
Editorial

Evangelical Social Ethics

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If one were to introduce a special issue of a journal on ‘Catholic social ethics’, one would pretty much know where to start (if not necessarily where to stop). The body of magisterial social teaching originating with Pope Leo XIII’s response (in *Rerum Novarum*) to the ‘social question’ of the late nineteenth century and most recently represented by Pope Francis’s response (in *Laudato Si’*) to the ‘ecological question’ of the twenty-first, has lent Catholic social ethics an enduringly coherent identity even amidst the wide and often conflicting diversity of the sources that feed it and the interpretations, elaborations and applications to which it has been subjected. Identifying ‘Anglican social ethics’ would be a taller order, yet, even in the absence of a magisterial authority to settle (or at least sharpen) the identity question, a corpus of leading Anglican texts appearing over the last century or so would be readily identifiable. English sources might include, *inter alia*, works by Maurice, Gore, Oldham, Kirk, Temple, Preston, O’Donovan, Williams and Milbank.

‘Evangelical social ethics’, however, since its appearance as a revival movement within orthodox Protestantism in the early eighteenth century,¹ has produced no comparable body of substantial and widely acknowledged texts in social ethics. As has often been remarked, notwithstanding a few outstanding individual exceptions evangelicalism is much better known for its history of energetic social and political activism than for its contribution to theologically weighty social ethics. Indeed, recoiling against what it feared was the corroding influence of the ‘social gospel’ from 1910-1970 the movement underwent a ‘great reversal’ (Moberg 1973), abandoning its own distinguished tradition of social engagement and allowing its horizon to shrink almost exclusively to the conversion of individuals (with the Salvation Army as one shining exception).

One damaging result of this half-century posture of social withdrawal is that, as recently as 2006, the Evangelical Alliance (the main umbrella body of evangelicalism in the UK) could report that:

Evangelicals are not renowned for authoritative, scholarly, sustained, theologically grounded thinking on complex social and political questions in ways that have characterised some other traditions.... Accordingly it has not been unusual to find evangelical political engagement appearing somewhat fragmented, inconsistent, unbalanced and consequently ineffective (Evangelical Alliance 2006, 136).

The articles that follow have chosen not to rehearse the story of how that deficiency came about² but rather to document the remarkable and concerted attempts since the 1970s to remedy it and to report on where things stand today. These efforts, which may not be all that well-known to those operating at a distance from the movement, have achieved a notable measure of success. The profile of evangelical social engagement and ethical reflection today is strikingly different to what it was in the 1970s. The most significant factor in that transformation is the rediscovery of the social-ethical mandate of Scripture itself – borne of years of biblical study, mostly on other topics, that eventually burst beyond the narrow doctrinal framework that had dominated the movement during the ‘great reversal’. In time, a critical mass of evangelical biblical scholars, theologians, ethicists and church and lay leaders eventually found themselves confronted by the far-reaching social – and now ecological – implications of all the key moments in the biblical story: creation, sin, law, prophecy, redemption, cross, resurrection, ascension and consummation (surveyed from interestingly different angles by David Hilborn, Greg Smith and Dave Bookless). They have often responded with characteristic energy, manifested in a host of new initiatives over the last 40 years (Chaplin 2014).

Yet recovering a mandate in biblical texts for social engagement does not yet amount to a full-blown social ethic that can guide contemporary action. That requires the development of wider theologically-informed conceptual frameworks that both integrate and extrapolate from biblical material and engage with contemporary ethical and social theory and empirical circumstances. The best evangelical social ethics engages in just such an enterprise (even if not always self-consciously). For example, one creative source of biblically-based evangelical social ethics is the Cambridge-based Jubilee Centre. On the basis of a rediscovery of, especially, the wide-

ranging implications of Old Testament *torah*, the Centre has developed a model for critical social analysis and reform termed 'Relationism' that proceeds along such lines, issuing in proposals for the reform of capital and finance, corporate structure, prisons, health, education and more.³

Nonetheless, as Smith and Bookless observe, the substantial advances in the movement at the levels of academic theology and organisational leadership have not, to say the least, been consistently matched by transformations on the ground. Bookless reports on his experience of encountering in evangelical congregations a wide diversity of evaluations of environmental engagement, ranging from 'insidious', 'irrelevant', 'incidental' to 'integral'. Across the movement, progress has been decidedly patchy; lip-service is often not matched by practical response or adequate resources; and there have been frustrating reversals where sectors of the movement opted to retreat from social engagement where once they took it up.⁴ For those keen to encourage more consistent social engagement, Bookless's valuable recommendations on how to increase grass-roots evangelical engagement on environmental issues apply to social engagement generally.

The articles that follow describe and assess aspects of the evolution of evangelical social ethics and action since the 1970s – the first three having been written by long standing participant-observers. David Hilborn provides a broad overview of key academic and official theological developments in evangelical social ethics since the 1970s and maps its current pluriformity. Drawing on empirical survey evidence, Greg Smith reports on how things stand on the ground in evangelical congregations, finding encouraging signs of social engagement but also continuing ambivalence about its relative priority and the proper methods by which it should be pursued. Dave Bookless addresses both theology and practice in an account of how British evangelicalism has embraced a clear commitment to the environmental, even if also revealing the same signs of ambivalence about practice identified by Smith. Guido de Graaff introduces the work of Oliver O'Donovan, the most significant and original British evangelical social ethicist (and moral theologian) of our generation, by means of a short review essay on his recent *festschrift*.

The territory covered by these articles is, inevitably, limited. First, while they pay attention to aspects of the global context of evangelicalism they focus largely on England, saying little about

contrasting developments in other nations of the UK (or about the strikingly different and vastly more diverse manifestations of the movement in the USA). Second, they do not address the significant recent upsurge in social engagement emerging from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) churches, currently the launch pad of some of the most interesting initiatives in the field. For example, prior to the 2015 general election, the first ever ‘Black Church Political Manifesto’ was produced by the National Church Leaders Forum (NCLF) (Muir 2015). Third, the protagonists in the articles are mostly white, middle class, English evangelical males. Conceding that limitation is not to indulge in pointless breast-beating but simply to note that it was such a demographic that dominated evangelical developments for much of the period since the 1960s – a confining state of affairs which, happily, is steadily changing.⁵

A fourth limitation of the pieces is that the striking growth of national evangelical political involvement is not fully described, so a word on that is in order here. This has come to expression in three ways. One is the increasing participation of individual evangelicals in many levels of political action, including a significant coterie of MPs, MSPs, councillors and so forth across many parties. A second is the increasing tendency of the Evangelical Alliance, as the most representative evangelical body in the UK, to take up political engagement on issues of constituency concern and generally to network with and support evangelical political activists and to collaborate with non-evangelical groups as well. A third is the emergence of many evangelical single-issue campaigning and lobbying organisations addressing issues as wide-ranging as sexual ethics and bio-ethics, family breakdown, poverty and debt, housing, BME concerns, business ethics, global development, ecological issues and more – thereby exhibiting the wide diversity, and the sometimes sharply conflicting enthusiasms of the movement.⁶ This diversity reflects the theological pluriformity described by Hilborn, although there is no one-to-one correspondence between a favoured theological paradigm and a preferred set of policy stances. It is common, for example, for adherents to both traditional and more radical paradigms to adopt, simultaneously, conservative positions on sexual or medical ethics while favouring progressive or even radical ones on social, economic and environmental ethics. One broad political tendency not mentioned in the articles but of increasing importance is the (re)emergence of appeals to Britain as a ‘Christian nation’ by certain prominent individuals and organisations,

in order to justify a particular set of political and legal stances, notably on religious liberty, family and sexual ethics and the place of Islam. Some critics have warned of the emergence from these sources of an American-style 'religious right' in the UK but this worry has been shown to be overblown (Walton 2013).

The British evangelical movement has, in fact, always been more diverse than some of its detractors, and some of its defenders, have often implied. Arguably there was in the UK, from around the 1900s to the 1970s, a reasonably wide (but never complete) consensus across the movement on core evangelical commitments (rather narrow ones, to be sure) and on who was to be entrusted to define them. But the clear trend since the 1980s has been towards increasing diversity of doctrinal stance, ethical commitment, missional priority and organisational expression – to the point that some have spoken of a serious and perhaps permanent fracturing of the movement (e.g. Warner 2007). That may be an exaggeration, and yet Hilborn's article clearly documents a significant proliferation of recognised models of social ethics, even though most advocates of these various models still wish to present them (not always entirely plausibly) as 'evangelical'.⁷ In any event, whatever the future holds for the unity of the movement, it is certainly true that theorists and practitioners of evangelical social ethics today must work out their stances, define their priorities and strike their alliances in the absence of a single centre of gravity.

In response to such diversity, and in the absence of any substantial indigenous legacy that might offer a sought-after cogency and coherence, many evangelical social ethicists have long been mining the intellectual and spiritual resources of other traditions in order to remedy these perceived deficiencies. Not surprisingly, a first port of call for some has been the social ethics of the sixteenth-century Reformers, principally Luther and Calvin or their direct descendants (Tyndale, Rutherford, Baxter, Owen, etc.). Others have turned for nourishment to the theological ethics of Barth and Bonhoeffer. Some – chief among them Oliver O'Donovan and several of his students – have sought also to reappropriate the fruits of the patristic and medieval tradition to that end.⁸ Still others have found energising resources in one or other school of contemporary social ethics or political theology, as Hilborn amply documents. To his account might be added mention of a critical evangelical utilisation of liberation theology in the 1970s (e.g., René Padilla and Andrew Kirk) and, since the 1990s, of Radical Orthodoxy (e.g., James K. A. Smith). A growing number – not least

Archbishop Justin Welby – are also finding in mainstream Catholic social teaching the orientation they seek.

A credible future evangelical social ethics will increasingly find itself compelled to engage with and learn from a range of traditions of social ethics well beyond the indigenous resources of the post-eighteenth-century movement. This may place in question whether something called an ‘evangelical social ethics’ will, or should, actually survive. Evangelicals will differ over whether that would matter and, if it does, how to remedy it. Yet in such an encounter evangelical practitioners will also be positioned to make their own authentic contribution to the wider enterprise of Christian social ethics by sharing the distinctive charisms of their own tradition – not least, a deep immersion in, but also a readiness to be confronted by, the radical and comprehensive demands of Scripture.⁹ In that they will, of course, find, and need, many allies outside their own movement.

References

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this issue, evangelicalism will be defined thus, rather than as (on some accounts) as a reiteration of sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestantism. Continuities at the level of doctrine are, of course, very clear.
2. For a brief review, focusing on English evangelical Anglicans, see Chaplin (2014).
3. See, e.g., Schluter and Ashcroft (2005) and Burnside (2011). The Centre's biblical work has been informed by that of Christopher J.H. Wright (mentioned by Hilborn and Bookless). 'Relationism' is not yet a full-blown social theology but more an intermediate paradigm that seeks to guide policy. It turns out to display a number of affinities with Catholic social teaching.
4. Promising new social action initiatives are, however, also continually appearing. An independent evangelical student group 'Just Love' was launched in 2013 by members of UCCF-affiliated Christian Unions and has grown rapidly.
5. For example, one of the best-known evangelical public intellectuals in the UK is Elaine Storkey, former president of both the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and Tearfund (the largest evangelical social action agency in the UK), and a prominent campaigner on gender issues. Women are increasingly prominent in leadership in several evangelical, or evangelical-inclined, social and political organisations, including Evangelical Alliance, Tearfund, Theos, Care and Christian Concern.
6. Mention should be made here of the highly productive think tank Theos (<http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/>). Founded in 2006 by Bible Society, it reflects broadly evangelical sympathies but is not officially evangelical and works ecumenically and across many political parties. It is not a single issue body but works to raise awareness of the importance of religion in public life generally.
7. For a parallel account of this diversity, focusing on varying evangelical understandings of 'the common good', see Chaplin (2015).

8. See, for example, the impressive recovery of the texts of classical political theology in O'Donovan and Lockwood O'Donovan (1999).
9. It has not been possible in these articles to present a detailed picture of the actual, and sometimes quite original, work in biblical social ethics done by evangelicals. The References in each piece direct readers to some representative sources.