

Matthew Avery Sutton. *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015. 480 pages. \$26.33.

How evangelicals who were once considered outsiders to the project of U.S. nationalism and deficient in patriotic fervor became counted among the boldest of flag-wavers a century later is just one example of the historical evolutions that Sutton explores in what is among the best in recent monographs explaining the triumphal advance of conservative Protestant evangelicalism. Sutton's book joins top-shelf works like Darren Dochuk's *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* (W.W. Norton, 2012), resisting the tendency of so many other scholars to locate evangelical political mobilization in the postwar years, or even later, in the 1970s, with the rise of the Christian Right, but rather much earlier. Like Dochuk, Sutton speaks not only to experts in the fields of U.S. history and religious studies, but also an educated popular audience, some of whom must still be asking, Where *did* these people come from? And educators, preachers, and students of worship will find his research illuminating for mapping one major trajectory of U.S. Christian identity.

Sutton invites readers inside a meticulously woven investigation of a loose movement of American Protestants he calls "radical evangelicals." For Sutton this category includes fundamentalists, Pentecostals, neo-evangelicals and other fellow travelers, northerners, southerners, and westerners. The radical evangelicals at the heart of his narrative are white men, and he says as much. Yet Sutton's discussion of African-American premillennialists is substantial, and he shows how their line of interpretation sometimes intersected but more often diverged from the movement's white leadership. While Sutton understands the nuances of difference between and among these various groups, he claims that a theological preoccupation with the imminent return of Jesus was much more consequential than what set them apart.

Sutton argues that premillennial apocalypticism with its fantasies of dispensations, rapture, and violent tribulation lies at the heart of so-called evangelicalism. If Sutton's focus is pragmatically narrow, his scope is impressively wide. This is a big book, but despite its heft, Sutton's encyclopedic research of manuscripts and published archives and crisp prose style captures the reader's attention and holds it. In eleven chronological chapters, Sutton takes us from the late nineteenth century to the present, guiding us through pivotal moments when prophecy belief spiked, compelling evangelicals toward greater cohesion and more political influence.

There's an old saying that prophecy believers keep the newspaper in one hand while they read the Bible in the other. The point is that apostles of premillennialism parse the meaning of obscure prophetic passages to make sense of the dizzying complexity of local, national, and geopolitical events. Sutton's historical survey shows this dexterity at work in many contexts, from its leaders' opposition to Jazz Age gender-bending, to their contempt for New Deal "socialism," to the redbaiting and anti-Soviet politics of the Cold War period, and beyond into the war on terror of our post 9/11 moment.

The central irony Sutton identifies is that of men and a few women (including Aimee Semple McPherson, the subject of an earlier book by Sutton) who are hell-bent on transforming a world they believe is soon ending. This determination leads to the political engagement that increasingly defined evangelicalism and propelled the movement from the margins of American culture and politics toward its center, and eventually, into the corridors of state power.

Sutton also reminds us of what we've always known about evangelicals—they (we?) are prolific communicators, whose use of printed matter and radio has been key to the dissemination of the premillennial gospel. Sutton doesn't extend his analysis of media into the eras of cable

television and new media, and that is one of the book's few shortcomings. Today we might say that radical evangelicals gaze at the ticker on Fox News, while reading Bibles on iPad apps and watching a live stream from Trinity Broadcasting Network's Jerusalem bureau.

Sutton's *American Apocalypse* is a superb work, for the power and clarity of its argument, the breadth and depth of the author's archival investigation, and the skill and sheen of his storytelling. He provides plenty of detail to explore where evangelicals were coming from. Yet *American Apocalypse* falls short of answering the all-important question, "Why?" Why is it that so many evangelical Christians in the United States have embraced the conviction—perhaps even taken delight in the notion—that the world stands on the brink of cataclysmic change through convulsive violence? To answer that question requires a riskier interpretive leap than Sutton's. No one work can supply all the answers since there are so many possible paths of analysis, but Sutton's *American Apocalypse* stands as an indispensable guide. Maybe readers should hold Sutton's work in one hand, and in the other, Jason Bivins' *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford, 2008). Read together, these books provide not only indispensable facts and historical narration, but also bold hunches that help explain why apocalyptic theologies attract so many in an age when democratic values everywhere are under attack.

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