BOOK REVIEW


In October, 1906, noted Methodist evangelist Sam Jones died while traveling on the Rock Island Railroad. Jones was returning to his hometown of Cartersville, Georgia, following his revival meeting held in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The railroad company provided the nationally-known preacher and his family with a special train car to return his remains to Georgia. The popular and controversial Jones was laid in state at the Capitol building in Atlanta and over thirty thousand people paid their respects. Today, few Methodists are aware of the life and ministry of Sam Jones. The new volume by Josh McMullen provides a welcomed sketch of Jones as well as several other recognizable “Big Tent” revivalists.

McMullen’s volume *Under the Big Top: Big Tent Revivalism and American Culture, 1885-1925*, examines the fascinating history and the social and cultural implications of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century phenomena known as “Big Tent Revivals.” The volume spotlights five evangelists who preached, lectured, and healed in circus-style tents, lecture halls, community centers, theaters, and roller-skating rinks across North America. Revivalists Sam Jones, Aimee Semple McPherson, Rodney “Gipsy” Smith, Billy Sunday, and Maria Woodworth-Etter canvassed the United States and Canada preaching the Bible and spreading the Gospel. McMullen notes that Big Tent revivalists, “embraced the emerging culture’s stress on personality, celebrity, energy, and entertainment. They accepted consumer culture’s emphasis on abundance, whether it was personal, economic, or religious. They offered this combination to audiences who found themselves in the midst of a cultural crisis” (7). As a result, revivalists and revivals navigated the blurred lines of both Protestant religion and American popular culture.

The central thesis of the volume investigates popular North American revivals during the historical and societal transition from the Victorian era to the modern consumer age. McMullen notes: “Big tent revivalists and their followers were at once highly modern and stridently committed to what they considered the fundamentals of the Christian faith. They cautiously unlinked Christianity from Victorianism and linked it with the new, emerging consumer culture” (8). Ultimately, these revivalists were not only reacting to consumer culture, they were helping to interpret it for their audiences.

Revivalists tapped into the vitality of early evangelists such as George Whitefield, Charles G. Finney and Dwight L. Moody, preachers who adopted and largely embraced popular culture and built bridges with their audiences.
by fusing societal interests with evangelical teaching. Big tent revivalism was ultimately a critique of Victorian religious expression. These ministers, teachers, and healers were not calling for a reviving or continuation of Victorian-era Christianity. Rather, they wanted to connect with the vitality and authentic experiences of American Christianity that pre-dated late nineteenth and early twentieth-century religious practice.

For Big Tent revivalists, authentic religion had degenerated to a point where preaching and teaching with “vim” and “vigor” was needed to revive Christianity. As a result, they shaped their message to fit a consumer ethos that embraced new technologies and cultural interests while embedding them within an historical reading of the Bible.

The significance of the book for United Methodist studies can be found in how McMullen brings understudied Methodist evangelist Sam Jones to light. Jones was born in 1847 in Oak Bowery, Alabama, from a line of Methodist ministers. He moved to Georgia, became an alcoholic, and eventually converted to Methodism in 1872. He traveled with his grandfather, a fellow Methodist who had preached at camp meetings and revivals during the early nineteenth century. McMullen also introduces readers to another lesser-known revivalist with Methodist connections named Burke Culpepper. Culpepper, the son of a southern Methodist evangelist, assisted his father in revival services and eventually became known as the “Billy Sunday of the South.” The volume places Jones and Culpepper in the same historical and cultural contexts as widely-known revivalists Aimee Semple McPherson and Billy Sunday. McMullen confirms that Methodists were very much a part of the revivalist tradition and demonstrates how Methodists, like other evangelists of the period, embraced and interacted with societal issues and concerns such as muscular Christianity, therapeutic healing, and urban ministries.

The strengths of the volume include the inclusion and analysis of a wealth of primary literature such as biographies, original documentation, and eyewitness accounts from local newspapers. McMullen also provides a balanced treatment of popular evangelists who have received much recent attention in scholarship (e.g. Aimee Semple McPherson and Billy Sunday) alongside understudied revivalists such as Sam Jones and Maria Woodworth-Etter. Even more impressive and important for future scholarship is how the author briefly addresses additional revivalists such as J. Gordon McPherson, and Fred Francis Bosworth.

While reading the book I discovered few weaknesses with the project. One addition that would enhance the volume is the inclusion of the voices and primary documentation from Protestant denominational executives, editors, and ministers. What were the opinions, for good or for ill, of Baptist, Congregationalist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominational leaders? How were the editors of Protestant denominational periodicals framing the work of Billy Sunday or Aimee Semple McPherson? Most of the evangelists spotlighted in this volume originally emerged out of these Protestant contexts and additional information would have been enlightening.

McMullen concludes with an important point for other future scholars to
build upon. He notes “big tent revivalists participated in the shift away from Victorianism, making an uneasy alliance with the emerging consumer culture. Indeed, revivalists helped construct America’s twentieth-century consumer culture and contributed to evangelicalism’s continued numerical success in that new milieu” (186). The book reframes Big Tent revivalists and encourages future scholars to think about these individuals in new ways. I look forward to future projects that emerge out of the important contribution of Josh McMullen’s research for American religious studies and ultimately for United Methodist studies.

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