


# Fundamentalists U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education

Laats, Adam
Oxford University Press, 2018

Book Review

Tags: evangelical higher education | fundamentalist education | higher education

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The aim of *Fundamentalist U* is to "offer a more complete history of fundamentalist and conservative evangelical higher education" including the daily functioning of evangelicalism. The schools studied include Wheaton University, Gordon College, Biola University, Moody Bible Institute, Bob Jones University, and Liberty University.

The task at all these schools is to balance academic legitimacy while maintaining reputations for religious purity. Laats defines the (evolving) distinctives of Christian fundamentalism and evangelicalism; outlines what it has meant for these schools to be "real" colleges or universities; demonstrates how the schools function as centers for both evangelicalism and fundamentalism; and examines the methods, models, and tools they have used to teach new generations of students.

The distinctive realm of Christian fundamentalism includes an interdenominational religious network of K-12 schools, colleges, universities, and Bible institutes dedicated to the promulgation of orthodox Christianity and to "remaining true to the supernatural truths of real religion as revealed once and for all in the pages of an inerrant Bible" (5). It means maintaining a belligerent stance against modernism, high levels of authority vested in personalities and charismatic leaders, a defense of Whiteness, and rigid positions on race which are elevated into tests of loyalty.

The distinctives of Christian fundamentalism (for example, conservatism) include a policing of all sexual behavior including homosexuality (which is framed as the ultimate sexual sin); traditional cultural attitudes around gender, family structure, and sexuality; and a constant

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monitoring of faculty and students regarding orthodox belief and action, in order, in part, to maintain their donor base, please fundamentalist parents, and ensure a regular flow of new students.

Laats examines evangelicalism's evolution into neo-evangelicalism, characterized by a willingness to critically examine beliefs, preparing students for missionary work, and the grafting of small government, free-market ideologies onto theology. Changing ideas about civil rights and racial equality forced schools to admit that racial segregation was an important part of evangelical character, that racial integration was "anti-Christian perversion" and that, in the 1970s, a fear of miscegenation and opposition to school desegregation orders fueled the formation of thousands of new K-12 Christian schools. Laats also outlines how the six schools studied became important intellectual centers for religious and political conservatism.

The first unfortunate aspect of the book is that moderate black, brown, and white believers who are part of the evangelical tableau are not characterized. Second, a short section on what racism, anti-blackness, and white supremacy meant and still mean for African Americans is a much needed addition. That is, an acknowledgment that the toxic mix of equating whiteness with true Americanism, unqualified support of war, and the easy inclusion of conservative political orthodoxy with theology would have provided some ballast that most students and teachers would find useful pedagogically. Still, this is an excellent introductory text on (white) Christian fundamentalism and evangelicalism. It is well-researched, well-written, and a pleasure to read.

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