

DeBerg, Betty A. *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990. 165 pp. Paper, \$9.95.

This book takes a new look at the history of American Protestant fundamentalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The result is a bold claim: gender issues were at the center of the emerging movement, especially of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s; thus doctrinal arguments and interpretations were often used by fundamentalist preachers and writers of the early twentieth century as tactics to maintain Victorian gender roles that were being threatened by the changes taking place through industrialization and urbanization. This claim is based on a thorough examination of a wealth of popular fundamentalist literature published between 1880 and 1930 that has heretofore received but little attention.

The theme is set against the background of the nineteenth-century "cult of the home." The economic competition in which men found themselves in the nineteenth century made them look toward the home as their haven of repose. The home became romanticized as the bastion of virtue in an evil world, and women became the guardians of such virtue. The rapid increase of women in the labor market threatened to end this "separate spheres" ideal and the "divinized" home, and elaborate campaigns were conducted by early fundamentalists to reverse the trend. These campaigns form the subject matter of most of the book.

The spiritual role of women had also led to the feminization of the nineteenth-century church. One part of the fundamentalist campaign was aimed at reclaiming the church for men. Thus the legitimacy of women speaking and holding positions of authority in the church began to be questioned, and the feminized language was replaced by masculine images, such as virility, militarism, and heroism. The pastor's role began to be seen as one of direction, authority, and leadership rather than as the servant of the church. Fundamentalism was masculine, modernism "effeminate."

The perceived worldliness brought on by modernism was blamed on women who had increased their freedom and abandoned their mission as spiritual guardians of the family. The sinful image of a "modern" woman was epitomized in the "flapper"—a woman who had accepted the revolution in manners and morals. The flapper smoked, danced, wore short skirts, petted with men in automobiles, and bobbed her hair. She became a symbol of the evils of modernity, the opposite of the Victorian "true woman," and a danger to men's morality and character which it was the woman's task to control and strengthen. By undermining the most basic fundamentalist values, the "flapper" was seen as threatening civilization itself.

The impact that these disruptions in gender roles had on theology is examined in the last part of the book. Whether the fundamentalists attacked evolution, the Social Gospel, or other enemies of faith, "it was not so much traditional theology they were defending as it was traditional gender ideology" (141). This is because the dynamics of gender touch all relationships and thus every aspect of life; with the changes taking place it was no longer clear what it meant to be male or female. Furthermore, the far-reaching political consequences of the fundamentalist campaigns affected "the distribution of wealth, electoral politics, social policy, the labor movement, health care delivery, public education, and economic growth" (149). Thus, according to DeBerg, today's attacks against feminism, abortion, and other such social practices are no new phenomenon but are inherited from the first wave of fundamentalism at the turn of the century.

This book presents a new twist to the traditional view of fundamentalism as primarily theological and provides a case study of the sociological view that considers fundamentalism a reaction to the changes taking place in society. It is a richly supported study of a largely neglected body of literature. The central claim of the book may be somewhat overstated, but its aim is to focus attention on a neglected dimension. Although DeBerg does not insist that gender issues superseded theological issues, this seems to be implied. At any rate, she shows that the two were intermingled, in that gender issues were often couched in theological images and terminology.

The book is well written, though at times the theme moves rather slowly because of the large amount of supporting materials presented. The claim about the far-reaching political consequences of the fundamentalists' gender-related campaigns, though largely obvious, is beyond the scope of the book and should be taken as conjecture supported more by other works DeBerg cites than by her own research. One also misses some comparative data as evidence of the validity of the central thesis. Although DeBerg claims that the overwhelming weight of the historical evidence precludes a more "balanced" view, the reader is left wondering whether the literature was chosen to support a preexisting thesis. It does not appear that any random selection was used. In such selective research, findings depend on the viewpoint from which the researcher approaches the question.

Traditional history, however, is probably no less selective. The woman's viewpoint is long overdue. *Ungodly Women* provides several insights that help us understand some of the developments in the church during the twentieth century. The book is a worthy contribution to church history and to the sociology of religion.