Mainstreaming Fundamentalism:
John R. Rice and the Reengagement of American Culture

Pew Research Grant Proposal
Fall 2012

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1. Project Overview and Description

Drawing upon the influence that he procured as the editor of *The Sword of the Lord*, John R. Rice (1895-1980) articulated a mainstream form of fundamentalism that called upon fundamentalists in post-World War II America to revive their cultural and political activism even as they upheld the principal doctrines of their movement’s founders. Rice championed “mainstream fundamentalism” because he considered it to be an effective means of countering both the supposed compromises of new evangelicalism and the isolationism of strident separatism. By advancing mainstream fundamentalism, Rice helped his contemporaries recover the crusading spirit of first-generation fundamentalists. In doing so, he blazed a path of activism that subsequent fundamentalists used when they confronted the modernism that they believed permeated America’s political, cultural, and ecclesiastical spheres.

Using Rice’s life as a lens through which I examine the fundamentalist movement as a whole, my purpose in *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism* is to analyze the internal debates and public actions that shaped the structure of fundamentalism in post-World War II America. To be sure, Rice’s life provides the ideal setting for such an examination because he helped to establish standards of conduct and belief for ministers and laypersons alike throughout his roughly sixty years of ministry. This is not surprising, especially since Rice dedicated himself to the militant defense of the faith and to the dissemination of fundamentalism’s influence upon American culture. Having initially been an understudy of fundamentalist firebrand J. Frank Norris, Rice
emerged as a fundamentalist leader in his own right by making his weekly newspaper, *The Sword of the Lord*, the most influential fundamentalist periodical of the twentieth century. He further strengthened his standing in the fundamentalist community by developing strong personal and professional ties with fundamentalist stalwarts such as Bob Jones Sr., by using the radio to spread his views to every region of the United States, by writing more than one hundred pamphlets and books, and by mentoring younger fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell and Jack Van Impe.

During the initial stages of his ministry, Rice focused upon the tasks of spreading the gospel message to the unsaved and establishing standards of belief and practice. Believing that fundamentalists could preach a pure gospel only if they avoided all forms of compromise, Rice also called upon fundamentalists to break fellowship with non-Christians and theological liberals. He eventually realized, however, that fundamentalists had gone so far in their practice of separatism that they had become isolated from the culture that they wanted to redeem. Believing that this was inconsistent with the crusading spirit of the movement’s founders, Rice dedicated the last two decades of his ministry to the task of convincing fundamentalists that they could maintain doctrinal purity even as they worked to shape the contours of America’s ecclesiastical and social structures.

By examining the role that the implementation of Rice’s ideas played in shaping the public face of fundamentalism, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism* will help to explain how and why certain fundamentalists replaced self-imposed isolationism with a culturally engaged faith. It will, therefore, provide invaluable insights into why fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell developed close associations with conservative leaders in major denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It will further demonstrate that
a particular version of American history was at the heart of why fundamentalists came to believe that it is their birthright to shape American life to fit their own image.

In addition to addressing elements of fundamentalism’s subculture that have been largely ignored by historians, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism* will contribute to existing scholarship because of the extensive research that I amassed for the project. Central to my work are thousands of pages of letters and other private writings from Rice’s personal papers, documents that no other historian has examined in their entirety. Other sources of information that form the core of my research include Rice’s public writings and sermons, archival documents from several fundamentalist leaders, oral interviews that I conducted with Rice’s surviving family members, and a host of relevant secondary sources. In short, I have either looked at or will soon look at the effects of Rice’s life upon fundamentalism from every conceivable angle.

**Chapter Outline**

Introduction

Chapter 1 The Making of a Fundamentalist Leader

Chapter 2 Populist Exegete: Establishing and Fortifying Standards of Conduct and Belief

Chapter 3 Evangelical Schismatic: Defining the Boundaries of Ecclesiastical Separatism

Chapter 4 “Pseudo-Fundamentalist”: Rice and the Internecine Controversy Over Separatism

Chapter 5 Cultural Warrior: Restoring Fundamentalism’s Political Voice

Chapter 6 Mainstream Fundamentalism: The Legacy of John R. Rice

Epilogue

Appendix Bibliography
2. Brief Survey of Relevant Scholarly Literature

Having long-recognized that preachers and evangelists hold a tremendous amount of influence within American fundamentalism, historians have made biographical elements central to their examinations of fundamentalism’s contours. Three successful examples of this approach are Barry Hankins’s *God’s Rascal: J. Frank Norris and the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism* (1996), William Vance Trollinger Jr.’s *God’s Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (1990), and D. G. Hart’s *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (1994). By focusing upon individuals who led various elements of fundamentalism during its first few decades, these works excel at defining the theological and cultural parameters of nascent fundamentalism.

Most of the magisterial works on the broader history of fundamentalism similarly concentrate upon the internal developments that took place within the movement up until fundamentalists split with new evangelicals in the early 1950s. This is the focus of George Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980) and Joel Carpenter’s *Revive Us Again* (1997). Thus, while these works are rightfully praised for analyzing the shape of early fundamentalism, they are not designed to state much about the developments of fundamentalism in post-World War II America.

The one area of post-World War II fundamentalism that has received attention from scholars is the rise of the New Religious Right. Books such as Michael Lienisch’s *Redeeming America* (1993) and Robert Liebman and Robert Wuthnow’s *The New Christian Right* (1983) highlight the politicization of fundamentalism that took place in the late twentieth century. But these and other related works provide no insights into the internecine disputes that took place within fundamentalism as many within the subculture moved to adopt activism. By focusing
upon one of the individuals who shaped fundamentalism between 1940 and 1980, 

*Mainstreaming Fundamentalism* will provide a needed examination of how fundamentalists dealt with the internal tensions and external challenges that accompanied the reevaluation of fundamentalism’s relationship with broader American life. It will also help explain why and how many fundamentalists emerged out of their self-imposed isolation to become a political and cultural force.

Given Rice’s contributions to the movement, it is not surprising that a few authors have given attention to his life. Most notably, Mark Dalhouse examines Rice’s role in a major intramural dispute over ecclesiastical separatism in *An Island in the Lake of Fire: Bob Jones University, Fundamentalism, and the Separatist Movement* (1996). Dalhouse correctly argues that Rice rejected the strict separatism that the leadership of Bob Jones University embraced in the late 1960s because he saw this as inconsistent with the heritage of fundamentalism. But Dalhouse does little to extend his arguments into the broader consequences of this conflict. Intending to add to Dalhouse’s examination, my book will show how Rice established foundational arguments for political and ecclesiastical activism when he pushed fundamentalists to cooperate with those outside of their movement who agreed with them on core theological and cultural issues.

The only work that gives extensive attention to Rice’s life is Andrew Himes’s *The Sword of the Lord: The Roots of Fundamentalism in an American Family* (2011). Written by one of Rice’s grandsons, this book provides helpful reminiscences about Rice’s life and ministry. Since it is primarily a spiritual memoir about his extended family, however, Himes’s book provides no substantive interpretation of the history of fundamentalism. Since Rice contributed significantly to fundamentalism’s internal character and public resurgence, his life and ministry deserve to be
placed within the realm of serious scholarship. And given the fact that fundamentalism reemerged as a cultural force in American life in the late twentieth century, an analysis of why fundamentalists embraced activism is needed within the studies of the movement’s history.

3. Tentative Schedule

January 2013 Complete and Submit Book Proposal
February – May 2013 Complete the Last Elements of Research
June – December 2013 Complete the Book Manuscript
January – May 2014 Submit Peer-Reviewed Essay (Taken from Book Manuscript)
Presentation of Research Material at a History Conference

4. Budget

The funds from the Pew Grant would enable me to forgo my usual summer teaching schedule and allow me to dedicate my summer to writing and editing. Moreover, while most of my research costs for this project are behind me, I will undoubtedly need to spend some money as I add to existing material.

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5. Faith and the Discipline of History

Foundational to my core belief system is the idea that I cannot truly call myself a disciple of Christ unless I approach all elements of my life as an extension of my faith. Therefore, I think that the integration of faith and learning has to be about more than simply putting a religious or Christian angle upon whatever subject I am addressing in my scholarship. Thus, I have no desire to be a historian who seeks to force human history into some type of “sanctified” framework. Instead, I am a Christian whose faith informs my understanding of the world.
Perhaps more than anything else, my approach to the integration of faith and learning means that my presuppositions about the world and God’s role in the world define the parameters of my interpretations of history. Since most of my research and writing focuses upon religious history, there is often a direct link between the spiritual and the scholastic in my work. But my foundational beliefs also shape my understanding of those elements of history that do not have explicit connections to religion. Thus, my scholarship is demarcated by central tenets such as the beliefs that God is active in human life and that humans are sinful and flawed creatures. In practice, this approach means that my core beliefs shape the topics that I pursue, the questions I ask about historical events, and the way I analyze the behavior of historical figures.

While I believe that my core doctrines can and should inform my scholarship, I do not accept the notion that my theology provides me with a special understanding of how God’s will has been enacted in every facet of human life. I am keenly aware that believing that God works in human history does not mean that I understand exactly how God works (or, has worked) in the world. Having determined that the particular will and actions of God are not easy to track, I focus my scholarship upon human behavior. When applied to projects such as my study of John R. Rice’s life, this approach to historical inquiry means that I concentrate upon the actions of those who identify with the Church. In so doing, I approach historical inquiry in the same fashion as most other historians in that I primarily analyze past human behavior. Even so, I do not view my examination of religious history as a simple academic exercise. Instead, because I analyze how the actions of those who claim to be Christ-followers square with the teachings and life of Jesus, I expect my work to push Christians to think more deeply about the meaning of their teachings and behaviors.
Even as I hope to address needs within the Church, I do not believe that integrative Christian scholarship should lead to the “ghettoizing” of the Christian faith. The history of the Church is filled with theologians such as Augustine and Thomas More who believed that Christians could learn from non-Christian thinkers. I embrace this tradition because I am certain that there are those outside of the Church who provide invaluable insights into the human experience. Moreover, I believe that we not only limit our understanding of the world when we examine only those works of art, music, literature, and history that are explicitly Christian, but we also fail to see the full beauty and brilliance that exists in the world God created when we take such an approach. Thus, I strive to be a scholar whose work shows appreciation of all seekers of truth even I seek to create work that those outside of the Christian faith will recognize as a valuable contribution to the study of the human world.

6. Curriculum Vitae – Please see attached document.