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Scandal of the Evangelical Mind (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, by Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1994. ix, 274 pages, \$19.99, cloth. Reviewed by Hubert Krygsman, Assistant Professor of History.

The “scandal” of the evangelical mind, according to Mark Noll, is that there isn’t one. Despite their powerful political lobby and contributions in limited fields like biblical studies, evangelicals have had little impact across the spectrum of modern arts and learning in America. Contrary to their own heritage, their central confessions, and the Bible, American evangelicals have failed to “think like a Christian— to think within a specifically Christian framework”(7). Here Noll examines the decline of evangelical cultural leadership in America and searches the resources of evangelicalism to find a way of returning from what some have called the “great reversal” of 20th century evangelicalism.

Noll’s argument is one more voice in a recent chorus of self-criticism within the evangelical community. His contribution is an historical diagnosis which surveys what has become, over the past two decades, a substantial body of literature on the development of American evangelical thought. Against the 16th and 17th century background of Protestant scholars like Calvin, Jacob Spener, and Jonathon Edwards, all of whom recognized God as creator and devoted what Noll calls the life of the mind to the worship of God, Noll charts the demise of evangelical thought through three main stages. During the 18th century revivals, evangelicals came to emphasize spiritual experience, intuitionism, and individualism. Their intuitionism led them to uncritically accept Enlightenment thought, particularly the moderate republicanism and the Baconian scientific method of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, and closed off further reflection on Christian principles for politics and science. During the early 19th century, evangelical intuitionism became increasingly biblicist and populist. Finally, in their reaction to the post-Civil War threats of urban-industrial society and evolutionist theory, evangelicals narrowed their biblicism and intuitionism even further in the forms of Creation Science, holiness, and premillennial dispensationalism. Rather than working to transform culture, Noll suggests, evangelicals retreated from history.

Noll repeatedly affirms his own commitment to evangelical piety. His criticism, therefore, is of the

“excesses” of pietism (48-49) which have twisted distinctive evangelical concerns with regeneration, the authority of Scripture, redemption through Christ, and sharing the faith, into docetic and gnostic tendencies to world-flight. In the last section of the book, Noll cautiously offers grounds for hoping that evangelicals will again engage contemporary culture. He appeals to the respect for Biblical revelation, the genuine piety, and the activist enthusiasm, as resources within the evangelical tradition that might provide the basic ingredients for renewal. As well, he welcomes encounters with scholars especially from Mennonite and Dutch Reformed heritages, who have held out the prospect of scholarship that is wide-ranging, based on Scripture, and faithful to God. These resources, together with the power of God’s Spirit, might yet push evangelicals beyond their excesses to renewed reflection on the world.

Noll’s survey provides a clear, helpful synthesis of what is by now familiar in historical scholarship. Herein lies a paradox, however, for the very richness of that scholarship, including Noll’s own works, seems contrary to his thesis. And while largely correct in his critical assessment of holiness and premillennialist evangelicalism, his argument about the absence of evangelical thought is also limited by his impressionistic assessment of the extent of evangelical scholarship. Noll offers no systematic search for Christian scholarship; rather, his standard for significant evangelical scholarship seems confined to those who have gained national attention, or at least the notice of *Christianity Today* and Wheaton College. His treatment of scholars in the Mennonite and Dutch Reformed communities is no less idiosyncratic. While excluding such scholars from his definition of American evangelicalism, he nevertheless claims them as models for evangelical scholarship, yet without examining where those scholars fit in their own respective traditions.

Underlying these idiosyncracies is Noll’s lack of clarity about central issues in the relationship between creation, God’s Word, and redemption. Noll holds up Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, and Wesley equally as models of the Christian “life of the mind,” without

distinguishing the merits or problems in how they understood the world in relation to God and redemption. Particularly striking is Noll's wonder at how the revivalism of Wesley and Whitefield could so readily appropriate Enlightenment thought (86), since Wesley himself adopted much of the Enlightenment's perspective, declaring his "experimental religion" as the complement to experimental reason. Noll's own argument for the significance of Christian scholarship concerning the world relegates the crucial "cultural mandate" of Genesis 2 to a footnote (53), and is undermined by his neglecting the significance of redemption for creation rather than for an otherworldly eschaton (241-46). One might well ask whether a

return to evangelical pietism is sufficient for the comprehensive Christian scholarship that Noll seeks, or whether it would simply return to the origins of the scandal.

Noll's work, which he describes as a "*cri de coeur*," reflects the struggles of his own circumstances. Despite its weaknesses, it challenges Christians to grapple with the relationship between creation and redemption, and to take up the vital task of comprehensive and ongoing Christian scholarship. As Noll rightly suggests, failure to do so means not abdicating cultural leadership to secular thought, but also neglecting to live gratefully for our sovereign Lord with our whole lives.

Mind Fields: Reflections on the Science of Mind and Brain by Malcolm Jeeves (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 1994). 135 pages. \$9.95, softcover. Reviewed by Paul Moes, Professor of Psychology

Perhaps the next great debate among Christians will not be the over the origin of humans or the role of women in the church. The next controversy may very well be related to the issues of responsibility and the dignity of humans in the context of continued scientific advances into the workings of the brain. At a recent conference honoring Nobel Prize Laureates in neurobiology, several conference speakers noted that perhaps the two areas of science currently causing the most profound rethinking of our world are molecular genetics and brain science. Recent books, such as Oliver Sack's popular *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and Antonio Damasio's more recent *Descartes's Error*, have illustrated for a wider audience the profound link between the highest levels of human thinking—perhaps even moral behavior—and brain functioning. In addition, Christians increasingly face complex issues such as how faith relates to human responsibility in the face of biological changes. Even the debate in the church over homosexuality often centers on what possible biological causes imply for understanding biblical statements.

These issues, and many more, make Malcolm Jeeves' book, *Mind Fields: Reflections on the Science of Mind and Brain*, a timely work. While the book is based on a series of lectures given at the University of South Wales, Australia, and therefore directed to an academic audience, it contains much of value for the general reader. Some background in science areas such as biology or psychology would make the book easier to tackle, but the determined reader without such background will still find a wealth of insights into the nature of brain and mind.

The book examines the evidence for the "ever tightening link between mind and brain" and the implica-

tions of this evidence for the age-old question, "what then is man?" The primary theses that Jeeves presents are that (1) the evidence for the link between mind and brain is indeed very compelling, (2) humans are psycho-physical unities, and (3) the ever tightening link between mind and brain does not imply that we can ever be understood in material terms. Stated another way, mind matters!

Despite these clear and well articulated positions, many of the issues discussed illustrate the title, namely, that examining such issues is a bit like walking through a mine field—one fears there may be trouble no matter which course is taken. Helping us negotiate through such treacherous areas is the very capable Professor Jeeves, who has written several invaluable books for the Christian academic community, such as *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* (co-authored by David Myers), and *The Scientific Enterprise and the Christian Faith*. Internationally recognized for his work in neuropsychology, Professor Jeeves possesses a wealth of knowledge and insights which he offers to the Christian community concerning this rapidly expanding field.

The opening chapter sets the stage for the issues by way of three vignettes. In one of these stories Jeeves describes how Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1783 suddenly lost his power of speech. His physician assumed that the cause lay in the throat and treated the problem by inflicting blisters on the side of his neck. The point of the story is that for most of our history humans have had a hard time accepting the idea that behaviors—even simple ones—could be controlled by such a seemingly unimportant structure as the brain. Still today we struggle to understand how consciousness and personalities could be embodied in such an organ.