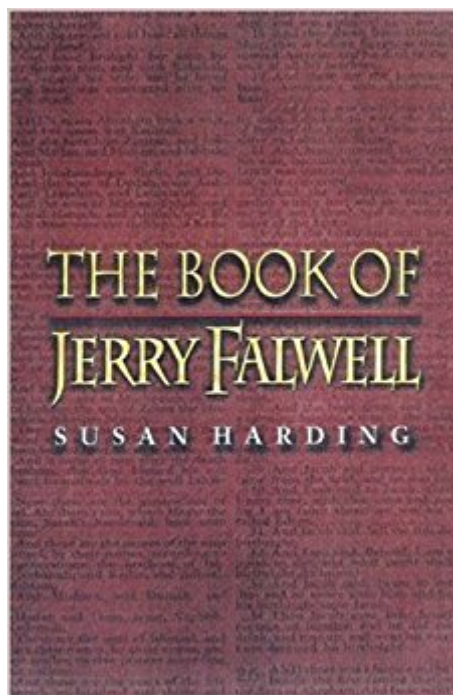




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# **The Book Of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language And Politics.**



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the early 1980s, Harding (anthropology, Univ. of California, Santa Cruz) followed Jerry Falwell's rising Christian fundamentalist movement. Focusing on Falwell's subtle dance between American evangelicalism and Bible-based fundamentalism, she calls her study not theology but the vernacular of Bible believers. By interpreting sermons, speeches, direct mail, videos, and TV broadcasts, she labors to elucidate this "language of cultural ferment" that ultimately serves, through the personal witness of Falwell, to bring fundamentalism out from its separatist tendencies and into a political revolution to save America in the 1980s. This is a highly readable book, though Harding can be a tad defensive of Falwell. When the media lumps him with the "telescandals" of lesser evangelists, she hedges on the line between participant and observer. Still, she remains true to her post-structuralism agenda, finding in the rhetoric of Falwellian fundamentalism the catalyst for social change and political fervor. Recommended.-Sandra Collins, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Lib., Pittsburgh Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Winner of the 2001 Award for Excellence in Religious Studies in Analytical-Descriptive Studies, American Academy of Religion Honorable Mention for the 2001 Cawelti Book Award, American Culture Association Honorable Mention for the 2000 Award for Best Professional/Scholarly Book in Sociology and Anthropology, Association of American Publishers"Harding has brought the finely tuned eyes and ears of an anthropologist to her research inside Falwell's fundamentalist Baptist community. Her analysis is incisive and empathetic."--Linda L. Giedl, *The Christian Science Monitor* "This is a highly readable book."--*Library Journal* "Harding's central subject is the rhetoric of fundamentalism, the language of its persuasion. But she also explains how Falwell, and others like him, have brought the fundamentalist community into politics . . . Harding's headlong exuberance propels [the book] and carries us deep into the mind and heart of a subculture that is increasingly

mainstream."--Ronald D. Elving, *Washington Post* "An eloquent and incisive study of religious fundamentalism in the United States. . . . [A] theoretically rich and highly original work."--Jeremy Stolow, *Sociology of Religion* "Harding's own mastery is on display throughout her book. . . . By the end . . . she has skillfully shown the myriad ways in which fundamentalist rhetoric created and transformed both the fundamentalist community itself and the wider American culture. Her work should be required reading not only for students of American religion, but for anyone who wishes to study sympathetically and fruitfully a different religious culture."--Jonathan Moore, *Christian Century* "So much has been written about resurgent Christian fundamentalism that it is difficult to imagine that someone might find something fresh to say about it. Yet Susan Friend Harding gives us some amazing glimpses into contemporary fundamentalism's heart and soul. . . . [A] bold, artful, and largely convincing book."--Joel Carpenter, *Journal of Religion*

Susan Harding, a cultural anthropologist by trade and practicing ethnographer, makes an attempt in this book to apply her craft to the "culture" of American Christian Fundamentalism. In light of the astonishing resurgence of Fundamentalism in the 1980s, Harding sets out to examine the special vernacular used within this cultural segment of society. Each of the ten chapters looks at a different facet, figure, or event connected with Falwell. Harding dissects his many "sermons, speeches, pamphlets, journals, books, direct mail, videos, television broadcasts, meetings, conferences, and other verbal, visual, and performed texts" in order to get a glimpse into not only Falwell's outward messages but also the underlying tensions that shaped those messages. She ultimately aims to lead the reader through the process by which Falwell revived, organized, franchised, and mobilized Fundamentalism. In the introduction, Harding describes Falwell and other fundamentalist preachers as men who "stand in the gap," meaning that they interpret the words of the Bible for a modern culture. The language these men crafted to reach their audiences is itself a sort of cultural vernacular, and in Part I she explores the language of witnessing and the roots of fundamentalist narrative language in the Scopes trial. She demonstrates the former by relating (verbatim) an actual witnessing testimony by Reverend Melvin Campbell. Her deconstruction of this witnessing speech is fascinating, though not a little strained and imaginative at times. It is difficult to determine if Harding is being genuinely receptive or merely humoring her host, but I suspect the latter is more accurate. Her recounting of the Scopes trial focuses on how that event was a "moment of narrative encapsulation" for fundamentalists. This is a helpful comment that puts the exile,

revival, and internal self-awareness of Fundamentalism into perspective. The question she ultimately hopes to answer is how the trial produced this narrative effect. Her answer is quite keen: the media's portrayal shaped not only the wider public's view of fundamentalists as country bumpkins, but also shaped fundamentalists' view of themselves as the persecuted opponents of modernity. It is odd, however, that in this analysis she skips over much of the twentieth century and jumps straight to the 1970s and 80s. By doing so she misses much of the important foundational work done by conservative evangelicals to keep Fundamentalism alive (thankfully Carpenter covers this period in *Revive Us Again*). Part II is substantially longer (eight chapters) and covers a wide range of topics, most of them revolving around Jerry Falwell. There are two chapters (3 and 7) that deal specifically with Falwell's rhetoric in both his testimony, *A Look Inside the Cup*, and in his pro-life book, *If I Should Die Before I Wake*. While Harding's breakdown of the language in these chapters is quite brilliant and probably carries much truth, it ultimately appears to be little more than a feminist deconstruction diatribe dressed up as a modest ethnographic case study. Both chapters have all the signs of deconstruction's exposure of an implicit hierarchy and the internal inconsistencies by which Falwell sets himself up as an anti-feminist male authority figure vying for power. Harding's analysis is nonetheless fascinating, however, especially as she moves the reader through his personal Jacob-like "prankster" testimony, and then the hero subtext in *If I Should Die*. There is undoubtedly a latent tension in his confessions and his controversies, but Harding provides compelling theories for why these problems miraculously sustained even fueled his followers' loyalty and the success of his ministries. The other chapters focus mostly on the more popular facets of fundamentalism's public notoriety: success in fundraising (or "Sacrificial Giving"), political activism (the creation of the Moral Majority), televangelism scandals, the creation/evolution debate, and end-times rhetoric. The former two aspects are the more important chapters since in them, more than the other chapters, Harding truly returns to her query of how Fundamentalism made such a powerful comeback in the 1980s. The answer in these chapters lies in Falwell's leadership (though she does not use this word) in bringing together the otherwise separatist fundamentalists, uniting them on common issues of concern, and mobilizing them for cultural engagement. Falwell's speeches (or "stump sermons"), according to Harding, were more like rites of passage (a term she greatly overuses) for his Christian

audiences. Here she again emphasizes the male-centeredness of his message and the movement as a whole, and the reader should not be drawn in (I certainly am not) by this line of argumentation. Harding may want readers to believe that women have no real place in authentic Fundamentalism, but her manipulation of the metanarrative is, again, strained. She zeroes in on an aspect of Falwell's stock political sermon—his mention of the problem of divorce—and spends half a dozen pages deconstructing his exclusionary jargon. According to Harding, the family only figures obliquely in all of this, which she dubiously claims is proof that his outward concern for family is only a ploy (167). This all seems incredibly incidental to the sermon; it is certainly not the central or underlying substance of Falwell's (admittedly tired) political rhetoric that she tries to make it out to be. Apparently she could not resist inserting her own exasperated loathing for Falwell's political message and rhetorical method (165–66). Nevertheless, Harding's exploration of the very fabric of Falwell's born-again vernacular is extremely compelling. Minus what occasionally appears to be a subtle attempt to portray him and other fundamentalists as sexist, power-hungry doctrinaires (these are my words, not hers—she's much too tactful to say these things outright), she is undoubtedly skilled in the art of ethnography—exposing the various unique devices which facilitate and ultimately shape a culture or subculture. Applied to Fundamentalism, these skills are helpful in guiding believers in some of the helpful, and also some of the deceitful, ways born-again Christians often go about pushing their agendas. Indeed, these agendas should not always be confused with the gospel.

Read okay, lived through most of this as a youth and young adult growing up.

I didn't like the topic of the book, but I think it is an extraordinarily well-researched and written text. If you want to understand Jerry Falwell, this book is like a key that fits a lock.

Harding does not attempt an expose, per se, although readers will be disturbed, perplexed and perhaps shocked by some of this book. For her research, the author immersed herself in the world of evangelical fundamentalism, getting to know the people, even becoming (in a sense) an insider herself. The fruit of her time is *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, an exploration of the way words are used in the fundamentalist "subculture" (though I am not sure if this is a designation Harding herself uses), specifically in the ministry of one of modern fundamentalism's key figures, televangelist Jerry

Falwell. The author's analysis rings true to life, for over the course of the past couple of years I have been on a pilgrimage away from my fundamentalist past, and can identify with many of her observations. For example, nowadays in conversation with fundamentalists I find I have to adapt my language and way of thinking to their language and way of thinking. When I have connected my worldview (still Christian, just not fundamentalist) to theirs, I can start to understand. Similarly, I find myself having to suspend my own mental system when talking to my new-age friends, and learn how words work in the world they inhabit. For this reason, Harding's perceptive commentary on fundamentalist political and religious speech resonates with my own perceptions, and thus emerges as fascinating, incisive and authentic.

Harding's provocative title promises in no uncertain terms to tell a good story. I experienced suspense as the Book of Jerry Falwell carefully delineated an important dimension of the story of America, then, more broadly and intensely, the story of speech, and of listening, making calmly powerful suggestions about the nature of both. With the hint of an irony that is at once intelligent and warm, Harding has written a rare book, a familiar book, about a culture often seen, from the corner of our eyes, in the side-view mirrors of our cars, one much closer than it appears. This author doesn't need to stray from a thorough elucidation of her subject to meditate intently upon larger questions, which is a continual delight. This book augurs well for anthropology in America.

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