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# EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN THE ENGLISH- SPEAKING WORLD DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY (FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2004)

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Evangelical theology was the prevailing mode of Christian thinking in the English-speaking world during the nineteenth century. It was the doctrinal system professed by the Evangelical Revival in Britain and the Great Awakening in America that in the previous century had given birth to Methodism, transformed the Congregationalists and Baptists into eagerly expanding bodies and begun to revitalise the Anglicans and Presbyterians. The revival was a pan-Protestant phenomenon and its adherents tended to sit loose to the detail of creeds inherited from the period of the Reformation. Evangelicalism was, as a disparaging Unitarian put it in 1847, 'the popular Theology'.<sup>1</sup> It was the burden of countless pulpits every Sunday in Britain, the United States, the British settler colonies and the territories throughout the world where Anglo-Saxon missionaries had carried the gospel. Its centrality to the church life of these lands during the nineteenth century has nevertheless been obscured in much of the secondary literature. The master-narrative of the history of theology in the United States, inaugurated by Frank H. Foster in 1907, sees the central theme as the decline of Calvinism.<sup>2</sup> The convictions brought over the Atlantic by the early settlers of New England, according to this account, gradually fell into decay over the centuries. This depiction, while far from entirely false, underplays the transformation of Calvinist thought into an Evangelical version and ignores the rise of a parallel doctrinal tradition created by Methodism. The modified version of Calvinism and the Arminian system of the Methodists steadily approximated to each other as the nineteenth century proceeded, forming the backbone of Evangelical theology.

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<sup>1</sup> William Gaskell, *Some Evil Tendencies of the Popular Theology: A Sermon* (Wakefield, 1847), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Frank H. Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (Chicago, 1907).

Likewise the accustomed view of British religious thought in that century, as first outlined by Otto Pflleiderer in 1890 and expounded more recently by Sir Owen Chadwick and Bernard Reardon, treats its development as the rise first of the Oxford Movement and secondly of liberalism.<sup>3</sup> Evangelical theology is pushed to the margins of the story or even beyond. For neither country, therefore, is the vigour of the tradition of thought deriving from the revival normally given its due. What is attempted here is a sketch of some of the main features of the body of theology that moulded the civilisation of the English-speaking world in the Victorian era.

### EVANGELICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The characteristics of Evangelical theology that had arisen in the revival period were sustained into the nineteenth century. One of them was an attachment to the Bible. The traditional biblicism of Protestants was if anything taken to a fresh pitch. Evangelicals believed in searching the Scriptures for doctrine, for guidance and for spiritual nurture. Works of theology rarely strayed far from the biblical text, which was frequently quoted to give authority to any strand of teaching. There were guides to Bible reading such as the widely used *A Scripture Help* (1816) by Edward Bickersteth, one of the leading Evangelical Anglicans of his generation. The circulation of the Bible, as was undertaken by the British and Foreign Bible Society (1807), the American Bible Society (1816) and their many imitators, was conceived as a mode of propagating the gospel in its own right. The Bible was the vehicle of revelation. 'There is but one final standard of Christian living, or Christian doctrine', wrote an American Free Methodist in 1884. 'That standard is the word of God, revealed to man in the Holy Scriptures.'<sup>4</sup> This comment was not designed to drive a wedge between the word of God and the text of the Bible, for Evangelicals would equally happily equate the Scriptures with God's word. Yet their attitude to the Bible cannot justly be identified, as it often has been, with Fundamentalism. There was normally no dogmatic insistence that the text of the Bible must necessarily be factually accurate on all topics. The work of scholarship that remained standard among Evangelicals for forty years, Thomas Hartwell Horne's *Introduction to the Critical Study and*

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<sup>3</sup> Otto Pflleiderer, *The Development of Theology in Germany since Kant and its Progress in Great Britain since 1825* (London, 1890). Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* (2 vols, London, 1966-70). B. M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: A Survey from Coleridge to Gore* (London, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> *Free Methodist*, 9 January 1884, p. 1.

*Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (1818), acknowledged that there are discrepancies in the biblical text. Similarly Charles Simeon, the mentor of generations of Evangelical Anglicans, held that it contains 'inexactnesses in reference to philosophical and scientific matters'.<sup>5</sup> Inspiration was originally defined, following Philip Doddridge from the previous century, in a way that allowed for different levels of inspiration in various parts of the Bible, though with the publication of *Theopneustia* (1841) by Louis Gaussen, a Genevan professor of theology, a higher estimate of the matter came into vogue. Gaussen held that the very words had been breathed out by God and so that all the Scriptures were equally inspired, but even he did not accept the idea that the text was dictated to the authors of the biblical books. The Bible was loved and revered but theologians did not normally treat it uncritically.

The theological system extracted from the Bible, secondly, focused on the doctrine of the cross. Although Evangelicals shared the substance of Christian orthodoxy with High Churchmen and others, they put particular emphasis on the place of the atonement in the overall pattern of theology. Theirs was a soteriological scheme, for, as they sometimes remarked, their starting point was ruin, the first of the doctrinal three 'r's. Their conviction was that humanity was fallen, and so universally infected by the disease of sin that alienated it from the Almighty. There was therefore a need for redemption, the second of the 'r's, which had been achieved by Jesus on the cross. An editorial in the main American Methodist periodical, *The Christian Advocate and Journal*, for 1872 had as its title 'The Cleansing Blood'. 'As the sacrifice of Christ lies at the foundation of all Christian doctrine', it contended, 'so is its application essential to all Christian purity and life.'<sup>6</sup> The received view was that the death of Jesus was both substitutionary and penal. Jesus, that is to say, took the place of human beings in order to receive the punishment for the sin that ruled their lives. Because he had suffered in their stead, they could be forgiven. The work of Christ was in some sense exemplary, since the submissive humility of the Son of God formed a model for Christian behaviour, but it was the power of the cross to turn aside the wrath of God that was dwelt upon. The Evangelical stress on the atonement contrasted with alternative interpretations of Christian theology that saw the incarnation as its kernel. Both Anglo-Catholics and Broad Churchmen in the Anglican communion, together with the many who were influenced by them in other

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<sup>5</sup> A. W. Brown, *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev. Charles Simeon* (London, 1863), p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York), 3 October 1872, p. 316.

denominations, normally treated the taking of flesh by the Son of God as the greatest doctrine of the faith. But Evangelicals remained convinced that Christmas was important primarily as a prelude to Good Friday. Every minister, according to the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1837, should 'keep the cross of Christ ever in view'.<sup>7</sup> The atonement was the fulcrum of the Evangelical theological scheme.

The work of Christ was nevertheless ineffectual unless it was applied to the soul of the individual. The third 'r', following ruin and redemption, was regeneration. All human beings, it was believed, had to be born again if they were to have the prospect of going to heaven. There was no ultimate advantage in giving time, wealth or influence for the cause of Christ, declared the British *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* for 1860, if there had been no personal submission to the Saviour. 'Christ has to do with *you*, to break *your* heart, to melt *your* soul, to bring *you* a happy captive to Himself.'<sup>8</sup> The process was one of conversion, which was seen as the human side of regeneration. Whereas regeneration, according to the 'Theological Dictionary' issued by the English Baptist minister John Rippon in 1801, was 'the MOTION OF GOD in the heart of a sinner', conversion was 'the MOTION OF THE HEART of a sinner towards God'.<sup>9</sup> The two were intimately related, and both, most Evangelicals believed, were in the last resort the effect of the Holy Spirit, whose work it was to bring people to Christ. Only those who had been converted were true Christians, for the experience was the essential gateway – the wicket gate of *Pilgrim's Progress* – to the life of discipleship. It was of no value to have been baptised as an infant if conversion did not follow in due course. Here Evangelicals differed from High Churchmen who maintained that the sacramental power of baptism was what turned people into Christians, and many of the fiercest English controversies of the early nineteenth century, culminating in the Gorham Judgement of the Privy Council in 1850, revolved round this contrast of opinion. Evangelicals nevertheless differed between themselves over the nature of conversion. Methodists, especially in the earlier nineteenth century, expected it to be instantaneous and conscious, whereas others were far more prepared to see it as a gradual and perhaps imperceptible development. The crucial point was to be aware of having passed from darkness to light. Reform, self-

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<sup>7</sup> *Account of the Twenty-Fifth Annual Session of the Baptist Union* (London, 1837), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, February 1860, p. 118.

<sup>9</sup> John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register for 1801 and 1802* (London, n.d.), p. 664.

improvement or good resolutions were not enough. Conversion was conceived to be essential as the entry on the Christian life.

Beyond conversion lay a life of diligent service for Christ. The activism that was a hallmark of Evangelicalism was the logical outcome of the experience of conversion. 'It is the duty of every one who knows *the good news* of salvation through Christ', announced *The Examiner and Chronicle*, the New York Baptist newspaper, in 1868, 'to *tell* the good news, as he has opportunity and ability, to his companion who does not know it, that he too may be saved.'<sup>10</sup> Vigorous evangelistic activity was a central characteristic of the Evangelical movement. It drove adherents of the movement to launch missions to the non-Christians in far-flung parts of the globe as well as to the nominal Christians at home. The impulse to be up and doing, furthermore, meant hostility to the power from which conversion had rescued the soul. 'No one can doubt', wrote a contributor to the *Rocky Mountain Presbyterian* in 1872, 'that a profession of Christianity means *war against sin wherever it is found and war to the death*'.<sup>11</sup> Hence Evangelicalism was the seedbed for many a movement of reform during the nineteenth century – against slavery (despite its staunch Evangelical champions in the American South), against drunkenness (generating the enormously influential temperance movement) and against inhuman conditions in cities and factories (supremely in the work of Lord Shaftesbury). Philanthropic effort was as regular an outcome of Evangelical belief as evangelistic endeavour, for each was rooted in the teaching of the Bible. Care for the needy, so striking a feature of the multitude of voluntary societies generated by nineteenth-century Evangelicals, was an expression of their desire to obey the commands found in Scripture. Through good works believers bore witness to the reality of grace in their lives and made advances on the pathway of sanctification. Evangelicalism, though producing saints and scholars, put far less of a premium on meditation or learning than many other Christian traditions. Its grand imperative was ever to be active in fulfilling the obligations laid on the converted soul.

#### AN ENLIGHTENMENT SYNTHESIS

The theology of popular Evangelicalism in the earlier nineteenth century, though inheriting the main outlines of the Puritan dogmatic scheme, differed from its earlier equivalent because it had also been shaped by the

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<sup>10</sup> *Examiner and Chronicle*, 2 January 1868.

<sup>11</sup> *Rocky Mountain Presbyterian*, October 1872.

Enlightenment. If the emphases on Bible, cross and conversion echoed the earlier Protestant tradition, the activism constituted a novel feature of the Evangelical mindset. Missions to the heathen, for instance, were far more a feature of Catholic lands than of Protestant countries before the emergence of Evangelical zeal. The change was related to a significant shift in the doctrine of assurance that reflected Enlightenment priorities. Puritans had wrestled with doubt, regarding assurance of salvation as an ideal to be sought after rather than the normal possession of the Christian. Conscientious believers had been expected to engage in protracted self-examination to establish whether or not they were in the faith, an introspective preoccupation that inhibited bold evangelistic ventures. Although this style of spirituality survived into the nineteenth century among conservative Presbyterians, especially in the Highlands of Scotland, and among traditional Baptists in rural England and the American South, it was not to be found among mainstream Evangelicals. Following Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, they standardly believed that it was possible to be sure of one's personal salvation. Evangelicals shared the Enlightenment's conviction in the power of reason, and extended its range to the spiritual realm. Knowledge of God could be as certain as the fruits of any other empirical investigation. With that confidence, they were eager to spread the truths they had attained. Their mission, furthermore, was undergirded by the typical high expectations of the future generated during the later eighteenth century. Evangelicals commonly held their own version of the idea of progress, the postmillennial belief that the gospel would spread throughout the whole globe before the return of Christ to the earth. They looked for what they called 'the latter-day glory of the church'. They did not have to wait for the Almighty to bring about the conversion of the world because they were authorised, they believed, to employ 'means', that is techniques offered by the modern world such as sailing ships and printing presses to disseminate the gospel. Missionary societies were modelled on joint stock companies. Here was a Christian pragmatism that saw the world as waiting to be conquered for Christ by the most efficient methods available. The Evangelical movement was bound up with the enterprise of modernity.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the integration of Evangelical thought with the legacy of the Enlightenment was the bond between theology and science. 'Nature and Revelation', wrote the English Congregational theologian John Pye Smith in 1839, 'are both beams of light from the same Sun of eternal truth; and there cannot be discordance

between them.’<sup>12</sup> The unveiling of the natural world, it had been settled, could only prove effective through empirical investigation; and Evangelicals gladly avowed their adherence to the methods of the father of empiricism, Francis Bacon. They adopted and developed the natural theology that had been popularised by William Paley to show the way in which the created order vindicated belief in a Creator. Seeing evidences of design in the universe, they argued that the implication was that there must have been a Designer. An able Indian boy in a Wesleyan school in India put the essence of the case clearly when he was examined orally by a visiting examiner in 1850: ‘When we behold a house, we conclude that there must have been a builder: so, when we examine the works of creation, we are convinced that they have proceeded from some cause.’<sup>13</sup> The argument from design seemed irrefutable so long as there appeared to be incontrovertible indications of purpose in the universe – with plants so formed as to be nourished by moisture, for example, and animals so constituted as to feed on plants. David Hume had challenged this line of argument by questioning the notion of causation, but Evangelicals had generally espoused the rebuttal of Humean scepticism in the common sense school of Scottish philosophy. The notion of cause, they held, was a given of human experience, and so there had to be a connection between design and Designer. The resulting case for theism was articulated in its most persuasive form in the writings of the Scottish Presbyterian Thomas Chalmers. For more than half of the century, science seemed to have been successfully turned into the handmaid of theology.

#### THE CALVINIST TRADITION

Among Calvinists such as Chalmers in the earlier part of the century the dominant paradigm of theology was derived from Jonathan Edwards. Although the New England Congregational divine had died in 1758, his pattern of thinking was sustained by his disciples in America, and in particular by Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins, the leading advocates of the ‘New Divinity’. The Edwardsean system bore the marks of accommodation to the rising temper of the Enlightenment both in its careful reasoning and in its insistence that the ways of God were consistent with public justice. Its central teaching, taken from Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* (1754), distinguished natural from moral ability. Human beings,

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<sup>12</sup> John Pye Smith, *On the Relation between the Holy Scriptures and Some Parts of Geological Science* (London, 1839), p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, September 1850, p. 996.



the New Divinity men argued, possessed a natural ability to believe the gospel, even though their actions were part of a chain of causation. Their failure to respond to the gospel was an expression of moral inability, a wilful refusal that rendered them guilty of disobeying the commands of the Almighty. This analysis was an ingenious way of reconciling the principles of Calvinism with the demands of evangelism. On the one hand, its advocates could still legitimately claim to be loyal to the Reformed tradition in upholding predestination. God, they asserted, was the source of the causes that led to the acceptance or rejection of the gospel. They were soft philosophical determinists, believing that, although the actions of human beings were caused, their choices were nevertheless free. On the other hand, they were keen champions of spreading the gospel. Ministers who had pondered the implications of Calvinist belief had sometimes reached the conclusion that since God had preordained the elect for salvation, he would infallibly achieve that goal without human intervention. There was therefore no need to challenge sinners to repent and believe; indeed, to do so was an impious trespassing on the prerogatives of the Almighty. The Edwardseans, however, contended that because all had a duty to embrace the offer of salvation, ministers had a responsibility to exhort their hearers to accept the gospel. The implication was that efforts to spread the gospel should be maximised. This was the theology that, with minor variations, was expounded in America by the Congregationalists Nathaniel Emmons and Edwards A. Park, in England by the Congregationalist Edward Williams and the Baptist Andrew Fuller and in Scotland by the Presbyterians who followed Thomas Chalmers. It was the epitome of orthodoxy among most Evangelicals who stood in the Reformed tradition.

The more conservative Calvinist thinkers looked on these developments with suspicion. The new ways of setting out the way of salvation seemed to make too many concessions to the intellectual spirit of the age. Andrew Fuller, in particular, was attacked for teaching 'duty faith', the responsibility of sinners to believe the gospel. But how, asked the traditionalists, could the non-elect be supposed to have an obligation to believe what they could not believe? The revisionists must be abandoning the limitation of salvation to the elect and with it the idea of particular redemption that was at the heart of Reformed belief. The charge had a measure of validity: moderate Calvinists commonly did hold that the scope of the atonement was in some sense universal even though it was effectual only for those who accepted the gospel. The 'Old Calvinists' would have no truck with such a formula, implying, as it seemed to do, that the redemptive purpose of the Almighty could be frustrated. The underlying

issue was that, whereas the Edwardseans were determinists, the traditionalists were fatalists. They believed in irresistible grace, a divine power that extinguished any possibility of human freedom. These views were upheld by the strict Baptists on both sides of the Atlantic who sustained an older piety. In America they were often called 'Anti-Mission Baptists' because, with unassailable logic, they contended that missions were an unwarrantable attempt to supersede predestination. Those whom God had chosen he would call in his own way, not by human means. The traditional Calvinism was upheld with greater theological acuteness by a number of Presbyterian divines, chiefly in the United States, especially at Princeton Seminary. There Charles Hodge argued manfully for a confessional Calvinism that, he contended, Edwards himself would have endorsed even if his nineteenth-century successors did not. But Hodge, unlike Edwards, adopted the common sense philosophy and so, in a sense, made his peace with part of the legacy of the Enlightenment. Only those who, like the Primitive Baptists of the American South, put themselves outside the cultural mainstream could avoid its pervasive influence.

The Evangelicals in the Church of England normally, though not exclusively, took the Calvinist side in the controversies against the Arminianism of John Wesley during the eighteenth century. In the following century its ministry contained a number of stalwart Calvinists such as D. A. Doudney, the editor of *The Gospel Magazine* from 1840 to 1893. Most Anglican Evangelicals, however, were less committed to the Reformed heritage than their Dissenting counterparts in England. The man who shaped the thinking of Evangelical Anglicans for much of the century was Charles Simeon, Vicar of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, from 1783 to 1836. Simeon, who was essentially a preacher, believed in extracting his theology inductively from the Bible. He rejected, in a fashion typical of the Enlightenment, the whole enterprise of metaphysics. He claimed to be 'no friend to systematizers in Theology'.<sup>14</sup> Before the end of his career he publicly repudiated Calvinism since it was associated in the public mind with the Puritans and revolution. His disciples, who included Bishops Charles McIlvaine in the United States and Charles Perry in Australia, carried his style of pragmatic, evangelistic theology throughout the worldwide Anglican communion.

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* (21 vols, London, 1832-33), 1, p. xxii.

## ARMINIANISM, REVIVALISM AND MISSION

The alternative to Calvinism in the Evangelical world at the opening of the nineteenth century was Arminianism. This body of thought was professed by the small bodies of General or Freewill Baptists, but it was chiefly the possession of Methodism. John Wesley, its founder, had died in 1791, but he had established the theological parameters of his movement for virtually the whole of the succeeding century. Wesley had waged ceaseless war on Calvinism, supposing that predestination undermined the responsibility to observe the moral law. His teaching followed that of the early seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius in holding that Christ died not for a limited number of the elect but for all. John's brother Charles insisted in his hymnody that 'For all, for all, my Saviour died'. There was therefore no doubt that the gospel must be preached to any who would hear. But since Wesley rejected the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, he maintained that true converts could subsequently fall from grace. A person lapsing into a course of sin had ceased to be a Christian and was in need of a fresh conversion. The grand aim of the Christian life, however, was holiness. Wesley believed that it was possible to reach a state of entire sanctification, what he called 'perfect love', before the grave. All known sin was removed from the soul and the believer enjoyed uninterrupted communion with God. Again this state could be lost and won repeatedly. Wesley reached these conclusions partly by reading the Bible, but partly by observation of his followers. The experience of Methodists was formative of theology because he held that the discipline is as experimental as natural science, in which he took a deep interest. He was an empiricist in the manner of the Enlightenment. 'It is a fundamental principle with us', he wrote, 'that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.'<sup>15</sup> There could hardly be a more explicit declaration of alignment with the age of reason.

The immense success of Methodism led to the growth of revivalism in theory as well as in practice. There was a long-standing tradition of revivals in the Presbyterian tradition. At the protracted communion seasons of Scotland and America anxiety for salvation could sweep over whole communities and last for several weeks. But with the advent of Methodism, intense revivals, often more noisy and emotional in manner, became regular features of the Evangelical scene. Evangelists of the other

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<sup>15</sup> John Wesley to Dr Thomas Rutherford, 28 March 1768, in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.* (8 vols, London, 1931), 5, p. 364.

denominations started aiming to stir up revivals. Charles Finney, an American who worked with Presbyterians and Congregationalists, turned the technique into something like a science in his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835). He advocated 'new measures' to facilitate conversions. Sinners troubled about the fate of their souls, for example, would be placed on an anxious seat at the front of a meeting in order to be objects of prayer for the whole congregation. Finney urged that, instead of taking time to work through their soul concerns, those seeking salvation should immediately surrender to Christ. The theologian who most clearly provided a rationale for Finney's procedures was Nathaniel W. Taylor of New Haven. Starting with the principle of duty faith – that a person has an obligation to believe the gospel – Taylor argued that there can be no 'ought' without 'can'. He inferred that all human beings must have a free capacity to believe. Conversion, as he put it, was 'within the sinner's will'. Finney echoed this view. 'Neither God', he wrote, 'nor any other being, can regenerate him, if he will not turn.'<sup>16</sup> Swept along by currents of thought drawn from the Enlightenment, Finney adopted a high view of human ability. He subsequently went on to embrace a view of human perfectibility similar to that of Wesley. Under the influence of a desire to maximise conversions, the structure of traditional theology was being eroded.

The impulse to spread the gospel led to the creation of overseas missions, beginning in England with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS, 1792) and in the United States with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM, 1810). The driving theology was outlined in the book *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792) by William Carey, the prime mover in the BMS. It was the doctrinal system of Carey's friend Andrew Fuller, the New Divinity deriving from Jonathan Edwards. The great example, cited in Carey's conclusion, was David Brainerd, Edwards's friend, who had gone as a missionary to the native Americans. The notions of duty, benevolence and postmillennial gospel triumph were to the fore. The inheritance of the Enlightenment was even more prominent in the version of missionary undertaking launched by Alexander Duff from Presbyterian Scotland in India (1830). Drawing on the thought of Chalmers, he devised a strategy in which education, the panacea of enlightened thinkers, should take priority over preaching. High-caste Hindus were trained in Western philosophy through the medium of English

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<sup>16</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, ed. George Radford (London, 1851), p. 413.

in the belief that they would be convinced by Christian apologetics and that their example would lead to the conversion of the lower castes. The most eloquent challenge to this approach came from Rufus Anderson, foreign secretary of the ABCFM from 1826 to 1866, who argued that to use English in education would alienate indigenous peoples from their own culture and so not reap a large harvest. Instead he advocated the training of indigenous ministry and the encouragement of local responsibility for church life. His views were substantially shared by Henry Venn, honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 to 1872. The other major figure influencing missions was the legendary Scot, David Livingstone, an agent of the London Missionary Society before resigning to become the most celebrated African explorer of the century. His *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1857) contended that a combination of Christianity and commerce would transform the continent. The assumption of them all was that civilisation went hand in hand with the faith.

#### THE RISE OF ROMANTICISM

The synthesis of gospel and culture available for export, it must be concluded, had been profoundly affected by influences stemming from the Enlightenment. The central theme in the history of Evangelical theology from the 1820s onwards, however, is its attempts to come to terms with the impact of Romanticism, the cultural movement that steadily supplanted the Enlightenment. Perhaps the fresh style of thinking is best known in the English-speaking world through the Lake poets, especially William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The new mood, however, was not confined to that generation of literary figures but steadily spread through the various departments of intellectual life as the century advanced. Romanticism in this broad sense replaced the Enlightenment's stress on reason with an emphasis on will and emotion. Awe, mystery and the dramatic came into vogue, as in the paintings of J. M. W. Turner. Metaphysics returned to fashion as the philosophical works of the German schools of Kant and Hegel were read. The historicism of Germany also found a deep echo in English-speaking lands, where the writings of Sir Walter Scott nourished a regard for the ancient, the traditional and the customary. The distinctive German idea that values are not absolute but relative to particular cultural settings made gradual headway. Meanwhile the understanding of a static universe operating according to fixed laws gave way in many fields to a vision of a world of change, growth and development. The favourite metaphors for human beings were no longer

mechanistic but organic: they were seen less as cogs in a mighty wheel than as trees nurtured in their own soil. A love of nature in its untamed grandeur – an admiration for mountains, lakes and forests – was near the heart of the new sensibility. With such a profound mental revolution in progress, theology could not remain immune. How did Evangelicals respond?

In the first place they reacted against the most striking expression of the new way of thinking in the churches, the Oxford Movement. In the Church of England J. H. Newman, E. B. Pusey and their associates, inspired by a Romantic sense of history, set out to recover the Catholic inheritance of the early Christian centuries, so introducing much higher doctrines of the church, the ministry and the sacraments than had been customary. Newman's eventual secession to the Roman Catholic Church in 1845 merely confirmed what Evangelicals had already concluded, that the enterprise was a plot to repudiate Protestantism. Those swayed by the Oxford Movement who remained Anglicans began to turn to ritualism, the introduction of Catholic practices into worship in order to evoke a sense of the numinous. Evangelicals stridently denounced the new developments, but they also produced reasoned theological replies. William Goode, a London clergyman, argued in *The Divine Rule of Faith and Practice* (1842) for the uniqueness of Scripture, as against tradition, as a source of religious authority. The fathers of the early church, he contended, treated the Bible alone as the complete repository of truth. In 1871 Nathaniel Dimock, a clergyman in Kent, published a powerful Evangelical analysis of *The Doctrine of the Sacraments*. On points of detail, however, Dimock shows signs of a willingness to move towards the Anglo-Catholics. He was prepared by the end of the century, for instance, to accept the idea that the eucharist involves a representation (though not a re-presentation) of the death of Christ. His fellow Evangelical Anglicans increasingly adopted liturgical patterns initiated by ritualists. It is clear that later in the century some of them were drawn towards compromise with a tradition that was catering for the Romantic tastes of the times.

The most significant early adoption of an element of Romantic thinking by Evangelicals was in the area of eschatology. The brilliant but wayward Church of Scotland minister in London in the 1820s, Edward Irving, who spent time in conversation with Coleridge, adopted a histrionic style of declamation, embraced high doctrines of the church and sacraments even before the Oxford Movement, endorsed speaking in tongues within his congregation and eventually inspired a new denomination, the Catholic Apostolic Church. But probably his greatest significance lay in his teaching about the second advent. In 1827 he published a translation of a

strange work by a Chilean Jesuit entitled *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, which predicted the imminent personal return of Christ, a belief then little known among Evangelicals. Abandoning the postmillennialism of his contemporaries, Irving urged that Christ himself would usher in the millennium, when he would reign on earth. This premillennial teaching, appealing to the new appreciation of the dramatic, gradually spread among Evangelicals of the Church of England as the century wore on. A version of it, dispensationalism, was zealously propagated by J. N. Darby, the leading personality in the early stages of the (so-called Plymouth) Brethren movement. World history, according to Darby, was divided into periods, or dispensations, in each of which the Almighty dealt in a distinct way with human beings. The church was an insertion into the divine scheme that would soon be caught up to meet its returning Lord in the air. By the end of the century dispensationalism had become popular in America, where it was to form the ideological glue of Fundamentalism. Its origins, however, must be seen as an irruption of Romantic sensibility into the Evangelical world.

Another symptom of Romantic influence is discernible in attitudes to holiness. The Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification was originally confined to Methodists, but, especially at meetings in the home of Walter and Phoebe Palmer in New York from the 1830s, began to attract attention from outsiders. From the 1860s a holiness movement developed beyond the bounds of Methodism. Phoebe Palmer taught that the experience of sanctification comes not after a long struggle, which was Wesley's view, but immediately in response to seeking faith. This was to break with the gradualism of the Enlightenment in favour of the crisis beloved of Romantics. This view became the teaching of the Keswick Convention, which from 1875 was the fulcrum of a non-denominational holiness impulse that spread round the world. Keswick held that holiness, like salvation, comes by faith. The state was achieved, according to Evan Hopkins, the Anglican clergyman who was its chief exponent, 'by a decisive act of will'.<sup>17</sup> The resulting experience was one of peace, 'the rest of faith'. Although it made relatively little headway in the United States, the Keswick view became the prevailing attitude to the spiritual life among Evangelical Anglicans. The movement nurtured a love of poetry, its leaders often expressed an admiration for Wordsworth and its centre, Keswick itself, was in the heart of the district associated with the Lake poets. 'The lovely face of nature's panorama', an adherent wrote in 1895, 'must ever

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<sup>17</sup> E. H. Hopkins, *The Law of Liberty in the Spiritual Life* (London, 1884), p. 15.

have a chastening and purifying effect.’<sup>18</sup> The Keswick conception of holiness should be seen as another result of the fusion of Evangelical theology with Romantic feeling.

A further indication of the same process is evident in the theology of mission. The initiator was again Edward Irving, who in 1824 preached a sermon before the London Missionary Society in which, with characteristic extravagance, he denounced at length the methods of his host organisation. Irving argued that the structure of home committees, financial support and business techniques should be discarded in favour of simple reliance on God. The apostles sent out as missionaries by Jesus, he told his hearers, had to spread faith: ‘therefore he made his missionaries men of Faith, that they might plant Faith, and Faith alone’.<sup>19</sup> His vision of the missionary was of an individual depending on the Almighty for his daily needs. The vision was fulfilled in a different field by George Müller, a Brethren philanthropist in Bristol, who long ran an orphanage on faith principles, making no appeals for money but waiting for the Lord’s provision. It was Müller’s account of his experiences that induced James Hudson Taylor to launch his China Inland Mission (CIM, 1865). The mission pioneered the methods adopted by subsequent faith missions of having no subscribers but only prayer partners. The Romantic ethos of the CIM was evident, for example, in its magazine cover, which had elaborate floral decoration in the Pre-Raphaelite mode; its supporters had to give on divine impulse; and its exaltation of faith was clearly kin to Keswick teaching. Its replacement of prudent organisational techniques with heroic personal endeavour encapsulated the shift away from the rationality of the Enlightenment to something more in keeping with the spirit of the age.

#### LIBERAL TENDENCIES

The changes effected by Romanticism that have been reviewed so far tended to draw Evangelicals into conservative theological channels. The most important developments associated with the new impulse, however, pushed them in the opposite direction, towards theological liberalism. The prime mover in America was the Congregationalist Horace Bushnell who said that he owed more to Coleridge than to any other source except the Bible. Bushnell’s ‘Dissertation on Language’ in his *God in Christ* (1849) contended that religious discourse should be understood not literally but

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<sup>18</sup> *Christian*, 25 July 1895, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Irving, *For Missionaries after the Apostolical School: A Series of Orations* (London, 1825), p. 28.



poetically. Doctrine was therefore incapable of precise formulation. The main journal of the more traditional Methodists was to claim that his ideas were too vague and indefinite, mere 'images of fog'.<sup>20</sup> The central doctrinal shift was away from the conception of God as Governor, a view favoured by the New Divinity, to the idea of him as Father. Tender feelings encouraged by the temper of the times, especially in respectable families, made it easier to think of him as a kindly parent than as a stern judge. There was consequently an alteration in the way in which the atonement was stated. It became harder to think of the Almighty willingly inflicting suffering on his own Son, and so the substitutionary understanding of the cross came under attack. Bushnell contended for a moral influence theory in his book *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (1866). It was hoped, furthermore, that a lenient Father would not inflict eternal punishment on his wayward children, and so the traditional doctrine of hell became less widely believed. Some turned to universalism, the expectation that all will ultimately be saved; others rested content with conditional immortality, the opinion that only believers will receive a heavenly reward while unbelievers will simply die. These slackenings of received convictions, particularly notable among the Congregationalists in Britain as well as in America, represented the arrival of milder views under Romantic influence.

Attitudes to the Bible underwent a comparable modification, chiefly because of the reception of German theories based on historicist principles that once more reflected the assumptions of the Romantic era. It was growingly believed by German scholars that the Bible must be analysed critically so as to discern the historical evolution of its ideas. When these suppositions were first widely ventilated in the Church of England by the publication of *Essays and Reviews* (1860), the Evangelical world was almost solid in its horrified opposition. Advanced Broad Churchmen seemed to have gone over to the party of the scurrilous freethinkers who had been in the habit of pointing out the discrepancies in the Bible in order to discredit it. But gradually Evangelical scholars began to take up some of the suggestions of the higher critics of Germany. The greatest crisis came in the later 1870s when William Robertson Smith, a brilliant young professor in the Free Church of Scotland, upheld the view that the text of Deuteronomy was composed after the time of Moses. Following protracted discussion, his views were originally judged legitimate, though a further seemingly irresponsible article sealed his dismissal. By the end of the century, higher criticism was entrenched in most of the theological institutions of the English-speaking world.

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<sup>20</sup> *Christian Advocate*, 1 August 1872, p. 244.

The notion that the idea of development was the key to understanding the world was growing in intellectual circles before Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* (1859), but his book gave a huge fillip to thinking in terms of growth. As the principle of the transformation of species became generally accepted, the arguments of natural theology no longer seemed tenable. If nature could adapt itself to its environment, there was no need for a Designer of the universe. Some Evangelicals were consequently troubled. The most vigorous repudiator of Darwin's theories in the Evangelical camp in England, T. R. Birks, Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge, argued not that the biologist's theory contravened Scripture but that he was ignoring the proper methodological principles hammered out by thinkers whose debt was to the Enlightenment. Likewise a contributor to the premier American theological journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1863 condemned Darwin for abandoning inductive method and so being 'notoriously imaginative as to his data, and hypothetical in his reasonings'.<sup>21</sup> Thirty years later, however, a writer in the same journal was saying that the theory of evolution had been 'of essential service to theology' by giving larger views of the government of God based on the doctrine of immanence.<sup>22</sup> Broader evangelicals took Darwin into their systems, allowing its themes to reconstruct their theology. The Scottish Free Churchman Henry Drummond went so far as to deploy evolution as a vehicle for evangelism in his *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* (1883). Growth towards maturity became a central motif of liberal Evangelical thought.

The other main broadening element in Evangelical thought at the end of the century, it must be admitted, owed little to the Romantic currents of opinion of the time. The social gospel was chiefly a response to the problems of the cities in an industrialising world. It was not solely an Evangelical movement, for some of its exponents on both sides of the Atlantic were from different ecclesiastical traditions. Nor was it intrinsically liberal in its theological affinities. The Salvation Army, for example, which remained impeccably fixed in its doctrinal anchorage, was prominent in the move towards trying to solve the difficulties of urban society. Yet among evangelicals the social gospel represented an addition if not an alteration to their theology. Preaching, according to Professor H. G. Mitchell of the Methodist Boston University in 1895, was only part of the mission of Jesus. 'He preached when he had opportunity; but he seems to have spent more time in healing the sick and otherwise supplying the

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<sup>21</sup> *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April 1863, p. 264 (J. M. Manning).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1893, pp. 413-14 (F. H. Foster).

physical needs of his countrymen than he did in talking to the multitudes that thronged him.'<sup>23</sup> Accordingly the mission of the church needed to expand to take on board the priorities of its Master. In England John Clifford and Hugh Price Hughes, the two leading social gossellers, similarly put fresh tasks on the ecclesiastical agenda rather than subtracting old ones from it. Very few in the Evangelical world saw the new social message as a diversion from the true gospel until well into the twentieth century.

The modifications of the gospel based on Romantic premises, however, did create alarm. The most vigorous rebuttal of late Victorian trends came from the doughty Baptist minister in London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. In the Down Grade controversy of 1887-88 he publicly withdrew from the Baptist Union because he could not continue to associate with deniers of fundamental truths. Although Spurgeon was a firm Calvinist, he was not protesting against the views of John Clifford, nor against the Arminian theology that Clifford shared with other General Baptists. Rather he was criticising those who, swayed by contemporary intellectual currents, were 'giving up the atoning sacrifice, denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture, and casting slurs upon justification by faith'.<sup>24</sup> He was voicing anxieties that were to surface in more widespread and more sustained forms after the First World War and were then to polarise Evangelicalism in America into Modernist and Fundamentalist factions. The liberal tendencies of the later nineteenth century pointed clearly to the one, just as Spurgeon's concerns anticipated the other. At the end of the Victorian era, however, the polarisation had not yet come to fruition. The American evangelist Dwight L. Moody, though himself adopting the premillennial teaching that was to be the rallying call of the Fundamentalists, nevertheless could use broader men such as Henry Drummond on his platform. Similarly the catechism of the Evangelical Free Churches, issued in London in 1899, still represented the common beliefs of all its constituent denominations, Methodist, Congregationalist, Baptist and Presbyterian. Evangelical Anglicans could have used it without demur. It spoke of God as Father, and yet adhered to a fairly traditional understanding of the atonement as propitiating the divine holiness. Liberal and conservative strands had not yet been sundered. The common Evangelical faith remained the popular theology of the English-speaking world.

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<sup>23</sup> *Methodist Review*, March 1895, p. 269.

<sup>24</sup> *Sword and Trowel*, April 1887, p. 195.