

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education***

Laats, A. (2018). *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the faith in American higher education*. Oxford University Press. 360pp.

The earliest universities were repositories of “received knowledge,” and it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century – largely due to influence from Germany – that universities began to see their task as the production of knowledge. This new conceptualization of the university posed a problem for Christian colleges as the pursuit of new knowledge could be construed as a rebuff of tradition and scripture. Laats’ (2018) *Fundamentalist U: Keeping faith in American higher education* shows that the early evangelical colleges had to do a careful balancing act. They endeavored to be “real colleges in every aspect” (Laats, 2018, p. 98) yet their founders and funders envisioned the Christian college as a counter-cultural space regarding evolution, campus life, and politics. Laats’ thesis is that rather than deny the quest of new knowledge, the emerging evangelical colleges insisted that their pursuit of new knowledge was more accurate than that which was found in the secular academy (2018, p. 25). That is, the Bible institutes (Moody and BIOLA) and fundamentalist schools of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wheaton, Gordon, Bob Jones) accepted the academic revolution in general; but *dissented* with the emerging epistemologies and ontologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were at odds with the Christian faith.

Laats describes himself as an outsider to evangelicalism and insists that he is neither for nor against Christian colleges. Despite his ethnographic distance from evangelicalism, he has deep insights into the values and perspectives within the movement, and at times, it is helpful to see how an outsider picks up on nuances that insiders would gloss over. For example, Laats is uninterested in the theological claims of Christian Universities (despite the connotation of the book’s subtitle). Instead, he is interested in the way that fundamentalist and evangelical universities have played a major role in shaping American politics. Just as Christian schools have had to hang in the balance between being the “guardians of knowledge” and “the producers of knowledge,” they have been caught between the two narratives that America has lost its soul (first by embracing

materialism, then postmodernism), and yet acts as a “city on a hill” (Laats, 2018, p. 263).

Laats does seem to enjoy relating stories about the sins of the various schools’ founders, the infighting, and the pettiness. Such a tarnished past does not particularly discredit evangelical schools any more than secular ones, but it does raise the question: Should not faculty and staff at Christian universities treat each other with grace? Additionally, Chapter 8 is a particularly poignant essay on problematic responses that flagship evangelical universities had in response to segregation and race relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He establishes that many evangelical schools were actively anti-segregationist at first, but during the 30s and 40s, they lost that focus and only began to embrace Civil Rights much later than non-religious schools.

The carefully researched text shows how Christian colleges have had to respond to changing social mores while also promising to uphold traditional standards. Laats recounts interesting stories from the days (1920s) that Moody Bible Institute sent spies to make sure students were not going to movies, and BJU had monitors check dorms to make sure students were not skipping chapel. Laats also reveals deep insights on the role that Christian colleges have played in helping alumni “get an education and a spouse.” He includes Elizabeth Elliott’s journals from her own college days, which provide an interesting backdrop for current discussions on “purity culture.”

*Fundamentalist U* is an important short history as it helps evangelicals understand how academicians outside of evangelicalism perceive the Christian College movement.

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