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The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics.

Susan Friend Harding

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The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics. Susan Friend Harding

National polls show that approximately 50 million adult Americans are born-again Christians. Yet most Americans see their culture as secular, and the United States is viewed around the world as a secular nation. Further, intellectuals and journalists often portray born-again Christians, despite their numbers, as outsiders who endanger public life. But is American culture really so neatly split between the religious and the secular? Is America as "modern" and is born-again Christian religious belief as "pre-modern" as many think?

In the 1980s, born-again Christians burst into the political arena with stunning force. Gone was the image of "old-fashioned" fundamentalism and its anti-worldly, separatist philosophy. Under the leadership of the Reverend Jerry Falwell and allied preachers, millions broke taboos in place since the Scopes trial constraining their interaction with the public world. They claimed new cultural territory and refashioned themselves in the public arena. Here was a dynamic body of activists with an evangelical vision of social justice, organized under the rubric of the "Moral Majority."

Susan Harding, a cultural anthropologist, set out in the 1980s to understand the significance of this new cultural movement. The result, this long-awaited book, presents the most original and thorough examination of Christian fundamentalism to date. Falwell and his co-pastors were the pivotal figures in the movement. It is on them that Harding focuses, and, in particular, their use of the Bible's language. She argues that this language is the medium through which born-again Christians, individual and collective, come to understand themselves as Christians. And it is inside this language that much of the born-again movement took place. Preachers like Falwell command a Bible-based poetics of great complexity, variety, creativity, and force, and, with it, attempt to mold their churches into living testaments of the Bible. Harding focuses on the words--sermons, speeches, books, audiotapes, and television broadcasts--of individual preachers, particularly Falwell, as they rewrote their Bible-based tradition to include, rather than exclude, intense worldly engagement. As a result of these efforts, born-again Christians recast themselves as a people not separated from but engaged in making history. *The Book of Jerry Falwell* is a fascinating work of cultural analysis, a rare account that takes fundamentalist Christianity on its own terms and deepens our understanding of both religion and the modern world.

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