

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

G. M. MARSDEN AND B. J. LONGFIELD

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The fundamentalist-modernist controversy was an extended conflict in the Protestant churches and American society at large between religious liberals, who sought to preserve Christianity by accommodating the traditional faith to modern culture, and militant theological conservatives, determined to save evangelical Christianity and American civilization from the advances of modernism and Darwinism.

In 1865 most Americans thought of their country as a Christian nation and looked on evangelical Protestantism as the national religion. Though the evangelical establishment was marked by denominational rivalries and marred by divisions between Northern and Southern churches, it demonstrated an impressive unity of beliefs and values. In the years between the Civil War and World War 1, this consensus dissolved. Differing responses to the profound intellectual and social changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced sharp divisions in American Protestantism which, in the wake of World War 1, erupted in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.

A revolution in thinking challenged traditional Christianity in the years after Appomattox. The publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in 1859 and the subsequent rise of evolutionary philosophy attacked dearly held beliefs about the accuracy of the Bible and God's providential design. Additionally, changes in the study of history, sociology, psychology and world religions and the Bible questioned the possibility of absolute religious and moral truth. Profound social changes added to the cultural turbulence. Immense immigration, rapid urbanization and industrialization, and the gradual secularization of society all presented formidable challenges to America's churches.

Evangelical Protestants responded to these changes in different ways. Many, accepting the advances in science, history and biblical studies, set out to save Christianity by adjusting the traditional faith to modern intellectual trends. These liberals, or so-called modernists, built on the foreign philosophical tradition of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and German Idealism and the religious thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889). In addition, they were heavily influenced by Unitarianism, Transcendentalism and the religious thought of Horace Bushnell. By the

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1880s an identifiable movement known as the “New Theology” had arisen. Pastors such as Theodore Munger and theologians like William Newton Clarke worked to accommodate the old faith to new ways of thinking. By the end of World War 1 liberals were well entrenched in the major Northern denominations, dominating perhaps half of the seminaries and a third of the Protestant pulpits.

Liberal theology placed particular stress on the idea of divine immanence. Enamored of evolutionary thought, modernists insisted that God revealed himself through the progress of history. This affirmation led to an optimistic world view manifested in an irrepressible faith in the goodness and freedom of mankind and the inevitable movement of history toward the fulfillment of the kingdom of God on earth.

Experience provided the final religious authority for modernists. Doctrines were seen as tentative and historically conditioned accounts of unchanging religious feelings. This emphasis allowed liberals to endorse wholeheartedly the findings of biblical higher criticism. Since the Bible was only an historically limited record of the progressive self-revelation of God to Israel, historical or scientific difficulties could be overlooked as anachronistic expressions of abiding religious experience.

Finally, ethics became the test of religious truth. In liberal circles concern for life here eclipsed interest in the life hereafter. The divinity of Jesus was commonly attributed to his ethical and religious perfection, and the church was understood to be an agency for moral action and development. Many liberals, insisting that the purpose of Christianity was to transform society into God’s kingdom, became vocal proponents of the Social Gospel.

While liberals were making peace with modernity by adjusting Christianity to culture, some conservatives engaged in theological innovations that would influence the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s. Most significant was the development of dispensational premillennialism, primarily by the Englishman John Nelson Darby. Popularized in America by Bible and prophecy conferences, the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) and numerous Bible institutes, dispensationalism was a complex method of literal biblical interpretation that divided history into seven eras, each marked by a different covenant between God and humanity. According to this scheme, the present age was destined to irreversible spiritual decline that would end only with the supernatural personal return and millennial reign of Christ. The dispensationalist view of the Bible as divinely inspired and without error found contemporary scholarly support in the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy formulated by nondispensationalist Presbyterian conservatives, most notably Benjamin B. Warfield, at Princeton Theological Seminary.

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Another conservative development that affected fundamentalism was the Keswick Holiness Movement. The Keswick teaching, a brand of Calvinistic holiness imported from England, emphasized a personal experience of “consecration,” followed by a filling with the Holy Spirit for a life of service. By the early twentieth century, Keswick holiness, which was popularized by many of the conferences, institutes and publications that promoted dispensationalism, had become an influential force among numerous theological conservatives.

Around the turn of the century, conservative Protestants began to forge alliances to defend supernatural Bible-based Christianity against the advances of the more naturalistic liberal theology. The clearest manifestation of this nascent coalition was the publication of twelve paperback volumes entitled *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915). The essays in these works addressed diverse topics, but almost all contributors defended the authority of the Scriptures against the claims of modern science and higher criticism. While the coalition behind *The Fundamentals* adumbrated the postwar conservative alliance, the essays were notably free of the militancy that would characterize fundamentalism in the 1920s.

In the heat of the cultural crisis that gripped America after World War 1, fundamentalism emerged as a distinct movement and the long-developing differences between liberals and conservatives exploded in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Modernists, more aggressive and influential than ever, and fundamentalists, sure that liberal theology and Darwinism were undermining Christianity and American civilization, squared off for battle. As the controversy intensified, theological moderates moved to one extreme or the other, polarizing church and society. In 1920 the conservative Curtis L. Laws coined the term *fundamentalist* to describe those willing “to do battle royal for the Fundamentals.” Eventually, the term *fundamentalist* came to refer to militantly antimodernistic Protestant evangelicals in general.

Fundamentalists and modernists fought on two fronts: the churches and the culture at large. In the major denominations and their mission fields, conservatives sought to halt liberalism by requiring subscription to traditional doctrines of supernaturalist Christianity, such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection and miracle-working power of Christ and premillennialism. In *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), J. Gresham Machen articulated the conservative claim that modernism was not Christianity and that liberals, therefore, ought to withdraw from the churches. Liberals, led by Harry Emerson Fosdick and Shailer Mathews, insisted that they were evangelical Christians and appealed to the American sense of liberty and tolerance. Denominational battles were especially intense among the Northern Baptists, Northern Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ, where both

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modernism and fundamentalism had strong and vocal representation. The Episcopalians and Northern Methodists, dominated by moderates and liberals, experienced minor skirmishes. Most Southern denominations, controlled by conservatives, remained relatively calm. By 1926 the liberal appeal to tolerance had, essentially, succeeded. To the dismay of the fundamentalists, the churches refused to drive modernists from their ranks.

In the culture generally, a variety of interdenominational groups, such as the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, and a host of fundamentalist stars—William Bell Riley, John Roach Straton and J. Frank Norris—led by three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, sought to save American civilization from the effects of Darwinism. Many conservatives had concluded that German military atrocities, biblical higher criticism, modernist theology and the revolution in morals of the twenties were all directly attributable to the spread of atheistic evolutionary philosophy. Darwinism, by sanctioning the law of hate, paralyzed the Christian conscience and threatened American democracy. To halt this apostasy a number of Southern states had, by the mid-1920s, passed laws banning the teaching of organic evolution in the public schools. This movement resulted in the famous Scopes trial of 1925 where Bryan and agnostic lawyer Clarence Darrow faced off amidst a carnival atmosphere in Dayton, Tennessee. Though John Scopes was convicted of teaching biological evolution in a local school, the Eastern press coverage, which characterized fundamentalists as ignorant hicks, and Bryan's simplistic defense of the Bible under Darrow's cross-examination, did irreparable damage to the fundamentalist cause. With Bryan's death five days after the trial, fundamentalism lost its most conspicuous leader. In the culture at large, as in the churches, the controversy wound down after 1926.

Fundamentalism and modernism underwent significant changes after 1930. Conservatives, enjoying impressive gains both inside and outside of the major denominations, regrouped and emerged later in the century as evangelicals and fundamentalists. Liberals responded to the challenges of the Great Depression, growing international tensions and neo-orthodoxy by abandoning their sanguine view of humanity and history. Nevertheless, the battles of the 1920s had profoundly altered the shape of American Protestantism. Henceforth, divisions between conservative and liberal Christians would far overshadow differences based on formal denominational ties.

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G. M. Marsden and B. J. Longfield
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