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Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney (Book Review)

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Wolffe, John. *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney*. (A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements and Ideas in the English-Speaking World, vol. II). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007. 280 pp. incl. bibliography. ISBN: 978-0-8308-2582-0. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History at Dordt College.

This is the third volume published in the InterVarsity Press' "History of Evangelicalism" sequence, but in covering the 1790s to 1840s, this is second in the series when it comes to the chronology of the subject. Author John Wolffe, formerly of the University of York, is now Professor of Religious History at The Open University, both in Britain. He is already well-known to students of the history of evangelicalism in the British Isles, thanks to his landmark publications on *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain, 1829-1869* (1991), and *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1845-1945* (1994). As a mature historian with extensive command of his sources, Wolffe here considers Anglophone evangelicalism in its prime, centering on the third and fourth generations from the initial "founding generation." This was, in England, the generation after that of the repentant slave-ship captain, John Newton (1725-1807), remembered for writing the song "Amazing Grace," and the poet William Cowper (1731-1800), who gave us the magnificent lines "God moves in a mysterious way/ His wonders to perform."

Wolffe has organized his material thematically, not chronologically (43), and this is particularly evident in his revealing discussions of worship styles, gender, and family (95-158). The three British figures mentioned in Wolffe's title are abolitionist parliamentarian William Wilberforce (1759-1833); the purposeful "improving" philanthropist Hannah More (1745-1833); Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), the leader of the counter-moderate Evangelical Party in the Church of Scotland and of the Free Church of Scotland following the "disruption" of 1843; and the American revivalist Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875). These figures do not dominate his text, as he is writing about evangelicalism in their time rather than about these individuals specifically.

The author's task is considerable, for by this point in its history, evangelicalism was already becoming as diverse as it was diffuse. Evangelicals were a recognizable party within the Church of England, led by men such as Charles Simeon (1759-1836) and later Hugh McNeill (1795-1879). They were a major party within the Church of Scotland until the "disruption" of 1843, and they were a minor party thereafter (93, 221-3). Wesleyan-Methodist bodies and a very significant proportion within the older bodies that descended from Anglo-Welsh "Protestant Dissent" (Congregationalists and Baptists on both sides of the Atlantic) must also be included, however diverse. And, beyond their Scotts-Irish homeland, there were extensive bodies of Presbyterians in the New World. In America, Presbyterians had already been divided between confessionally-minded "old lights" and revivalist-oriented

"new lights" at the time of the "first great awakening"—and in the period here considered sustained a further division, this time between "Old School" and "New School" Presbyterianism in 1837 (93). Moreover, Wolffe must extend his canvass as far as Australia and New Zealand (14-15, 33, 191, 236).

He explicitly adopts David Bebbington's rightly-influential articulation of the four "special marks" of evangelicalism: conversionism, activism, Biblicism and crucicentrism (19-20). Arguably, these "marks" effectively capture the character of evangelicalism. However, they also help to explain the increasing lack of cohesion and cultural ineffectiveness of evangelicalism.

Much of the period addressed by Wolffe is co-terminus with the so-called "second great awakening" (47f.). This was the era of Wilberforce's co-laborer, Thomas Fowell Buxton (1786-1845); Thomas Charles of Bala (1755-84), a key figure in the modern history of Wales; and Robert Haldane (1764-1842), who took the evangelical message to Geneva itself. Yet amid the profusion of personalities, societies, trends and developments, it is possible to discern three foci in Wolffe's broad discussion. These pertain to the questions of revivalism, of evangelicalism's stance towards public life, and of its failure to achieve any form of functional and therefore effective unity.

It was in America that evangelicalism could fully unfold, and it is here that we see its true character most comprehensively manifested. Even by the first decades of the nineteenth century, it was becoming clear that the deeper inclination within evangelicalism was towards Baptist-style individualism and a Wesleyan-Arminian understanding of the way of salvation. It was the Methodists and Baptists who set the pace and made the greatest gains (40-41). Much of the evangelical future was adumbrated at and in relation to the "revival" at Cane Ridge (56, 58), with its protracted exclamatory preaching, intense emotion, and physical manifestations among the hearers. This was an ambience calculated to convey the notion that we are sovereign in our own salvation. From this context there emerged the doctrinally Arminian "Cumberland Presbyterian Church" (93). When the influences of Cane Ridge and the Kentucky "camp meeting" style "revivals" reached England, Jabez Bunting (1779-1858), the Methodist leader in the old country, himself steeped in the ethos of the Wesley, complained bitterly of the excesses of this newer revivalism (65, 79). His hostility thereto provoked the formation of the Primitive Methodists in England (66). Perhaps it was only a matter of time before the ways of revivalism were refined to a consciously practiced array of techniques. Here we concur that Finney is a decisive figure (72). His doctrine and practice confirmed that the main development of

evangelicalism was away from any kind of Calvinism (74-8). Finney's "new measures"—which had become a kind of evangelical orthodoxy by the twentieth century—came into prominence in 1837-44, the final years of the "second great awakening" (87-8). Others could say that Finney's presumptuous manipulations might account for why the awakening came to an end.

Wolffe works hard to contextualize his subject (22-34). He is aware that pre-millennialism implies cultural pessimism and retreat (81), although such influences can be notoriously difficult to trace in detail. People often do not tell us why they think and act in certain ways, and sometimes they might misunderstand themselves seriously. The impact of "revivals" is likewise hard to assess (69). Although in-depth discussion is not feasible in a wide-ranging survey, Wolffe does not evade the difficult questions. His passage on "revivals in context" (89-91) merits the most careful consideration. My assessment is that within evangelicalism generally, the distinction between "revivalism" as an array of evangelistic techniques and the God-given impartation and renewal of spiritual life was never as clear as it should have been, and by the first half of the nineteenth century, that distinction was in the process of being lost by most evangelicals themselves.

Also problematic was the attitude of evangelicalism towards society generally, and political life specifically. In 1797 Wilberforce published his *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher Middle Classes of this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity* (161). This extended tract blasted against the prevalent pro-forma "we go to Church on Sundays" kind of respectability that masqueraded as Christianity. Although the characteristic appeal was to individuals, the evangelicals of this period also sought to address social issues. They were prodigious founders of societies for rectification and improvement (161-92). Yet this activism could be in constant tension with the movement's deeply ingrained individualism and conservatism. Evangelicals in the American South grew suspicious of Yankee Presbyterian and Congregationalist evangelical abolitionist do-gooders (189). In Great Britain, the anti-slavery agitation might serve as a kind of practical "political apprenticeship" (218), but the evangelical exaltation of "heart" over "head" meant that the formulation of a coherent and systematic understanding of societal structures was not on the agenda. Therefore it is not surprising that evangelicals were less than sure-footed on Catholic emancipation (217). Moreover, when seeking to address public issues, they could find

themselves promptly entangled in unfinished ecclesiastical business. They seemed incapable of addressing the question of the reformation of the church. In England, the issues between Anglican and Protestant Dissenter remained unresolved. In Scotland the disruption of 1843 further divided the church, even as the Free Church of Scotland continued to uphold the establishment principle. In Upper Canada (Ontario) it was the Methodist leader Egerton Ryerson (1803-82) who successfully challenged the prospect of an established Anglicanism (224-25). Intellectually, evangelicalism was lacking in coherence; organizationally, it was disparate—all in spite of immense commitment and fervor. Wolffe's conclusion, that by the 1840s the "political limitations of evangelicalism" were "apparent," is not surprising (227). His purview is the "English-Speaking world," and so he does not consider the critique of the religious direction of the times made by the Dutch aristocrat Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-76), the author of *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847) and founder of the anti-revolutionary movement in the Netherlands, that was to eventually exceed the limitations of its initial conservatism and achieve significant structural insight into public life.

In the Anglophone world, evangelicals certainly sensed their lack of cohesion. It was a central concern in forming the "Evangelical Alliance" in London in 1846 (242-45). But no effective unity was achieved. Evangelicalism could not overcome the yawning chasm between evangelical abolitionists and the stalwart defenders of the "peculiar institution." And neither could the Alliance bridge the continuing divide between Anglican and Protestant Dissenter. Evangelical unity has almost always amounted to little more than subscribing to broad generalizations. In Anglophone countries it has tended to be as divided as the middle classes to which it is mainly confined (190). Perhaps we might envisage evangelicalism as if it were a kind of exploding cosmos, with an immense number of fragments moving away and breaking off from one another, thanks to the explosive force present in the initial core. I am told that there are far more than twenty-five thousand Protestant denominations in the world today. Certainly, the earliest denominational divisions of Anglophone Protestantism preceded the coming of evangelicalism in the eighteenth century, but it is hard not to conclude that this fracturing reflects the influence of evangelicalism worldwide. This volume is an excellent survey of evangelicalism at an earlier stage of this process, and is strongly recommended.