

**EVANGELICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
DAVID BEBBINGTON**

*David Bebbington is Professor of History at the University of Stirling in Scotland and is widely regarded as one of the leading contemporary historians of evangelicalism, a reputation which was established by his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Unwin Hyman, 1989) in which he propounded his now widely quoted definition of evangelicalism. His most recent books are *The Mind of Gladstone* (OUP, 2004) and a history of nineteenth-century evangelicalism, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism* (IVP, 2005), part of a multi-volume history of the movement, a series which he also co-edits. The BAHNR editor, Neil Dickson, talked to him early in 2003 about Timothy Stunt's *From Awakening to Secession* and took the opportunity to put some questions to him about the state of the historiography of evangelicalism.*

**NTRD:** Tell me about the older literature of evangelicalism. Is there any value in it?

**DWB:** Yes, I'm sure there was value in some of the older literature. If you take a book like Edwin Orr's book on *The Second Evangelical Awakening in Britain*, it was published well over half a century ago now, and yet that still has detailed evidence about revivalism in the nineteenth century. More recent research calls into question some of the findings, but even if the answers given aren't all that modern research would look for, the questions are still important ones that have to be asked. I think that's true of a lot of the older literature. Some of the books on the Evangelical Party in the Church of England that were standard in the early twentieth century still have their value in pointing to important individuals and movements. There are

Balleine's *History of the Evangelical Party* and Elliott-Binns' *Evangelical Movement in the English Church*. People read those with great pleasure, partly because they're very readable and they actually introduce people less familiar with the field to some of the themes to their great advantage.

Some of the older books, too, are very scholarly. If you take, for example, Charles Smith's book on *Simeon and Church Order* which was published long ago as 1940, that book is very carefully footnoted and made a important impact on general historiography when it came out. However, you have to be careful with that book, and perhaps that is true of a lot of the older historiography. Smith does have a very definite contemporary, ecclesiastical polemical purpose. His aim was to show that the greatest Evangelical of them all in the Church of England was a very loyal Anglican—hence the phrase 'church order' in the title. The implication was that everybody should be so in their day too, so you have to take that particular dimension of his argument with a pinch of salt, and perhaps even subtract it from the overall research. So yes, the older literature has its place, but one has to be very careful with it.

**NTRD:** I see the late 1980s as a key turning point in the emergence of the new historiography. 1988 saw the publication of Boyd Hilton's *Age of Atonement*, the following year your own *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* appeared, and publications have multiplied throughout the 1990s. If you accept this chronology, what do you see as being behind this growth in a new evangelical historiography?

**DWB:** If you take the two texts that you mentioned, I think there are specific reasons which are rather distinct. Hilton's book argues that the earlier nineteenth century in all its aspects, including even the commercial sphere, was deeply swayed by evangelicalism, so that the very metaphors used in public life were drawn from evangelical faith. The notion of atonement, for

example, was omnipresent as Hilton suggests, and so the book arose out of the realities of the nineteenth century. The evidence cried out for that interpretation. There had been two previous studies, very valuable in their own way, on ecclesiastical social thought in the earlier nineteenth century, but neither emphasised just how evangelical that social thought was. Boyd Hilton saw that they didn't, saw the evidence that people at the time did think in those terms, and so produced a book to reflect what was the case. Reality, therefore, imposed itself on the mind of a historian.

That's true of the Hilton book. If you take the book that I wrote, a lot of it arises from requests that came from various evangelical groups for talks on aspects of the evangelical past. There were requests for papers, conference presentations, even a series of lectures at Queens University, Belfast, on the history of the evangelical movement. There was a big gap waiting to be filled, and so it seemed a very good idea to fill the gap with a book that tried to take an overview. But in a very strong sense that was a response to the changed realities in the world. The evangelical movement was stronger, especially perhaps in institutions of higher education, than it had been for many decades and there were people therefore wanting to have historical perceptions of evangelicalism from the evangelical perspective, and it was possible therefore to cater for them. So the book was a response to a felt need to a very large extent. There were different reasons, therefore, but a combination of the evidence and the movement wanting to know about its own tradition did I think lead to the efflorescence of the '90s that you speak of.

**NTRD:** Do you think it reflects a social change that was happening within evangelical churches—that people were moving from a more working-class type church to producing a

lot of scholarly individuals. I'm thinking here of what happened in the Brethren, but was that happening largely in evangelicalism?

**DWB:** I'm sure you're absolutely right it was happening in the Brethren. I'm given a little pause by the reflection that there were lots of really scholarly individuals in, say, the Evangelical Party in the Church of England throughout its history, throughout the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, but what had traditionally happened was that people of academic disposition were pushed off into acceptable scholarly activities, for example, doing theology with a view to training other people to be clergy or be missionaries. That is a very marked phenomenon, so the notion that you could actually do history for its own sake rather than to train people as a back-up for missiology was becoming something rather more of a novelty, and I think that largely reflects the rise of the IVF movement, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, which by encouraging people to think Christianly in the 1970s, actually generated this sort of concern by the late 1980s. I pin on that as the most important single circumstantial factor linked to what followed.

**NTRD:** So you're not saying that it indicates a move within evangelicalism from a more activist-type faith to navel gazing in western countries, such as Britain and America?

**DWB:** I wouldn't put it like that—there may be an element of truth in that interpretation, but I think it's more true to say that the change reflects a restoration of evangelical confidence. It has always been thought that it was legitimate for evangelicals to do things that did obvious good to humanity, like preaching the gospel or healing their bodies but it was now held that it was acceptable for evangelicals as evangelicals to do academic things in universities. I suppose the most obvious aspect is the growth of New Testament scholarship under the fostering influence of F.F. Bruce, but the historical side is another dimension of it. One has to say that there were people who were producing works

about the history of evangelicalism in some respects long before the late 1980s. Some of the articles published by John Briggs, for example, from roundabout 1970 onwards did this, but it was hard to bring these together into a synthesis until quite a lot of these articles were around. They were like steppingstones across the middle of the unknown, but when they existed it was possible to throw a bridge across the middle and connect them.

**NTRD:** Given the emergence of this new evangelical historiography, what do you see as its strengths?

**DWB:** Firstly, that it reflects the evidence. The reality is that in the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth century, many aspects of life in the western world, including settler territories like Australia which were in a sense outgrowths of the western world, were permeated by evangelicalism. The evangelical Christian presence was extremely strong in churches, denominations and sects, and one of the strengths of the historiography is that it actually reflects that religious reality as religious. It's not reductionist. It's not looking at religion for the light it shows for example on the emergence of working-class movements as the work of E.P. Thompson did. Thompson's achievement was great in its own day in many ways, but nevertheless he was interested in religion not for the sake of religion, but for the sake of something else that it was supposed to illuminate.

But another strength, I think, of this evangelical historiography is its strong insistence that you must not only look at religion *per se*, but you must look at religion in its total setting, look at religion in the setting of society. You must be willing to engage in class analysis of people who went to church. You look at religion in terms of its setting in the world of ideas, so you see theology as part an evolving intellectual pattern, which can be analysed in terms of the history of ideas. What that means is that the evangelical movement is set within its real

context, how people really lived in the social and intellectual world of their times. There must be no artificial segregation between the sacred and the profane which was not part of the reality of people's experience at the time.

So I do think that this historiographical development has very marked strengths—no doubt it has its deficiencies too and these will be available for the next generation of historians but one to lay bare!

**NTRD:** We've already talked about evangelicals being involved in the world of scholarship. Mark Noll, as you know, has famously written in the first sentence of *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* that the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is no evangelical mind. In the light of what you've been saying, do you think this is less true of evangelical historiography or are there still deficiencies?

**DWB:** Mark Noll would himself say that in the area of philosophy in the United States there is a remarkably developed evangelical mind. So there are exceptions to that generalisation. What is more, in the area of historiography in the States—the church history of the United States—I think it would be fair to say, is dominated now, as was not dominated twenty years ago, and certainly forty years ago, by evangelical scholars. So that historiography, yes, is another growing exception in the United States and one of the chief reasons why that is so is Mark Noll! Another reason is the work of George Marsden with his seminal work published in 1980 on *Fundamentalism and American Culture* which I think showed the remarkable potential for relating evangelicalism to its setting in terms of American historiography. That has led to an efflorescence of work in America, but also has had a ripple effect on developments elsewhere. So I think that there has developed something approaching an evangelical mind. However, if you say that the defining quality of a mind is the capacity for internal debate,

there is rather less internal debate amongst evangelical historians than perhaps a mature mind might reveal. We tend to shy away from debate, from disagreeing with each other, and that has many admirable and comforting aspects, but it could be that for the mind to be fully developed people have to disagree with each other even when they agree with each other theologically.

**NTRD:** If we can turn to your own writing for a moment, you have claimed that the defining characteristics of evangelicalism are conversionism, crucicentricism, activism and biblicism. How well do you think the recent literature has sustained what has sometimes been called the 'Bebbington quadrilateral'? Do you see it as in need of revision or do you still stand by what you wrote fourteen years ago or so?

**DWB:** If you're writing about anything, you have to know the thing you're writing about, so there was a need for some sort of definition of what evangelicalism is. The most obvious way of defining it is to take definitions current at a particular point in the past time, and use the way in which people defined the movement at the time. If a person is described as an evangelical, then the person is an evangelical. However, that obvious method does not work. That is because at any one point in time, some people claimed to be evangelicals and other people said they weren't! And that's true not just on the liberal side but also on the fundamentalist side. In the inter-war period in Britain, there were lots of liberal evangelicals who insisted that they were evangelical, but conservative evangelicals said they weren't! And there were some fundamentalist evangelicals, who were very insistent they were the only evangelicals, but some liberal evangelicals said they were not evangelicals. So there are exclusions. You therefore have to have some supra-historical criteriology for determining who you are supposed to be studying. The way to do that is through some model of characteristics built up over space and time which provides a

common essential core. That's what the model of four characteristics is designed to do. It does reflect reality, I think, in large measure from the 1730s right up to the present day, in the western world generally, and therefore I am inclined still to defend it. If you don't have it, you've got to have something that is its equivalent, and I've seen no better.

Let me suggest one or two ways in which people have proposed its improvement. One way is to add individualism as a fifth characteristic. I don't agree with that because a very large number of evangelicals have been extraordinarily communitarian—communitarian in the sense that they've placed enormous emphasis on the centrality of the family in Christian nurture, transmitting the faith down the generations, in their emphasis on the Christian church itself. A lot of evangelicals have placed as much emphasis on the doctrine of the church at some times and in some places as many so-called High Churchmen. After all, Edward Irving was an evangelical—he came up with the Catholic Apostolic Church and you can't get a more elaborate ecclesiology than that...

**NTRD:** The Brethren too.

**DWB:** Absolutely! Brethren ecclesiology is fundamental to their existence and that's not just a matter of theory. It's also a matter of practice—mutual support and mutually acknowledged leadership is of the essence of Brethrenism. So I don't think you can get away with individualism as being a defining characteristic because a lot of evangelicals have not been.

Another objection that people have made is: well surely some Roman Catholics fit the definition. I'm very happy with that. If Roman Catholics fit the definition, then I'm happy to call them evangelical Catholics. What is more, a lot of Catholics are themselves these days happy to call themselves evangelical Catholics, and if they're happy I certainly don't want to deny them the privilege of using the term. There's even an



organisation based in Dublin which is called Evangelical Catholics. They accept these four emphases as being distinctive and important, at the core of their faith.

The third objection that's been raised is: well aren't you allowing some evangelicals to be heretics if they fit that typology of four characteristics? Couldn't they actually deny some aspects of Christology, for example, and still under your definition be evangelical? Well my answer to that is, yes again I accept this impeachment. There are such things as heretical evangelicals. The most obvious instance are the Oneness Pentecostals in the Appalachians of the United States. They actually began by engaging in a distinctive baptismal practice—that is to say baptising in the name of Jesus only—and because their theology is largely determined by that practice, they came up with a sort of Jesus Unitarianism, accepting only that the second person of the Trinity is God,. There's no distinct first person, there's no distinct third person. Now that is heresy according to Christian tradition, the councils of the Christian faith, and in the last resort I would say, the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, the Oneness Pentecostals, like almost all Pentecostals, fit the fourfold typology. I'm not prepared, therefore, to say that they are anything other than evangelicals, but I do want to say that they are heretical. I'm therefore perfectly prepared to admit the category of heretical evangelical—it's not surprising, for there are heretical High Churchmen, there are heretical Roman Catholics and so on.

So, so long as you accept that there are those qualifications that can be made because of the nature of reality, I'm very happy with the quadrilateral still.

**NTRD:** Others, most notably John Stott, have criticised definitions such as yours because they don't distinguish between human and divine activity. I suspect they're coming from a more theological direction, because they're unhappy with the way the

new historiography neglects theological factors and stresses sociological factors. How would you respond to that?

**DWB:** I'm a mere historian, I simply look at evidence, conceptualise it, and write it up. The province of the historian *qua* historian is not intrinsically to write of the ways of God. I am perfectly happy to introduce theological considerations and conceptualisations just as a Marxist historian introduces Marxist preconceptions into his conceptualisation, but I am not going to distinguish between the action of God and the action of man as a historian. That does not lead to the denigration of theology. On the contrary, I want to stress the importance of theology as a motivating factor. I want to stress the importance of theology as a field for analysis in terms of the discipline of the history of ideas as much as I possibly can. Indeed, I would happily spend all my time examining the history of theology, and I think there is an enormous body of work waiting to be done on the history of evangelical theology. It's been grossly neglected even by some historians who have been superb looking at the social dimension. Recent historiography does not lead to a neglect of theology. Furthermore, paradoxically it actually leads to an understanding of the divine because it shows how in practice God has worked. For example, a book has just appeared by the Revd Dr Ken Jeffrey on the revivals of the north-east of Scotland of 1858 to '62 which shows that revivalism was a phenomenon that was deeply related to particular types of socio-economic settings even though revival was going at the same time. What that shows is how God works. God actually in his mercy accommodates himself to human circumstances and works through them to bring people to faith in Christ which I am convinced, as any evangelical would be, is the result of the supernatural transformation of people's lives. So studying history in depth actually enhances one's sense of the way in which the Almighty works and leads

one to adore his works in grace as scientists lead us to adore his works in nature.

**NTRD:** So what space does this leave for the older categories of historical explanation, such as providence? Is there no place for it in the work of a modern evangelical historian?

**DWB:** I believe—I expressed this view in a book that came out a decade before the evangelicalism book—that Christian historians are committed to a world view which includes prominently a doctrine of providence, a doctrine probably underplayed in much contemporary literature and reflection. Providence is extremely important to the historian because the historian is concerned with the past and providence is the way in which God operates in the historical process, past, present and future. So I do believe that a Christian providentialism is important, but that doesn't mean that one should always talk about the way God is actually operating in his providence when writing history. I am strongly of the conviction that a historian should try to see the world whole, and therefore relate his empirical research to his conviction about the providential operations in the past. He should try to integrate those as fully as possible. When writing ordinary history for a general audience there is no reason for that Christian historian to say that at a particular point God intervened because that is likely to make the reader say, "Oh this is a load of religious fanaticism." What the Christian historian can most powerfully do to persuade people of the importance of evangelical faith is to say this is how people came to faith and acted when faith was an operational principle in their lives and it had these effects. That is actually the best apologetic. So providential convictions, I think, are absolutely essential but that does not mean that one is compelled constantly to talk of divine action.

**NTRD:** Many evangelicals though will be uncomfortable with the way much of this seems to be going and particularly the way in which the new historiography appears to show how culture

has shaped evangelicalism more than evangelicalism culture. What seems to be at the heart of the criticism is where is the core of truth that endures? What would you say to such a criticism?

**DWB:** I would say, first that if the reality is that evangelicalism has been shaped by its cultural setting, then because we have to tell the truth, it's something we have to say. What is more, it actually is a very revealing exercise because by showing what has varied over time, the core which has not varied becomes all the clearer. The core which obviously has not varied does actually come down to the quadrilateral we spoke of earlier. So oddly enough it highlights what is unique, or rather what is distinctive about evangelicalism, as a result of concentrating on the way it in which it is shaped by its context. However, I wouldn't want to say *a priori* that evangelicalism is more shaped by its context than the context shaped by evangelicalism. At many times and in many places, the sheer strength of evangelicalism has been such that evangelicalism has exercised a determining influence on the way society operates around it. For example, it was true in Fiji in the nineteenth century. Methodism became the dominant cultural influence and shaped every aspect of life according to the norms that John Wesley had taught. That is why to this day Charles Wesley's hymns are still sung in the Methodist chapels of Fiji. So I don't want to take it as an *a priori* assumption that culture determines evangelicalism more than evangelicalism determines culture—I want to investigate how the interplay of gospel and culture has worked out in different places and different times.

**NTRD:** Turning now from the general theoretical considerations we have been considering to the actual themes historians of evangelicalism are addressing: one is internationalism. There have been a lot of comparative studies of evangelicalism come out recently. Tony Blair said in a recent interview with Jeremy Paxman that the choice between America and Europe was a false

one for Britain, we needed both. Where do you stand in the division of America and Europe for British evangelical history?

**DWB:** Because I want to write about and participate in larger groups writing about as many aspects of the past as possible, I certainly don't want to exclude either one or the other. I don't see any reason for making a choice any more than Tony Blair does. What has to be said, though, is that there have been more interactions between the British Isles and America in evangelical history than there have between the British Isles and continental Europe. That is for a very specific and easily ascertained reason: it is because of the common linguistic reservoir. When you speak the same language, you absorb the literature produced by the other groups within that linguistic field. People in America in the nineteenth century habitually read the sermons of Spurgeon and in the twentieth century evangelicals in Britain habitually read paperbacks written in America. The directional flow of influences changed in terms of its overall balance—although there still British influences in America just as there were American influences on Britain in the nineteenth century—but nevertheless the interaction between Britain and America is a very weighty matter.

When that's been said, there is more interaction with continental Europe than is often made out. In Sweden, there was a conference on revivalism last November at the University of Lund, and the Swedish audience was very struck that British experience in revivalism corresponded extraordinarily closely to the Swedish experience of revivalism, especially as it flowed outside the established church of Sweden in the nineteenth century. Their literature traditionally had suggested that their brand of revivalism came from Germany. But they felt very strongly at the conference that it clearly had much stronger affinities to Anglo-American revivalism. Now that clearly shows that influence from the British Isles and indeed America over

Sweden was very marked in the nineteenth century in this core area of evangelical history, and therefore I don't think we should ever neglect the interaction between Britain and continental Europe. When that's been said I think it will be found to be a valid generalisation that, British influence over Europe in the evangelical field has normally been much stronger than European influence over Britain.

**NTRD:** Internationalism has been a very important theme in recent historical writing, but also we live in a very ecumenical age. In view of the international and transdenominational nature of evangelicalism, is there still any space for regional and denominational studies?

**DWB:** I think it's very important to insist on the linkages. There have been marked international linkages, and one of the weaknesses of the historiography in much of the twentieth century was that it was written within national boundaries exclusively and that has been distorting. One of the great tasks that has been begun in the 1990s and that lies before us in the twenty-first century, is to show how this global movement has had common themes, common threads, in so many parts of the world, especially where the English language has been spoken. But when that's been said, the stress on the internationalism does not exclude the emphasis on the regional. Far from it. The more local you get, the more you approximate to the real experience of most people. Most people did not migrate from continent to continent—although migration obviously is another important theme of the history. Most people lived in one particular place, or two or three places, so that to look at a very precise local history of evangelicalism can be very revealing. The history of a single congregation can be extraordinarily important because that is where people actually live their Christian experience. But regional studies comparing different congregations in different towns, different villages, are illuminating in many ways, not least

because of the potential for comparison within the region. Denominational history is certainly not dead. It is extraordinarily important to see how people of the same sets of convictions operated over space and over time, because that is actually how most people within evangelicalism have lived their Christian experience over the last two-and-a-half centuries. The tendency towards the dissolving of denominational boundaries—a very marked phenomenon of the present, so that people choose churches to belong to not by denomination but by other criteria—has not been the norm over the last two-and-a-half centuries. So if one wants to be faithful in reflecting how people actually lived their Christian lives, one has to give the history of denominations and if one doesn't explain the content of the denominational literature, one is missing a very high proportion of what actually made evangelical Christians tick in the past. Therefore there is scope for publishing a history of the Brethren in Scotland!

[laughter]

**NTRD:** What about biographical studies? A lot of the older writing was in the form of biographies. Any continuing strengths here?

**DWB:** I think it's its fair to say there has been a reaction against biography, partly because people wanted to look at groups, to look at people *en masse*, at a social level below the individual who would form a subject for a biography. There have been good biographies in the late twentieth century of significant twentieth-century figures. Ian Murray's *Martyn Lloyd-Jones* is a very careful and detailed study of his life, and there've been good biographies of particular individuals published in the recent past. There's been very good study, for example, of Hugh Price Hughes, the distinguished Methodist social gospeller of the 1880s and 1890s, a work that brings out his thought and his practice very clearly in relation to Methodism and English society

at the time. So there are biographical studies of British subjects and there even more outside Britain. There are some very good biographies that have come from Australia, and there are extremely good ones from America, like the biography of E.J. Carnell, the president of Fuller Seminary in the 1950s. We're about to get what I suspect will be commonly regarded as the best biography of an evangelical of the current decade and possibly a much longer period, which will appear later this year, that is George Marsden's life of Jonathan Edwards.

**NTRD:** What about studies in spirituality? Are you satisfied with the current state here?

**DWB:** There are some very good books written in this field. For Britain, Ian Randall's *Evangelical Experiences* looks at spirituality with enormous thoroughness for the inter-war period—across the board, virtually every evangelical denomination is covered within the nation. But again if you go beyond Britain there's been a study of spirituality within its broad historical context in several parts of the world that has been very revealing indeed. George Rawlyk, for example, has looked at the life, thought and experience of Henry Alline in the Maritimes of Canada in a way that has transformed the historiography of those provinces. So I think that spirituality is becoming a more central field for research. My little book on *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England* tried to recommend this as an area for further study, and I do think that in the next couple of decades the history of spirituality is an area of development, for if we have a history of the mind, why shouldn't we have a history of the soul as well?

**NTRD:** There also has been a rise in polemical popular evangelical history. I'm thinking of Oliver Barclay's *Evangelicalism in Britain*, David Smith's *Transforming the World* and Ian Murray's *Evangelicalism Divided*. Do you see



any value in such work written from a partisan viewpoint intent on showing that history teaches a lesson?

**DWB:** If a person has a purpose, that purpose can lead him or her to discover things that a person who didn't have that purpose would not find, so I think that some of the polemical histories that have been written have actually homed in on aspects of evangelicalism that otherwise might have been neglected and I think that is very valuable. David Smith's book, for example, looks at the heritage in terms of social engagement which otherwise might have been neglected. However, I do think that some partisan history is most useful to other historians as a source for perceptions in the days in which the book was written rather than as a source for investigating the past, the period about which it was written. There is scope for histories of historiography. Histories of historiography can be extraordinarily revealing about mindsets at particular stages in history.

**NTRD:** Is it at this popular level you would accept a more theological reading of history? I'm thinking of, for example, Eifon Evans's history of the Welsh revival of 1904 in which he's clearly quite content to write in more providential aspects. Would you see scope for that at a more popular level written for a Christian audience?

**DWB:** Oh yes! And I would hope that people would continue to deal with history in that way in the pulpit, in the way that has been common practice in the past, in the twenty-first century. I see a continuity between rigorous academic history and popular historical illustrations in the pulpit where there is a range of positions in between which vary in terms of the rigour with which the positions being commended could be defended. But that is true in all areas of life. It is true in scientific investigation, it's true in any of the other fields which are addressed in the pulpit and that necessarily is so; and I don't want to rule anything out. I like pottering around in my ignorance in relation to lots of

fields that I know nothing about in order to instruct myself. Occasionally I give a bit of evidence from one of these explorations as a sermon illustration and I hope I can get away with it!

**NTRD:** So to come finally to Timothy Stunt's *From Awakening to Secession*. Clearly some of the themes we've been talking about are reflected in his work. Where do you place it in terms of the context we've been talking about?

**DWB:** One of the most important features of that admirable book is its international quality. It does stress that there are very important links between the British Isles and Switzerland in particular in the early decades of the nineteenth century. I don't think before Timothy Stunt wrote that we were aware of many of those links, and so he's very much a pioneer. What is more, he is actually showing in his book an instance of an exception to a generalisation I made earlier. There is a great deal in that book about the Swiss influence on Britain. There's a great deal with Haldane going to Geneva, the British influence over what happened in Switzerland certainly, but significantly, some of the ideas that were generated in Switzerland came back and had a major impact on the evolution of British evangelicalism.

Not only do I think Stunt is important in terms of his international linkages, but he is also important in relation to the theme of gospel and culture, because the book is a really detailed study of many of the aspects of the impact of romantic cultural influences on the evangelical movement. The *mélange*, therefore, that Stunt explores was the way in which people were trying to reformulate their received evangelical understandings in the light of romantic categories. For example in relation to faith. Edward Irving's image of the missionary going out without institutional support was very much that of a romantic hero. Now that is an extraordinary important aspect of the way in which evangelicalism was affected by its cultural setting, in this case its

high cultural setting, and Stunt studies it very carefully. What is more, the fruit of that in many respects was the cultural ambience out of which sprang the Brethren movement. Brethren owe an enormous debt, of course, to John Nelson Darby who is studied in the book, but also to the faith principle as acted on by Groves when he went out to Persia, so that this particular formulation of the relationship between gospel and culture that became a reality in the 1830s is the chrysalis out of which the butterfly of Brethrenism has arisen.

**NTRD:** The book ends on a kind of cautionary note. He says ‘the potential for spiritual enthusiasm is wonderfully ambivalent. Sometimes it finds expression in the disintegration of restricting frontiers and in personal enlargement, but it is equally liable to lead to more sharply focused loyalties and shrinking perspectives of responsibility.’ Recently Adrian Hastings has written that ‘evangelicalism looks like a tide always claimed to be just about to come in, yet never quite reaching the shore with the force proclaimed.’ In the recent evangelical historiography do you see dangers of a false triumphalism?

**DWB:** Certainly for the period about which Hastings is writing, that’s the twentieth century. Evangelicals in the second half of the twentieth century have been conscious of being on the up. They’ve been part of a growing movement but they sometimes have not been as aware as they might be that they have been taking an increasing share of a shrinking market. That is to say that evangelicalism may have been a bigger proportion of professing Christians in the land but the proportion of the population of professing Christians has shrunk. Now that is not a recipe which permits triumphalism, and yet triumphalism has sometimes been voiced. So there certainly is a cause for caution.

In the nineteenth century, however, I think that a little bit more triumphalism might do no harm. Evangelicalism, as Hilton’s book showed, was so pervasive in the culture, and what is more

continued to be pervasive in many sections of the culture long after Hilton suggested that it had faded—the age of atonement gave way to the age of the incarnation. That reality needs to be emphasised in the secondary literature much more than it has been hitherto. And dimensions of the permeation of the culture by evangelical faith in the later nineteenth century need to be brought out. For example, there is still scope for a really good study of the way in which evangelical faith determined the mores of the Kailyard School in Scottish literature.

What is more, it is extremely important for purposes of Christian apologetic that this is done. There is a great deal of assumption in a lot of ordinary history—good history—that religion has faded in importance over time since the enlightenment—the secularisation thesis has been widely accepted. It neglects the extent to which evangelicalism actually reversed secularisation in the nineteenth century by its pervasive spreading of Christian values, and unless evangelical historians point out that that evangelical injection into society was a reality, an important aspect of the beneficial impact of the faith on national life in Britain, and on the life of the world more broadly, will be forgotten about. People will not have some of the evidences that point them to Christ brought to their attention. Therefore a little more triumphalism amongst evangelicals in relation to the nineteenth century would be a very good thing.

**NTRD:** Thank you very much.