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Review: 'Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism'

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Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of American Evangelicalism. By Timothy E. W. Gloege. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. xv + 307. \$34.95 hardcover.

It is a fine time to be a historian of fundamentalism/conservative evangelicalism in the United States. Over the past few years a number of outstanding works have appeared, many of which take seriously politics and economics. The best of this scholarship includes: Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* (2011); Kevin Kruse, *One Nation under God* (2015); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (2009); Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse* (2014); and, Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason* (2014).

Now we can add to this list Timothy E. W. Gloege's *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism*. Central to this cogently argued and beautifully written study is the argument that in the years between the Civil War and World War I leading conservative evangelicals abandoned the notion that Christians were formed in community, nourished by particular denominational traditions with particular creedal commitments. Instead, they understood religion as they understood economics, i.e., in highly individualistic terms, with individuals making rational and practical choices in both church and the marketplace. Operating out of these commonsensical and unexamined assumptions, these conservative evangelical leaders created a "new form of 'old-time religion' that was not only compatible with modern consumer capitalism but also uniquely dependent on it" (2).

To tell this story Gloege focuses on the role of Chicago's Moody Bible Institute (MBI). Founded in the 1880s by revivalist (and former shoe salesman) Dwight L. Moody, MBI's original purpose was to prepare Christian workers for the task of evangelizing the working class, a task which – in the wake of labor strikes and the 1886 Haymarket bombing – Moody proclaimed to be the means for establishing social stability. Unconstrained by denominational ties, Moody and MBI's superintendent, Reuben Torrey, created a curriculum that would train their prospective Christian workers in the most effective evangelistic methods while thoroughly steeping them in knowledge of the English Bible. Guiding the

latter was the notion that the Bible should be read plainly, as it was a “God-breathed, self-interpreting text” that served as “an all-sufficient replacement to church and tradition” (37).

The problem with reading the Bible plainly was (and still is) that taking such an approach – especially when it comes to the teachings and life of Jesus – could lead one to political radicalism. So it was in the 1890s, when Populists used the Bible to make the case for social transformation. Such radicalism threatened the entire MBI enterprise, especially given that Moody had promised to solidify the status quo, not overturn the capitalist order. For “respectable” evangelicals and corporate funders to continue to support the school, the Bible needed to be made safe, hedged in. Toward that end Moody and his school turned to dispensational premillennialism. Even though it required, as Gloege observes, “breathtaking departures from traditional Protestantism,” it provided “an alternative solution to a realist reading of the Bible” (105). No need to worry about the Sermon on the Mount; it applies to a future dispensation!

Even more important in Gloege’s telling, MBI also shifted its focus from Christian work to middle-class Christian consumption, a process presided over by Henry Crowell, Quaker Oats founder and head who became MBI president in 1904 (Moody had died in 1900). The task for Crowell and company was to create a brand-new, nondenominational theological product for conservative evangelicals to consume. The result was *The Fundamentals* project, which Gloege explains better than anyone else I have read. He convincingly documents how Crowell and other MBI administrators dominated this Chicago-based operation, which resulted in twelve, oft-repetitive volumes that established a “baseline” of Christian “essentials,” with biblical inerrancy as the most important. Importantly, these “fundamentals” were not a creed, as a creed would have been too rigid for consumption by conservative evangelicals from a variety of denominations. These “fundamentals,” which elided hundreds of years of church history and theological arguments while simultaneously inventing a claim to historical legitimacy, had as their goal to create a “modern ‘old-time religion’” designed to rally a “diverse coalition of evangelicals and churchly conservatives” to a war against their alleged liberal and modernist enemies. (Gloege spends much less time on the latter, but of course the Christian enemies were as “constructed” as the Christian essentials.)

While the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s made limited use of *The Fundamentals*, MBI had established the template for an evangelical anti-liberal “old-time religion.” And while the fundamentalist controversies of the 1920s were much less “respectable” than Crowell and company would have liked – the belligerent William Bell Riley was a *bête noire* – by the end of the 1920s MBI had re-established its dominant role in conservative evangelicalism, a position it would hold for the next few decades. But by the latter years of the twentieth century MBI had faded from prominence, unable to adapt to the increasingly segmented religious marketplace. As Gloege notes, “having pioneered the idea that religion was something to be consumed rather than practiced, MBI became lost in the shuffle of competing brands,” which now include (to mention a few examples) the “‘praise-and-worship’ industrial complex,” the “evangelical hipsters in the emergent church movement,” and – in a wonderfully apt description – “the mash-up of Jonathan Edwards and Ayn Rand in Minneapolis Baptist minister John Piper’s neo-Puritanism” (232-233).

The fusion of consumer capitalism and conservative evangelicalism is now complete in America. One striking result is that, as Gloege observes in the introduction, “conservative evangelicals [have] effectively hobbled their ability to offer systematic critiques of capitalism” (11). But *Guaranteed Pure* actually suggests a more damning conclusion. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels famously observed that with the triumph of capitalism “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.” Are we here? Has evangelical Christianity in the United States simply melted into the capitalist ether, leaving in its place an unholy religious consumerism that is much more about niche brands and market shares than it is about anything faintly recognizable as the Gospel?

That *Guaranteed Pure* should compel readers to consider such a question is high praise, indeed.

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