

## Interview with Molly Worthen

*Molly Worthen is an assistant professor of history at UNC-Chapel Hill. She did her undergraduate and graduate studies at Yale University, where she received her PhD in religious history in 2011. Her research and teaching focus on American religious and intellectual history, particularly Christianity. She is a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times and has also written about religion and politics for Slate, the Boston Globe, Foreign Policy, and other publications. Her most recent work, Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism (Oxford University Press, 2013) discusses the changing ideas and objectives of American evangelical Protestants since World War II. It recently won the Religion Newswriters Association 2015 Excellence in Nonfiction Religion Book Award. Worthen was interviewed on Sept. 10, 2015 by Elizabeth Chase, a junior at UNC-Chapel Hill majoring in biostatistics and history.*

**Elizabeth Chase:** To start off, I'm curious about what drew you to history. In your book, you mention that you went from Russian religion to American diplomatic history, and then to the history of American evangelicalism. How did that happen?

**Molly Worthen:** In high school and college, I was fascinated by the diversity of human experience across time. I took a couple of history classes, particularly one on Russian history, and became persuaded that for a huge proportion of humanity through the ages, religion has been an important lens through which people understood their world. If I wanted to understand the history of the individuals, then I had to understand religion. I did not come out of a religious upbringing, so it was really alien terrain for me. Because of my interest in Russian history I spent some time learning about Russian orthodoxy. That was my first scholarly foray into religion. Then I had a bit of a detour. I took a class in which the seminar paper mushroomed and became my senior thesis, which became my first book, and which was not really about religion, but about American diplomatic history. But when it came time to figure out what I wanted to do next, I wanted to study history but also to be a journalist. I had worked at a couple of newspapers, my college paper, things like that. I thought, "Well, I'm fascinated by all sorts of ancient history. I'm fascinated by medieval monks, by ancient Byzantium, but if I want to pitch articles to editors, most editors aren't too interested in thirteenth-century Carthusians, right?" I had to choose something practical, so I directed my attention to conservative Protestantism in modern America, which has this obvious intersection with politics that the news media is hungry for. As I got into my doctoral studies, it became clear that I couldn't understand the twentieth century without doing my homework all the way back. Courses in scripture, early church theology, and medieval history satisfied all my curiosities there and really enriched my study of the modern period. So that's where I've been planted ever since.

**EC:** Why is the history of American evangelicals an important topic?

**MW:** I guess the easy, practical answer is to say that there are an awful lot of them. There are something like 80 million self-described evangelicals in this country, about a quarter of the population. So I don't have to make the same case that someone who studies, you know, the Shakers has to make, because there are just a lot of bodies. But, more than that, evangelical Protestantism is woven into the warp and woof of American political and cultural history. You

can't really understand the history of American politics without taking seriously evangelical Protestants' ideas about not just the world, but the supernatural, and how the two are entwined.

**EC:** In your book, you made a deliberate point that you weren't talking about the Christian Right, but you were talking about American evangelicals. What's the difference?

**MW:** Often the mainstream media uses the Christian Right as a synonym for evangelicalism, and they're really not the same. The term "the Christian Right" is a contested one, but it really refers to a group of mobilized activists who have a particular set of political goals and a certain worldview and context. Certainly many members of the Christian Right are evangelical, but the evangelical world is far more diverse than even evangelicals themselves realize. It includes people who would characterize themselves as politically progressive, or otherwise at odds with those affiliated with the Christian Right. In *Apostles of Reason*, I wanted to take samples across the spectrum of evangelical belief, including some folks who perhaps would not want me to call them evangelical, because that word has become so politically tainted in the American context. I include the Mennonite Church, for example, and many Mennonites would say, "What?! We're not evangelical!" But I found it helpful to think of evangelicalism as a conversation, as a dialogue between groups that disagree about lots of stuff, but who care about what one another gets up to, because they're invested in similar questions. I found myself thinking of evangelicalism as a group of people who disagree on a clear statement of faith, but who are asking and worrying about the same kinds of questions about faith.

**EC:** In your portrayal, it seemed to me that evangelicals treat their faith almost as an ideology. Would you agree with that assessment?

**MW:** Evangelical Protestantism is an ideology like Marxism or anarchism. It is a fully formed worldview with a set of claims about what a human being is, the destiny of humankind, and a systematic structure through which to process reality. In my book, I suggest that part of what explains the success of a relatively small number of evangelical activists in popularizing an ideologically charged form of Christianity, what they called a Christian worldview, was their effort to answer the same cosmic questions that other ideologies of the era answered. In the time period I write about, many conservative Protestants found themselves hungry for a way to answer pressing theological and cultural threats. They felt that their authority in America was under attack. Prior to the moment where I start my book, American fundamentalists and modernists had a huge clash: America was being invaded by immigrants of all sorts of skin color and faiths. On top of this, first-wave feminism was challenging the traditional view of the family and the role of women. Cities—dirty, filthy, noisy, full of pestilence and foreign laborers—were swelling at the expense of traditional life in the countryside. The characters whose activism opens my story grew up in the aftermath of that and are trying to figure out a way to reclaim America for their vision of orthodox Christianity.

**EC:** You discuss the tension between evangelicalism's supposed anti-intellectualism and this deep desire to be intellectually legitimate and competitive. When and how did you first notice that disconnect? Do you think it's always been this way, or is this a recent development?

**MW:** Secular scholars, for most of the twentieth century, have characterized conservative Protestantism as a major component in the anti-intellectual strain that we see in American culture. Certainly there was a time when the revered intellectuals in any community would have been orthodox Protestants. But their authority in universities like Harvard and Yale began to

decline as early as the early nineteenth century. Evangelical Protestants reacted against innovations in intellectual life and intellectual culture by going on the defensive and calling on a much older tradition of trying to reconcile orthodox Protestantism with cutting-edge science in order to defend their religious beliefs on scientific terms. Christians have always been concerned to defend the Bible as a source of truth, and they became adept at borrowing the weapons of their enemies and turning those weapons back upon them. They mastered the language of Enlightenment rhetoric to talk about the truth of the Bible, not just pertaining to matters of salvation, but pertaining to matters of scientific and historical fact, from the scope of the Flood to the details of ancient Israel's politics. This is the intellectual source of the accusation that evangelicals are anti-intellectual, because they insist that the Bible must be true in the same way that a modern science textbook claims to be true. They refuse to sunder faith and reason and say they're just two separate ways of knowing the world. There is a class component as well, and that maybe fuels some of the defensiveness. During the Scopes trial, sarcastic, secular reporters like H. L. Mencken wrote up accounts of the illiterate, ignorant, unwashed, barefoot fundamentalists who believed that the world was flat. While John Scopes was found guilty at that trial, evangelicals lost the public relations war and have been trying to recover from that ding to their intellectual reputation ever since. Over the course of the twentieth century, we've seen them continue to invest in higher education and really try to create places of Christian higher learning and to earn the respect of the wider world. They're very proud of those in their ranks who go to the Ivy League and earn fancy PhDs while still keeping the faith.

**EC:** I was particularly interested in the accounts of the attempts to establish Christian institutes of learning, some of which worked better than others. A common theme was that they'd establish this institution and everything would be going great, but then it was as if the intellectual flourishing got to be too much, and it would get crushed. How do you think this pattern has affected the movement?

**MW:** In the case of evangelicals in higher learning, they've tried to do this dance. They try to integrate themselves into the wider sphere of secular accreditation institutions and universities, which accept the presuppositions of Enlightenment empiricism. At the same time, they're holding back from those presuppositions and basing their efforts at intellectual investigation in their faith in a particular interpretation of a set of holy scriptures. They sincerely want their students and their faculty to contribute to the advancement of human knowledge. In my research, I uncovered episodes where the administrators and faculty struggled with this balance, especially when pushed by enterprising students who were skeptical in one way or another of larger cultural orthodoxies on the campuses of places like Wheaton College. The administrators are only human. They try to do the right thing, but they have to please several audiences at once. They have to please their donors, the powerful ministers, the alumni, and the parents who pay tuition, while also creating a space for students to learn. You see them trying to negotiate this, and sometimes deciding that the student who published a dark essay in the lit mag that seems to question the Christian worldview went a bit too far, and they shut it down. I think evangelical educators have been skeptical of some of the rhetoric about academic freedom in modern secular academia, because they think it can take you off a cliff. The view is that if you depart from this Christian framework, you're not seeing the world correctly. You're a bad scientist; you're a bad historian. You're not a student who is going to uncover the truth. You can see how this puts them in a bit of a tangle when they try to assimilate at least partway into the culture of mainstream higher education.

**EC:** Do you think it would be better for evangelicals to be off in their own evangelical institutions like Wheaton and others, or are they better served by trying to integrate into schools like UNC-Chapel Hill? If they are trying to integrate, do you have any advice to evangelical students or professors trying to deal with academia as it is?

**MW:** Evangelicals themselves have debated this a lot. Most evangelicals are educated by the big state system. On the one hand, they've created very vibrant subcultures through organizations like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. On the other hand, they often find themselves in contexts where they're in a position of having to defend their faith. When I teach, I'm very careful to compare the assessment of a secular historian to the assessment of a believer. I try to make it clear to believing students in the traditions I talk about that they can be open to the history I'm telling them without automatically putting up their guard and seeing it as an attack on their faith. I also acknowledge that the presuppositions of my endeavor are very different, and in some cases mutually exclusive, from the presuppositions of faith. It's a tension that's important to talk about, and we can talk about it without either party becoming hostile.

**EC:** One of the traits that you seem to think make evangelicals unique is their lack of intellectual authority. They don't have a pope: they've got to figure it out on their own. Do you think that lack of authority is even more emphasized in the United States?

**MW:** Evangelicals will say that their authority is *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone, but of course as history tells us, there's no shortage of disagreement on what that means in practice. I think it is true that the American context has exacerbated this. American history has borne out the fact that these multiple authorities that compete—Reason, Scripture, religious experience, community—and this has been both a continuing problem for evangelicals, but also a source of great dynamism and strength.

**EC:** Toward the end of your book, you start chronicling evangelicals' rise to power in recent decades. You note that leaders of the movement like Jerry Falwell and Francis Schaeffer had managed to project an image of consensus among evangelicals, but you're skeptical of the consensus. Why?

**MW:** Since there's no evangelical pope and because evangelical church leaders are by and large pretty weak, evangelicals are more inclined to schism. The idea of national consensus even among Baptists or some other subset of evangelicals is an impossibility because of the way evangelical culture works. In the twentieth century, there have been certain figures that the media has settled on as a spokesperson for evangelicalism. Billy Graham very much cultivated his reputation as a polished, polite, an evangelical-you-could-take-home-to-dinner-to-meet-Mom, who would stand for the faith. And secular journalists were so happy to have someone they could quote for the "evangelical" perspective. But even in Billy Graham's heyday, when he was immensely popular, there were all kinds of groups who dissented from what he represented. During the rise of the Christian Right as an organized political movement in the 1970s and 80s, liberal evangelicals like Jim Wallace tried to wrestle the evangelical mantle from someone like Jerry Falwell. Wallace wanted to make evangelicalism stand for a broad ethic of life that cared just as much about poverty as it did about fighting abortion. But he largely failed. And again, Jerry Falwell's success in becoming a poster boy for evangelicalism is partly due to the mainstream media's desire to quickly get a handle on this mysterious subculture, because many reporters themselves weren't part of that world. I think that the degree to which Jerry Falwell

spoke for all evangelicals was always exaggerated. It was simply that, if you were an outsider, it was hard to see past the loudest spokesperson to the diversity and the quarrels going on within. Much of my book is an effort to get into those quarrels, the internal debates among evangelicals themselves that had consequences for evangelicalism's influence on mainstream culture and politics.

**EC:** Did you have a favorite quarrel to write about?

**MW:** I got very interested in writing about a relatively obscure evangelical theologian affiliated with the Church of the Nazarene called Mildred Wynkoop. She and a few colleagues tried to preserve what they saw as the unique heritage of their church, in the tradition of John Wesley, for integrating faith and reason that veered from the fundamentalist understanding of inerrancy, without going down the path of liberal mainline Protestantism. The Nazarene tradition doesn't get a lot of airtime in conventional accounts of evangelicalism, and so when I published the book, some Nazarenes got their hands on it and they just loved it! They loved that I was paying attention to their little church, which doesn't have a whole lot of members, and that I was tracing their role in these bigger debates. They were so excited about it that they sent me a bobblehead of Mildred Wynkoop as a token of their appreciation, and I was very touched. The most gratifying thing since the book has come out is the great feedback I've gotten from evangelicals. As an outsider, it's very gratifying when insiders say, "Yes, you've got a lot right here, I learned something about my own tradition from your perspective."

**EC:** Is there anything specific you might do differently in future books?

**MW:** Because it's got so much theology in it, I think the people who've read *Apostles of Reason* are those who are already persuaded that religion is important. I've concluded that I've got to do a better job of smuggling religious history in the form of something that looks to the naked eye like political or cultural history. It's made me think strategically about how I can persuade more general readers, more historians who maybe don't focus on religion, to take religion seriously in explaining the course of history.