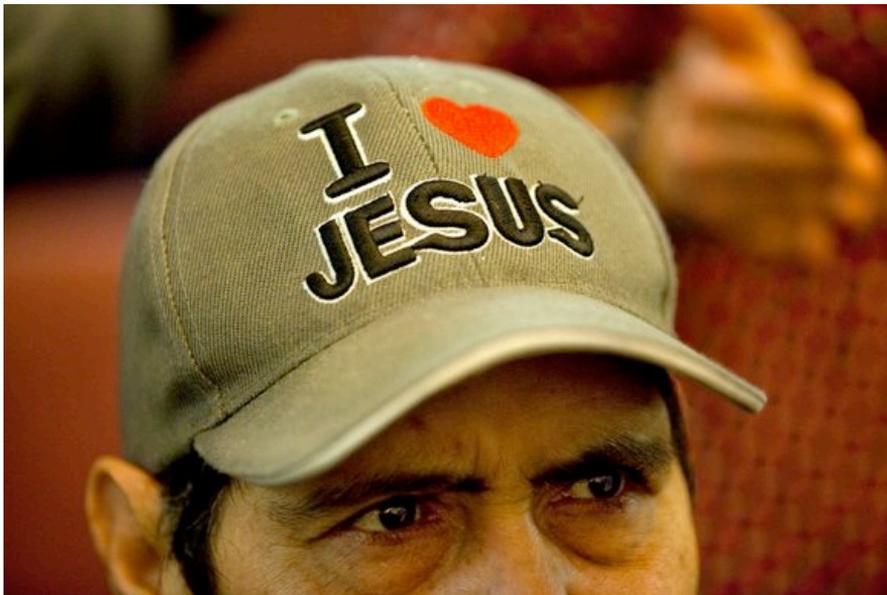




American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism by Matthew Avery Sutton

The relentless rise to prominence of US evangelicalism

Tony Allen-Mills Published: 21 December 2014



Come again? True believers look forward to Armageddon (Stetson Freeman)

characters, jarring beliefs and a supporting cast of “adulterers, fornicators, liars, hypocrites, bums, hobos, rascals, scoundrels, crapshooters, tramps and loafers”, as one preacher helpfully comments. And if one or two of Sutton’s chapters get a little bogged down in doctrinal discussions of “pre-millennialists”, “anti-modernists” and “churchly, creedal conservatives”, he is very acute on the central paradox of Armageddon lore: true believers are looking ecstatically forward to all that death and pestilence, because only after the world is in flames can the faithful be rewarded with the second coming of Jesus.

Nowhere is this peculiar clash between fear and hope better illustrated than in the case of a 13-year-old girl named Ruth Bell, the daughter of an American missionary in China, who, in the early 1930s, was not remotely unsettled by her father’s warnings that the Antichrist was on the march. “Oh, just think,” Bell wrote to him, “the end of the world may come soon and then we will be so happy.” Bell’s belief in impending apocalypse never wavered; she went on to marry Billy Graham, the hugely influential evangelist, but died aged 87 with Jesus still not here.

The growth of American fundamentalism started, Sutton suggests, rather incongruously, with the Oxford University Press, which, in 1909, published a heavily annotated version of the Bible concocted by a hard-drinking Tennessee theologian named Cyrus Ingerson Scofield. Scofield’s Bible introduced millions of new readers to the “Rapture”, a concept of celestial rescue based on the notion in Thessalonians that “we who are

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IT HAS always been difficult for outsiders to explain modern America’s dogged and pervasive enthusiasm for Christian fundamentalism, and the sort of apocalyptic “end times” scenarios that feature a mass departure to celestial safety while nonbelievers burn in hellfire.

Where did this streak of religious doomsaying come from? And how did American evangelicalism mutate from wild-eyed preachers in the early 20th century standing on street corners and warning that the end is nigh, to a formidable political force that recent presidents dare not ignore?

It is to the great credit of Matthew Avery Sutton, an American historian who has spent the past seven years “thinking about the end of the world”, that we now have a concise, convincing and eminently readable account of the rise of the US evangelical movement, from what he describes as “provocative outsiders to consummate insiders”.

In *American Apocalypse*, Sutton traces its improbable spread. It is a disquieting story filled with outrageous

alive and remain” will be “caught up in the clouds” to meet “the Lord in the air”. This spawned a century of feverish imaginings about who would be saved (whether by angels or spaceships or passing clouds) and who would be left behind.

After Scofield’s prodigiously imaginative biblical theorising, “end times” anticipation spread rapidly, aided in part by the outbreak of the First World War. Among the prominent voices of the time was a fire-breathing preacher named Billy Sunday, a former player for the Chicago White Stockings baseball team, who seized on Germany’s emperor, Wilhelm II, as the Antichrist incarnate. Sunday railed against the “hungry wolfish huns” who were also a “dirty bunch of pretzel-chewing, [sausage]-eating highbinders”.

Yet somehow the world failed to end before the war did in 1918, and a series of postwar setbacks curtailed the growth of evangelical fervour. Most prominent of these was the so-called “monkey” trial of 1925, when a Tennessee teacher named John Scopes was charged with defying a state law banning Darwin’s scandalous evolutionary theories from polite Christian classrooms. Scopes was found guilty after a landmark debate, but in the trial’s aftermath, writes Sutton, fundamentalism increasingly came to be seen as “anti-intellectual... rural and intolerant”.

A resurgence in Christian hopes of apocalypse came with another world war. Once again a ready-made Satan stepped forward — not, initially, Adolf Hitler, but his posturing Italian sidekick, Mussolini, who, when told that many Americans regarded him as the Antichrist, was apparently quite pleased.

As the war unfolded, American fundamentalists began to soften their image. “Rather than living as dissidents and exiles, simply buying time until the Rapture, they sought to protect the US from divine judgment,” writes Sutton. They relabelled themselves “evangelicals”, and a new generation of charismatic preachers, led by Graham, shook up the traditional church establishment.

By the late 1970s, conservative Republicans had begun to sense the potential power of the evangelical vote, and in 1979, the Rev Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority pressure group was born. At its peak, the group claimed 7m followers; all it needed was a political leader who understood the value of the Christian vote. In 1980, it found one, and Ronald Reagan was elected president.

Reagan may not have been a serious believer himself, but the conservative former Hollywood actor instinctively knew that labelling Russia “the evil empire” would resonate with millions of God-fearing Americans.

Sutton’s valuable, timely and often entertaining account more or less ends with Reagan; no president that followed would dare ignore evangelical voters, and with the election in 2000 of George W Bush, they had one of their own in the White House. The mainstream rebranding of American evangelicalism has tended to mute apocalyptic discourse of late, but Sutton notes that according to past polls, 79% of US Christians still believe in the second coming, and 41% of all Americans think Jesus will get here by 2050. As a force in American life, the evangelicals are still very much to be reckoned with.

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