

“Something to be Reckoned With”

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In 1980, the sleeping giant of American politics awoke. Evangelical Protestants comprise, along with Catholics (whom they approximate in number), one of the two largest religious blocs in the United States. The entry into electoral politics of a hefty portion of them as a self-aware Christian Right helped to ensure the triumph of Ronald Reagan and to transform and immensely complicate the affairs of the Republican party. The story is famous, Newt Gingrich's fall from grace providing only the latest, and surely far from the last, act in a riveting drama.

Many fewer nonevangelicals, most of them academics, are aware of a parallel and equally dramatic turning in evangelical intellectual life—though one without the rightward political bent. In 1995 appeared a new bimonthly journal called *Books and Culture*. The magazine is a self-conscious adaptation of the *New York Review of Books*, right down to the newspaper stock on which it is printed; and the editors of *Books and Culture* hoped that their periodical might do for evangelicals what the NYRB has done for secular intellectual life; that is, provide a forum in which academic and freelance intellectuals engage with gusto a general educated public. Like the NYRB, *Books and Culture* has assembled a stable of writers who repeat in its pages, many of them well known to each other. But, whereas the NYRB came into existence as the more-or-less chance result of a newspaper strike, *Books and Culture* culminates a kind of evangelical Long March through American intellectual life.

The names regularly on its pages represent almost a roster of the revolutionaries who have led this struggle. Among them are such widely respected academic intellectuals as the historians Mark Noll of Wheaton College in Illinois and Nathan Hatch and George Marsden of Notre Dame; the philosophers Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale and Alvin Plantinga of Notre Dame; and Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary. It is more than a curious coincidence that Hatch and Noll were classmates at Wheaton College and that Marsden, Wolterstorff, Plantinga, and Mouw once



taught together on the faculty of Calvin College in Michigan (an institution to which we shall have occasion to recur). For Wheaton and especially Calvin have been seedbeds of an intellectual renaissance within American evangelicalism (broadly defined: about which more later, as well) that has gone far beyond theology to establish a visible evangelical presence in literary scholarship, psychology, history, philosophy, and other fields.

Both Plantinga and Wolterstorff have delivered the revered Gifford Lectures (which puts them in a company with William James, Etienne Gilson, and Rudolf Bultmann). Hatch's *Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale) is the standard work on the defining events of the nineteenth-century religious history of the United States. Marsden's *Soul of the American University* (Oxford) ranks among the most talked-about academic books of the past decade. Similar plaudits could be accorded other Books and Culture authors. Roger Lundin's *Emily Dickinson* (Eerdmans) is one of the most sensitive studies of that poet. David Lyle Jeffrey's recent encyclopedic analysis of the Bible in English literature was widely received as a magnificent work of scholarship. These scholars are in no sense confined within some narrow evangelical discourse; they speak to, and are heeded by, academics of all stripes in their various disciplines. And they strive as well to speak to a wider audience.

Yet, in so speaking, they have had something distinctive to say. They are not standard-issue scholars. As believing Christians, they understand the import of religious faith in everyday lives. They take theological ideas seriously. They refuse to reduce belief to an epiphenomenon of social forces or material circumstances. Thus, while conforming fully to the canons of secular, mainstream scholarship, they have helped to nurture in the academy a heightened sensitivity to Christian faith as a factor important in its own right. They have hardly conquered the high citadels of academe, and they have a long way to go before becoming anything like a major presence in the universities, but they have made their presence felt.

In part the influence flows from organization. Evangelical scholars have developed a cadre of learned societies parallel to the larger disciplinary associations that largely regulate American academic life. There is a Society of Christian Philosophers to match the American Philosophical Association, Christians in Political Science alongside the American Political Science Association, a



Conference on Faith and History affiliated with the American Historical Association, and so on. But these groups, while founded by evangelicals, are no longer exclusively comprised of them. The current president of Christians in Political Science, for instance, is a Roman Catholic. And this indicates another key to the success of the new evangelical intellectuals: cooperation with other Christians concerned about revivifying Christianity in the life of the mind.

As recently as 1970, probably no credible prophet would have forecast these developments. The dilapidated state in which evangelical intellectual life found itself during the middle decades of the twentieth century was more than a little ironic. For much of the nineteenth century, an informal evangelical establishment had come close to dominating cultural life in the United States. But in the 1880s and 1890s battles between fundamentalists and modernists (as these two blocs would come to be called after 1900) effectively destroyed this evangelical near-hegemony. In the 1920s the decade of the infamous Scopes trial - fundamentalism was decisively defeated within the mainline Protestant churches. Thereafter the fundamentalists withdrew into the periphery of American culture, making scarcely any contribution to the nation's intellectual life.

The rise of the so-called New Evangelicalism after World War II loosened the rigidities of fundamentalism and, via the populist revivalism most famously exemplified in Billy Graham, expanded the numbers of evangelicals; but it did little to bring them back into the intellectual mainstream. As recently as 1994 the distinguished historian Mark Noll could write, in the first sentence of a widely noticed book, that *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans) "is that there is not much of an evangelical mind." Within their own boundaries evangelicals did, however, nurture distinctive habits of thought. The more unchanging among them retained a nineteenth-century approach to natural science, which led them into creationism, and a "dispensationalist" and literalist biblical hermeneutic, which predisposed them to apocalyptic prediction at the drop of a crisis in the Mideast. It is from this self-enclosed world that the new evangelical intellectuals have emerged in the last few decades, into a full engagement with contemporary culture. It is, indeed, because of their distress that their fellow believers had so shut themselves off from the larger life of the mind that a small cadre of evangelical academics decided a decade or so ago to struggle explicitly against such anti-intellectual isolationism. *Books and Culture* is the latest result.



Roman Catholics of a certain age will be inclined to draw an analogy to the experience of American Catholic intellectuals in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and the near-simultaneous collapse of the intellectual hegemony of neo-Thomism. In the 1960s, Catholics likewise stepped out of a kind of intellectual ghetto and became full and equal participants in the broader intellectual life of the United States. But, although the structural similarity is remarkable, the parallel is misleading. Whatever the weaknesses of American Catholic culture in the first half of the twentieth century, its intellectual life was rich and vigorous. Neo-Thomism tied it to a deep and sophisticated tradition of philosophic speculation; the international character of the church connected Americans (even if as distinctly junior partners) with the brilliance of the Catholic Revival - with writers as various and shining as Jacques Maritain, Christopher Dawson, and Georges Bernanos.

There was nothing equivalent in the mainstream of American evangelicalism. Nineteenth-century evangelicalism had produced intellectuals of real stature—Charles Hodge, James McCosh, James Dwight Dana—but the churches that nurtured such minds—the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians—went the modernist route in the twentieth century. The denominations from which came the vast majority of fundamentalists and, later, New Evangelicals—such as the Southern Baptists, the Church of Christ, and the various Pentecostal groups—were populist in character, little attuned to the life of the mind and often suspicious of it. A professorial acquaintance of mine is a loyal member of the Church of Christ who works hard to renew links between Christianity and academic thinking; when asked why he doesn't pay more attention specifically to the distinctive intellectual traditions of his own denomination, he raised his eyebrows and asked wryly, "Just what would those be?"

Given these facts, the evangelical intellectual revival seems genuinely puzzling. How did a religious movement that has historically produced preachers rather than professors (and still specializes in the former) manage to generate within a couple of decades a distinguished cohort of scholars? How could so sturdy an intellectual life arise on such feeble intellectual traditions?

The answer to this apparent paradox is that evangelicals, in fact, did not build—could not have built—on their own intellectual foundations. Here the curious prominence of Calvin College, alluded to earlier, becomes salient. Calvin is a small institution with a history of having featured on



its faculty a surprising number of rather distinguished scholars, especially philosophers and historians. It also, and not coincidentally, has a history of something close to tribalism, though diluted in recent years. Founded in the nineteenth century to serve a recent Dutch migration into the Midwest, Calvin has remained closely bound to the children of those immigrants—reading the names on the faculty roster, one could be forgiven for thinking oneself in Amsterdam—and to their fairly small denomination, the Christian Reformed Church. But, though weak in numbers, the C.R.C. is sturdy in mind. It inherited the same rich Calvinist (or capital-R "Reformed") theological traditions and the same predilection for education that made Presbyterianism probably the most intellectually impressive of the larger American churches.

But it inherited them in a distinctive form, in the neo-Calvinism of the Dutch politician and theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905 and earlier the founder of the Free University of Amsterdam. Kuyper rejuvenated John Calvin's beliefs in the devastating effect of Original Sin on the entire human person, including the intellect, and in the power of saving grace, therefore, to enable the elect to see reality more clearly; he likewise repeated Calvin's insistence on the duty of those whom God had saved to glorify God by working to reform his world. In contrast to Catholic thinkers, who tend to emphasize the common rationality of all human beings, Kuyper thus stipulated a sharp opposition between Christian and non-Christian thought. He also stressed (in George Marsden's words) "the importance of the 'mind' of the age in shaping its culture," and he identified "the Christian task as a broad one of transforming all of culture for God's glory."

Mixed with their hereditary fondness for books and schooling, Kuyperianism made among the Christian Reformed a perfect recipe for cooking up writers and scholars. James Bratt, a historian at Calvin College sometimes associated with the "evangelical" intellectual revival, has written winsomely about the results in his 1984 book *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Books on Demand). From Calvin College itself emerged many of the leaders of the "evangelical" revival: Mouw, Marsden (who qualifies as an honorary Dutchman from his many years on the Calvin faculty), Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and others. Through Calvin College's influence, neo-Calvinism stamped its decisive impress on many of the other leaders, including Hatch and Noll.



The quotation marks now appear around "evangelical" to indicate a certain problem with the term that becomes apparent as soon as one brings in the Calvin College group. As a Calvinist people, the Christian Reformed have a strong doctrine of the church and a deep attachment to creedal traditions. This sets them apart from the American evangelical lineage with its religious individualism and consequently weak ecclesiology-and its immediate recourse to the Bible alone as the ground of faith. Shared commitments to doctrinal orthodoxy and a mutually held high view of Scripture have sufficed to ensure hearty cooperation between Christian Reformed and "real" evangelical intellectuals-between Calvin College and Wheaton College, to phrase the matter in an institutional synecdoche-and in some contexts even to blur altogether the differences between them. But the fact remains that Kuyperian neo-Calvinism looks very different from most of twentieth-century American evangelicalism.

Kuyperianism hardly exhausts the resources on which the new evangelical intellectuals have drawn. Mark Noll notes that recent evangelical political thinkers have also borrowed "from the Anabaptist heritage, from the mainline Protestantism of Reinhold Niebuhr, or from the neoconservative Catholicism of Richard John Neuhaus, Michael Novak, and George Weigel." Perhaps the favorite writer among bookish evangelicals is C. S. Lewis, an Anglican who rarely had kind words for their version of Protestantism. And, while attention to the Kuyperian tradition maps the main highway in recent evangelical scholarship, for a movement as diverse as American evangelicalism it is not the only road. Recent stirrings at places like Messiah College (Brethren in Christ), Pepperdine University (Churches of Christ), Baylor University (Southern Baptist), and several Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal institutions show that renewed concern about intellectual life does not derive only from the Reformed. Such eclecticism helps to explain the suppleness and adaptability of recent evangelical intellectual life. From my viewpoint, however, the decisive influence on the revival remains neo-Calvinism.

Whether this judgment is correct or not, the success of these evangelicals in finding resources outside of their own tradition, in order to enliven the life of the mind within it, is not only one of the more fascinating and impressive episodes in recent intellectual history, it also raises a curious question. To what extent can the evangelical intellectual revival properly be called evangelical? The



distinctives of evangelicalism seem to survive more in religious than in intellectual behavior: the new evangelical intellectuals pray as evangelicals but think as Calvinists or Anglicans, or sometimes even Catholics.

Whether the evangelical intellectual revival will make serious inroads into the broad culture of American evangelicalism remains to be seen. Even many evangelical intellectuals remain skeptical about this. That it has made, and will continue to make, a substantial mark on American academic life seems indisputable, especially in history, philosophy, and more recently sociology. But the overall effect will likely be to fortify other, nonevangelical Christian approaches to scholarship, rather than to generate an original, distinctively evangelical life of the mind.

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