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Faith of Our Fathers: Religion and the New Nation (Book Review)

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fusing, tapestry in which immanentist, higher critical, evolutionary and Ritschlian strands all have their parts to play” to the “conservative-liberal” debate (87). Sensitive to the complexity of issues involved, he distinguishes between the *fundamentalist*-liberal conflict and the *conservative*-liberal debate:

Fundamentalism . . . never made the orchestrated impact upon Britain that it did upon America; nor was the millenarian impetus as great in the former nation as in the latter; and within America itself the Mennonites, the Calvinists of the Christian Reformed Church, and the Lutherans of the Missouri Synod—all theologically conservative—were not shaken by the fundamentalist-liberal convulsions of the nineteen twenties and thirties to anything like the degree that the larger of the Baptist and Presbyterian churches were. (91)

The conservative-liberal debate must be placed in the context of the larger battle for the hearts and minds of people that raged throughout the Western world at that time. In terms of Abraham Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*: “. . . Christianity is imperilled by great and serious dangers. Two life systems are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat” (108).

Sell makes many interesting comments in these last two chapters about such things as the role of millenarian and holiness movements, Arminian and latitudinarian thinking, the nature of Scripture and essence of Gospel, the need for conversion and Christian witness in society, and the views of J. Gresham Machen, C. Van Til, J. Murray, H. Bavinck, H. Dooyeweerd, C.F. Henry, etc. (Surprisingly, Sell does not mention G.C. Berkouwer, the

renowned Reformed dogmatician at the Free University in Amsterdam.)

Concerning those who advocate the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of Scripture and those who believe that only biblical doctrines are inerrant, Sell comments: “We cannot yet pronounce a verdict upon this debate, though we may dare to hope that the pursuit of inerrancy will not become a world-denying hobby” (144). Sell’s desire for a balanced approach to this long and often tense debate is clearly summarized in a quote from I.J. Hesselink:

. . . The real problem is that some “evangelicals,” like old-time liberals, have operated with a truncated Bible, despite their formal acknowledgement of its authority. They have rung the changes of John 3:16 and Acts 16:31—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved”—but they have conspicuously ignored the social significances of the Magnificat and the Beatitudes. They have reveled in passages like Isaiah 1:18—“Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow”—but have paid little heed to a major motif in the prophets as summarized in Amos 4:25—“Let justice roll down like waters of righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (144-145)

What makes Sell’s book worthwhile to read and reflect on, including many of his extensive endnotes on pages 147-191, is his emphasis on the historical roots and larger context for the conservative-liberal debate and his desire that the Scripture of God not be separated from the God of the Scriptures.

Faith of Our Fathers: Religion and the New Nation, Edwin S. Gaustad (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987). 139 pp. \$15.95. Reviewed by Louis Y. Van Dyke, Professor of History.

Edwin S. Gaustad, Professor of History at the University of California, Riverside, traces the movement from religious toleration to religious liberty which occurred during the first fifty years following United States independence. His theme is that while we may yearn for the good old days when life was less complicated, the fact is that people faced choices and options no less bewildering then than now. Not the least of these questions was over the precise role that religion ought to play in the public arena as well as in private life. While historians Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch argue that the center of American intellectual life changed from religion to politics during the Revolutionary era, Gaustad’s thesis is that religion played as important a part in shaping the new nation as did politics (in fact, in the minds of the founding fathers, the two could not be separated), and that between the years 1776-1826 many “course-plotting”

decisions were made.

The era was marked by religious anxiety as the “. . . concern for individualism pulled against the concern for community, a tension that persisted through succeeding generations, a tension that demanded and demands the best of both reflection and resolve” (136). Ratification of the Constitution raised questions of tremendous religious concern. That document stated, in effect, that religious matters simply were not to be the business of the state. There was to be no national church and no “symbolic center” around which Americans could unite. Thus, as the nation moved from a period of established churches to one of disestablishment, difficult questions arose which demanded answers—questions which persisted for the next two hundred years. Can morality be separated from religion? Is religion necessary to maintain social order? Is it possible, much less desirable, for

the state to be totally value free? Is religion basically individual and private or is it communal and public?

Gaustad asserts that there were seven perspectives which guided people in formulating answers during the years 1776-1826. The majority, including Anglicans and Congregationalists, believed that religion had to act in partnership with the state in order to preserve society. A vocal minority, in the tradition of Roger Williams, William Penn, and Lord Baltimore, maintained that religion was primarily a matter of the heart rather than of the state. Others believed in a variation of the first position in that they wanted a religious community, but its hallmark was to be a civil religion. This group raised up heroes such as Franklin and Washington as their icons. Still others argued over the relationship between civil and religious liberty and how much of one or the other should be granted or tolerated. Enlightenment figures, including Jefferson and Madison, wanted to use Reason to purify religion that had been "corrupted" by the instituted church over the centuries. Another group pointed to the excesses of the French Revolution as proof of what happens when Reason becomes god. They preferred instead a national reaffirmation of a sovereign god. Finally, there were those who exhibited some of all of the above. This rather amorphous group of evangelists believed that America "could still be very much shaped by, if not governed by, the 'evangelical mind'" (119). It was their

vitality and energy which was responsible for the Second Great Awakening, only to be shattered on the rocks of the slavery controversy. In sum, according to Gaustad, "What those decades do reveal is a strong bond between religion and the new nation. But the strength of that bond depended not so much upon the power of the government as upon the faithfulness of the people" (133).

The book is amply footnoted, contains a useful bibliography, and includes documents of materials pertinent to the religious history of the era. There are some minor typographical errors. The author has John Adams engaged in correspondence twelve years before that worthy was born, for example. I found the chapter on the *Philosophes* to be the least successful. It is not clear to me just what the impact of their ideas was upon the religious history of the early republic. Further questions remain regarding civil religion. Was civil religion rooted in Christianity or in the Enlightenment or in both? Did all Christians accept a civil religion? A helpful article at this juncture is Gerald Rober McDermott, "Civil Religion in the American Revolutionary Period: An Historiographic Analysis," *Christian Scholar's Review*, XVIII:4, June 1989, 346-362.

Nevertheless, this is a valuable book! For the scholar it serves as a reminder that religious history must not be neglected. For the general reader it sketches a segment of American history that unfortunately is all too often omitted.

Public Knowledge and Christian Education, Theodore Plantinga (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988). 121 pp. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication.

A good place to begin reading this book is the "Postscript" in which Plantinga indicates his purposes in writing this essay. His first concern is that some supporters of Christian schools talk as if their schools are "public," which would mean that they do not have a distinctive character that would justify their existence. The second concern "is the tendency of Christian teachers—especially on the higher levels of learning—to manifest solidarity with the secular world of learning" (119).

Plantinga begins the book by arguing that we should think of knowledge as *oral*, that is, to regard it as highly addressed and highly focused language. Teaching, he says, is "telling"—a creative activity of personally addressing students. Instead of simply transferring information, the teacher guides and advises children as they seek orientation in the world. In contrast, science is a set of statements made by a group and is essentially anonymous. Hence, science belongs to the realm of "public knowledge" rather than "local knowledge." Today's science is heavily influenced by Descartes' philosophical method of doubt and "the science student is supposed to walk in Descartes' footsteps" (29). The need for loyalty is important because science is ultimate-

ly a search for consensus and the science teacher is often more loyal than independent. The method of science becomes a "Trojan horse" in the camp of Christian education.

In chapter five, the author describes several approaches to the question of the relation of Christianity and culture: anti-cultural, secular Protestantism, cultural Protestantism, and post-Enlightenment Protestantism (his position). "Post-Enlightenment Protestants propose to use the plurality of cultural discourses in the world today to guard against the threat of an exclusive totalitarian discourse (including scientific discourse) claiming the right to speak the final word on all questions of concern to man. They recognize that the very plurality of discourses has the effect of relativizing them. At the same time, this plurality opens a place for revealed discourse and the extension of revealed discourse that the Christian tradition calls preaching" (59). This position gives the Christian teacher the opportunity not only to recognize the different discourses but also to exercise the responsibility to choose between the many available. This selection problem is a key consideration that the Christian teacher faces.

The author's criticism of science is strong: "Today's