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## Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism (Book Review)

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# Book Reviews

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Worthen, Molly, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 2013. 376 pages. ISBN 978-0199896462. Review by Scott Culpepper, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

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If the primary goal of an author writing an academic work is to illicit intense debate, then Molly Worthen's *Apostle of Reason* is wildly successful. Worthen's comprehensive exploration of what she calls a "crisis of authority" within contemporary evangelicalism exposes the tensions at the very center of American Christianity and tips more than a few sacred cows. She identifies the issue of clashing authorities as the basic conflict within contemporary evangelicalism. This conflict in turn drives the intellectual, political and evangelistic approaches that evangelicals have pursued in order to influence American culture.

Worthen, an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, focuses on this clash of authorities from the very beginning of *Apostles of Reason*. In the introduction, she argues that "[t]he central source of anti-intellectualism in evangelical life is the antithesis of 'authoritarianism.' It is evangelicals' ongoing crisis of authority—their struggle to reconcile reason with revelation, heart with head, and private piety with the public square—that best explains their anxiety and their animosity toward intellectual life" (2). Yet Worthen also quickly insists that this same desire to "reconcile" reason with revelation has pushed some evangelicals to embrace the life of the mind, even to the point of pursuing academic careers, just as other evangelicals reject academic authorities and instead rely on popular "experts."

The main catalyst for the tension between mind and heart in American evangelicalism, according to Worthen, is the adoption of presuppositionalism by several Reformed thinkers in the late nineteenth century. She identifies the development of the Princeton school of theology, and the formulation of biblical inerrancy as a theological concept, as contributors to a greater dependence on presuppositionalism and propositionalism in evangelical thought. Worthen also points to the public theology of Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper as essential to the adoption of presuppositionalism by evangelicals. It is Kuyper and his disciples who encouraged evan-

gelicals to recognize and highlight the influence of presuppositions on all worldviews, not just religious worldviews. The popularity of worldview construction based on Christian presuppositions, which now predominately orders evangelical thinking, is portrayed by Worthen as an alluring sphinx and a double-edged sword. According to Worthen, the same worldview emphasis that drives the more intellectual and socially active Reformed traditions was also utilized by the early founders of Neo-Evangelicalism in the 1940s and '50s to support a more populist form of the same vision. This populist form tended to emphasize the influence of nonacademic "experts." This movement leaned toward the anti-intellectual tendencies that many evangelicals and secular critics have long bemoaned in contemporary culture.

Several interesting facets of Worthen's argument are introduced as she fleshes out these main ideas throughout the book. After discussing the Reformed influence on the founding of Neo-Evangelicalism in the early 1940s, she then intimates that Reformed ideas and influence were penetrating other traditions attracted to the Neo-Evangelical movement who had not previously been concerned with worldview or inerrancy. Her particular focus on the influence of ideas she identifies as "Reformed" on Wesleyan and Anabaptist groups is particularly interesting. She portrays Anabaptist thinkers such as Harold Bender and John Howard Yoder as heroic purists determined to preserve the integrity of their tradition against persistent inroads of Reformed ideas. As she points out, certain Anabaptists found in Reformed theology "an appealing framework in which to respond to secular science and culture . . . , [yet o]thers wrestled to purge this influence and nurture internal renaissance—and even to "evangelize" the neo-evangelicals" (78). One particular concern of these theologians was the possibility that Reformed views of Scripture and society might lead members of the historic "peace" traditions to abandon their pacifism. This alleged Reformed transformation of other evangelical traditions is a major theme in Worthen's text. It is used in *Apostles of Reason* to account for the surge in evangelical inter-

est in academia as well as the rise of populist forms of worldview formation such as creation science and Christian Reconstructionism.

*Apostles of Reason* contains a fairly detailed account of evangelical thought and cultural engagement in the late twentieth century. Detail is definitely one of Worthen's strengths. *Apostles of Reason* differs from many treatments of evangelical life in American culture by broadening its scope to note how the international growth of evangelicalism has affected American evangelicalism. She also explores the influence of the Charismatic movement on evangelical life and worship. These influences and their tension with the intellectual tendencies toward presuppositional argument and the quest for intellectual respectability are portrayed as both destructive and creative aspects of evangelicalism. Worthen observes that while the "charismatic renewal swept through mainline Protestant and evangelical churches, converts mainstreamed and modernized practices long exiled to the margins of Christianity, supposedly the purview of snake-handlers who had resisted the taming of the Enlightenment" (142). In Worthen's view, international missions in particular have brought evangelicals into engagement with non-western traditions, whose thought-categories are not as amenable to an emphasis on worldview construction and presuppositional argument. Adjusting to these conditions on the mission field has helped to accentuate the more emotive and pietistic elements of evangelicalism, as well as give evangelicals a more objective perspective on American culture. Evangelical missionaries questioned the methods and morays of their parent culture in areas such as civil rights and church growth strategies. As Worthen succinctly puts it, "[i]deas that hatched in the mission field came home to roost" (133).

While Worthen captures the quest of more emotive evangelicals to weigh the head/heart balance in favor of the heart, she also explores the quest of other evangelicals to find more intellectual depth in worship and worldview. Her discussion of the Charismatic influence on evangelism is tempered with a parallel focus on those evangelicals whose intellectual spirituality eventually led them back to more traditional forms of worship. Noted evangelicals returned to Canterbury, Rome, and Constantinople in a quest to reconnect the future with more ancient forms of devotion.

Many books about evangelism have been written by evangelical scholars, but Worthen turns the microscope back on evangelical scholars in *Apostles of*

*Reason*. She describes how Francis Schaeffer's modified form of Kuyperianism inspired a generation of young scholars to pursue advanced studies in the humanities. These young evangelicals became part of an evangelical intellectual renaissance of sorts, one that both praised Schaeffer for his inspirational influence and also challenged his sometimes distorted interpretation of evidence. Schaeffer and his progeny parted ways when Schaeffer became more of a cultural warrior and evangelical academics focused on a more careful, nuanced engagement with secular academia. Commenting on Schaeffer's epistolary exchange with evangelical historian Mark Noll in the early 1980s, Worthen observes that "Schaeffer wanted evangelical Americans to become soldiers of history rather than careful students" (218).

The "culture war" and the emergence of the religious right feature prominently in the final chapters of the book. Worthen seems to intentionally resist arriving at this topic too soon due to her stated purpose to avoid the tendency of other scholars to make the evangelical story a primarily political story. Worthen's analysis of the political engagement of evangelicals is built on her previous foundation of emphasizing the ideas and theological ideologies of evangelicalism. For Worthen, even the activist and public parts of the puzzle are simply an extension of the battle of authorities at the heart of evangelical experience. Because evangelicalism derives so much of its energy from its internal battles and intellectual contradictions, Worthen prefers to use the term "evangelical imagination" rather than "evangelical mind" to describe the way evangelical reflection influences evangelical action. Her conclusion is that these tendencies are inherent in the evangelical construction of reality and will continue unresolved. As she puts it, "[t]he evangelical imagination has been both an aid to intellectual life and an agent of intellectual sabotage" (265). This "evangelical imagination" will continue to serve as a source of both inspiration and friction for evangelicals. Worthen concludes ironically that "[i]f the evangelical imagination harbors a potent anti-intellectual strain, it has proven, over time, to be a kind of genius" (265).

Worthen's work is impressive for its sheer scope and detail. She has a good command of the differences among evangelicals. Unlike many commentators on evangelicalism, she does not paint all evangelicals with the same label. One can disagree with the way she positions different groups within evangelicalism. For instance, Worthen appears to argue that the evangelical scholar who thinks that he or she is funda-

mentally different from a Ken Ham or David Barton is fooling himself/herself to some degree. Scholars and popular authorities may seem to come to different conclusions about the Christian approach to science and history, but Worthen posits that they are fundamentally the same in terms of their quest to use Enlightenment categories tamed with Christian worldview to understand the world. She may have a point that evangelicals of all stripes are struggling together with the tension between Enlightenment categories and faith, but so is everyone else. Throw in the fact that presuppositional thought possibly has more affinities with post-modernity than with modernity, and complications arise with Worthen's formulation. Evangelical historians have typically pointed to the influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy as a major cause for adoption of an easy harmony between Baconian Scientific thought and Christian theology in early American culture. Both Mark Noll and George Marsden, along with many others, have expanded on these connections. Worthen notes this influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in passing, but focuses primarily on presuppositionalism as the root of the evangelical crisis of authority. Yet it would seem, more than anything else, that the quest of modern culture warriors is to recapture the easy affinity between Baconian induction and Christian theology that existed in nineteenth-century America.

One assumption Worthen seems to make is that everyone who uses worldview terminology in the twentieth century must have been influenced by the ideas of Kuyper and the Reformed tradition. This perspective does not take into account the diversity of the Reformed tradition or the actual content of Kuyper's world and life view, in contrast to the way it is portrayed by other advocates of a worldview approach to Christian thought. While evangelicals have incorporated Reformed ideas, they have not

subsumed these ideas holistically, instead using elements of them in an incomplete or distorted fashion. Worldview emphasis did not originate in the nineteenth century. Christians have been describing faith in terms of comprehensive worldviews since the days of Christ and the Apostles. While it is true that some Reformed thinkers developed a distinctive language and concepts for understanding Christian worldview in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the evangelical embrace of worldview has often tweaked those ideas in ways that have sometimes subordinated the Reformed conception of worldview to aspects of their own tradition. For example, Mark Noll's *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* contains an insightful investigation of the many ways that populist modes of thought and a variety of traditions shaped the evangelical mind, or what Worthen describes as the evangelical imagination.<sup>1</sup> Intellectual influence is notoriously difficult to trace. It is doubly so in the complex world of evangelical life and thought. The Reformed influence in both academia and popular evangelicalism would seem to be more complicated and more multi-directional than Worthen describes.

While there are many aspects of *Apostles of Reason* that are sure to provoke furious debate, the book is definitely a page-turner and conversation-starter. Worthen tells a good story and supports her thesis with many interesting details. *Apostles of Reason* is a provocative critique for Christians to consider as we strive together to hold together the pondering of the mind, the yearning of the spirit, and the devotion of the heart.

### Endnote

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

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Smith, James K.A., *Discipleship in the Present Tense: Reflections on Faith and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Calvin College Press, 2013. ISBN 9781937555085. Reviewed by Neal DeRoo, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Dordt College and Fellow of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service.

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John Wilson, editor of *Books and Culture*, has described James K.A. Smith as a "whirling dervish of public philosophy [who] generates enough intellectual energy to supply a middle-size city all by himself."<sup>1</sup> While, as far as I know, he does not whirl any more than the average person, the rest certainly seems true—Smith is a great public philosopher whose output is simply staggering. By my count, *Discipleship in the Present Tense* is the 20<sup>th</sup> book that bears Smith's name as either author, editor, co-editor,

or translator, and the ninth since 2009. But it is not simply the quantity of Smith's publications that bears recognition. It is also the style and the quality of those publications. His *Cultural Liturgies* series (2009's *Desiring the Kingdom* and 2013's *Imagining the Kingdom*, with a third volume still to come) has shaped the conversation about Christian worship and Christian education, shifting the focus away from human thinking and believing and toward human action and loving. That his name is as likely to be