

# **Evangelicalism and British Culture**

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‘To say’, declared W. H. Groser, secretary of the Sunday School Union, in 1900, ‘that the Church has remained unaffected by influences permeating our national life would be to assert that we are independent of our social environment’.<sup>1</sup> That supposition, he assumed, was absurd. People are moulded by their circumstances and consequently the Christian community is swayed by its setting. That process takes place in many ways. Political factors can impinge on churches, absorbing their time and energy in exercising power or else in avoiding its exercise. Perhaps the impact of the state is greatest when it is hostile, but during the era since the eighteenth century, with a few notable exceptions, the public authorities in Britain have been generally benign, or at worst neutral, towards religion. Likewise economic conditions can shape church life, with abundant or restricted resources drastically affecting the conduct of congregational affairs. Wealth or poverty have certainly altered church methods in Britain, but usually the chief effect has been on the scale of operations rather than their substance. The concern of this paper is with a more fundamental aspect of the condition of human beings, their cultural formation. The subject is the basic assumptions that have coloured the way Evangelical Christians have looked at the world and ordered their affairs—what we might call the spectacles behind their eyes. How have cultural attitudes shaped the expression of the Christian gospel in Britain?

## **Evangelicalism and popular culture**

One aspect of culture that undoubtedly affected Evangelicals was its popular dimension. There were deep-seated patterns of inherited custom among the common people that necessarily interacted with the gospel. This was the plebeian culture celebrated by E. P. Thompson, with a respect for fairness, a strain of neighbourliness and a variety of rough but vibrant ways.<sup>2</sup> It was remoulded by the process of industrialisation and the growth of literacy but nevertheless retained much of its resilience into the twentieth century before it was transformed once more by the mass

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1. *Sunday School Chronicle* (1900), p. 729, quoted by P. B. Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England, 1780-1980* (Redhill, Surrey, 1986), p.197.

2. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), spec. chap. 3.

media. It included a great deal of superstition, with traditional events such as bonfires and well dressings marking the cycle of the seasons and consultations with wise women as in the novels of Thomas Hardy. Popular beliefs of this kind were by no means confined to the countryside but still flourished in London in the early twentieth century. Charms, amulets and a powerful sense of luck remained deeply rooted among cockneys.<sup>3</sup> This dimension of popular culture, open to the supernatural, seems to have formed an initial advantage to evangelists on entering an area. Thus in west Cornwall belief in a shadowy local spirit called 'Bucca' who had to be propitiated if fisherman were to expect success helped prepare the way for the huge impact of Methodism on the region.<sup>4</sup> Although there were tensions between superstition and orthodoxy, the locals at least had a lively awareness of a spiritual dimension to life. As Evangelical faith put down roots in an area, furthermore, its sacred worldview often meshed into folk religion. At Staithes on the North Yorkshire coast, for example, a Methodist harvest festival of the late twentieth century was plausibly explained by a visiting sociologist as having as much to do with the potency of nature as with distinctively Christian faith.<sup>5</sup> There seems to have been, for good or ill, a great deal of common ground between Evangelicalism and popular culture.

Nevertheless the relationship between the two was more often one of antagonism. Many of the earliest Methodist preachers of the eighteenth century were greeted with fierce opposition, often encouraged by local clergy or gentry but generated chiefly by a sense that the community was under attack by outsiders. Thus in Pendle Forest in Lancashire in 1748, John Bennet's singing band of Methodists was resisted by a rabble with drums, music and guns.<sup>6</sup> For much of the nineteenth century respectable Evangelicals were sharply marked off from the rough element in the parish who never darkened the doors of a place of worship. Their entertainments, which seemed an alternative to true religion and a source of perennial temptation, came under severe Evangelical censure. At Derby, for instance, the annual races, which had long been a haunt of betting touts and their cronies, were eventually suppressed by the magistrates

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3. S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c. 1880-1939* (Oxford, 1999).

4. William Bottrell, *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, 2nd series (Penzance, 1873), p.246.

5. David Clark, *Between Pew and Pulpit: Folk Religion in a North Yorkshire Fishing Village* (Cambridge, 1982), pp.104-5.

6. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven CT, 2005), p.90.

in 1835 as a result of Evangelical pressure.<sup>7</sup> The sharpest encounters often took place over drink. The centre of male sociability among the poor was the alehouse and the number of drink outlets was immense. In Lambeth in 1905 there were 172 churches, chapels and mission halls but as many as 430 public houses and beerhouses.<sup>8</sup> Drunkenness was always a target of church censure, but down to the middle years of the nineteenth century total abstinence was rare except in Primitive Methodism. Increasingly, however, drink seemed the supreme obstacle to conversion. From the 1870s Nonconformity and much of Scottish Presbyterianism turned decisively against alcohol. Even the Church of England launched a strong temperance society, supported chiefly by Evangelical clergy. There were annual temperance sermons; Bands of Hope encouraged the young to take the pledge; and the temperance campaign turned into a political cause. Plebeian culture, on the other hand, remained wedded to the public house. A gulf was created between the poor who liked a drink and the churchgoers who on principle shunned alcohol. Consequently gospel and culture in its popular dimension were in perpetual collision for much of the twentieth century.

### **Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment**

Other features of culture, however, became indigenised within the Evangelical movement and the bulk of this paper will take them as its theme. High culture is usually contrasted with the popular variety, but in reality tendencies that began in the elevated circles of cultural innovators gradually spread to a much wider public over time. The rank and file of Evangelicals were therefore affected by the steady dissemination of the main currents in western civilisation over the last three centuries. The first major wave of influence that percolated down to them was the Enlightenment, emphasising the ability of reason to discover truth and improve the human lot. John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton, the chief progenitors of Enlightenment in the English-speaking world, both contended that received knowledge was not to be taken on trust. That stance is often supposed to have made the Enlightenment intrinsically anti-religious, with human reason pitted against divine revelation. It is true that Voltaire, one of its greatest luminaries, set the tone of the French

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7. Anthony Delves, 'Popular Recreation and Social Conflict in Derby, 1800-1850', in Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914* (Brighton, 1981), p.107.

8. Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* (New York, 1982), p.24.

Enlightenment with his cry of *écrasez l'infâme*, a rallying call against the institutional embodiment of revealed religion. It is also true that many of the British religious thinkers of the eighteenth century who were most affected by the spirit of the age, whether latitudinarians in the Church of England, moderates in the Church of Scotland or Socinians in Dissent, became in varying degree detached from traditional Christian convictions. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that the Enlightenment was immensely varied in its expressions, so that, in north Germany for example, it was closely bound up with pietism.<sup>9</sup> Similarly in England and Scotland, although there were outright opponents of Christian teaching such as the Deists and David Hume, there was a great deal of overlap between Enlightenment thinking and orthodox theology. There was no automatic antagonism between the intellectual temper of the age and the rising Evangelical movement.

On the contrary, Evangelicalism was permeated with Enlightenment values from the inception of the movement and on into the nineteenth century. Both, in the first place, were dedicated to empirical method. Locke and Newton equally favoured investigation as the method for discovering truth. Each man was deeply respected by Evangelicals, even though they were most devoted to the common sense philosophy of Thomas Reid, a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, as a foundation for their thinking. Although the Scottish school held that first principles have to be assumed, its methods were essentially empirical, not deductive. Its texts were standard in the curriculum of nineteenth-century theological colleges. Respect for empirical method led to sympathy for science. Natural theology, the prevailing British tradition of apologetic, formed a bridge between science and religion. Evangelicals heartily approved when, in 1802, William Paley published his *Natural Theology*. They frequently followed Paley in appealing to the evidences of a designing purpose in the world that confirmed the existence of a Designer. The most popular work by Thomas Chalmers, the leader of the Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland, was a series of *Astronomical Discourses* (1819) on the wonders of the heavens and the glories of their Maker. Natural theology remained the framework within which Evangelical theologians came to terms with Darwin after 1859. Purpose, they argued, could still be discerned in an evolutionary world so long as it was not assumed to be absent. An Enlightenment framework continued to ensure that there was little or no gulf between

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9. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1982).

science and religion in Evangelical thought for most of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

A second bond between Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment was optimism. A leading characteristic of the later Enlightenment of the second half of the eighteenth century was the idea of progress, the notion that humanity is advancing morally towards a better future. A similar optimistic temper marked Evangelicals. 'More will in the end be saved than will perish', declared Thomas Scott, the leading Anglican Evangelical commentator on the Bible. 'Diseases, wars, passions', he went on, 'will all be subdued.'<sup>11</sup> Scott's confidence in the elimination of the scourges of humanity was a result of postmillennial teaching, the belief that the second coming of Jesus will not take place until after a millennium of peace and prosperity. On this reading of biblical prophecy, the millennium will dawn as a result of the gradual extension of the gospel and the consequent spread of Christian values throughout the world. In this vein the *General Baptist Magazine* carried an article in 1854 on the millennium envisaging not only the disappearance of moral evils but also such secular benefits as the end of 'the oppressive weight of taxes that grind nations to the dust'. 'Governments will still probably exist', the writer remarked, 'but theirs will then be an easy office; for all will be a law unto themselves.' This happy state of affairs might take some time, but could be expected to arrive around the year 2016.<sup>12</sup> The postmillennial view was not unanimous among eighteenth-century Evangelicals, but, in the wake of the upheavals of the French Revolution, it became their general opinion. The launching of the missionary movement at the same juncture seemed to vindicate the expectation of the universal triumph of the gospel. The vigour of Evangelical postmillennialism goes a long way towards explaining the strength of the Victorian idea of progress. They were mutually reinforcing and, as the century wore on, virtually indistinguishable.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Enlightenment was its pragmatism. Traditional institutions, it was insisted, must be reformed so as to make them efficient. This was the stance of Jeremy Bentham and the current of utilitarian thought with

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10. D. W. Bebbington, 'Science and Evangelical Theology in Britain from Wesley to Orr', in D. H. Livingstone et al. (eds), *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1999), pp.120–41.

11. J. H. Pratt, *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders: Notes of the Discussions of the Eclectic Society, London, during the Years 1798-1814* ([1856] Banner of Truth Trust rpt. London, 1978), p.257 (7 June 1802).

12. *General Baptist Magazine*, July 1854, pp.308, 309.

which he was associated. Equally it was to be found amongst Evangelicals. They were far less committed than earlier generations of Protestants, whether Churchmen or Dissenters, to precise forms of church order. Instead they were willing to experiment. Because their grand goal was the rapid propagation of the gospel, they were impatient with any obstacles posed by traditional ways in the churches. Lay agency is one of the most significant expressions of their pragmatic temper. Christian initiatives were not left to the professional clergy but were taken up by laypeople, female as well as male. Thus Methodism was run by society stewards and the great majority of its sermons delivered by lay preachers. Likewise in the Church of Scotland Chalmers revived the office of deacon in 1819 so that businessmen could deploy their talents in the service of the church.<sup>13</sup> There were many other instances of a new flexibility in the area of ecclesiology. Thus early Anglican Evangelical clergy, eager to preach wherever there were needy sinners, often entirely ignored the parochial system of the church. Likewise during the early nineteenth century the Baptists, despite their existence as a denomination being predicated on their practice of believer's baptism, largely abandoned their insistence on the rite as a condition of participation in communion.<sup>14</sup> Matters of lesser importance than the proclamation of the gospel could be adapted for the sake of greater effectiveness. Societies rather than churchly agencies were likely to be better managed, and so the British and Foreign Bible Society and similar organisations were typical expressions of the Evangelical temper. If secular Enlightenment thinkers aimed to promote utility, Evangelical biographers frequently praised the usefulness of their subjects. The assimilation of the spirit of the age by Evangelicals meant that there was a close affinity between the two approaches.

### **Evangelicalism and Romanticism**

Another high cultural force, however, impinged on religion in the early nineteenth century. The new mood, Romanticism, developed in pioneering literary circles, especially in Germany, from the last years of the eighteenth century. In Britain its most celebrated exponents were the Lake Poets, William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, and the historical novelist Sir Walter Scott. The term 'Romantic', however,

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13. S. J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982), pp.132–3.

14. M. J. Walker, *Baptists at the Table: The Theology of the Lord's Supper amongst English Baptists in the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot, Oxon, 1992), chap. 2.

is used here not in a sense restricted to that generation of authors, but rather it encompasses the whole cultural wave that spread out from them, enveloping first some of the highly educated and then a slowly increasing proportion of the population as the century wore on. The preferences of the era of Enlightenment were gradually—but by no means entirely—supplanted over the decades. Instead of the Enlightenment exaltation of reason there was an emphasis on will, emotion and intuition. Simplicity was replaced by mystery, the artificial by the natural and the novel by the traditional. The new taste underlay the appeal to history of the Oxford Movement in the Church of England and the ornate display of Ultramontane ritual in the Roman Catholic Church. Coleridge was a major inspiration for other Anglicans such as Thomas Arnold who shaped subsequent Broad Church theology. So Romanticism exerted a powerful influence over the direction of Christian thought in the Victorian age.

Evangelicalism was far from immune. Edward Irving, a minister of the Church of Scotland in London, acknowledged Coleridge as his mentor. It was Irving who, more than any other, transposed Evangelical doctrine into a Romantic key. In a memorable sermon lasting over six hours delivered before the London Missionary Society in 1824, he denounced unsparingly the methods of his host organisation. The society, he claimed, had capitulated to modern business methods in a spirit of expediency. Missionaries should instead go out without resources other than a total reliance on the Almighty for their support. The rational calculation of the Enlightenment must be abandoned in favour of radical faith. Again, Irving was ready with Romantic eyes to recognise dramatic events as bearing the authentic hallmarks of the supernatural. Accordingly when, in 1831, speaking in tongues broke out in his congregation, he readily accepted its miraculous credentials. The legitimacy of speaking in tongues was to be an article of faith in the Catholic Apostolic Church that institutionalised Irving's convictions. Most significantly of all, Irving came to believe that Jesus would return soon and in person. In 1827 he published *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, a translation from Spanish of a work by a Chilean Jesuit, contending for Jesus' 'own personal appearance in flaming fire'.<sup>15</sup> In the book he dropped the postmillennial expectation of the gradual advance of the gospel in order to embrace the premillennial hope that the second coming would precede the millennium. That

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15. J. J. Ben-Ezra, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, trans. Edward Irving (London, 1827), p.vi.

was to abandon the characteristic eschatology of the Enlightenment for that typical of Romanticism. Irving was the person who did most to inject Romantic presuppositions into the Evangelical bloodstream.

Another man who seconded Irving's efforts was J. N. Darby. The outlook of Darby was coloured by Romantic taste. Poetry, for Darby, was an attempt 'to create, by imagination, a sphere beyond materialism, which faith gives in realities'.<sup>16</sup> There are the hallmarks of the new sensibility: imagination, the supersession of the material and faith itself. At first, as an Irish clergyman, he held views of apostolic succession comparable to those of the Oxford Movement. Then, as he moved into Brethren circles, he developed as strong an insistence on the supremacy of faith over reason as Irving. His species of premillennial teaching, dispensationalism, bore the mark of a characteristic feature of Romantic thought, cultural relativism. There were no permanent standards by which to evaluate every part of human history, but rather the dispensations were separate stages when God's dealings with humanity were distinct—a principle that enabled him to repudiate Irving's acceptance of the revival of the gift of tongues as something alien to the present age. Other men who left a substantial legacy to Brethren also drank deeply from the Romantic well. A. N. Groves was the epitome of the wandering missionary depending wholly on the Almighty that Irving had envisaged and George Müller was an immensely influential exemplar of living by faith rather than by rational planning. Brethren as a whole embraced an ecclesiology that bore the Romantic impress. Christian assemblies were formed not by human act but by 'gathering to the Lord'. They had no defined membership, but consisted of those who were 'in fellowship', vital elements in an organic community. Their leadership was not constituted by formal procedures but by the emergence of men with appropriate gifts. All was natural and spiritual. The Brethren movement can be seen as adopting a Romantic version of Evangelical faith.<sup>17</sup>

The main effect of the Romantic mood in the Evangelical movement as a whole, however, was to push many of its adherents in a more theologically liberal direction.

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16. Heyman Wreford, *Memories of the Life and Last Days of William Kelly* (London, n.d.), p.81, quoted by M. S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby* (Neptune, NJ, 1992), p.167.

17. This point is developed in D. W. Bebbington, 'The Place of the Brethren Movement in International Evangelicalism', in N. T. R. Dickson and Tim Grass (eds), *The Growth of the Brethren Movement* (Milton Keynes, 2006), pp.247–50.



The central shift was in the doctrine of God. The theologians who had written under the sway of Enlightenment had understood the Almighty primarily as the just governor of the universe. A younger generation falling under Romantic influences, by contrast, saw him primarily as Father. The pacesetters of the new view were the Scots John McLeod Campbell and Thomas Erskine, who complained that earlier writers depicted God in legal imagery rather than in terms of the family.<sup>18</sup> The Almighty was now seen, however, essentially as father of all, so that no distinction was drawn between those who were adopted into his family and those who were not. The effect of this doctrine of the fatherhood of God was therefore to blur the line between the converted and the unconverted. There were other Romantic innovations. They included a shift in emphasis away from the atonement to the incarnation, the premier doctrine in the estimate of High Churchmen and Broad Churchmen alike. Theologians influenced by F. D. Maurice such as the Wesleyan John Scott Lidgett commonly took this path. The problem here was that the centrality of the cross was being eclipsed. Again, the biblical higher criticism that impinged on Evangelical scholarship in the later Victorian years was founded on German Romantic premises. The development of doctrine in ancient Israel, it was believed, must have conformed to an evolutionary pattern. After much debate, William Robertson Smith was dismissed from the Free Church College at Aberdeen in 1881 for embracing this point of view. So Romantic currents of thought were beginning to erode the accepted understandings of conversion, the cross and the Bible, three of the Evangelical fundamentals.

Yet aspects of the Romantic vision could also point in a theologically conservative direction. The faith principle became in the later years of the nineteenth century the animating idea behind a wave of new missionary bodies beginning in 1865 with Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission. Premillennialism stiffened the backbone of Evangelicals in the Church of England, though not spreading to many people outside its ranks other than Brethren. And the Keswick movement, beginning in 1875, taught a Romantic prescription for holy living. The Lake District, where its annual convention gathered, had once been the home of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Those associated with Keswick, such as Frances Ridley Havergal, often possessed poetic taste or talent. The substance of the teaching, that holiness was attainable by faith

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18. D. W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester, 2005), pp.156–7.

rather than by effort, bore witness to the twin Romantic emphases on moments of crisis and personal trust. The mode in which sin was dealt with, according to Keswick teachers, was not by removing it ('eradication') but by repressing it ('victory'), an enduring process that was typical of Romantic categories. The whole enterprise can be recognised as a recasting of spirituality in a Romantic style. By 1900, despite dogged resistance by J. C. Ryle, it had come to dominate Anglican Evangelicalism.<sup>19</sup> Before the end of the nineteenth century parts of the Romantic inheritance had strengthened theological conservatism within the Evangelical movement.

It was in the twentieth century, however, that a Romantic way of looking at the world became most widespread in the British public. In the Garden City movement at the start of the century, for example, the advocacy of rural features in new cities such as front gardens and open spaces can be seen as an expression of the wistful quest for the purer influences of the countryside that was near the heart of Romantic sensibility. Again, when the Labour MPs of 1906 were asked who had moulded them most intellectually, the reply was not Karl Marx but John Ruskin, the prophet of fostering the beautiful in the world of work and one of the greatest Romantic prose writers. The Roman Catholic Church exercised a fascination over sensitive minds in the earlier twentieth century because of its insistence on the value of tradition inherited from the past and the capacity of faith to respond to symbols. The continuing Ultramontane ethos of the mass had what Ronald Knox, the son of an Anglican Evangelical bishop but himself a Catholic convert, called a 'dramatic and appealing character'.<sup>20</sup> The first half of the twentieth century was an era when the cultural legacy of Romanticism reached its apogee.

The effects were felt in all the strands of Evangelical life. From the first decade of the twentieth century 'liberal Evangelicals' started to emerge in the Church of England. At first the phrase was used of Evangelicals who leant not in a Broad Church direction, towards a more liberal theology, but in a High Church direction, towards a more Catholic form of churchmanship. Typically it described those clergy who wished to adopt liturgical practices once thought alien to Evangelicalism such as vestments, a choir and flowers on the communion table. In 1904 one self-professed 'Liberal Evangelical' explained that his standpoint meant that he was able to

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19. D. W. Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England* (Carlisle, 2000), chap. 4.

20. Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, vol. 5 (Princeton, NJ, 1961-75), p.261.

introduce flowers to his church without ‘noxious teaching’.<sup>21</sup> The reason often given was that young people, because of their improved aesthetic preferences, could be retained only by a higher churchmanship. Liberal Evangelicals organised themselves from 1906 in a body which from 1923 took the title the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement. By the 1920s it had become more committed to a broader theology, especially in wholeheartedly welcoming biblical criticism. Its ethos was most fully expressed in the Cromer Convention, an annual devotional gathering on the lines of Keswick. It was exclusively Anglican, highly clerical and tolerant of addresses that verged on pantheism. Edward Woods, later Bishop of Lichfield, would go out on the cliffs carrying a copy of Wordsworth in his pocket.<sup>22</sup> The convention was a carrier of the Romantic spirit.

The Methodists possessed a parallel body in the Fellowship of the Kingdom, which emerged at the end of the First World War. It recast traditional Methodist teaching in terms of three watchwords, Quest, Crusade and Fellowship. The Quest sought spiritual experience; the Crusade meant outreach; and the Fellowship was for members meeting in fortnightly groups. The very terminology was redolent of knightly enterprise at the court of King Arthur. Its publications illustrate the same Romantic ethos. J. Arundel Chapman, for instance, described biblical inspiration in these terms:

A poem such as Wordsworth’s *Michael*, the picture of the Austrian Tyrol in June, a piece of music such as Bach’s Mass in B Minor, the view of the Langdale Pikes, differ markedly, but they are all alike in this—that they get us.<sup>23</sup>

Inevitably many Methodists gravitated in a High Church direction, a Methodist Sacramental Fellowship being launched in 1935. According to K. Harley Boyns, a minister who wrote a pamphlet called *Our Catholic Heritage*, ‘The past, with its conquests, its fragrance, its saints, its immortal splendour, is ours’.<sup>24</sup> The echoes of the Oxford Movement’s discovery of an idealised Christian tradition nearly a century before are unmistakable.

A similar pattern is evident among churches possessing a Reformed inheritance. Many congregations of the Church of Scotland, largely reunited from

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21. *Record*, 23 September 1904, p. 954 (A. H. Hope-Smith).

22. I. M. Randall, *Evangelical Experiences: A Study in the Spirituality of English Evangelicalism, 1918–1939* (Carlisle, 1999), p.56.

23. J. Arundel Chapman, *The Bible and its Inspiration* (n.d., n.p.), p.5.

24. K. Harley Boyns, *Our Catholic Heritage* (n.d., n.p.), p.8.

1929, introduced more frequent communion, service books with fixed liturgies and the observance of the Christian year. So close did the Church of Scotland move to the Church of England that by the 1950s there was nearly a merger of the two established churches. Although a campaign by the *Scottish Daily Express* ensured the scheme's rejection because it entailed the acceptance of bishops, the Presbyterian leaders themselves were willing to embrace episcopacy.<sup>25</sup> In Wales the trend was less marked, but greater dignity of worship did appear among the Calvinistic Methodists, from 1930 called the Presbyterian Church of Wales. A book about the home missionary work of the Welsh Presbyterians published in the late 1940s captured in its title the same spirit as the Methodist Fellowship of the Kingdom: *The Romance of the Forward Movement*.<sup>26</sup> Among the English Congregationalists there were two tendencies shaped by Romantic influences, pointing in different directions. On the one hand there was an advance of theological liberalism, which proceeded far beyond the bounds of Evangelicalism. Thus T. Rhondda Williams, one of its leading exponents and chairman of the Congregational Union in 1929, regretted that Wesley and Whitefield had been burdened by 'the incubus of a traditional theology'.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand there was the so-called Genevan movement that gathered around Nathaniel Micklem of Mansfield College, Oxford, from the 1930s. Micklem stressed the place of Calvinists within any fully developed understanding of Catholic tradition. His friend B. L. Manning of Jesus College, Cambridge, shared his vision, extending it to the other Free Churches. For him the early Methodists of Lincolnshire singing the hymns of Charles Wesley about the cross were the modern equivalents of mediaeval penitents wending their way across the same wolds chanting of the five wounds of Christ.<sup>28</sup> The evocation of the past once more provided a sanction for the exaltation of the church and the sacraments. The supreme instance was W. E. Orchard, the minister who conducted high mass at the Congregational King's Weigh House Chapel in London before seceding to Rome.<sup>29</sup> The High Church remodelling of the Reformed tradition could hardly go further.

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25. Tom Gallagher, 'The Press and Popular Protestant Culture: A Case-Study of the Scottish Daily Express', in Graham Walker and Tom Gallagher (eds), *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp.193–212.

26. Howell Williams, *The Romance of the Forward Movement* ([Denbigh, 1949?]).

27. T. Rhondda Williams, *The Working Faith of a Liberal Theologian* (London, 1914), p. 40, quoted by A. P. F. Sell, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Milton Keynes, 2006), p.15.

28. B. L. Manning, *The Making of Modern English Religion* (London, 1929), pp.141–2.

29. Elaine Kaye, *The History of the King's Weigh House Church* (London, 1968), chap. 8.

Baptists had a rather different blend of currents flowing amongst them. Many of the denominational leaders such as the Cambridge classicist T. R. Glover fitted into much the same liberal Evangelical mould as the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement. Among the rank and file, however, there were sympathies for the more conservative expressions of the Romantic legacy. Queensberry Street Baptist Church, Old Basford, Nottingham, is an instructive case-study. In 1929 an energetic member still in his twenties, a children's dress manufacturer named Douglas Stocken, stayed in the Aberystwyth holiday home run by the Young Life Campaign, a dynamic evangelistic organisation. There Stocken was quickened by its version of Keswick spirituality centring on 'full surrender'. Returning to Nottingham, he threw himself into Young Life Campaign activities and became church secretary three years later. The church was renewed by the Keswick message, becoming the most vigorous Baptist cause in the area. There was a range of striking changes. The church began to concentrate on 'soul winning'. Bazaars were abandoned as worldly entertainments. The church now raised money only by voluntary giving. Premillennial teaching became standard. Queensberry Street drew away from other Baptist churches but closer to Anglican Evangelicals and Brethren who also supported the Young Life Campaign and Keswick. There was, in short, a transformation of cultural atmosphere. The Romantic style had at last filtered down to a Nottingham suburb.<sup>30</sup> Baptists included in their ranks a good number professing similar higher life and adventist beliefs. That helps explain the alignment of more Baptists than of other Nonconformists with the conservative Evangelical coalition in the post-war era.

The pattern of Evangelical life in the early twentieth century was therefore moulded by the cultural inheritance from the previous century. The Romantic legacy made it common to present the Christian faith in rather ethereal form, blurring the sharp lines of doctrine and concentrating on the fatherly love of God. That generated the liberal tendency. At the same time certain doctrinal themes, especially those surrounding the church, sacraments and ministry, chimed in with Romantic preoccupations. The same trend that made the Roman Catholic Church specially attractive gave rise to a higher churchmanship among many Evangelicals. Yet Romantic influence had also generated beliefs with conservative implications.

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30. D. W. Bebbington, *A History of Queensberry Street Baptist Church, Old Basford, Nottingham* (Nottingham, 1977), pp.38-9.

Keswick teaching and the advent hope, popular among Anglicans, Brethren and others such as the Baptists of Queensberry Street, stiffened resistance to liberalism. The cultural mood that had animated the avant-garde of the early nineteenth century had spread so as to become a diffuse but potent element in the church life of the twentieth century.

### **Evangelicalism and Modernism**

The first major challenge to these ecclesiastical styles arose in the 1930s. It came from the Oxford Group led by Frank Buchman, a Pennsylvania Lutheran minister. Teams of life-changers, often Oxford undergraduates, visited an area to urge personal surrender to God. Individuals were drawn into groups where they talked frankly about their efforts to achieve the four ethical absolutes: honesty, purity, unselfishness, love. Adherents were encouraged to spend daily quiet times jotting down thoughts in note books as a way of discovering the guidance of God. The Oxford Group aroused suspicion in many Evangelical quarters because its meetings often dispensed with prayers, hymns or scripture readings. 'Such a movement', darkly observed the Brethren magazine *The Witness*, '...can only have one end (Rev. 3.16)'.<sup>31</sup> The later history of the Oxford Group, which turned in 1938 into Moral Rearmament, might seem to have borne out this judgement for it became less distinctively Christian. For a while, however, at the depth of the great depression, the movement attracted attention to the Christian message, won converts and in the eyes of some observers seemed to presage revival. For all its idiosyncrasies, it brought a fresh burst of evangelistic vitality into the land.

The impact of the Oxford Group can be traced to its cultural role. Buchman wanted to remove every obstacle to the transmission of the gospel and so deliberately adopted the latest fashions. His movement therefore reflected the new cultural mood that had been created by the literary and artistic avant-garde in the years before and after 1900. This was the phenomenon variously called 'Modernism' or 'Expressivism'. It bore little relation to the contemporary movement of theological modernism, which was an advanced form of liberalism, but took its name because it embraced the modern as an alternative to Romantic nostalgia for the past. It could equally be called 'Expressivist' because of a characteristic commitment to free self-expression. Cultural Modernism

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31. *The Witness*, 67 (January 1937), p.17.

was as original a phase in the history of Western civilisation as the Enlightenment or Romanticism, and can best be understood as a cultural wave succeeding them. Its origins can be traced particularly to Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1870s and Sigmund Freud in the 1890s. From Nietzsche came the belief that there is no intrinsic order in the universe. Hence, it came to be held, there is no correspondence between words and things so that language cannot represent reality. From Freud, Jung and their circle came the perceptions of depth psychology. There was exploration of the recesses of the subconscious, leading to the view that thought cannot be distinguished from feeling. The novelists such as James Joyce who explored the stream-of-consciousness technique and the artists such as the Surrealists who turned the world of dreams into their subject-matter were typical exponents of this fresh cultural manner. The Oxford Group was its leading embodiment in religion.

The Buchmanites therefore displayed many of the most typical characteristics of the period's cultural pioneers. They believed in self-expression, telling each other in their groups how they really felt. Accepting the basics of depth psychology, they pursued mutual counselling. Personal relations had to be authentic, and so the Groupers went in for first names. They would even, according to a critical representation, have called Saint Peter 'Pete'.<sup>32</sup> Like Modernist artists, they rejected any notion of boundaries, not distinguishing the sacred from the secular and so, to the scandal of most Evangelicals of their day, going for rambles on a Sunday. Their doctrine was unspecific, for, like the mood they represented, they refused to pin down words to a single meaning. In the spirit of the Bohemian creators of Modernist art, they disliked institutions and so normally sat loose to the churches. Yet, because they were so anti-institutional, they relied on authority to hold them together and gave a degree of control to Buchman that some contemporaries likened to that of Hitler. For a while during the 1930s these techniques had an enormous appeal for the young, the prosperous and the educated, the sector of the population most swayed by recent cultural innovations. As war supervened and Moral Rearmament turned in fresh directions, the permeation of the churches and of society largely came to a halt. The lasting penetration of Evangelicalism by the new cultural mode in this period was

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32. John Moore, *Brensham Village* ([1946]London, 1966), p.171.

therefore very limited.<sup>33</sup>

The major impact of Modernism/Expressivism was therefore deferred until the 1960s, the decade of the expressive revolution in society at large. By then the cultural movement had evolved as it spread to a wider public, but it had not been superseded. The phenomenon that has come to be called 'Postmodernism', which many would date from the 1960s, did not replace Modernism. Postmodernism is so called because it rejects Modernity, the legacy of the Enlightenment, not Modernism. In reality the two formed one stream of cultural influence. Thus in the field of architecture the Bauhaus school of the 1920s constituted the cutting edge of the 'Modern Movement'. Its central principle was giving precedence to the functional over questions of traditional design. A major Postmodernist monument, Richard Rodgers's Pompidou Centre in Paris, by placing its service ducts on the outside, bears witness to the same priority. For all the differences of appearance, there is an underlying continuity between the two. The essence of both is authenticity, the hallmark of Expressivism. Late twentieth-century Postmodernism was an increasingly diffused version of the cultural forces that sprang into being around the opening of the same century.

The chief way in which this cultural phenomenon impinged on Evangelicals was through charismatic renewal. Charismatics baptised the rising cultural mood into a Christian guise. Its characteristics therefore echo those of the Oxford Group in the 1930s. There are exceptions: the Group had none of the exuberant worship that was so salient in the renewal movement, but in the earlier period there was no question of altering the existing style of church services. Nevertheless the similarities are marked. The worship style of the charismatic movement was itself about self-expression, showing by gestures such as hand raising how people felt inside. The prayer counselling therapy that became a feature of renewal drew extensively on depth psychology. An insistence on authentic personal relations led to a rejection of individualistic churchgoing and sometimes to the creation of Christian communities. The sacred and the secular were not held apart so that, for example, there was an unprecedented surge of creativity in such matters as the making of banners and the inclusion of dance in worship. There was a tendency to downgrade fixed theological formulas and even, in some charismatic house churches, to insist that theology must

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33. D. W. Bebbington, 'The Oxford Group between the Wars', in W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds), *Voluntary Religion* (Oxford, 1986), pp.495–507. idem, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp.235–40.



be expected to change over time. There was a dislike of the institutionalism of existing denominations that provided much of the spur to form new house churches. And at certain points, especially in the 1970s, there were authoritarian tendencies within the movement. The so-called 'heavy shepherding' of that juncture, sometimes extending to the choosing of life partners for adherents, was subsequently largely repudiated, but the attributes of leadership became a much more common theme at conferences. The charismatic movement represented the rising temper of the age.

The growth of charismatic renewal is one of the most striking features of late twentieth-century Christian history. It revitalised many existing congregations and gave rise to substantial networks of new churches. Even where it did not come to dominate, it commonly affected the style of church life, especially in worship. Seconded by technological improvements, a multiplicity of instruments was introduced and the visual came to rival the verbal. One symbolic change was the legitimisation of applause. Noise in church had been frowned on in the period when Romantic norms prevailed since it was conceived to be a profane intrusion on the sacred. The expressive revolution in worship, however, encouraged clapping both to keep time with the rhythm of the music and to show appreciation of particular contributions to services.<sup>34</sup> All this was specially welcome to the young, the educated and the successful. The young appreciated worship that approximated to pop music; the educated were aware of the latest cultural trends; and the successful could pay for their taste to be gratified. Holy Trinity, Brompton, the leading bellwether congregation among Evangelicals by the end of the twentieth century, was full of the young, the educated and the successful. The appeal of Holy Trinity was partly a consequence of the clear exposition of the gospel that the church set out in its Alpha evangelistic programme, but it was also partly the result of its close adaptation to the cultural currents of the time. Just as the gospel in its Enlightenment form had exerted a strong appeal in the early decades of the Evangelical movement and in its Romantic style in the century or so from the 1830s, so its embodiment in a Modernist/Expressivist idiom proved to be powerful in the years around 2000.

### **Evangelicalism and culture**

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34. D. W. Bebbington, 'Evangelicals and Public Worship, 1965-2005', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 79 (2007), pp.3-22, spec. p. 20.

A number of conclusions flow from this analysis. In the first place, it is evident that Evangelicals have been deeply embedded in their cultural settings. W. H. Groser was right to claim that churches are moulded by their environments. It is impossible to understand the patterns of theological and ecclesiastical change without attention to the cultural context. Secondly, popular culture did not shape the trends in the expression of the gospel as much as developments in high culture. It is true that local customs impinged on how Evangelicals spread and lived the faith, but the deferred impact of intellectual innovations was far greater because they soon meshed with major theological concerns. Popular culture in the sense of secular ways of life probably exerted its greatest influence by repulsion, creating a gulf between the churches and the mass of the people. The high cultural movement of the Enlightenment, in the third place, provided the intellectual framework within which early Evangelicals operated. Empiricism, optimism and pragmatism all constituted common ground between Evangelicals and their progressive contemporaries, so giving them a powerful apologetic advantage. The growth of the movement owes a great deal to this extensive intellectual affinity. Fourthly, the succeeding cultural wave of Romanticism immersed many Evangelicals. Its consequences were manifold, fostering liberal developments in theology and more elaborate liturgical practice, but also giving rise to distinctly conservative doctrinal trends, especially through the faith principle, premillennial teaching and the Keswick Convention. And finally the emergence of a novel Modernist/Expressivist mood exercised a comparable effect on the Evangelical movement in the twentieth century. After a stunted initial impact in the 1930s, it exerted a transforming influence over Evangelical life in the decades after the 1960s. Overall it is clear not only that the host culture has helped shape the articulation of the gospel but also that it has contributed in no small measure to its degree of success.