Wiebe, *The Blue Mountain of China* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1970), p. 100.
- 6 Froom is a Seventh-day Adventist.