

Two Awesome Problems

The Tragic Failure of Britain's Evangelical Awakening

by Jonathan W. Rice

Recently, I began reading a book so interesting that I stayed up until 2:30 a.m. finishing it. If you ever want a detailed account of how the nineteenth-century English Evangelicals ended the British slave trade; abolished sati and infant sacrifice in India; banned child labor and other such abuses in England; started the world's first 'animal rights' group (The RSPCA, which banned the torture of animals for sport); rehabilitated prostitutes; reformed the Parliament; brought education and relief to the destitutes of England; brought about prison and lunatic asylum reforms, etc., then the book to read is "The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians," by Ian C. Bradley (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1976).

Bradley tries to take the stance of an impartial historian. However, it becomes clear after a few chapters that the subjects of his study are steadily gaining his admiration and empathy. In every chapter he critiques the excesses of the movement: their petty legalisms, repressive behavior codes ("The Cult of Conduct"), intellectual philistinism, and so forth. And yet, his approach is fair and he always balances the negatives with their many positive contributions. For the most part, the positives win out. A famous historian quoted in the book sums up the mixture: "Between 1780 and 1850 the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world and became one of the most inhibited, polite, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical" (p. 106).

The book, however, ends on a tragic note. Many of the Evangelicals lost their children and grandchildren to agnosticism or atheism. All throughout its pages, we see glimpses of English Evangelicalism's serious weakness: anti-intellectualism. It comes out in the many accounts of their petty legalism and sometimes even pharisaic separatism; and how they terrorized their children with stories of juvenile Sabbath-breakers, who actually had a little fun on a Sunday and then died and went to Hell for it; and how they forbade their members to read "secular" novels and discouraged them from patronizing "secular" art and music (Mozart and Beethoven were flat out!). Their intellectual weakness becomes more pronounced in their view of "practical" religion.

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"The Tragic Failure of English
Evangelicalism Repeated by the
Indian Church Today"

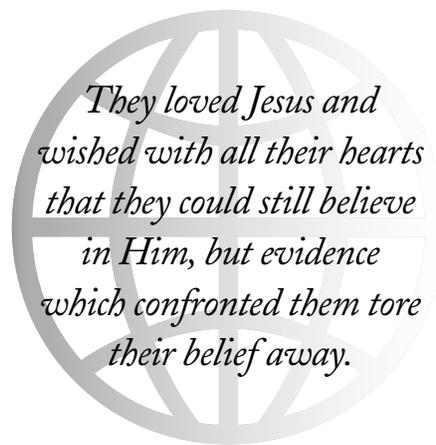
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True Christianity, they believed, did not entail entering the marketplace of ideas. They did not think it worthwhile to intelligently engage the skeptics, German Biblical critics, agnostics and atheistic philosophers of their day. Instead, they claimed, God had called them to a purely practical faith: to send forth missionaries, to help the poor and downtrodden, to better peoples' manners. These were the things pleasing to God; not intellectual debate or true apologetics. In fact, a popular belief of theirs was that one could only prove the existence of God by looking deep within one's own conscience (pietism at its worst!). When, by the mid-1800s, much of Evangelicalism became influenced by the rise of proto-fundamentalist groups, any fading hope of a 'life of the mind' was dashed to pieces.

Which brings us to the tragic last chapter of Bradley's book, the story of the new generation: the children and grandchildren of these nineteenth-century Evangelicals. While some of them kept the faith, "an alarmingly high number deserted the Evangelical fold" (p. 194). Some still remained Christians. For example, three of William Wilberforce's sons became Roman Catholics and the fourth became a non-Evangelical Anglican. Thomas Macauley also forsook Evangelicalism, though he still considered himself Christian. The real tragedy is not in these cases, but in the many others who abandoned the Christian faith altogether. Bradley notes that, "Samuel Butler, George Eliot [pen-name of Mary Ann Evans], Leslie and James Fitzjames Stephen, and Francis Newman renounced Christianity altogether and became atheists" (p. 194). There are many others whom Bradley doesn't mention. For example, what about Margaret Noble several years later, the Wesleyan pastor's daughter, who as a child "loved Jesus very much" and wanted to be a missionary when she grew up? As an adult, she came under the spell of Swami Vivekananda, converted to Hinduism, changed her name to Sister Nivedita, and wrote praises to "Kali the Mother." The list could go on and on.

Many of those who fell away fit into a similar pattern. On one hand, they resented the repressive narrowness

of their upbringings, but they also appreciated the many good aspects. The main issue was with the world of ideas: No longer were they protected, sheltered children, reading the propaganda of Hannah More. They were now thinking adults in the real world, reading the assaults of atheists, agnostics, and occultists. Their parents and their church had not provided answers to such attacks on their faith. Nor had they trained their children in the critical examination of the Biblical worldview vs. other world views, which would have provided them with the tools to find answers for themselves.



The result was a severe "conversion" crisis, but this time a conversion away from faith to atheism or agnosticism.

Many of them agonized deeply over their loss of faith. It was as though they had been robbed. They loved Jesus and wished with all their hearts that they could still believe in Him, but the evidence which confronted them tore their belief away. Many of them held onto as much of their godly past as possible. They tried to salvage the strong sense of morality, duty, hard work and self-control, but without the God who had given it to them in the first place. One of them summed it up this way in 1873: "Let us dream no dreams and tell no lies, but go our way, wherever it may lead, with our eyes open and our heads raised" (p. 200). There is bravery and integrity in this statement, together with a horrible sense of the tragic. It is the practical creed of a man who had once known and loved God, but had lost Him, and was facing his short life alone and abandoned in a now empty universe.

The story of the great author George Eliot (the pen-name of Mary Ann Evans) was very upsetting. I had grown up reading her stories but had never known the story of her life. She was raised an Evangelical and loved God with all her heart (but, unfortunately, she had not been taught how to love Him with her mind). Her hero was William Wilberforce, and when she was 19 she wrote, "Oh that I might be made as useful in my lowly and obscure station as he [Wilberforce] was in the exalted one assigned to him" (p. 199). In another letter, she said that she would be happy if the only music she ever heard again in her life were worship music. However, all was not well. Bradley notes that "Three years later she rejected Christianity in a conversion which was almost as cataclysmic as those which had brought others to vital religion" (p. 199).

What was it that shattered Evan's faith? She read two books of Biblical criticism, Charles Hennell's "Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity," and Strauss' "Life of Jesus." Utterly disillusioned, she abandoned her faith and spent the rest of her days alone in the universe, without God. She tried her utmost to live a moral and selfless life without divine assistance, but failed miserably. In the 1850s, when she had become a successful author, she met George Lewes, a philosopher and scientist. Lewes was a married man, but they "fell in love." Since he had no legal grounds for divorce, he simply abandoned his wife and moved in with Evans. They lived together as though married until Lewes' death in 1878, trying to pretend that Lewes' real wife didn't really exist. What a wonderful beginning and yet such a horrible shipwreck for Mary Ann Evan's life.

What sickened me the most was the fact that Evans lost her faith through reading the works of Hennell and Strauss! At this point in history, those men are no longer taken seriously. Their works have been completely refuted. No careful, thinking person today could ever lose faith by reading Strauss! In our time, some people lose their faith over the Jesus Seminar, but the western Church has come a long way in scholarship. Right off

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the top of my head I can think of at least three books, two by Protestants and one by a Catholic, which solidly refute the theories of the Jesus Seminar (and there are many more). Why didn't the nineteenth-century English Evangelicals produce solid responses to Strauss and others? Why were they so lazy in this area when they were so diligent in every other aspect of life? Why did a whole generation have to be robbed of their faith in Christ? Why did a sweet young girl like Mary Ann Evans have to get deceived, fall away, and then live a life alienated from God as the mistress of another woman's husband? True, Evans and all the others were adults, accountable to God for their actions and beliefs. But from a Biblical perspective, they were also sheep whose shepherds had failed to protect them from savage wolves.

The book's conclusion left me with deep grief in my heart for a generation now long dead. And I thought of today's English, the great-great grandchildren of the Evangelical generation. An England where the Royal Family has degenerated into tabloid trash, where Mick Jagger has become a knight, and where instead of Christian spirituality they follow everything from Hare Krishna to Harry Potter. And don't forget those wonderful Brits who convert to Islam, like shoe-bomber Richard Reed. What a travesty!

When Vishal Mangalwadi joined me in the office the next morning, I told him about my reading experience and how badly it had bothered me. Vishal immediately said that the present-day Indian church is failing in the exact same manner. He mentioned as an example the attacks of Hindu journalist/politician Arun Shourie against the gospels a few years ago. I was in Calcutta then and read them each week as they came out in *The Asian Age* newspaper. He had used his connections to write full paged, syndicated articles attacking the Bible for several Sundays in a row, culminating

on Easter Sunday. (Apparently, someone forgot to tell him that Hindus are tolerant of all religions!) The amazing thing about it was he was using old, outworn, nineteenth-century arguments against Christianity. A few weeks later, one Christian leader gave a pathetic, insipid reply in the op-ed section of the *Asian Age*, but that was it. The rest of the Indian church was publicly quiet.

I mentioned the articles to some colleagues at the Bible college where I taught. Some were unaware of them and others seemed rather sheepish, as if the articles might be shaking their faith as well! One person said that maybe RZIM (Ravi Zacharias International Ministries) or some such group should write a response. But no one from any of the well-funded seminaries in India ever said or wrote a word. Nor did any of the well-paid church bishops, who in addition to their salaries get free housing and transportation. Several years later, they still remain silent! And not only that, there is more to the scandal. In 1989, Sita Ram Goel wrote his "History of Hindu-Christian Encounters" (Voice of India Publishing). Around the same time, Voice of India also published "Psychology of Prophetism." Over twelve years later, the Indian church still has NOT responded to these attacks against Christianity. When Arun Shourie wrote "Missionaries in India," (1994) only one person, Vishal Mangalwadi, responded with a book. No one has of yet answered his newest anti-Christian polemic, "Harvesting our Souls."

Why does the Indian church allow such intellectual attacks to go unchallenged? Are the bishops and seminarians afraid that if they write well-researched answers that somebody might beat them up or throw rocks at them? What really is the problem here? Perhaps the same anti-intellectual laziness which destroyed English Evangelicalism. Please do not

underestimate the intelligence of our Indian young people. Many Christians all over India have read these attacks, especially the ones serialized in *The Asian Age*. How many of them have already lost their faith because no one in the church bothered to give them an answer? Maybe we should just tell them to "Trust and obey and go on your way." Is that what the church leaders think? They should not fool themselves. The young people will go on their way, out of the Church and into Hinduism or something else. The fault, however, does not lie with the Indian Church alone, but with the Western missions groups that pour untold millions of dollars into India. These groups seem not to have learned anything at all from the failures of both English and American Evangelicalism. For they will invest millions of dollars to send western tracts, dig wells, build hospitals, and give free food to impoverished Muslims in India. But if someone requests a few thousand dollars to help Indian Christian thinkers do some serious research and writing, they are ignored.

Each generation of leaders in each nation will be accountable for the sheep in their care. They will answer for it at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Which reminds me...possibly no other group in church history was more aware of the Judgment Seat of Christ than the nineteenth-century English Evangelicals. They were, in fact, overly aware of it, almost to the point of neurosis. How devastatingly ironic it is that those same people will have to give an account at the Judgment Seat of Christ for losing entire generations, starting with their own children, because they were too lazy to challenge the wolves at the door.

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