

for a sequel in which he could continue to investigate the global collective memory of slavery.

How the Word Is Passed is a powerful and valuable book, one that will speak to a range of audiences, from archivists to teachers and students to parents. As we, like Smith, grapple with how to articulate and remember the gaps of a “crime that is still unfolding,” we would do well to ask ourselves what responsibility our public schools have to facilitate our collective reckoning with slavery and racial violence (p. 289). While readers must inevitably determine this responsibility for themselves, *How the Word Is Passed* suggests that the answer, in part, might lie within these museums, historical memorials, and community celebrations. In these places, and in thousands of similar sites around the world, there exists the opportunity to investigate a history that is too often forgotten or overlooked, a history we must learn so that we can truly understand our present and future.

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MINDS WIDE SHUT: HOW THE NEW FUNDAMENTALISMS DIVIDE US

by Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. 307 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

In late 2020, a collection of leading political scientists wrote a brief in *Science* on what they characterized as the “fierce urgency” of fighting growing political sectarianism in the United States (Finkel et al., 2020, p. 536). Among their recommendations for reforming our increasingly toxic and combative political culture, the authors called for promoting intellectual humility: by developing a commitment to nuance and an awareness of our own cognitive limits, we may become less self-righteous, more judicious, and better able to resist the simplistic and moralized stories that seduce us into extremism and open us to misinformation.

With the release of *Minds Wide Shut: How the New Fundamentalisms Divide Us*, Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro take up the call for promoting intellectual humility with an engaging and wide-ranging paean to inquiring, cautious, and rigorous thinking.

The main preoccupation of *Minds Wide Shut* is the surge in what the authors call “fundamentalism,” a term they use to refer to a particular kind of reductive, self-certain thinking that flourishes under conditions of polarization. *Minds Wide Shut* focuses on the characteristics of fundamentalist stances and their alternatives in the domains of economics, literary theory, politics, and religion, but the habits of mind under discussion run deep, and educators of all stripes will find it easy to appreciate the contrasting approaches to thinking at work in their fields.

The book begins with the acknowledgment that the term *fundamentalism* has often been used loosely, as a catch-all disparagement to identify politi-

cal opponents as dangerous and unreasonable. To rise above this cheapened and imprecise usage, the authors begin by discussing three criteria that they argue characterize fundamentalist modes of thinking: certainty, firm belief in the perspicuity of truth (the conviction that the nature of the world is unambiguous), and the reliance on sacred or foundational texts. Importantly, Morson and Schapiro contend that this kind of fundamentalism can (and does) exist among members of both the political Left and political Right and that it exists in a negative as well as a positive form. Whereas positive fundamentalists believe that they are in possession of unassailable truth, negative fundamentalists dismiss the notion of truth entirely, insisting that what we often talk about as truth or knowledge is reducible to power relations, cultural values, or other social constructions, thereby arriving at a similar conclusion about the futility of close reasoning. These various manifestations of fundamentalism are dangerous, the authors argue, not just because they foreclose learning, but because they tend to justify violence and conflict against nonconforming factions.

Having sketched the contours of fundamentalism, the authors bring its logics into further relief by contrasting it with attributes of healthier and more virtuous intellectual orientations. Drawing on enlightenment thinkers like J. S. Mill; the practical, case-based reasoning of “casuistry” (p. 58); and literary realists (with special emphasis on the Russian canon), Morson and Schapiro advocate for a dialogic stance that positions understandings of the world as provisional, always subject to falsification in light of appropriate evidence, and ever wary of absolutist solutions and claims of certainty.

In the sections that follow, the authors detail how these contrasting thinking styles show up in the worlds of politics, economics, religion, and literature. In the section on politics, they discuss the rising conviction that one’s own political bloc has a monopoly on righteousness, decency, and cogent policy. They highlight how the circular, authoritarian logic of Marxist-Leninist ideology bred a culture of fear, dysfunction, and violence in the former Soviet Union. Closer to the present, they discuss the pseudoscientific impulse to foreclose debate about empirical matters by appealing to the authority of social scientists. In the section on economics, the authors criticize the dueling fundamentalisms of free market absolutism and totalitarian command economics, illustrating the failures of each with historical vignettes and a case study of contemporary climate policies. The section on literature, meanwhile, extolls the virtues of realist novels as sources of insight into life’s fundamental complexity, while the chapter on religion offers a meditation on how sacred texts (and the Bible in particular) can be read by people of faith without sapping them of their spiritual force and singular content or as decontextualized revelations of immediate and self-evident significance.

The vignettes that populate each chapter—an exchange of letters between Erasmus and Martin Luther on whether scripture admits multiple valid interpretations, the testimony of a former Soviet bureaucrat on how the dictates of

Marxist economic theory forced Soviet factories into grossly ineffective manufacturing practices—are illustrative, making the nuances of Morson and Schapiro’s analysis clear and corroborating the existence of powerful fundamentalist modes of thinking in each of their focal domains. There is good humor here, too, with the authors effectively eliciting not just concern and exasperation but also a wry appreciation for the large and small ironies that characterize the follies of certitude. Overall, the book is at its strongest when it is elucidating the contradictions and dysfunctions of the various fundamentalist ideologies the authors survey.

There are places, however, where the work strays from the spirit of its own advice. Despite the book’s central focus on contemporary habits of mind, Morson and Schapiro engage only lightly with the seventy-odd years of research from fields like psychology and political science that have studied these habits of mind directly. Important questions about individual variation in susceptibility to fundamentalist thinking, the social and environmental conditions that encourage its emergence, and the interrelations between generally repressive attitudes and other kinds of reductive thinking are not taken up in detail. Readers are thus left without a discussion of how the authors’ own conjectures about the prevalence and consequences of indulging in fundamentalism ought to be evaluated and what existing evaluations of those questions have to teach us. In light of the authors’ endorsement of, for example, Karl Popper’s demand that meaningful claims be subject to falsification and scrutinized against relevant evidence (p. 278), these omissions feel like a passive violation of their own normative framework for how to address empirical questions.

Minds Wide Shut also ultimately withholds more than I expected on two other fronts. I was surprised at the absence of strategic recommendations for educators and others interested in cultivating antifundamentalist mindsets: while much can be inferred about how to teach good habits of inquiry, I suspect many readers would have been interested in more insights from the authors’ own illustrious careers as antifundamentalist educators on moves that might succeed in developing those same commitments. I was also somewhat surprised by the book’s relatively light engagement with the contemporary manifestations of fundamentalist logic, despite the titular focus on “new fundamentalisms.” Although the sections on economics and politics wade directly into discourse around such hot button topics as the Green New Deal (p. 151), and while references to present controversies are not uncommon, among the most frequent touchpoints throughout book are callbacks to the failures of the Soviet Union and analyses of nineteenth-century Russian literature (by contrast, the former U.S. presidential administration is mentioned only in passing, and only as a subject about which attitudes are divided, as opposed to an object of direct scrutiny). While certainly not without lessons for or connections to contemporary thinking, these anchors feel far enough removed from Twitter mobs or Qanon conspiracists to warrant more frequent and explicit

discussion of how these putatively illuminating frames inform the behavior of fundamentalists currently at large.

Nevertheless, *Minds Wide Shut*'s characterization of opposing intellectual stances across its focal domains is incisive and regularly convincing—an ode to important virtues that are often under threat—and the authors' decision to avoid discussing certain contemporary figures can be read as a tactical conceit to reaching an audience that might be turned off by challenges to favored figures. With lucid analysis and engaging prose, the authors largely succeed in making their case against fundamentalism in its various manifestations while helpfully illuminating the core tenets and connective propositions that animate a diverse array of troubling thought systems. The alternatives they propose are equally well detailed and offer an expansive set of ideas and models that educators and students alike may draw from in an effort to become better epistemic citizens. It is a book whose varied examples and intricate reflections I suspect I will return to and one that educators of all kinds would benefit from reading in order to develop more considered orientations to truth, dispute, and the practice of inquiry.

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Reference

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