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Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Spirituality Deficit

Frank Turner of Yale University is not a household name in Evangelical circles, but this professor of nineteenth-century British history certainly deserves to become one, now that he has published a monumental biography of John Henry Newman (*John Henry Newman. The Challenge to Evangelical Religion*, Yale University Press, 2002). Professor Turner concentrates almost entirely on Newman's early life inside the Church of England, and ends his 641-page book with his subject's apostasy to Rome in 1845. Far from being a hagiography, Professor Turner's study is a detailed dissection of the Newman legend, showing only too clearly to what extent Newman himself, along with his later followers and admirers, doctored the truth in order to justify his somewhat eccentric beliefs and career. What is particularly interesting, and little understood nowadays, is that Newman was brought up in, and reacted against, a religious culture so deeply impregnated with Evangelicalism that it was possible for him to regard it as synonymous with Protestantism as a whole.

Professor Turner has done his homework on Evangelicals, and much of the book is taken up with describing what they were like in the early nineteenth century. For all the changes which have occurred since then, the modern evangelical reader is likely to be struck by how much has remained the same. Then as now, Evangelicals practised an earnest religion, full of bourgeois assumptions and morality, and suspicious of anything odd or offbeat. Theologically, they were (and still are) content with a blend of past masters and present popularizers, whose great gift is to make such things as Bible study accessible to the non-specialist. Its central doctrine was (and is?) penal substitutionary atonement, acceptance of which guaranteed the believer that he or she would have a place waiting in heaven. It was a positive, activist and fundamentally democratic creed, which did much to set the tone for Victorian Britain.

But in Newman's youth, Evangelicalism was also a troubled faith, and in that respect also, there are modern parallels which must give us pause for thought. Scientific rationalism had yet to make its major impact, but already there were

those who felt that Evangelicals were rationalists at heart, ready to sacrifice the mysterious side of Christianity if that stood in the way of ‘progress’. Many Evangelicals felt no particular loyalty to the Church of England, and were prepared to work outside its bounds when that suited them, while clinging to it for the advantages which its structures afforded. In some cases, as in the British and Foreign Bible Society, they were even ready to co-operate with Unitarians, so unimportant did mere differences of doctrine seem to some of them. At the other end of the spectrum, Evangelicalism was rent by schismatic tendencies of a more apocalyptic nature, with charismatic outbursts leading to the formation of the Catholic Apostolic Church (the so-called ‘Irvingites’) and the Plymouth Brethren. John Henry Newman knew all about this, as his younger brother Francis was attracted to John Nelson Darby for a few years, before he drifted off into an even more radical Unitarianism, and he came to regard it as potentially fatal to any recognisable form of Christianity.

Professor Turner shows how Newman, after a Calvinist conversion at the age of fifteen, gradually grew dissatisfied with Reformed theology and turned against it. He rejected penal substitution, and came to see evangelical faith as the sworn enemy of orthodox Christianity, which he identified as Catholicism—not Roman Catholicism, mind you, but a form of faith more or less unique to him. In a brilliant analysis, Professor Turner shows us how Newman constructed his own fantasy church, excommunicated the rest of the world, and then tried to remake it in his image. Tractarianism is revealed as a theological fraud, widely denounced as such at the time, but nevertheless attracting a following among those (including some disillusioned Evangelicals) who wanted a consistent framework for their beliefs which could claim divine authority, and not merely parliamentary sanction. In Newman’s mind, Evangelicalism was but an ante-room, which led directly on to liberalism and unbelief though, as Professor Turner shrewdly points out, it was the Tractarians who were the true liberals—and sceptics to boot! They were out to destroy the Protestant Church of England, and were far more successful than anyone at the time could possibly have imagined. How many modern Anglicans agonize as Newman and his colleagues did, over whether or not they can subscribe *ex animo* to the Thirty-nine Articles? Indeed, how many modern Anglicans have ever read them? The Tractarians did not create a Catholic church in England, but they managed to marginalise Protestantism inside the national church—a negative achievement with which we now have to live, whether we like it or not.

Newman turned to Rome, but he could equally well have founded his own church, or drifted off (like his younger brother Charles) into atheistic socialism. The arch-Catholic remained psychologically Protestant to the end, regarding his 'submission' to the Pope not so much as an act of humble repentance from Anglican schism and heresy, as an opportunity to work out his radical ideas on a wider (and as he hoped, more receptive) stage. That things did not work out that way need not surprise us, and it seems fairly clear nowadays that Newman deserved all the difficulties which Rome put in his way after his conversion. His vision of the world was warped in some fundamental ways (notably in his attitude towards women and marriage) and it is not surprising that Rome found much of what he had to say unpalatable. In the end, Newman became their hero, but only after most of his ideas had been forgotten and his own past had been covered over in a skillful, if largely untruthful, autobiography (*Apologia pro vita sua*), which remains his most appealing work.

How did Newman get away with it? Why were the Tractarians so successful when virtually everything they did was plainly fraudulent? In particular, how could they caricature Evangelical religion and succeed, when most (if not all) of their audience knew that what they were saying was wide of the mark, to say the least? Professor Turner does not go into this in detail, but the modern evangelical reader can sense what his answer must be. Evangelicalism, then as now, was long on truth (understood in propositional terms) and short on 'spirituality'. 'Be still and know that I am God' might as well be omitted from most evangelical Bibles, so little attention is paid to it. The Apostle Paul is great when talking about justification by faith, but when he advocates sacrifice (like fasting or celibacy) in the service of the Lord, nobody in the evangelical world is listening. Evangelicals are always ready to preach and teach, but they do not find it so easy to listen or learn—certainly not from anyone who is not approved of in their circles. Is it any wonder that to outsiders, we often come across as narrow-minded, arrogant, uncultured and just plain dull?

We can sit and tell ourselves that this caricature is unfair (which it is) but would it not be much better if we faced up to the fact that every caricature contains at least an element of truth, and that the unflattering portrait painted of us is not altogether unrecognisable? Whatever the reasons may be, there is a deficit of true spirituality in our midst, and this allows counterfeit versions,

put forward by the Tractarians in their day and by a wide assortment of charismatics, catholics and liberals in ours, to claim the field instead. Evangelicals are quick to find fault with the Toronto blessing or the Alpha course (with good reason, to be sure), but slow to learn the lessons which such phenomena teach us. The Vineyard experience would not have swept through the evangelical world like the bubonic plague if there had been a robust spirituality able to resist it; its astonishing success is a measure of how great our need of spiritual renewal really is, and ought to have stirred Evangelicals up accordingly. (It did not.) Books of all kinds are churned out by evangelical presses, but devotional classics are not among them; nowadays, even *Pilgrim's Progress* sits on the shelf, unread by anyone under retirement age. They prefer Harry Potter!

Man is a spiritual animal, and will seek the mysterious wherever it may be found. The official rationalism of our public culture is powerless to prevent this, and we do not have to go far to find otherwise sane people indulging in the most mindless and perverse activities, searching for the elusive spiritual effect which these are supposed to have. As evangelical believers, we are horrified by this 'new age' mentality, but instead of merely reacting against it, we must learn to recognise why it is so powerful, and respond to it with the real thing—Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Tractarians made an impact because they appealed to their hearers' spiritual side, and practised an asceticism which demanded real commitment from their followers. The present Archbishop of Canterbury is widely regarded as being 'deeply spiritual' despite (or rather because of) his unusual blend of emotion and incomprehensible mysticism, cloaked in the form (but lacking the substance) of Christian orthodoxy. Meanwhile, Evangelicals are busy (always busy!) organising yet another mammoth conference, producing even bigger mounds of paper, and neglecting the one thing needful—our daily, faithful and humble walk with God. May He open our eyes before it is too late and renew us with His Spirit, that in the days ahead we may bear faithful witness to Him in who we are as His people, as much as in what we do for His sake.

GERALD BRAY