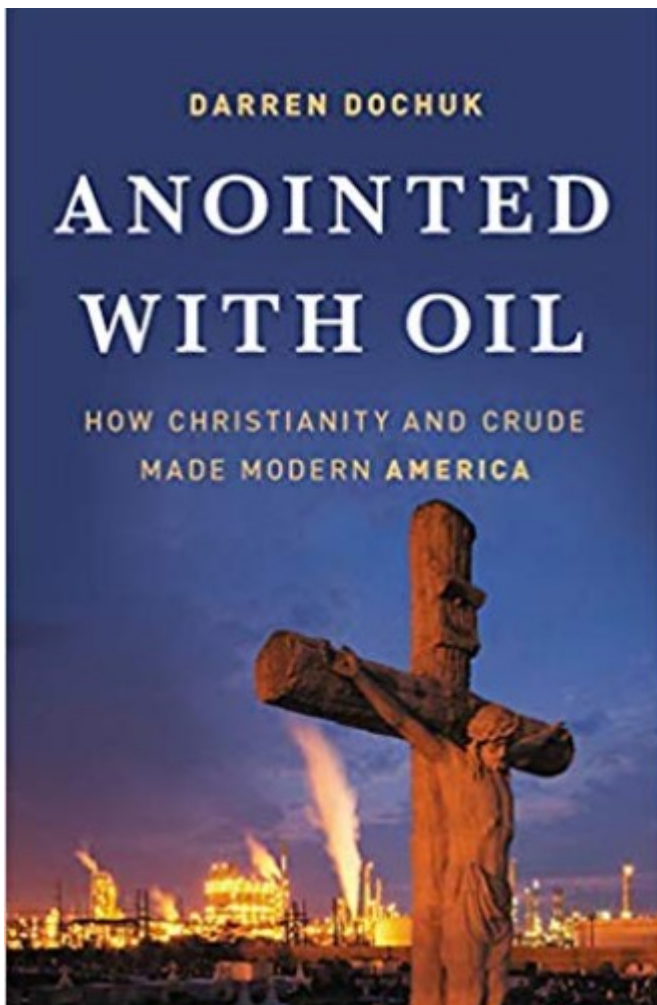


The fundamentalists, the modernists, and the oil they both swam in

Darren Dochuk shows how oil and American Christianity have long shaped each other.

by [Connor S. Kenaston](#) in the [October 23, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Anointed with Oil

How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America

By Darren Dochuk

Basic Books

Oil is all around us. It's in our cars, our planes, and our plastics. News of its latest spills splashes across our social media feeds. Its profitability tempts our politicians and funds our philanthropies and schools. Oil bubbles just beneath the surface of numerous contemporary political debates. Still, it is easy to forget oil's ubiquity because energy regimes are structured in ways that make forgetting possible. Thankfully, recent scholars have been shining light on the sometimes invisible oil industry and how it has affected society.

Historian Darren Dochuk makes an important addition to this growing literature. Whereas most scholarly works and popular media depict oil and religion as either separate or in tension, Dochuk, who teaches history at the University of Notre Dame, suggests that the oil industry has shaped—and been shaped by—religion.

At the outset of the book, Dochuk describes the “two sparring spirits of capitalism” that animate his story. He refers to these spirits as the “civil religion of crude” and “wildcat Christianity.”

Embodied especially by the Rockefeller clan, the civil religion of crude celebrated the centralization and rationalization of both the oil industry and American religious institutions. By conquering the competition and consolidating operations, companies like the Rockefellers' Standard Oil and its subsidiaries created operations of tremendous scale that could increase efficiency and eliminate the sinful waste and chaos of boom-and-bust cycles. The Rockefellers' philanthropy and humanitarianism—including the millions they gave to ecumenical initiatives—stemmed from that same drive for efficiency and centralization. Impelled by the social gospel, practitioners of the civil religion of crude attempted to use oil and its profits to modernize and uplift America and the world. Oil's gifts, they believed, could build God's kingdom.

The civil religion of crude collided with wildcat Christianity, the gospel of independent oil companies. Wildcat Christians drilled wells on untapped lands with end-time urgency. They believed in a personal encounter with an active all-powerful God, and they endured and even embraced oil's risks due to their conviction that oil's whims were the work of God. In contrast to the civil religion of crude, wildcat Christianity demanded that its practitioners focus on saving individual souls before

the coming apocalypse rather than vainly attempting to reform society with human-made solutions.

In the late 19th century, the civil religion of crude dominated the physical, political, and spiritual landscape. Believing order to be godlier than the pell-mell rush of competition with its often disastrous consequences, the devout Baptist John D. Rockefeller quickly expanded Standard Oil, crushing his fellow oilers along the way. By the end of the 1800s, Standard Oil controlled 90 percent of the nation's refining capacity and had expanded its operations overseas. Leaning on missionaries' networks and knowledge, global oil ventures and the transnational humanitarianism they helped spur reinvigorated the narrative that Americans were God's chosen people to reform the world in God's image.

The civil religion of crude's dominance would not last, however. Chased out of Pennsylvania oil fields by Standard Oil, wildcatters like Lyman Stewart moved west to drill lands that Standard officials did not believe to be oil-rich. With divining rods in hand, wildcatters proved Standard wrong. Their discoveries of oil in California and Texas in the early 1900s inaugurated a Gusher Age that shifted the balance of petro-power.

Independent oil companies expanded their power and influence over the course of the 20th century. They competed with major oil companies in Africa, South America, and Asia. Mid-century global developments—such as the successful pursuit of oil in Alberta, Canada, by independent oil companies and the collapse of the “moral alliance” between major oil companies and Middle Eastern Muslims—proved to be a boon for wildcat Christianity. Ultimately, the 1970s energy crisis, domestic protests about Standard's presence in undemocratic nations, and wildcat Christianity's domestic political gains under Reagan spelled the end of the civil religion of crude.

The robust rivalry that drove the American oil industry's expansion around the globe extended beyond the oil patch. As Dochuk effectively demonstrates, oil money was at the root of major divisions in American Protestantism. For instance, wildcatter Lyman Stewart commissioned the influential series of articles known as *The Fundamentals* while John D. Rockefeller Jr. paid for the distribution of liberal Protestant minister Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Rockefeller oil money funded numerous institutions associated with liberal Protestantism such as the National Council of Churches, the University of Chicago Divinity School, and the Interchurch World Movement. Meanwhile, independent oil's

dollars, especially those of Sun Oil's J. Howard Pew, helped found the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary, and *Christianity Today*.

Put simply, oil's profits and interests helped build the infrastructure of 20th-century American Christianity. Ironically, oil money has also shaped the avenues 21st-century Christians have to combat climate change. As Dochuk points out in his epilogue, both the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Pew Charitable Trusts have begun advocating for policies aimed to check climate change and curb the power of corporate oil. Oil truly is all around us.

Dochuk's ability to successfully weave a large array of sources and characters into a compelling and important narrative is remarkable. While the majority of the book focuses on the executives, preachers, and politicians who fueled the spread of oil, Dochuk's smaller sections on consumers and their religiously inspired boycotts and political advocacy suggest a glimmer of hope in this otherwise sobering tale. These protests suggest that Christians who advocate for petro-power regardless of its social and environmental costs do not have a monopoly on religious responses to energy regimes. Perhaps with a little end-time urgency, religious consumers and activists can still help curb the impending climate catastrophe. After all, if Rockefeller and Pew came around, anything is possible.