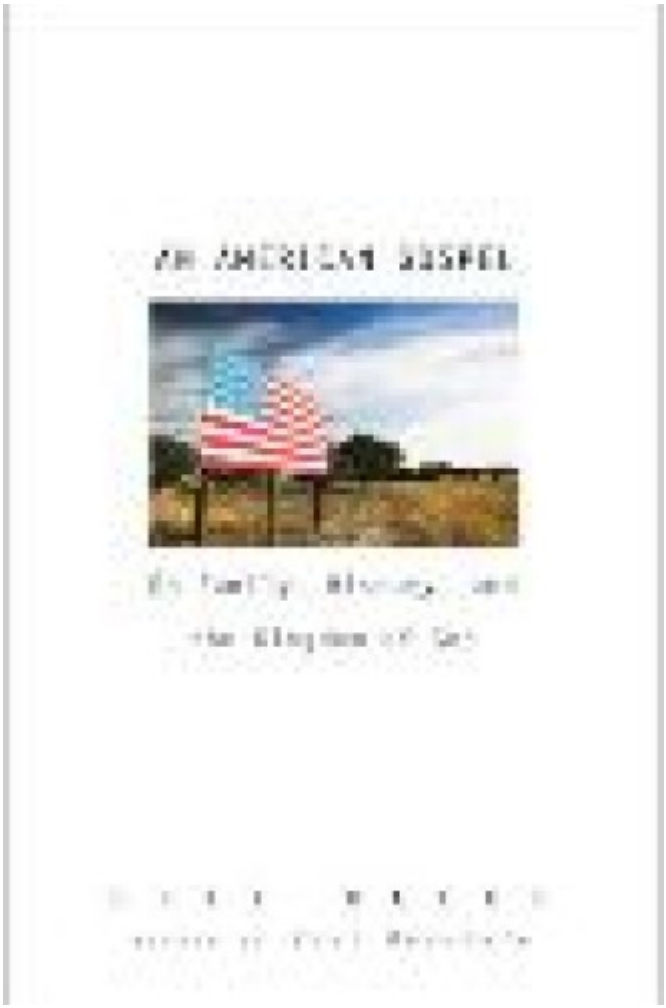
Ex-fundamentalist

By Randall Balmer in the July 28, 2009 issue

In Review



An American Gospel: On Family, History, and the Kingdom of God

Erik Reece
Riverhead

In the late 1980s, while I was writing *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, someone named Richard Yao was all the rage. Yao had founded a group called Fundamentalists Anonymous, and to hear him tell it fundamentalism—a term that was thrown about loosely then just as it is now—constituted a threat to mental health and was responsible for every malady imaginable, from bunions to the national debt.

The media were delirious, especially during the ratings bonanza of the televangelist scandals. Yao appeared on virtually every talk show (the modern equivalent of the confessional) to trumpet his deliverance from the icy clutches of fundamentalism. Mercifully, Yao's self-congratulatory 15 minutes of fame expired years ago, but the cottage industry of ex-fundamentalist memoirs continues to thrive. *An American Gospel* is merely the latest in that genre.

When Erik Reece was only three years old, his father succumbed to depression and committed suicide. Because he, like his father before him, was a Baptist minister, Jesus was to blame, of course; it was guilt by association. "In the end, my father was locked inside my grandfather's story," Reece writes: "the morality tale of fundamentalist Christianity." The underlying question of whether or how fully the father's grasp of the faith comported with the life and teachings of Jesus—or exactly what role Jesus played in this disaster— doesn't seem to trouble the understandably grieving son. Instead, Reece invites us along on his own religious quest, which he began as a young adult—a quest that has been part therapy, part inquiry. "I have spent the eighteen years since I stopped going to my parents' Baptist church attempting to extricate myself from its hold on me," he writes.

It is, to be sure, an exhilarating journey. Reece is a good thinker and a gifted writer who takes the reader on a romp through space and time, from Walt Whitman and the Gospel of Thomas to colonial Virginia and a Zen Buddhist retreat in Kentucky. Reece rejects what he calls "Puritan fundamentalism" (an anachronistic term if ever there was one) in favor of the writings of William Byrd, an 18th-century Virginian whom Reece describes as "a Leonardo of the New World." Byrd's principal appeal appears to be that he was a gleeful sexual libertine offering a welcome antidote to the "ascetic, life-negating principles of the Puritans."

Reece admires the agrarianism of Thomas Jefferson and laments that Americans long ago chose the urban vision of Alexander Hamilton over the ideal of the self-

reliant Jeffersonian farmer, a contrast that Reece cryptically portrays as “the difference between a version of Christianity based on Jesus’ death and Resurrection, and one based on his life and teachings.”

No spiritual quest these days is complete without what Harvey Cox long ago described as a “Turning East.” Reece spent a summer at a Zen Buddhist retreat, where he read Walt Whitman and concluded that the Pauline writings are responsible for much of the repressiveness of contemporary Christianity: “Paul managed to take the ‘good news’ of the Gospels and turn it into another stifling set of prohibitions, laws utterly lacking in spirit.”

Rather than take this conclusion as a pretext for a return to the canonical teachings of Jesus, Reece used it to propel himself further afield. By the time he alit, he had embraced some hybrid of transcendentalism and American pragmatism, drawing his “American gospel” from such diverse sources as Byrd, Jefferson, Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Lynn Margulis, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Gospel of Thomas, which Reece believes provides the best rendering of the words of Jesus.

Although Reece is a fine writer, *An American Gospel* lacks any element of suspense whatsoever. When the author declares near the end of his narrative that he is “leaving behind the Christian church—its sanctuary, its sermons, its deathly hymns—for what Thoreau called the ‘unroofed church’ of the natural world,” the statement packs all the surprise of a Rush Limbaugh rant against the Democratic Party.

The problem with *An American Gospel*, as with most such memoirs, is that the journey is portrayed as a zero-sum game. The author must either embrace the faith altogether, with all of its ambiguities, or reject it altogether in favor of some other faith or ideology. It’s always presented as an either-or proposition, which of course is another species of fundamentalism. The stories that most intrigue me (in part, I’m sure, because they mirror my own pilgrimage) are those where the protagonist struggles, even rages, against the faith of her childhood—perhaps even rejects it for a time—but then comes to appropriate it on her own terms and to appreciate the texture, the wisdom and the richness of the tradition while discarding the distortions and the adiaphora.

When I lead my congregation in the recitation of the Nicene Creed every Sunday, one of the things we affirm is our belief in “the communion of the saints.” That can mean many things, but it surely includes deference to tradition, to the understanding and beliefs of generations that have gone before us. It means that we should not blithely discard the traditions of the faith, even as we sort through the chaff. That’s a sentiment very much at odds with our do-it-yourself, Protestant-inflected society, enamored as it is with the cult of novelty in everything from technology and fashion to megachurches and spirituality.

Cobbling together one’s spirituality from eclectic sources while flaunting an indifference toward tradition is quintessentially Protestant, not to mention an insufferable cliché. Despite his protestations, Erik Reece remains more a Baptist than he’d like to believe.