Josh McMullen


The subject of revivalism at the turn of the twentieth century has long presented religious historians with a conundrum. An older body of work frames evangelists like Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Sam Jones as conservative holdouts who proclaimed the “Old-Time Religion” while fending off the rise of liberal religion and a new urban culture. Recently, historians have challenged that portrayal, pointing instead to ways in which fin-de-siècle revivalists mixed evangelical piety with the effective use of modern media and consumerist appeals. In *Under the Big Top,* Regent University historian Josh McMullen offers a novel solution to the tension between these two depictions of big tent revivalism. Revivalists fomented a transition in American evangelicalism from Victorianism to modern consumer culture, which is why revivalists can appear simultaneously conservative and subversive. It is a both-and answer to an either-or question.

The misconception of revivalists as Victorian traditionalists is partly a consequence of historians looking back at them through the lens of the subsequent fundamentalist—modernist controversies, thus fashioning them as proto-fundamentalists primarily concerned with upholding orthodox doctrine and defending traditional values. Yet McMullen reminds us that the big tent revivalists were pragmatists more concerned with maximizing the size of their audiences than with doctrinal niceties. And in contrast to the Victorian view of religion as a means of instilling discipline, character, and self-denial, the revivalists anticipated the trend toward a therapeutic faith that privileged happiness, personality, and self-expression.

McMullen channels Christopher Lasch and Jackson Lears on this point, but also challenges their secular assumption that the shift towards a therapeutic, consumer culture necessarily entailed a rejection of religion. In contrast, McMullen argues that the rise of consumer culture did not come at the expense of religion, but that big tent revivalists were themselves transitional figures. Success in big tent revivalism required a knack for publicity and the ability to entertain crowds with jokes, compelling personal anecdotes, and theatrical staging. Evangelists were even known to bring live animals onto the stage just to illustrate a sermon point. Revivalism had gone to the circus, but at least the peanut and lemonade stand sales helped the bottom line. Some revivalists also embraced the trappings of the new celebrity culture—think of Aimee Semple McPherson’s fur coats and Billy Sunday’s automobiles—but even those who
rejected such displays of prosperity still used their newfound fame to attract large crowds, sell autographed books, and endorse everything from study bibles to home insurance.

Reframing big tent revivalism is not McMullen’s only significant contribution. Rather than simply appealing to the usual suspects—e.g. Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Sam Jones—he also covers less well-known evangelists like Gipsy Smith, Maria Woodworth, and J. Gordon McPherson, who have been the subject of little or no scholarly work until this book. That meant digging through an impressive array of local newspapers, but adding in those voices gives the reader a strong sense of the way in which revivalism permeated all levels of American society at the turn of the twentieth century. For every nationally-recognized figure there were dozens of evangelists with significant regional influence.

Those three evangelists in particular provide some of the most compelling examples of how big tent revivalists represented a transition in Victorian social mores. For example, Gipsy Smith frequently incorporated stories about his ethnic background into his sermons, suggesting that if God could save a drunken Gypsy and turn him into a gospel preacher, then what excuse did his white audience have for not surrendering their lives? J. Gordon McPherson and Maria Woodworth used similar logic in reference to their race and gender. While these kinds of conversion narratives ostensibly supported Victorian ideals of domesticity and whiteness, they also embodied a radical subversion of those same ideals.

Under the Big Top should be read in conversation with Timothy Gloege’s Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism and Matthew Bowman’s The Urban Pulpit: New York City and the Fate of Liberal Evangelicalism. Gloege’s business-minded successors to Dwight L. Moody were as disruptive to the Victorian consensus as McMullen’s big tent revivalists. Both groups embraced modern methods in order to appeal to consumers in novel ways. However, the urban, liberal evangelicals in Bowman’s work, with their focus on pragmatic Christianity and social reform, sound more like Victorians than proponents of consumer culture. Yet they too adopted the tenets of a therapeutic gospel, emphasizing experience and emotion at the expense of doctrinal rigidity. Each scholar is tugging on one strand of a much larger story about fin-de-siècle Protestantism.

McMullen’s thesis on big tent revivalism as a transitional movement in American religion from Victorianism towards consumer culture is convincing, but I was left wondering about how revivalist support for Prohibition fits into that narrative. He touches on the topic briefly but only to note it as an exception to the rule that revivalists were relatively uninvolved in legislative