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Review: Apostles of Reason, Part III

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 13, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Today, I conclude my review of Molly Worthen?s *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*.

As I mentioned in the first part of this review [1], Worthen is great at providing vignettes that not only illustrate her point but enliven the text, such as the luncheon exchange between Carl Henry and Karl Barth. Another such telling vignette comes from 1961, when Mennonite leaders, who wished to engage the neo-evangelicals but were also suspicious of their approach, had a breakfast meeting with evangelist Billy Graham. ?Graham was the consummate diplomat,? Worthen writes, noting that he was encouraging of continued dialogue, said he ?could easily be one of [the Mennonites] in about 99% of what had been said,? and applauded the Mennonites? emphasis on discipleship. ?At the same time, Graham was leery of appearing to chummy with a group that was, as far as the rest of the evangelical world was concerned, marginal,? Worthen adds. ?He insisted that no press release quote him directly.? The episode shows the preacher at his empathetic, and diplomatic, best as well as illustrating the almost political calculations that accompanied efforts to craft a united front among evangelicals.

Earlier, I related Worthen?s account of the challenge Mennonite leader John Yoder posed to the neo-evangelical movement. Worthen quotes from his letters and public writings but she also takes time to introduce the reader to the man. We learn that he was born in a Mennonite community in Ohio, went to Goshen College, then took his doctorate at the University of Basel, studying under both biblical theologian Oscar Cullmann and existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, as well as attending Barth?s seminars and developing a habit of following the great theologian around at social events. We are introduced to some of his non-Anabaptist acquaintances with whom he would carry on correspondence for years. On of the sins of many intellectual historians is that they are too quick to focus exclusively on ideas and spend little time introducing the reader to the actors. In a few sentences, Worthen makes Yoder a person, not a mere repository of ideas, which not only keeps the book from growing dull, it is actually a useful antidote to a fixation on ideas as if they were disembodied propositions, existing in some intellectual ether.

The reader of *Apostles of Reason* is introduced to other fascinating actors along the way with similar biographical sketches. One of the most interesting is Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, a Church of the Nazarene scholar who with her husband served as a co-pastor and missionary for twenty years. She decided to extend her education beyond the borders of her denomination, attending Western Evangelical Seminary and then earning a doctorate at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, where Carl Henry had matriculated. Her doctoral dissertation focused on the historical and semantic aspects of the debate over biblical inerrancy. In 1961, she went to Japan to teach and served as the founding president of the Nazarene seminary in that country, returning to the U.S. in 1966 to direct the department of missions at a Nazarene College in Tennessee. She finished her illustrious academic career at the Nazarene seminary in Kansas City, serving as theologian-in-residence. Her 1972 book, *A Theology of Love*, became required reading at many Nazarene seminaries and had a profound influence on the curricula at the denomination?s Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools.

Later in the book, the reader is introduced to Rousas John Rushdoony and Francis Schaeffer, men who had a

profound impact on late twentieth century evangelicalism. Rushdoony was to the evangelicals what the Acton Institute is for Catholics: He tried to effect a marriage between the libertarian impulses of Austrian economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, and in this marriage, the child would be Christian Reconstructionism, ?a plan for transforming government and culture according to Christian presuppositions.? I suppose that would be one way to confront the forces of secularization. Schaeffer was ?a brilliant demagogue who offered up all of Western history in an hour?s lecture, stripped of confusing nuance,? as Worthen writes. He also got into bed with libertarians and his final book, *A Christian Manifesto*, ?drew a direct line from the Reformers through seventeenth-century Scottish theologian Samuel Rutherford, who advocated limited government based on the theory of covenant in Deuteronomy, to Presbyterian minister and Founding Father John Witherspoon ? and called for civil disobedience if today?s politicians failed to honor America?s founding values.? Schaeffer had a profound impact on the Christian lawyers who worked with the libertarian Rutherford Institute to litigate religious liberty cases. Schaeffer?s books were best-sellers, outselling Kane Fonda?s workout tomes, Worthen notes. His ideas continue to shape the religio-political landscape of American evangelicalism and I think Worthen captures the essence of the man and his ideas when she writes, ?Schaeffer wanted evangelical Americans to become soldiers of history rather than careful students?.Schaeffer?s ministry was a grand and clever exercise in anti-intellectualism.?

Worthen treats all of the subjects in her book with both carefulness and empathy. She is no Mencken and never treats the evangelicals she surveys as bumpkins; She takes them every bit as seriously as they took themselves. And, her treatment of the ideas that shaped this crisis of authority receives all the nuance and energy they demand, even if the reader ends up wondering if those ideas always deserve it. Thus, when one reaches the end of the volume, her verdicts on this history are highly persuasive.

Four conclusions jump out at me. The first I quoted on Tuesday but will post again here:

Fundamentalism is a paradox. Its partisans ? of any faith ? call for the return to an imagined arcadia in which God?s voice boomed plainly from scripture. Yet as a historical phenomenon, fundamentalism is wholly modern. It is a set of reactions against the aftershocks of the Enlightenment and the evolution of global capitalism: the breach between faith and reason, the rise of the secular public square, and the collapse of traditional social hierarchies and ways of life. Creatures of modernity, fundamentalists have happily availed themselves of modern technology. Fundamentalists ranging from separatist Baptist preachers to Al Qaeda propagandists have demonstrated a genius for employing the latest media and political (or military) weaponry to spread their message and accomplish their aims. To fundamentalists, history, too, is a technology: a trove of data to be strategically deployed.

The only thing I would add is this: It is clear that modernity requires religion to play on its turf. We preach and pray in the world and our world is a modern world. But, I wonder if it has been necessary for fundamentalists ? and it is not only fundamentalists ? to have agreed to let modernity set all the rules. It is one thing to permit modernity home field advantage, although every field is, to the believer, a new avenue for evangelization. But, why not resist the temptation to play by modernity?s rules by engaging in a culture war when ours is the Gospel to proclaim?

The second conclusion is this:

The decisive battles over the meaning and role of the Bible in modern society did not, primarily, unfold in the form of dueling proof texts or Sunday pulpit ripostes, but in skirmishes for control of the machinery of intellectual authority: seminaries, mission boards, denominational presses, and authorized church history.

So much for *sola scriptura*. Turns out even a church that tries to understand itself as a mere conduit for biblical belief will be knee deep in ecclesiology as soon as there is an issue that requires discussion and the desire to see one?s point of view vindicated.

The third conclusion Worthen delivers comes at the end of her examination of the Emergent Church movement, a recent development in evangelical circles but one which Worthen believes highlight tensions found from the beginning. She writes:

The limitations of the Emergent Church follow the pattern apparent throughout American evangelical history: the dilemma of a community that extols individualism but ensnares every individual in a web of clashing authorities. This conflict has been sharpest in higher education, where ? because of financial and cultural pressure to accommodate secular norms ? evangelicals have made the greatest strides in balancing these contesting standards. They still struggle, however, to please two gods: to negotiate between the professional mainstream and their own constituents.

This conflict has played itself out very differently in our Catholic tradition, for obvious reasons, but the struggle is still there. And, like the evangelicals, there is nary a debate within Catholicism that does not eventually come down to ?clashing authorities.?

The final conclusion of Worthen?s that merits highlighting comes at the end of her look at sociologist James Davison Hunter?s book *To Change the World.* She writes:

The phenomena Hunter identifies spring from evangelicals? crisis of authority. The anti-intellectual inclinations in evangelical culture stem not from wholehearted and confident obedience to scripture, or the assurance that God will eventually corral all nonbelievers, but from deep disagreements over what the Bible means, a sincere desire to uphold the standards of modern reason alongside God?s word ? and the defensive reflexes that outsiders? skepticism provokes. The cult of the Christian worldview is one symptom of the effort by many evangelical leaders to fold competing sources of authority into one, to merge inference with assumptions. The evangelicals who adopt this soft presuppositionalism hope that it might prove to be a viable political currency, one that can but cultural capital where proof texts and personal testimony fail.

There is a lot to unpack in that paragraph if you have not read the book. Which leads me to my final verdict: Read this book. Worthen has made an invaluable contribution to understanding the recent history of American evangelicalism and, if you don?t understand something of 20th century evangelicalism, you don?t understand America, and you certainly don?t understand how Catholics often get tangled up in debates framed in terms quite alien to our tradition but touching on the core issue modernity poses to all churches, the issue of authority. That these important issues come with a prose that is light and lively is a further blessing. Hats off, ladies and gentlemen: A genius has entered the room and her name is Molly Worthen.

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