
Pro Rege

Volume 20 | Number 4

Article 4

June 1992

Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America (Book Review)

Hubert R. Krygsman
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Krygsman, Hubert R. (1992) "Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 20: No. 4, 26 - 28.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol20/iss4/4

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

for religion comes in the numinous *experience* of the holy, the mystical *experience* of unity, the transformative *experience* of reorientation, courage in facing suffering and death, the moral *experience* of obligation, and the *experience* of order and creativity in the world. The Bible is understood as a record of human experiences. It can claim no uniqueness or normative authority. It is simply another sacred book, alongside of others, that testifies to the religious dimension of human existence through myth and story. Confession testifies to one's religious experience, and theology systematically and critically reflects on this experience of the religious community. While Barbour does at one point speak of

revelation, it does not function in any authoritative or significant way in his treatment.

In spite of these objections *Religion in an Age of Science* can be read with profit by almost any serious student of the field. A person outside of the natural sciences, however, may find some of the discussion in biology, astronomy, and physics difficult reading. The book's greatest value lies in the fair and lucid way Barbour describes and analyzes many different positions. As a vital participant in the ongoing discussion of the relation between natural sciences and the Christian faith, he paints the landscape of current scholarship on many crucial issues.

Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America, 2nd ed., by Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 271 pages, paperback. Reviewed by Hubert Krygsmann, Instructor of History.

The republication of this work, with only an afterword added to its 1986 version, indicates the durability of Noll's scholarship and the scarcity of comparable studies. The book remains an important survey of the historical development of twentieth century evangelical thought from its retreat into fundamentalism through its renaissance, during the post-war period, in neo-evangelical scholarship. In tracing this development Noll also lays claim to a tradition of evangelical critical scholarship. And in the final chapters of the book he moves from diagnosing the perils faced by that scholarship to proposing what he calls a "theology of criticism" for a more effective integration of faith and scholarship (9-10).

On the one hand, belief in the Bible as God's Word bound evangelicals to a "community of belief" committed to accepting the factual veracity of the Bible and to insistence on a supernatural God as the transcendent origin of the Bible and spiritual reality (7). On the other hand, it involved evangelicals in a community of scholarship, or of "intellectual neutrality," for the purpose of discovering the content of the Bible. As Noll notes, these loyalties also rested on the assumption, albeit unrecognized, of an inductive and realist, or Baconian, paradigm of scholarship.

By focusing on Biblical scholarship, Noll singles out a rather narrow strand of twentieth century evangelicalism. Though he is familiar with George Marsden's portrayal of evangelicalism as a broad historical movement rooted in the revivalist tradition, Noll's working definition identifies evangelicals as those holding a central "conservative" belief in the Bible as God's Word, understood "in a cognitive, propositional, factual sense," (8) and as coterminous with the authority of God. Such a definition, with the attendant emphasis on Biblical scholarship, inescapably bypasses groups like the Pentecostals who emphasize spiritual experience rather than Biblical scholarship, and who, as Donald Dayton points out, constitute the vast majority of the evangelical movement (see 204, fn 11). Noll's search for a tradition of evangelical scholarship is thus focused on what might be called the scholastic strand in evangelicalism, with which Noll is both familiar and frankly sympathetic.

It was out of these loyalties, Noll contends, that evangelicals cultivated a tradition of critical scholarship. Prior to 1900, evangelicals took up the challenge of contemporary historical scholarship and theory. While appropriating the "factual results" of historical scholarship, evangelicals also criticized the evolutionary and naturalist assumptions of many historical critics of the Bible. Thus they held forth their older inductive method, against the new Kantian paradigm, both as the proper model of objective scholarship and as consistent with the Bible and the primacy of spiritual reality and a supernatural God.

Noll treats evangelical belief in the Bible as giving rise to an inherent tension between "faith and criticism."

According to Noll this resulted, not in a conflict between paradigms within the scholarly community, but in a "clash between two traditional loyalties, to scientific scholarship as a neutral, objective inquiry, and to the Bible as the factually accurate Word of God" (25). In reaction to the growing prevalence of the Kantian paradigm and the ideal of specialized research, alienated evangelical scholars like J. Grescham Machen insisted on an uncompromising doctrine of plenary Biblical inerrancy and turned for support to the broader community of evangelical faith. In so doing they reinforced the revivalist emphasis on populist authority, turned their

attention to sectarian ecclesiastical politics, and confined their now anemic Biblical scholarship to the enclaves of denominational seminaries and colleges. Forced to choose between their loyalties, their debate with modernist scholars led evangelicals to abandon the community of critical scholarship, and "drove conservative scholars and revivalistic populists together into a fundamentalist movement" (38).

Noll indicates, however, that the isolation of evangelicals was never complete. While abandoning the American scholarly community, evangelicals forged new contacts with immigrant confessionalist and British evangelical groups. In the middle section of the book, suggesting possibilities for further study: he compares these groups with American evangelicalism, as well as outside sources, and present them as alternative evangelical responses to modern culture for rejuvenating American evangelical scholarship. Among these outside sources were immigrant scholars like the Reformed theologian Geerhardus Vos at Princeton and the publisher William B. Eerdmans. Most significant, however, was the contribution of British evangelicals, who because of their commitment to the social establishment, a pluralist education system, and an idealist philosophy, were able to retain their ties with the community of critical scholarship and maintain an outlet for conservative Biblical scholarship.

While their search for "theological respectability" (96), in Billy Graham's words, was carried out from the network of fundamentalist institutions built during the 1920s, it was through immigrant and British contacts and organizations that American evangelicals re-entered the scholarly community. Noll charts the evangelical renaissance in the growing number of evangelicals involved in doctoral studies, professional organizations, and publications on Biblical scholarship. "New evangelicals" like Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, Bruce Metzger, and Edward Carnell, revived a "believing criticism" which continued to subscribe to a "conservative" but moderated view of Biblical inspiration in order to embrace modern scholarship and yet defend evangelical doctrine. Though diverse, these neo-evangelicals were once more confident of the harmony of scholarship and Biblical truth, actively concerned with "society," according to Ockenga (94), and thus prepared, Noll argues, to consider the Bible and scholarship in historical context.

The neo-evangelical movement, however, now found itself in conflict with the traditional evangelical community. In Noll's diagnosis, evangelicals lacked a broad tradition, a catholic community, and the epistemological self-consciousness and sophistication needed to appreciate and guide new departures in scholarship. At

this point Noll shifts his attention from historical analysis and proposes a "theology of criticism" (9) that would address "questions about the more general theological framework within which the scholarship proceeds" (173). His concern here is to help develop the neo-evangelical movement further. By clarifying their views on the nature of the Bible, its relationship to its context, and the frameworks in which the Bible is interpreted, evangelicals might more discerningly cooperate with modern scholarship and employ the "objective" benefits of wide-ranging Biblical research. Not only could such a "believing" criticism be open to both modern scholarship and divine revelation, but it might more effectively integrate Biblical study and theological conclusions with the study of history so that the Bible could more fully illumine all of life.

Noll's proposal for a full engagement with history is laudable, but also questionable on at least two counts. On the face of it, Noll's proposal promises a significant change in evangelical thought, but it is not likely to be relevant to or heeded by the broader evangelical community. Without a clearer indication of the relation between evangelicals as scholars and evangelicals as a broad community of faith, a relation rooted more deeply than the fundamentalist marriage of convenience, the neo-evangelical return to respectable contemporary scholarship (121) may also mark its isolation from the broad evangelical community. At the same time, Noll's own polarization of faith and scholarship, evident in his title and throughout his typology, reflects his basic concurrence with nineteenth century evangelical assumptions and limits his proposal for integrating faith and historical scholarship. His citation of Carl Armerding's definition of "believing criticism" as combining faith in special revelation and supernatural intervention with the cause and effect relationships of history suggests his continued assumption that religion, and spiritual reality, can be abstracted from history, understood merely as an instrumental means for revelation rather than as the site of revelation and religion (163-4). And Noll's definition of the evangelical tradition as the "creative conjuncture of confidence in Scripture as the Word of God and dedication to the solid results of research wherever they are found" (164), perpetuates the framework of Common Sense realism with which nineteenth century evangelicals separated religion and fact.

Noll's intent is stated most explicitly in his "Afterword." Faced with the post-modernist challenge to the absolute truth claims of evangelicals, he aims to ally evangelicalism with the Enlightenment ideal:

As in previous ages when Augustine exploited Plato and Thomas Aquinas drew on Aristotle for distinctly Christian purposes, so perhaps the time has

come for evangelicals to plunder the well-burnished riches of the Enlightenment and the newer treasures of modernity to furnish a house of learning made with their own hands. (209)

Such an ideal holds little hope for a thorough engagement with history from the perspective of faith; to the contrary, the Enlightenment minimized history in favor

of scholastic metaphysics and contributed immensely to the separation of faith and scholarship. Noll's laudable attempt to integrate faith and scholarship still assumes disparate categories for history and the absolute, and thus demonstrates, even while struggling to overcome it, the "divided mentalities" (192) of the evangelical tradition.

The Parables of the Kingdom, by Robert Farrar Capon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1985. 174 pages, paper. \$12.95.
The Parables of Grace, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1988. 184 pages, paper. No price.
The Parables of Judgment, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1989. 181 pages, cloth. \$15.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Capon's expository trilogy brings us a treasure-trove of exegetical and theological reflection on the parables of Jesus. This fresh and provocative look at the Gospel parables reveals a very different Jesus than most of us are familiar with and a richer universe of meaning and discourse than most of our theological systems can appreciate.

The parables are like old shoes to many of us. You know where they are and how they fit and feel. We have become familiar, even content, with the parables and with our comfortable understandings of them. We read them unreflectively, thinking their meanings so plain and their message so facile that all we need do is stand in their proximity and they will imprint themselves upon us. In Capon's hands, however, the Lord's parables are anything but the flannel-graphed nuggets of wisdom and sage advice that our Sunday School teacher made them out to be. Many of the parables "are not agreeable; most are complex; and a good percentage of them produce more confusion than understanding." The teller of these sometimes perplexing stories "spoke in strange, bizarre, disturbing ways" (Kingdom, 1).

Why did Jesus prefer the obscure to the clear, the round-about to the straight ahead? Quite simply, because he was not what first-century Israel expected the Messiah to be, and he was not going to play to the popular messianic expectations. Jesus defied and broke down every plausibility structure of the first-century (and ours too). From beginning to end, he was not a sword-and-saddle Messiah, but a carpenter-and-cross Messiah. And it is all as dumbfounding today as it was in Herod's day. Jesus was rather un-messianic, by all standards but his own; and he was going to be the Messiah only by his own. He was dealing with people who thought they had all the answers. Jesus' one-liners and baffling stories, simply put, made mince-meat out of people's expectations. Capon's presentation allows the parables to shred ours as well.

Capon divides the parables into three sections. *The Parables of the Kingdom* cover the parables that occur in the Gospels prior to the feeding of the five thousand, thus before Matt.14, Mark 6, and Luke 9. *The Parables of Grace* cover the parables and parabolic activity between the feeding of the five thousand and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, thus ending at Matt.21, Mark 11, and Luke 19. *The Parables of Judgment* cover the parables between the triumphal entry and the events of the passion narrative.

In *The Parables of the Kingdom* Capon develops the idea that God uses left-handed rather than right-handed power. God does not run his creation by way of overt, direct demonstrations of his power and authority, but covertly, even surreptitiously. The key word throughout these parables seems to be *aphete* (translated variously as "forgive" "allow" or "let"). Where we would prefer judgment and absolute, unerring justice for the evildoer, the kingdom parables emphasize that God's judgment is usually withheld for the Day of the Lord. Over-against the standard Jewish messianic expectations of a militaristic, parochial, retributive, vengeful, coercive, demonstrably powerful king and kingdom, Jesus spoke of a catholic, mysterious, forgiving, hidden yet present kingdom which aggressively demands our response. This paradoxical kingdom says that apparent weakness is true strength. Yes, there is judgment and retribution, but those wait upon the Day of the Lord—as in the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13).

Where *The Parables of the Kingdom* focus on the paradoxical idea of strength in apparent weakness, *The Parables of Grace* are no less confounding. Here the fundamental theme is that Christ wins by losing. The linchpin of grace is that it comes from the cross, and only from the cross. The essence of the gospel is grace, not success; not achievement, but grace. God is interested more in grace than in judgment.

Not surprisingly, the final installment, *The Parables*