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A REVIEW OF RANDALL STEPHENS' *THE FIRE SPREADS*

A review of Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008. xi + 393pp. \$27.95 (cloth). ISBN: 9780674026728.

“Location, location, location” is the old adage in real estate, and Randall J. Stephens has astutely applied this principle in his investigation of American holiness and pentecostal religion. As is true in many fields, there is an ever shrinking range of topics in American religion that have not been subjected to previous scholarly study. This leaves newcomers with the task of identifying a fresh angle or perspective that will inform current scholarship in ways that move beyond what has already been written by others. This is certainly true of the holiness and pentecostal movements, and Stephens’ intelligent solution is to consider the subject from a geographically specific perspective. He cogently argues that in the American South, one finds a unique environment where these movements developed distinctive traits that in turn influenced the broader culture of the region. This insight, that the South reshaped pentecostalism, and that in turn pentecostalism influenced 20th century southern culture, is one with sufficient nuance and cogency to sustain this thoughtful investigation. The added bonus to Stephens’ thesis is that there is an irony involved in this symbiotic relationship. Whereas the early southern holiness movement of the 19th century was characterized by a counter-cultural impetus, the southern pentecostals of the late 20th century had largely come to embrace and defend many of the mainstream American values that their predecessors had eschewed. Stephens’ consideration of the factors behind this shift is not exhaustive, but does offer helpful insights into the evolving nature of 20th century southern pentecostalism.

For readers unfamiliar with the nuanced history of the American holiness movement and the subsequent blossoming of pentecostalism, Stephens offers an approachable, yet sufficiently complex, orientation that is simultaneously engaging and informative. A significant factor in this story is the origin of both movements as imports to the South. The holiness movement of the 19th century was a Northern phenomenon, disseminated to southern regions by religious literature and “carpetbag holiness missionaries” who were, not too surprisingly, viewed with great suspicion in the South of the 1880’s and 1890’s (8). By the end of that century, the movement had taken root in the region, and at least twenty indigenous perfectionist newspapers had sprung up in the South. However, even as the stigma of “Yankee religion” was being overcome, controversy continued as these enthusiastic practitioners of full sanctification boldly criticized their fellow southern Christians who did not embrace their specific theological vision. For, according to the holiness advocates, the goal of Christian experience was not merely personal salvation (justification), but also necessarily included perfectionism (full sanctification). This was basically the old Wesleyan doctrine

that had over time come to be de-emphasized in the Methodist Church. According to holiness beliefs, conversion was only half the story, for it was radical purification that presented the Christian's lifelong goal. Holiness practitioners openly criticized their Methodist cousins, who had neglected this essential Wesleyan doctrine as denominational membership had become more established and mainstream. The holiness movement sought to revive these lost principles, and in doing so, to return the 19th century Church to a system approximating the Christianity of the New Testament. This primitivistic impulse left little room for compromise with those seen as opposing their theological agenda. As Stephens helpfully notes, "the narcissism of minor differences" (from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*) informs much of the resulting hostility between holiness promoters and their Methodist and Baptists opponents (11).

While the theology of northern and southern holiness advocates was closely aligned, Stephens explains how the latter developed in distinctive ways. Race became a prominent early theme, as these radicals experimented with integration at a time when "race-mixing" was verboten. They also advocated a shocking degree of gender equality for their socially conservative context. These kind of countercultural impulses have often been interpreted by scholars as an expression of the movement's disenfranchised membership. Stephens cautions that one can easily overemphasize the socio-economic status of the early members. Yes, a good portion of them were from the lower strata of society, and yet he argues that a considerable number of holiness advocates were from the New South's middle class and above. Whatever a member's individual station, the movement overall did maintain an interest in the poor. This social concern has confused some observers who have assumed a self-help dynamic was motivating concern for those on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder.

While these broader social issues did factor into the movement's agenda, it was the criticism of non-holiness forms of Christianity that provided their basic impetus. Southern Methodists and Baptists were seen as having reached a compromise with the world that had cost them their true faith. Members of those denominations were involved in such illicit activities as "gambling, buying lottery tickets, reading Sunday newspapers, going to theatres, drinking whiskey, using tobacco, and riding Sunday trains" (70). To holiness advocates, these outward actions were seen as manifestations of an inward shift away from the relentless pursuit of sanctification. They were portrayed as external confirmation of the diluted and mainstreamed theology of the Methodist and Baptist denominations. In turn, the established denominations responded to the holiness threat by portraying its practitioners as "half-crazed rustics" (72).

Stephens argues that underlying these theological issues was a fundamentally different vision of southern culture. The established denominations espoused southern cultural practices, whereas the holiness enclave spewed criticism. The "Lost Cause" ideology so prominent in the post-bellum South was officially endorsed by the established denominations. Sectionalism, Jefferson Davis, and the validity of the southern cause were explicitly defended in denominational

periodicals. In contrast, holiness leaders commonly portrayed the humiliation of the War as atonement for slavery. Their frequent practice of integration at meetings was cause for violent retaliation in some instances, with gunfire and revival tent burning serving as concrete expressions of disapprobation by fellow southerners.

Through effective use of print media, alongside old fashioned revival-style meetings, the southern holiness movement grew quickly during the last decade of the 19th century. The uncontrolled and proliferate itinerant ministers who disseminated holiness theology were beyond the control of any denominational body, and frequently wrought havoc when coming into a religiously calm town. However, with the passage of that century's last decade, the emphasis on social concerns (race, gender, poverty) was diminished, and the anarchy became primarily theological. This was a consequence of the increasingly premillennial theology of the movement. According to this popular system of theology, Christ was to return to earth before the Biblically predicted period of a one thousand year culmination of earthly history. Thus, reasoned the premillennialists, why expend futile energy on social correction or politics? Better instead to focus on awaiting the imminent parousia of Christ (138). This premillennial perspective "distanced southern holiness people from much of the national holiness movement," and according to Stephens, the bracketing of social concerns cost the group a portion of their historical identity (172). It also set the stage for 20th century developments, where southern pentecostalism moved steadily toward mainstream American culture, losing its historical identity as counter cultural radicals.

The premillennialism that had been imported from the North was followed by pentecostalism brought in from the West. The famous 1906 Asuza Street revival in Los Angeles had direct bearing on developments in southern holiness circles. Many holiness leaders travelled to California to participate first hand in this new movement that took holiness theology one step further by teaching the practice of glossolalia (speaking in an unfamiliar language) as necessary evidence of true Christianity. Stephens presents this chronological development of theology as containing an inner logic for the holiness advocates: "sanctification, divine healing, and the premillennial coming of Jesus were precursors to the baptism of the Spirit and tongues speech" (205). Now, speaking in tongues became the new way to determine correct faith, and of course this new standard brought with it a new set of divisions as some holiness practitioners refused to accept the new doctrines of pentecostalism. In addition, the new Pentecostals were even further removed from the established denominations who considered them "Linguo-Dynamiters" who "jabbered like barnyard fowls" (220).

As southern pentecostalism continued to experience phenomenal growth in the 20th century, Stephens describes the shifting values of the movement, as its members became increasingly "comfortable with the values and ideals of an affluent society" (233). This was manifest in various forms, as some advocated a "prosperity gospel" or even "conservative politics," moves that ironically gave them a connection to broader Christian fundamentalism, whereas their

movement early on had sought to contrast “both mainline Protestantism and bourgeois culture” (234).

At this point in Stephens’ analysis, he seems to abandon the carefully mapped style that had characterized the text up to this point. The final 50 pages feel a bit meandering as he touches upon various disjointed 20th century aspects of pentecostalism (he even loses some of his geographically specific focus). Several of the “radical” elements of southern pentecostalism merit more analysis (Jesus Only advocates, Snake Handlers, and ongoing race issues are all given brief attention in a somewhat disjointed fashion). In addition, the closing that includes Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Tammy Wynette, and John Ashcroft wanders around a bit. It is also unfortunate that several of his earlier themes (how do pentecostals continue to view non-tongues speakers, how has late 20th century southern pentecostalism retained regional particularities, how has the ongoing relationship between Pentecostals and the older denominations developed) are largely neglected at the end of the text. Yet, Pentecostal pacifism made sense as a relevant subject, as did the political machinations of Pat Robertson (a figure perceived in popular culture as representative of the broader movement). In the end, Stephens does retain his central thesis: namely, that southern pentecostalism “eventually identified with the same kind of social and political conservatism they had once shunned or even openly condemned” (281).

This carefully researched text (the early figures seem to be speaking for themselves through Stephens’ lucid prose) takes account of social context in a fair-minded fashion that carefully avoids the reductionism of some previous works on pentecostalism, while also subjecting the movement and its leaders to thoughtful scholarly examination. This can be a tricky balance to maintain, but Stephens has done an admirable job of presenting the leadership in their own voices, while simultaneously subjecting their perspective to his own informed analysis. Simultaneously, his geographically oriented approach cogently argues that southern pentecostalism has distinctions that merit a particularized investigation in order to better understand both southern culture and southern religion. In this case, the location specific rubric offers insights that are missing in other more broadly construed texts on this topic.

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Shoemaker, Stephen. “A Review of Randall Stephens’ *The Fire Spreads*,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 9 no. 3 (Fall 2008): 45-48.