

Evangelical Disenchantment: 9 Portraits of Faith and Doubt
David Hempton

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This is not a happy book. It contains all sorts of turmoil—spiritual, psychic, intellectual, familial, emotional. As Hempton notes, disenchantment was ‘not a normally a happy experience’ (p.197). He takes ‘nine creative artists, social reformers, and public intellectuals who once were associated with the evangelical tradition, but who later repudiated that tradition.’ His selection includes the novelists George Eliot and James Baldwin, the painter Vincent van Gogh, the anti-slavery campaigner Theodore Dwight Weld, and the feminist Frances Willard. He allows each individual to tell her or his own stories through the evidence each has left of their faith journeys without any moral censure on his part. Disenchantment narratives are a species of complaint, and, as Hempton wryly notes, ‘nothing reveals as much about the inner workings of institutions as their complaints department’ (p.3). Using, then, what he admits is an unusual perspective, in addition to offering a series of biographical profiles, he hopes to illuminate the nature of evangelicalism. He succeeds admirably in his aims. His case studies, which are fascinating in their own right, can reveal positive aspects of the tradition, such as its moral seriousness which continued to inform the lives of his chosen nine; but these individuals also show its weaknesses, such as its propensity to claim ‘selective salvation for evangelical Protestants alone’ (p.191).

The Brethren movement is rich in disenchantment narratives. While I do not want to suggest that it was more prone to producing disenchantment than other Christian groups, some of Hempton’s conclusions suggest why it might have produced disillusionment more frequently in certain types of person. On the basis of his nine examples, Hempton claims that the most troubling aspect of evangelicalism for the disenchanted was that it ‘carried with it an embrace of an unwelcome dogmatic system’, presenting particular

difficulties for ‘creative and intuitive personalities who chafed against theological systems’ (p.191). In addition, Hempton claims that evangelicalism often did find change difficult to deal with. ‘Evangelical Christianity,’ he writes, ‘under the pressure of new and threatening questions, was particularly prone to fundamentalist answers, thereby further undermining its appeal to thoughtful adherents’ (p.197). As the Brethren were dogmatic system builders and fundamentalists *avant la lettre*, it is no surprise that the result has been that they have found it hard, if not almost impossible, to retain creative individuals, and in fact two of Hempton’s nine are Brethren: Francis Newman and Edmund Gosse. This makes the Brethren, if not the best represented Christian body in Hempton’s study, then as well represented as any other (the Presbyterians may be as well represented—there is some doubt as some of Hempton’s people moved denominations).

All the strengths of Hempton’s approach are seen in his essay on Newman. He sympathetically traces Newman’s journey from his early evangelicalism, through the influences of Darby and Groves, his attacks on the character of Jesus in the 1853 edition of *Phases of Faith*, to the eventual ‘moral theist’. Although Groves emerges with his image unscathed, Darby is not spared for his harsh treatment of Newman in his *Irrationalism of Infidelity* (1853). Hempton’s conclusion is devastating: ‘it was the evangelicals who disappointed his expectations, spoiled his youth, and singed his soul. These are not easy things to forgive or forget’ (p.69). The essay on Gosse finds it harder to allow Gosse to speak for himself, partly because he is a less likeable individual, but mainly because of the current problems with Gosse’s own accounts—he offered a hostage to the hermeneutics of suspicion with his *Father and Son*. Philip Gosse’s belief in the complete accuracy of the Bible was central to the divergence between him and Edmund, who, in a telling analogy referring to their approach to the scriptures, unfavourably compared his father’s microscopic attention to science with Darwin’s ability to construct a grand narrative. But ultimately Edmund was set on making his mark on high

society, and the ‘implied democratic and populist dynamic’ of the Brethren (p.157) was always going to suffer.

However, there are problems with Hempton’s assumptions about the Brethren. He assumes that the whole movement was marked by dispensational premillennialism. In fact, in eschatological matters Gosse’s parents were followers of the quite different premillennial scheme of B.W. Newton—it was his *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* that so tortured the young Edmund—and it this which explains, unlike Darby, their constant predictions of the precise year of the second advent. It is also doubtful how much of the dispensationalist element Newman would have been able to imbibe given the years of his association with the Brethren when Darby’s thought was still in its infancy. Also doubtful is Hempton’s assertion that believer’s baptism by total immersion is ‘the central religious ritual of the Plymouth Brethren’, necessary for admission to communion (p.149). This may be true of contemporary Ulster, where Hempton taught for many years, but it certainly did not apply to the period of which he is writing here. A pity, then to record these blots in the scholarship of a book which should be read and digested by anyone who cares about the evangelical past and, perhaps more importantly, future. As Hempton states, these stories deserve to be told.

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