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The European Roots of Evangelicalism

ALISTER E. McGRATH

While I was lecturing in the United States recently, I commented on the dynamic character of American evangelicalism to one of my hosts. 'Huh. American evangelicalism may be three thousand miles wide, but it's only six inches deep', was his caustic reply. His point was simple and telling: in his view, the forms of evangelicalism which have gained influence in the United States lack depth and staying power. This is a criticism which has been directed against American evangelicalism by even some of its most sympathetic recent commentators.¹ The broad features of this analysis can be summarized as follows. American evangelicalism has lost sight of its spiritual and theological foundations. It has allowed itself to become dependent upon highly effective religious marketing, adept political manoeuvring (especially evident in the rise of the religious right), and a shrewd investment in and use of the media, supremely television. In all these respects, it has shown itself to be far more responsive to the shifting outlook and aspirations of American society, constantly wrong-footing its opponents, especially within the mainstream Protestant churches, who are in decline partly as a result of this lack of vision.²

But the price of this success has been too high for comfort. For many observers, modern American evangelicalism relies too much upon strategic political alliances with both left and right.³ Effective presentation and marketing has masked an increasing spiritual and theological shallowness.

Yet the adoption of American forms of evangelicalism in Britain is becoming increasingly common. And this, as many observers are coming to realize, may be a hindrance to the progress of evangelicalism in Europe. It is not simply that certain American forms of evangelicalism are open to question, especially regarding their underlying theologies and attitudes to power; it is that they are too obviously *American* to be assimilated easily into European culture. The advancement of evangelicalism in Europe requires us to seek authentically European forms of evangelicalism, already culturally assimilated to the European situation, and already represented in the lives of the European churches.

But what sort of evangelicalism is appropriate? Thomas C. Oden, one of

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- 1 See Michael Scott Horton, *Made in America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids 1991.
 - 2 See J. W. Gregg Meister, 'Presbyterians and Mass Media: A Case of Blurred Vision and Missed Mission', in M. J. Coalter et al. (eds), *The Diversity of Discipleship*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville 1991, pp 170-86.
 - 3 For a superb analysis, see Michael Scott Horton, ed, *Power Religion: The Selling out of the Evangelical Churches*, Moody Press, Chicago 1992.

America's most respected theologians and a highly perceptive critic of postmodernism, has argued that Anglican evangelicalism has strengths which are conspicuously lacking in its American counterpart. A similar observation has been made within the evangelical community in Australia. In a highly charged article published in the April 1992 number of *On Being*, the leading Australian evangelical magazine, John Waterhouse argues that the movement has lost its way, having accommodated itself too much to the spirit of secular culture.⁴ Surveying the confusion within Australian evangelicalism, he comments:

The only winner is, paradoxically, the Anglican church. With its tradition of not precipitously separating the wheat from the tares, or pressuring people into public commitments before they are ready, the tentative outsider is given time to grow into faith, while the long-term believer, burnt out by a negative church experience, is given time to lick his wounds.⁵

Anglican evangelicalism is increasingly being seen as a role model by those concerned for the long-term future of the movement. Views such as those noted above are gaining currency, and must force Anglican evangelicals to ask themselves what it is about their approach which is attracting attention on the part of thoughtful evangelicals elsewhere. The answer to this question is complex. In part, it is due to the considerable respect accorded to Anglican theologians of British origins (such as James Packer and John Stott) within American evangelicalism. But there are other matters involved. My concern in this article is to emphasize the enormous importance of the following point: *Anglican evangelicalism originates within and is naturally culturally adapted to the European scene.* It has enormous potential in the new Europe — if we can find the ways and the people we need to make the best possible use of our tradition.

An essential feature of the attractiveness of Anglican evangelicalism relates to the deep theological and spiritual roots bequeathed to us by virtue of our European origins and context. We, who are too often blind to the enormous value of these roots, need to discover what they are, and how important they are likely to be for the continued growth and nourishment of evangelicalism in Europe in the next millenium. The American novelist Henry James, brother of psychologist William James, spoke of 'American innocence seeking European experience'. Subsequent writers have sought to portray this as very old fashioned and Eurocentric, pointing out that Americans experience far more things than their European counterparts. But James' point went far deeper than this superficial response suggests: Europe is, quite simply, much *older* than America.

More significantly to our theme, Europe is the first continent to have been evangelized. As a result, it has had more than a millenium of experience of relating faith to the complex issues of life, and ample experience of things that can go wrong with institutional Christianity. The history of European

4 John Waterhouse, 'The Crisis of Evangelicalism', *On Being*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1992), pp 4-8.

5 Waterhouse, 'Crisis of Evangelicalism', p 7.

Christianity is littered with errors — errors from which we can learn. In particular, the European Reformation — from which modern evangelicalism ultimately traces its origins⁶ — bequeathed modern evangelicalism a spiritually sophisticated outlook.

On the one hand, the outlook of the Reformation was capable of relating to the experiential and personal needs of early modern Europe. Yet on the other, it was grounded in the realization of the importance of structures for long-term stability. Relevance in the short term was not seen as entailing the abandonment of the heritage of the past.⁷ The mainline reformers were not men and women who were prepared to throw away uncritically the spiritual heritage of more than a millenium. Their attitude was that of retaining the accumulated wisdom of the past wherever possible, yet constantly asking whether that heritage was faithful to the scriptural witness itself. 'Test everything. Hold on to the good' (1 Thess. 5:21).

Historically, the English Reformation may be regarded as maximizing the historical continuity between the pre- and post-Reformation churches. The institution of the church, including the episcopacy, was left largely unchanged, despite significant alterations to its liturgy and articles of religion. Anglican evangelicalism finds itself in a remarkably advantageous position, largely on account of this heritage. It is able to draw and build upon the stability of a long-established institution. It is genuinely receptive to the potential of time-honoured practices and outlooks, while concerned to ensure that these never ossify into irrelevant curiosities. Yet it insists that the creative dynamism of the gospel must never be compromised.

Having spoken in general terms about the European background of evangelicalism, I now wish to highlight three areas in which the European origins of evangelicalism are of continuing importance. Restrictions on space have inevitably limited my selection of subjects; the reader must regard what follows simply as indicative, rather than exhaustive.

Rediscovering Roots

This history of European culture and of the Reformation has been deeply affected by the search for roots. Cultural stability and enrichment have often been seen as inextricably linked. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the case of the Italian Renaissance, rightly regarded as one of the most important and creative periods in European culture. The art galleries and museums of the world are packed full of exhibits showing the remarkable originality and imagination of the new culture which took hold of northern Italy during the period 1350-1550. By the end of the sixteenth century, virtually all of western Europe had been infected by this astonishing enthusiasm and vision. But

6 There is insufficient space to justify this point, which is the subject of a book I am currently working on. Readers might like to explore the appearance of evangelical attitudes within the Italian church in the late fifteenth century, as documented by Barry Collett, *Italian Benedictine Scholars and the Reformation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985. The terms *evangelisch* and *évangélique* made their appearance in the 1520s.

7 For further details see Alister E. McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1992.

what lay behind this magnificent outburst of energy, of incredible artistic excitement, at the time?

The answer to this question is complex. However, a substantial part of that answer can be stated in two Latin words—*'ad fontes*, back to the original sources'. Italian culture gained a new sense of purpose and dignity by seeing itself as the modern heir and champion of the long-dead culture of classical Rome. The Italian Renaissance could be said to be about bringing the culture of ancient Rome back to life in the modern period. The imaginations of artists, architects, poets, writers and theologians were seized by this vision. Imagine being able to allow the glory of the past to interact with the cultural void of fourteenth century Italy! And as the process of recollection began, Italy began to gain a reputation as the cradle of a new civilization in Europe.

It is no accident that Italy was the birthplace and cradle of the Renaissance. The Italian writers of the period appear to have seen themselves as returning to their cultural roots, in the world of classical Rome. A stream, they argued, was purest at its source; why not return to that source, instead of being satisfied with the muddy and stagnant waters of existing medieval culture? The past was seen as a resource, a foundational influence, whose greatness demanded that it should be allowed a voice in the present. The Italian Renaissance arose through a decision to allow the historic roots of Italian culture to impose upon the present, to inform it, to stimulate it—and to transform it. The explosion of creativity which resulted is an eloquent and powerful witness to the potential effects of returning to cultural roots, and allowing them to impact upon the present.

Evangelicalism has been deeply affected by this concern for roots. One of the central insights of evangelicalism has been its realization that the Church of today needs to be constantly challenged and nourished by returning to its roots in the apostolic era. This is no historical romanticism, based on the belief that things were better in the past than they now are. Rather, it is the realization that the Church needs to be reminded of its reason for being there in the first place, if it is ever to regain its sense of mission and purpose in the world. The evangelical can point to the way in which the Renaissance led to an enrichment of European culture by a return to its sources. In the same way, the life and witness of the modern Church can be enriched and nourished by a constant return to its sources in the New Testament.

At first sight, this respect for roots might seem to be a recipe for encouraging unoriginality and the stifling of creativity. But there is another side to this story. Commitment to a tradition is not equivalent to an encrusted dogmatism, a denial of the freedom to think or of the importance of creativity. Freedom to think without an accompanying commitment to a tradition can lead to little more than an unanchored chaos. The twentieth century has provided us with ample historical examples of what happens when a society breaks free from the restraining force of tradition. Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union are excellent illustrations of the unacceptable consequences of a break with tradition. Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' reflect his despair at the totalitarianism which results when a civilized society chooses to break with its traditional values. It is very easy to break with one's roots; but, as the cultural

history of the Soviet Union in recent years makes clear, it is very difficult to pick up those roots, once broken.

European cultural history, of which Anglican evangelicals are only too aware, thus emphasizes the need for continuity and responsibility. The suggestion that we should totally abandon the religious past in favour of some exciting new development (usually imported directly from California) is resisted, in the light of the European experience of the need to preserve the past as a check to the excesses of the present. It is perhaps only to be expected that the most bizarre recent religious cults, as well as innovative approaches to Christianity, generally have their origins in California, where a deep sense of rootlessness prevails. In his *Evolution of Human Consciousness*, John H. Crook comments as follows on the rise of the 'hippy' movement in California around the time of the Vietnam War:

It is no accident that the impetus came largely from the immigrant state of California where traditional cultural values are perhaps most fragmented and a need for new roots is most pronounced.⁸

European evangelicalism lacks this sense of rootlessness, and is thus resistant to many of the destabilizing developments especially associated with Christian churches in this fragmented and unstable region.

Roots are important for continuity and stability; they nurture the conditions under which growth and maturity may develop. Tradition encourages wariness, through exercising a restraining influence upon innovation. An enduring tradition, firmly located in history and taken seriously by those who claim to be its heirs, ensures caution and continuity within that community. Faithfulness to one's roots is not inconsistent with addressing contemporary needs and opportunities.

The relevance of theology

Richard John Neuhaus, author of the highly-acclaimed volume *The Naked Public Square*, puts his finger on one of the weak points of modern theology. Surveying the output of one leading North American religious publishing house, he remarks: 'most clergy, never mind lay people, have given up reading theology'.⁹ Why? Two reasons may easily be given:

- a) much modern theology is written in a style and using a vocabulary which is alien to the vast majority of its potential reading public;
- b) much modern theology addresses issues which bear little relation to the concerns of the Christian public.

Let me explore the second point further with reference to the novels of David Lodge. Lodge, formerly professor of English at the University of Birmingham, is a distinguished student of postmodern literature. His novel *Small World* is a witty and elegant exploration of the inner inconsistencies of deconstruction. A more recent novel, *Nice Work*, asks us to imagine a collision of worlds — the world of a small business in Birmingham, specializing in the manufacture of machine parts, and that of a junior lecturer in the Department of English at the fictional University of Rummidge (which bears

8 Crook, op.cit., (OUP 1980), p 361.

9 Richard John Neuhaus, in *First Things*, October 1991, p 71.

suspicious resemblances to Birmingham), who is deeply influenced by Jacques Derrida. In a marvellously narrated section, Lodge describes the latter's gradual realization that the vital issues of her life — deconstruction, the arbitrariness of the relation between the signifier and signified — are an utter irrelevance to ninety-nine point nine per cent of the human race. It is a painful realization, which alters her outlook upon the academic world.

It is a sad and simple fact of life, that much modern theology is perceived as totally pointless, not just by the general public, but even by educated lay Christians. Its vocabulary and concerns seem to belong to a different planet. Yet the Reformation offers us a vision of a time when theology was directed towards the issues which concerned the Christian public.

As a university teacher of theology at Oxford, I cannot help but notice the reaction of theology students to my lectures on Reformation thought. 'We can understand what these people are talking about!' is a typical response from students who have been bewildered by the verbal prolixity (often, it has to be said, masking a conceptual shallowness) of the writings of some recent theologians. 'They're dealing with real questions' is another response, grounded in a growing impatience with an academic theology which seems bent on pursuing questions of purely academic interest.

The issues which are today treated with what often approaches polite contempt by academic theologians were regarded as of vital importance by sixteenth century writers — issues such as the nature of the true Church, the proper relation of the Church and state, the grounds of Christian assurance, and a direct answer to the age-old question, 'What must I do to be saved?'

These issues are still debated today. But they are largely debated outside the academy, in local church study groups, in university Bible studies, and in many North American seminaries. The academy has become seriously isolated from the heartbeat of North American Christianity. Happily, this has happened to a far lesser extent in the United Kingdom. This anxiety is also reflected in the status of the theologian, to which we may now turn.

The status of the theologian

In the Middle Ages, theologians were often equally isolated from the community of faith. They were generally individuals, like the great Thomas Aquinas, who were based in the majestic monasteries of Europe. They were cloistered within the confines of the monastic life, and wrote — when they wrote at all — for an audience of their fellow monks. It is rare — but happily, as the example of Thomas à Kempis reminds us, not totally unknown — to find a medieval theologian operating outside this context.

In our own day and age as well, theologians have become increasingly detached from the communities which they are meant to serve. They have become more and more professionalized, isolated within academic theological faculties, and becoming vulnerable to the charge of dwelling within ivory towers. Professionalization has tended to remove theologians from within the communities of faith, and placed them within the narrow confines of the universities. Secularization has led to a separation of personal faith and academic life; the professional academic theologian need not have any commitment to the faith or life of the church.

The Reformation bridges the gap between these two unsatisfactory approaches to the function of theology, and offers a working model to contemporary evangelicalism. The reformers, however diverse their origins may have been, were individuals who were based in the cities of Europe, living within the communities which they served, and sharing their faith. They were isolated by neither monastery nor university from the people who looked to them for guidance. Their task was to interpret and apply the gospel to the concrete situations in which they found themselves — above all, in relating to the lives of ordinary people.

Perhaps one of the most important moments of the Reformation may be traced to 1520, when Luther made the momentous and dramatic decision to cease being a purely academic reformer, addressing academic issues and audiences, and instead to make a direct and passionate appeal to the religious hopes and faith of the German people. Luther became both a preacher and a pastor — and his pastoral concern and experience shows up, time and time again, in his theology. Luther read and interpreted the New Testament as one who believed that it was of vital and continuing relevance to the life of the Christian community (another stark contrast between the theologians of the Reformation period and much modern academic discussion). His is a genuine pastoral theology, a theology which addresses the needs and concerns of ordinary believers, and those who seek to minister to them.

Similarly, throughout Calvin's writings, we find a determination to engage with the real world of everyday life in the city of Geneva, along with all the problems and possibilities this brings with it. It seems that Calvin learned the lessons which Reinhold Niebuhr also learned in downtown Detroit during the 1920s. In his *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929), Niebuhr wrote:

If a minister wants to be a man among men he need only stop creating a devotion to abstract ideals which everyone accepts in theory and denies in practice, and to agonize about their validity and practicability in the social issues which he and others face in our present civilization. That immediately gives his ministry a touch of reality and potency.¹⁰

Precisely this pattern stands out in Calvin's spiritual and homiletic writings. Calvin addresses real and specific human situations — social, political and economic — with all the risks that this precision entails. Here is no abstract theorizing, conducted in the refined atmosphere of an ivory tower. Rather, here is a theologian sharing the life of his people, and attempting to interpret and apply the gospel in that situation. Calvin wrote, worshipped and preached as a member of the community which he addressed. He was not apart from them; he was not above them; rather, he wrote from within his community, as part of it, sharing its life and its problems. Here is no theology imposed from above or from outside, but a theology generated within a community, with the needs, possibilities and aspirations of that community in mind.

Is there not a model here which has relevance and appeal for today?

10 Meridian, New York 1957, p 16.

Again and again, ordinary Christians today comment on how irrelevant they consider theologians to be. 'They seem so distant.' 'They don't seem to understand the problems of everyday life.' 'They seem to have a totally different agenda from ordinary believers.' 'We can't understand what they are going on about.' While teaching as a visiting professor in the United States in 1990, I even heard the following criticism of certain theologians teaching at major North American seminaries: 'These people don't even go to church — why should we listen to them?' 'There is no way that these people present us with role models suitable for Christian ministry.'

In brief, academic theology gets a very bad popular press. These comments are deeply revealing, indicating the considerable gulf that has opened up between the academy and the Church. Surely, many ask, there must be a more satisfactory way of conceiving the task, calling and responsibilities of the theologian? It is thus vitally important to note that the Reformation offers a very different model, with a distinguished history of application within the Christian tradition. The theologian is one who is called to serve the community of faith from within. Part of that service is criticism of its ideas and outlooks — but it is a loving and caring criticism on the basis of shared Christian beliefs and commitments, rather than the modern criticism of the Christian community by academic 'theologians' on the basis of secular beliefs and values, often radically agnostic or atheistic, which that community feels no pressing reason to share.

This approach was developed by the Marxist writer Antonio Gramsci, who used the Reformation as a paradigm for his notion of the 'organic intellectual'. This idea, which originates at the time of the Reformation, is of considerable importance to contemporary evangelicalism. Gramsci argues that two distinct types of intellectuals can be discerned. In the first place, there are those who are imposed upon a community by an external authority. These 'institutional intellectuals' were not chosen by that community, and have influence only in so far as that authority is forced upon the community. In contrast to this, Gramsci notes — and commends — the idea of an 'organic intellectual'. The organic intellectual is one who arises within a community, and who gains authority on account of his or her being seen to represent the outlook of that community. His or her authority emerges naturally, and reflects the esteem in which the community holds them.

This model of the theologian is enormously helpful. It resonates with the experience of evangelicalism within the Church of England, which has always regarded institutionally-imposed authorities with some suspicion. Evangelical theologians earn their spurs in the evangelical constituency, gradually gaining respect and commanding authority on account of their observable fidelity to Scripture, ability to express themselves, and concern for the wellbeing of the church. John Stott — an excellent example of an 'organic intellectual' — has no institutional authority worth speaking of, but rightly enjoys enormous status within the worldwide evangelical community (and beyond) on account of his having *earned* that respect. Whereas certain bishops have been imposed upon a church which is increasingly weary of their pretensions to authority, Stott and others like him have authority because they have been accepted as being *worthy* of possessing authority.

Towards a European Evangelicalism

Anglican evangelicalism may have a distinctive contribution to make to the life of the worldwide Christian community, and supremely that of Europe. Many who are attracted by the vitality of certain forms of American evangelicalism are distressed at their superficiality, lack of historical roots, tendency towards radical individualism, and uncritical assimilation of certain disturbing features of contemporary American culture. Many Europeans find it insensitive to their central cultural norms.

Anglican evangelicalism, on the other hand, is capable of sustaining the dynamism of the gospel, while at the same time avoiding these weaknesses which are increasingly being seen as potentially fatal in the longer term within a European context. It represents an historical form of evangelicalism particularly suited to the European situation. It is an 'insider' to the European context; it belongs. To attempt to import its American counterpart is potentially detrimental to the advance of evangelicalism, in that it comes to appear as an 'outsider', something which has been imported rather than emerged naturally within a European context. Some American forms of evangelicalism tend to meet both cultural and theological resistance, thus creating a negative climate of opinion concerning evangelicalism in general. This point is of particular importance in relation to evangelism. Fears of cultural isolation are often a barrier to conversion; this possibility is considerably more likely if the form of Christianity involved is seen to be non-European in its origins.

There is at present considerable resistance to evangelicalism on the continent, not least on account of its American pedigree. As Europe moves towards asserting its independence from the United States at every level — military, economic and political — there is likely to be growing resistance to specifically American forms of evangelicalism. Anglican evangelicalism can ensure that an evangelical presence, which is culturally suited and adapted to the European situation, is maintained and expanded in the years that lie ahead.

This is not to say that *Anglicanism* can — nor that it should — be exported to continental Europe. Rather, it is to insist that Anglican evangelicals can enable their colleagues within the mainstream European churches to rediscover the spiritual vitality and dynamism of evangelicalism, and adapt it within the structures of those existing churches. James Packer, noting that 'evangelicalism is trans-denominational', provides us with both a vision for the role of evangelicalism within the mainstream churches, and a theological justification for maintaining its presence in this manner.¹¹ Anglican evangelicalism is able to provide the following:

a) a *role model* for the manner in which evangelicalism can develop and grow within the life and structures of mainstream churches, whether Anglican or otherwise;

b) a *theological justification* for this presence;

11 James I. Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem: An Analysis*, Latimer House, Oxford 1978; idem, *A Kind of Noah's Ark? The Anglican Commitment to Comprehensiveness*, Latimer House, Oxford 1981.

c) *resources*, in the form of publications and people, which will be of value to the growing evangelical presence within the European churches; and finally

d) a *vision* for what can be done. A generation ago, evangelicalism was a little more than a despised minority presence within the Church of England. Today, many non-evangelical observers regard it as holding the key to the future of that church. If I could offer a personal reflection on this final point, I am constantly impressed by the manner in which European theological students here at Wycliffe Hall return home charged with enthusiasm and excitement at what might be possible in their own churches, and armed with at least some of the resources to try to make this vision into a reality.

There is no room for complacency here, and much that needs to be done. Anglican evangelicals, here reflecting a serious deficiency in British culture as a whole, are often notoriously ill-equipped to deal with modern European languages, and often seem to entertain the idea that English is understood universally. But there is a real opportunity here, which awaits us. As Eastern Europe opens up its doors to western Christian theological and pastoral educationalists, there is every opportunity for evangelicalism to become deeply embedded in the Europe of the new millenium. The work of organizations such as the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, which gives much needed support to evangelical writers in Europe, needs to be supported.¹² Surely there is a vision here, which must inspire us to hope for and work towards great things!

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¹² For details, contact the secretary, Revd Dr Gerald Bray, Oak Hill College, London N14 4PS.