Falwell and followers

by R. Jonathan Moore in the November 21, 2001 issue

The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics. By Susan Friend Harding. Princeton University Press, 352 pp., $50.00; paperback, $18.95.

Many of us expect perfection from America's religious leaders and then quickly pounce on them when they are inevitably revealed as no better than human. The discovery of Jesse Jackson's adultery provided the most recent example. His perennial opponents gleefully exulted in having public proof of the preacher's imperfection, and even those who usually support Jackson's efforts wondered aloud at the speed with which his sins were acknowledged and pushed aside. Meanwhile, Jackson's flock rallied around him, eagerly providing a supportive backdrop for the televised melodrama of confession and forgiveness.

The cultural elite is often befuddled and outraged when followers continue to support those involved in scandal. What's wrong with these people? Don't they understand what this hypocrite has done? Only religiously deluded simpletons, some conclude, could be hoodwinked into forgiving and forgetting so quickly and completely. What such critics fail to understand is that the credibility of religious leaders like Jackson does not depend entirely, or even mostly, on their flawlessness. Focusing upon Jackson's missteps and contradictions leads cultural observers to read the story of Jackson's life much as literalists read biblical tales, as stories whose authority and credibility depend upon empirically verifiable moral purity and the absence of contradictions between messenger and message.

But this is not the reading strategy used by followers of Jackson and other public religious leaders. Through the eyes of Christian adherents, a leader's imperfections--though no less real or upsetting--are viewed against the backdrop of the Bible, a world full of unreliable heroes and morally ambiguous saints. Followers are not indifferent to Jackson's failings or ignorant of the crevasse between his ethical exhortations and his own deeds, but they are able to locate him in a religious tradition that has long taught that God can and does act through the most imperfect of servants.

That same backdrop informs the interpretive landscape for the disciples of another famous, often morally ambiguous Baptist preacher, Jerry Falwell. His longstanding public prominence may suggest that there is nothing new to say about him (and indeed, a weary public may hope this is true), but Susan Friend Harding disagrees. An adviser to the excellent documentary series *With God on Our Side* and a cultural anthropologist at the University of California--Santa Cruz, Harding explores the rhetorical world of Falwell and his followers. Those who join this expedition into the heart of American fundamentalism will return with fresh insights and a new map that will prove indispensable for future journeys.

The return of conservative Christians to political activism in the '70s and '80s informs Harding's work, but the author is less concerned with history as such than with the language comprising and creating that history. She ventures into a religious subculture's rhetorical world and returns with a thick description of fundamentalist vernacular. To gather her data, Harding plunged into Falwell's evangelistic empire in Lynchburg, Virginia, by attending worship services, mingling with congregants, visiting Falwell's Liberty Baptist University and interviewing other pastors. She sealed her baptism into conservative Christianity by immersing herself in Falwell's words, from his books and sermons to his pamphlets and public statements. Her field work, she says, allowed her to stand in a liminal place between salvation and damnation, in the fundamentalist world but still not quite of it. "Standing in the gap between conscious belief and willful unbelief, in a place I call 'narrative belief,' opens up born-again language and makes available its complexity, its variety and creativity, and its agile force."

She begins her book with a fascinating and lyrical account of her interview with Melvin Campbell, pastor of Lynchburg's Jordan Baptist Church. Harding quickly finds herself smack in the middle of full-bore witnessing. As she reconstructs what happened during her lengthy encounter with Campbell, she tells the story of losing her initial naïveté about being able to remain both in and outside of the community she's chosen to study. She learns that there is no such fence-straddling position in the fundamentalist world: one is either born-again or not, saved or lost, with nothing in between.

In her description of her encounter with Campbell, Harding gives us a key to discerning the reasons for, or the mechanics behind, the process of witnessing. The story illustrates one of her strengths: her willingness to let fundamentalists, generously quoted throughout the text, speak for themselves. Campbell isn't

threatened by the presence of Harding's tape recorder; in fact, she thinks he's glad she'll have a record of their session "so that I might listen to it again and again should I prove too hard-hearted that afternoon to receive the help he offered me."

What happens over the course of their session is an education in "pure fundamentalist ritual, shorn of almost all distractions." Witnessing, she concludes, "is the plainest, most concentrated method for revealing the Word of God, one in which language is intensified, focused, and virtually shot at the listener."

Harding describes beautifully the effective, sometimes subconscious ways in which Campbell uses language as a means of conversion. In the process of telling both biblical and contemporary stories, Campbell constantly coopts her into them with subtle cues. The use of "we," for instance, refashions his stories of others into stories about her. Those tales inevitably result in the lost being saved, thus setting up a theological road map for her--as one of the lost--to follow. Through his storytelling and "supple mastery of biblical conventions," Campbell opens a window of access for Harding into a divine pattern of history. Joining the ranks of Christian fundamentalism means also submitting one's own story to the biblical lens; conversion is really conversion into a particular narrative tradition.

Harding's most original contribution to our understanding of fundamentalism is her analysis of the process of generativity. Fundamentalists sincerely claim to be biblical literalists, to understand the Bible as literally and unchangingly true. But Harding finds that, in expounding that literal text and the lives of its prominent interpreters, they are constantly creating new truth.

Harding makes a compelling case for generativity as the key to understanding Falwell's--and fundamentalism's--continuing appeal. She has closely examined fundamentalist rhetoric in several "texts": Falwell's own biography, fund-raising for Liberty Baptist College, the public language used by conservative Christians during the 1980s, Falwell's "stump sermon" on morality and politics, prolife writings, interpretations of Israel and the end times, and the telescandals. Harding paints a portrait of Falwell as a master preacher constantly engaged in a (literally) creative dialogue with his audience. Televangelists like Falwell, we learn, are masters of "narrative instability." Faith traditions which carve out space for supernatural activity are inherently unstable, Harding finds, in the sense that "they depend on faith constantly constructed out of intrinsically dubious claims. They are built on ambiguous figures and events composed of narrative gaps, excesses, and

indeterminacies which the faithful must ceaselessly close, suppress, and fix in the name of God."

Followers of Falwell must also address the narrative instability inherent in their leader's own biography, a theatrical tale ridden with attention-grabbing, often ethically dubious episodes. A brief list includes his calculated stealing of his college roommate's girlfriend (his eventual wife, Macel); an investigation into his enterprises by the Securities and Exchange Commission in the 1970s; the founding (and eventual disbanding) of the Moral Majority and the hubris such a title implied; his suing of pornographer Larry Flynt; his somewhat hostile takeover of Jim and Tammy Bakker's PTL enterprises at the height of the televangelism scandals; his visible support for "The Clinton Chronicles," an irresponsible, rumor-mongering pseudo-documentary; and his attack on Tinky-Winky the Teletubby as a closet homosexual.

In all of this, critics see nothing but subterfuge, hypocrisy and sensationalism. But to the consternation of these critics, Falwell's followers--though always aware of his grandstanding and personal contradictions--continue to support him. Harding helps us understand just how this "complex, mercurial, irreducibly ambiguous man of God" maintains his leadership role. In the fundamentalist world, the biblical narrative and his own biographical narrative stream into and reinforce each other. His followers, Harding contends, rely upon the same narrative strategy to process both stories, and it is that interpretive practice that ultimately grants Falwell his authority.

Harding identifies several "story cycles" that constitute Falwell's version of his own biography; each opens up for listeners gaps between his suspect motives and actions and his calling as a religious leader. His supporters harmonize the discrepancies and reconcile the ambiguities as they do when treating the Bible: "It is as if Falwell, in has varied storied manifestations, were telling his followers, 'Read me as you read the Bible. I appear in many versions. There are differences between the versions, and there are awkward silences and anomalies within them. My tales are troubled and they are troubling. Harmonize my discrepancies. Close my gaps. Overcome my troubles. Make me whole. Make me true.'"

During the '80s, Falwell raised doubts among his followers in a variety of ways: financial troubles, mismanagement of Liberty Baptist College, an attempt to institute a "tithe-or-quit" policy for his thousand-member staff in 1989. His followers rarely accepted him uncritically; instead they were left to grapple, interpretively, with their doubts. By coming to accept their leader, provisionally, once again, Falwell's flock

reaffirmed their faith and his own identity by engaging in "an ongoing, collaborative work of rhetorical art." By the end of this analysis, Harding clearly intends "art" to mean both artifice and skill: Falwell generates and constitutes an original narrative, and he does it masterfully.

Harding's own mastery is on display throughout her book. The author provides multiple variations on analytical themes, thematically circling and probing in the style of a saxophone soloist, soaring above, around and behind the notes on the page to provide a fresh interpretation of an old standard. By the end of the song, she has skillfully shown the myriad ways in which fundamentalist rhetoric created and transformed both the fundamentalist community itself and the wider American culture. Her work should be required reading not only for students of American religion, but also for anyone who wishes to study sympathetically and fruitfully a different religious culture.