Selling the Old-Time Religion: Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920–1940. *By Douglas Carl Abrams.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. xiv + 168 pp. Index, notes, bibliography. Cloth, $35.00. ISBN 0-820-322946.

Reviewed by Peter Wosh

Few places and times might seem less congenial to fundamentalist values than the United States of America in the 1920s. Conservative Christians appeared under siege, culturally and theologically. A consumer-oriented social order flourished that glorified excess, privileged pleasure, sanctified leisure, and valued material affluence above all else. Movies, radio stations, and popular magazines broadcast wise-cracking, wide-open, and urbanely cynical messages into every corner of the nation. These new media outlets helped to create a mass culture that seemingly rode roughshod over traditional community values. Religious and ethnic diversity thrived in America's metropolitan centers, as Catholics and Jews reconfigured the urban landscape with steeples and synagogues. Modernist theologians exerted considerable influence within the major Protestant polities. Historical criticism threatened biblical inerrancy. Religious conservatives, who once dominated America's temples of learning, now appeared marginal to the nation's reigning academic and intellectual elites. It is no wonder that fundamentalist leaders perhaps felt a bit alienated and generally out of sorts.

However, as Douglas Carl Abrams demonstrates, fundamentalist reactions to early-twentieth-century mass culture proved more ambiguous, complex, and varied than the preceding portrait suggests. Ambivalence remains the main analytical concept of this book. No dogmatic fundamentalist "party line" conditioned reactions to early-twentieth-century business culture. Conservative Christians were as confused and conflicted as most other Americans concerning changes in the economic order. Many fundamentalist leaders embraced consumer capitalism, viewing prosperity as a sign of divine favor. Others incorporated modern advertising techniques, sales pitches, promotional extravaganzas, and media productions into their ministries. Some built substantial institutional empires by aggressively adapting contemporary fund-raising principles and bureaucratic forms to their efforts, linking their fortunes to wealthy patrons and businessmen. A few sharply criticized American capitalist culture, maintaining an uncompromising defiance toward secular society. Most remained supremely confident that they could effortlessly balance worldliness and religion without corrupting the latter. They retained some critical distance but felt comfortable utilizing the forms of secular culture in order to advance spiritual purposes. Business means could well serve fundamentalist ends.

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Abrams's book reflects the emergence of new trends in fundamentalist historiography, as exemplified by the work of such scholars as George Marsden, Joel Carpenter, and Michael Hamilton. These historians view the period between the world wars as a critical moment of self-definition and institutional expansion within the fundamentalist movement. Religious conservatives, operating below the radar of both the mainline Protestant denominations and secular media outlets, built a powerful organizational network, consolidated their endeavors, and fashioned a new relationship with American culture during this time. Bible schools, Christian colleges, radio ministries, publishing houses, and urban tabernacles remained central to their efforts. Abrams spends considerable time examining such key institutions as the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Bob Jones College, Moody Bible Institute, and Wheaton College, ably demonstrating the ways in which they incorporated modern business practices and contemporary technology into their operations. He also concentrates primarily on the most visible and vocal ministerial leaders within the fundamentalist movement: Bob Jones Sr., James M. Gray, Paul Rader, Charles G. Trumbull, John Roach Straton, William Bell Riley, and James O. Buswell.

These authorial choices constitute the book's principal strengths and weaknesses. Abrams paints richly subtle portraits of inherently interesting individuals and institutions. His examination of Bob Jones College illustrates the point. He traces the college's genesis as a utopian community financed by its founder through a series of shrewd Florida real-estate deals. He documents the college's failure during the Great Depression and examines its rebirth in Tennessee as a most "modern" college in terms of facilities and teaching methods, but one that, in the words of its splashy advertising campaigns, also brooked "NO COMPROMISE WITH SO-CALLED MODERNISM" (p. 57). Bob Jones College cultivated a highbrow image, developed innovative arts programs and dramatic presentations that placed it in conflict with other fundamentalist educational institutions, and walked a fine line by embracing theatrical forms in its curriculum while rejecting most modern theatrical content in its rhetoric. The disagreements between Bob Jones Sr. and Bob Jones Jr. over curricular change and cultural attitudes also suggest a broader generational divide within fundamentalist leadership that requires further examination.

Still, this study remains based on the words and occasional deeds of a relatively small number of male ministerial fundamentalist elites. We learn little about the way in which lay fundamentalists, even wealthy and prominent ones, actually managed their own economic enterprises or conducted their business affairs. Most information concerning the religious rank and file is deduced from sparse anecdotal evidence and brief references in relatively obscure religious periodicals. Abrams demonstrates that there was considerable diversity within the

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fundamentalist leaders' reactions to modernity, but they appear as a remarkably homogenous group in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, class, social background, educational attainment, and political leanings. The degree to which they were representative, even within the fundamentalist subculture, appears questionable, and Abrams sometimes too easily assumes that this small cadre of fundamentalist leaders spoke for all American fundamentalists.

Despite this caveat, *Selling the Old-Time Religion* makes a very useful contribution to the growing body of scholarship that considers the relation between business and religion in modern America. Readers might profitably consider it alongside the collection of essays edited by Larry Eskridge and Mark A. Noll, *More Money, More Ministry: Money and Evangelicals in Recent North American History* (2000). Both volumes illustrate the fact that religious reactions to economic change often veer in unanticipated ideological directions. Early-twentieth-century theological conservatives, for example, regularly excoriated denominational liberals for embracing modernism and failing to take a stance that was critical of American cultural excesses. Abrams and his colleagues certainly demonstrate that fundamentalists stood firm against alcohol, flappers, jazz, and cinema sex. For a truly prophetic and consistently antimodern cultural critique of consumer capitalism, however, both cultural historians and committed Christians would be well advised to look beyond the borders of Bob Jones College and Moody Bible Institute.

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