Uneasy Consciences and Critical Minds: What the Followers of Carl Henry Can Learn From Edward Said[1]

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The year 2003 saw the deaths of two men whose writings have interested me over the years: Edward Said, the great Palestinian literary critic and political activist died of leukaemia in September; and Carl Henry, one of the founding fathers of the new evangelicalism died in December.

To those familiar with their work, they seem like strange bedfellows for anyone to link together in this way. Said was a polymathic scholar who also wrote widely on Middle Eastern affairs in a passionate and engaged way; Henry was a high-class journalist who, though undoubtedly very clever and accomplished, really devoted much of his life to a popular explication and application of the Christian faith in the contemporary world. Yet, like other 'heroes' of mine, from George Orwell to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, they both represented an ideal: the engaged intellectual. They both saw the importance of being what one might call informed amateurs in areas which were not within their own immediate fields of technical expertise. They also responded to the need to speak out uncomfortable truths to those who hold institutional power, whether on the international, national or local stage. I want to say more about the importance of engaged intellectuals later, but first it is probably wise to introduce Henry in context to those readers unfamiliar with the history and culture of American evangelicalism.

When Carl Henry died on 7 December 2003, aged 90, the world of evangelicalism lost the man who was undoubtedly its elder statesman, one whom Timothy George describes (with forgivable hyperbole) as the man who was central to the very invention of evangelicalism.[2] Certainly, Henry was a remarkable figure, the epitome of the American can-do mentality applied to the areas of evangelical theology and evangelism. Here are just a few of his achievements: he was a member of the founding faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary; the first editor of *Christianity Today*; lecturer at large for

1 I am grateful for comments on this paper by colleagues and friends, especially Bill Edgar, Manny Ortiz, Rob Burns and Ian Glover.

2 'Inventing Evangelicalism', *Christianity Today*, March 2004; available at http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/003/6.48.html

World Vision; mentor to Charles Colson; and, through his writings, populariser and defender of evangelical orthodoxy, particularly on the issue of Scripture through his six volume work, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (1976–83; recently republished by Paternoster). Like John Stott or Martyn Lloyd Jones in the UK, he was one of the men who set some of the basic agenda for evangelical life in the post-war USA.

While Henry did work on the international stage, he was, as the short summary above indicates, essentially an American figure. It seems therefore appropriate to spend a few pages of *Themelios* introducing him to our predominantly British (or at least non-American) readership. This will facilitate a better understanding both of the man and his work and of the current state of American evangelicalism. Whether we like it or not, America sets the agenda here as in so many other areas. After all, American evangelical books fill study shelves around the world; and the larger culture of America has marked life in all parts of the globe. Understanding America is therefore important if only because even those who are most vigorously anti-American still define themselves in terms set by the USA.

To assess simultaneously both the contribution of Carl Henry and the culture of American evangelicalism is no easy task, and I will attempt no exhaustive presentation here. Instead, I have decided to take as my guide Henry's little book from 1947, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Though less than 100 pages in total, it was the work which brought Henry to national prominence and for which he will, in the long run, probably be best remembered.[3]

To understand the book, it is important to grasp something of the nature of American fundamentalism (basically a synonym for evangelicalism prior to the movement to which Henry belonged) in the 1930s. Essentially, the movement was characterised by a cultural and moral legalism, opposed, for example, to Hollywood, cinema, dancing, consumption of alcohol, and smoking (at least in the northern states whose economy did not depend upon tobacco). There was also an intellectual and theological obscurantism, where learning was regarded with deep suspicion. Both the legalism and the obscurantism were reinforced by a deep-rooted dispensational theology. When one combined these with public relations disasters such as Prohibition and the Scopes Trial, the evangelical world in which Henry cut his teeth in the thirties and forties was marked by its basic irrelevance to American society. It simply had nothing of any interest to say to the modern world.[4]

It was against this background that a group of younger evangelicals, including Carl Henry, along with others such as E.J. Carnell, George Eldon Ladd, and Paul K. Jewett, decided to launch a revised evangelicalism, indeed, a 'new evangelicalism', in post-World War II America. They obtained degrees from mainstream universities; they addressed themselves to the latest developments in theology and biblical studies. They also sought to defend and expound Christian evangelical orthodoxy in a way that avoided the vicious polemical tone of the past.[5]

[3] The work has recently been republished, with a new introduction by the current President of Fuller, Richard Mouw, and the original introduction by Harold Ockenga, by Eerdmans (2003).

[4] Good introductions to this period are George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (Oxford: OUP, 1980); D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

[5] On the atmosphere and agenda of the new evangelicals, see George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

The agenda for this new movement was expressed nowhere more clearly, nor in briefer compass, than in Henry's book, *Uneasy Conscience*. In eight brief chapters, Henry offered very little in the way of specific suggestions for action and much in the way of general, inspiring rhetoric to goad his fellow evangelicals out of their social, cultural and political apathy and mobilise them for activism in all these fields. The major problem, as Henry saw it, was a basic indifference to the world around engendered by an indifference to the present, something which was intimately related to the faulty eschatology of dispensationalism. To quote Henry himself, 'Whereas once the redemptive gospel was a world-changing message, now it was narrowed to a world-resisting message' (19). What evangelicals needed to grasp was the fact that their message applied to all of life, and was transformative of all areas of human endeavour. They should therefore prepare themselves accordingly. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Henry seemed to know that the development of this programme required the development of a distinctive evangelical consciousness, and that required the production of the necessary cultural tools (68–71). Such could only be achieved by the proper education of leaders to manage these tools, and the creation of a popular evangelical front which set aside divisive secondary doctrines in favour of maintaining a unified policy in the face of the common secularising foe.

In light of this manifesto, we can see Henry's time at Fuller, his work on *Christianity Today* (*CT*), his involvement with the Evangelical Theological Society, and his various other activities on the evangelical stage, as part and parcel of his desire to see evangelicalism making a difference to the world around by engaging thoughtfully and relevantly with the world as it presented itself. On the occasion of his death, therefore, it seems appropriate to ask to what extent the project has proved successful, and whether we can learn from the strengths and weaknesses which it embodied.

Before doing so, however, it is important for me to state clearly my own position relative to the American evangelical scene so as to allow the reader the opportunity to play 'spot the prejudice' in my own analysis. I am, according to the US Immigration and Naturalisation Service a 'non-resident alien'; in other words, I live in America (and, indeed, I find that, generally speaking, I like living in America) but I do not belong to America; and that is a useful way of understanding my take on American evangelicalism. It is the world I inhabit, but I do not belong there, and thus perhaps have the ability to spot certain things which a native might miss through over familiarity. There is also the potential to misunderstand other things for precisely the same reasons. I am also familiar with only a relatively narrow band of American Christian life, that is, the white Reformed, generally suburban/urban professional middle class branch. Of Mennonite, Arminian, African American and Latino streams, to name but four, my knowledge is limited and mainly second hand. Yet this places me very close to the kind of evangelicals to whom Henry was making his appeal.

The first comment to make about Henry's book is that it is first and foremost a plea for evangelical engagement with society and culture at all levels. This is not to say that Henry is laying out a detailed plan of what such an engagement should look like. Unlike many of the current generation of American evangelicals, Henry, though clearly something of a Republican himself, stopped well short of identifying a particular brand of politics as being distinctively Christian, preferring instead to argue that Christians should be *involved*, not prescribing exactly what that involvement should look like. The dilemma he faced was this: on the one hand, those Christians who engaged in politics, the arts, et cetera were on the whole those of definite liberal or neo-orthodox convictions which gave the whole arena of cultural engagement a somewhat heterodox

feel. On the other hand, the fundamentalists, particularly as influenced by the 'pull up the drawbridge and wait for the end' mentality of dispensationalism, had tended to regard any engagement with the world as futile. Any attempt to improve the social, political, and cultural spheres was, at best, pointless and naive, at worst 'worldly' and positively sinful. In the late forties, of course, with the Iron Curtain, the Berlin crisis and the increasing anti-Red hysteria of American politics, this mentality was reinforced by a knee-jerk fear of anything which smacked of socialism.

Over against this, Henry argued that evangelical Christianity had developed a faulty eschatology which projected Christ's kingdom into the future and thus had lost sight of the nature of that kingdom in the present day and age. Eschatology became the reason – or perhaps the pretext – for retreating from fields of necessary Christian endeavour. One can understand the attraction of this. The collapse of orthodoxy in the mainline denominations in the 1920s, coupled with the various social forces unleashed by the economic policies of the 1930s and the trauma of the Second World War and the start of the Cold War, meant that many of the old certainties, whether social, political or theological, were no longer as impregnable as they had once seemed. Retreat in such circumstances must have seemed most attractive; and baptising that retreat with a theological rationale which made it appear biblical must have had tremendous appeal. Like the boy in the schoolyard who has been excluded from the soccer match and who then turns away in tears declaring that he never wanted to play anyway, so fundamentalist Christianity turned from the traditional public sphere and retreated into its own subculture.

Since Henry's day, of course, much has changed, and that in no small measure because of the life and work of Henry himself. Indeed, if we look at just two areas, those of theological and political engagement, we can see the difference that the kind of vision encapsulated in Henry's manifesto and pioneered by him and his colleagues has made to the American evangelical world.

Theological Engagement

Henry's own life and work, supremely the six volumes of *God, Revelation and Authority (GRA)*, indicate how seriously he took the need to work out evangelical orthodoxy in a contemporary context. There are times when this gives his work a bizarre and very dated feel – for example, the long interaction in GRA with the 'Jesus People' who have proved about as significant for Christianity since the 1960s as Rolf Harris's Stylophone has been for the music of Kraftwerk. Nevertheless, the central point of these volumes is that scriptural authority is significant; that it is not enough to say the Bible is true or authoritative without defining such notions with great care and relating them to other theological points; and that this must be done in a manner which is relevant to the challenges of today, not yesterday. And this point is well-made and well-taken. Indeed, one could argue that it was this issue, the relation between God, revelation and Scripture, that dominated much of Henry's early and mid-career, This was reflective of a more general concern in the wider theological world from the 1940s through the 1960s with the problem of what exactly constituted revelation. Of course, it is always relevant; but it had peculiar relevance at this point in time, and Henry's response indicated his sensitivity to the times.

Nevertheless, while Henry's dream of articulating evangelical theology in a thoughtful, nuanced way is admirable, the practical realities of the vision were flawed. The institutions which spearheaded the new evangelicalism (Fuller Seminary, *Christianity*

Today, the Evangelical Theological Society) were all interdenominational in order to produce a kind of popular front evangelicalism, focused on gospel essentials. This was done in order to combat the forces of theological liberalism and, to a much lesser extent, fundamentalism.[6] Such a vision is admirable, arguably representing an attempt to take seriously the NT teaching on the unity of all believers in Christ. Britain has its parallel institutions: the old London Bible College (now the London School of Theology); UCCF; the Evangelical Alliance; the British Evangelical Council (now Affinity). While the origins and agendas of these British groups differ somewhat from their American counterparts, the vision of a popular evangelical front is much the same. Yet the strength of this model – that of transcending traditional, denominational boundaries – also its weakness, in that it removes the activity of theology from the immediate church context. This has a twofold effect: first, it can foster a somewhat eclectic approach to theology, with a marginalising of areas where disagreement exists, regardless of how important they are; and, second, it removes the obvious mechanisms of accountability.

To take the first of these. The sidelining of issues which historically divide evangelicals can be a most positive thing. Should differing views of baptism, say, or eschatology, prevent informal fellowship between believers and churches in different traditions, or hinder joint evangelistic campaigns? Most are inclined to say not, as this might lead to a complete fragmentation of evangelicalism which would inevitably undermine effectiveness. Yet this raises the problem of which issues are central and which are peripheral. Given that many died on both sides of the eucharistic debate at the Reformation, should we see different views of the Lord's Supper as mere superficial differences or as disagreements which must disrupt all fellowship? Perhaps a more pertinent example for modern evangelicalism would be the disagreement between Calvinists and Arminians over the nature of human decision with reference to salvation, or between charismatics and non-charismatics with reference to the continuation or cessation of the spiritual gifts. To what extent are these differences significant?

It is tempting to argue that the answer to this question really depends upon the circumstances. Sharing a platform in the interests of a local evangelistic campaign with others with whom one disagrees on these issues would seem, all else being equal, an appropriate, modest, and charitable position to take, one which avoids the nasty excesses of narrow sectarianism. I would wish, at this point, to stress my agreement with such an attitude, allowing as it does for a manifestation of the heart of the gospel and a focusing of minds on that which unites, rather than that which divides. Yet here is the problem: who, in these circumstances, decides where the boundaries are to be drawn at each level of possible co-operation? On what basis do they do so (from, say, a common platform against abortion, where Protestants routinely speak with Roman Catholics, and even, on occasion, atheists and representatives of other religions – again, legitimately in many instances in my opinion – to a joint communion service or agreements regarding mutual eligibility of ministers)? Thus, the broad-based nature of evangelicalism is both its greatest strength and its most unfortunate weakness.

The most graphic example of this problem in action has been the events surrounding the debate over the openness of God which has taken place in the Evangelical

6 It is interesting that Henry's criticisms of fundamentalism in *Uneasy Conscience* are carefully nuanced to ensure that there is no doubt in the reader's mind that, while theological liberalism is the enemy, fundamentalism has more the character of a misguided friend. He clearly saw it as having a grasp of the supernatural gospel, albeit in a somewhat truncated form, in a way that liberalism simply did not.

Theological Society. Here certain orthodox evangelicals made an attempt to rule that openness teaching was in conflict with the Society's position and that those holding to such should cease to be members. My own very personal take on this issue is twofold: I do not regard open theism as Christian orthodoxy and therefore see it as having no place in a Christian organisation. Yet, given the fact that the ETS is not a church and that its doctrinal basis of membership only requires belief in inerrancy and in a basic Trinitarianism, I see no constitutional grounds for the expulsion of individuals who sign this and believe it. The key issues for me theologically (e.g., divine foreknowledge, penal substitution, the nature of grace) are simply not dealt with in the DB, inferential arguments from inerrancy notwithstanding. Therein lies the problem: transdenominational organisations need to play down differences in order to function; yet in so doing they raise questions about the drawing of boundaries which cannot be easily answered.

This, yet again, brings us to the issue of accountability: who decides what the limits of fellowship are in these transdenominational organisations? Where doctrinal bases exist, who decides where the lines must be drawn or what can and cannot be embraced within them?

To deal with this in any detail would be too complex, but one significant issue which is often missed in discussion and which relates very closely to the way in which evangelicalism connects to American culture, is the need of these groups to raise money. Evangelicalism is costly: from the glossy pages of *CT*, to the payrolls of the seminaries, to the lecture fees of evangelical superstars, evangelicalism needs money. In practice this means that its public position is always a negotiation between various theological concerns and the willingness of those with money to underwrite the project. This is where the problems of accountability can become acute. Even the briefest glance at the pages of *CT* reveals how much the organ depends upon advertising for revenue; and this dependence is not theologically neutral. First, the kinds of ads carried are, by virtue of being in the pages of *CT*, invested with the authority of the magazine, whatever the editor might claim to the contrary. Editors may not personally approve of a particular product (and, one might add in passing that the existence of advertising for theology courses and books does turn theology into a product, to be packaged, branded and sold – itself an interesting phenomenon); but allowing them to be placed in their journal gives them formal approval. I should know, as I edit the journal you are currently reading, which, as you notice, carries almost no advertising as a matter of principle. When adverts for a veritable smorgasbord of seminaries appear in the pages of *CT*, the differences between them are inevitably relativised by virtue of their existence as part of the larger consensus being created by the magazine itself. When advertisements for Christian approaches to financial security appear in the pages of *CT*, placing personal wealth near the top of Christian priorities, then *CT*, and the evangelicalism it claims to represent, surrenders any possibility of compelling prophetic critique of the prosperity gospel within its pages.

Second, companies only place advertisements in organs that sell; so sales become very important; and this means that the editor needs to maintain circulation in order to maintain commercial income. Thus there will be a constant pressure to make sure that the content of the journal appeals to the widest range of readers possible. This almost certainly means a lowering of the intellectual level in order to net as big an audience as possible. Any comparison of the *CT* of Henry's day with that of ours would seem to confirm that the magazine has become glossier, more aesthetic, and less intellectually demanding, as the years have gone by. This is surely not unrelated to the way in which

it is financed and marketed. As commercial television is more likely to succeed by producing 'reality TV' instead of documentaries on AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, so *CT* is more likely to maintain circulation by running interviews with Max Lucado than with some less photogenic character doing something less exciting than writing bestsellers. One might also note that when the organs which help to create and sustain the unity of one's movement are dependent upon the consumerist system of western society, it becomes very difficult to mount any effective critique of, or resistance to, that system. Evangelicalism internalises the system; and then the system is as unquestioned and unquestionable as the laws of gravity.

Third, given the transdenominational disparate nature of the evangelical world noted above, the very function of a media organ such as *CT* is in large part to manufacture a kind of consensus. It is to create at least the appearance of unity among dramatically different groupings. This again places at the heart of the new evangelical project a natural gravitational pull towards lowest common denominator themes. In turn this influences the mindsets of those who read the organ uncritically and with no awareness that the very nature of such a commercial media product is somewhat less than ideologically neutral. Organs such as *CT* do not simply reflect the evangelical world; they help to create and sustain it. In a certain sense they determine who and what gets covered; and the various demands of consensus and commerce mean that certain figures and issues will get better coverage than others.

This is not to say that these problems could be solved by dismantling transdenominational evangelical enterprises *tout court*. I suspect such would be disastrous and would militate against the Bible's teaching on the unity of the body. I would argue that Henry's vision needs to be modified, indeed radicalised, to include careful reflection upon how evangelicalism is to be held accountable to the church. I would also argue that it does not simply need to engage with society but that it also needs to subject the most unspoken orthodoxies of modern Western society to vigorous critique. It is this which the political engagement of the white middle class American evangelicalism has, on the whole, failed to do in any radical sense.

Political Engagement

If the fundamentalism against which Henry was reacting was politically apathetic, looking for a kingdom which was projected pretty much into the future, much of white American evangelicalism today is tied to right wing politics of a fairly radical kind. Economically there is little to choose between Republican and Democratic options at the ballot box. One is dealing with debates about the weighting of tax burdens, with the basic free market system being an unquestioned orthodoxy for both parties. There are some key areas of disagreement on foreign policy, but the real division for many Christians is the issue of abortion.[7] Although reports seem to indicate that substantial minorities in both parties disagree with their official party lines (Republicans are pro-life;

[7] To be fair, the content of *World* magazine, whose readership is overwhelmingly white, would seem to indicate that other issues are starting to come to the fore, especially education (i.e., creationism; home-schooling) and family values (i.e., gay marriage). *World* is without doubt one of the principle means by which an apparent political consensus on a host of other issues (welfare, foreign policy etc.) has been created and sustained as normative orthodoxy among an influential segment of middle class white conservative evangelicals in the USA.

Democrats are pro-choice) this does not translate into grass roots nuancing of political allegiances. There is a fierce loyalty to the Republicans being exhibited by most white Christians. Henry himself in *Uneasy Conscience*, was careful to avoid the identification of any economic system with Christianity (e.g. 84–85). The current function, however, of abortion as the card which trumps everything has killed meaningful political thinking on other issues in many evangelical circles. Health care, foreign policy, and welfare are simply non-issues when compared to the termination of pregnancies. Eschatology is perhaps less significant, but US policy towards Israel is undoubtedly shaped to some extent by the power of groups which hold to a particular view of the role of the restoration of political Israel at the end of time. This is reinforced at a grass roots level by the popularity of the end times novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, a popularity which is not restricted simply to Christians.

Underlying this is something that is perhaps more insidious. That is the belief among many American evangelicals that America has a special place in God's providential care. This is, of course, the archetypal error which all dominant political and economic powers have made, from Rome (see Augustine's *City of God*) to the British Empire. Yet America is so all-surpassingly powerful on the world stage. The language of manifest destiny is so deeply ingrained in her public discourse, from the mythologies of the Founding Fathers to those of Hollywood. Nationalism, intensified by being connected with the language of divine sanction, is a very real problem. The myth of American superiority in all areas is one which the popular media perpetuate by playing up America's undoubted strengths while ignoring her weaknesses and the contributions of other countries and societies. Even the allegedly liberal minded in Hollywood are deeply involved in this mythologising of America – witness films such as *The Last Samurai*. And then the cult of strength, beauty and superiority is long-established. Back in the 1930s George Orwell expressed concern that no ugly or poor people were generally allowed to spoil the aesthetics of American magazines and newspapers. Today the television provides an even more powerful way of reinforcing such national mythology. The myth of American superiority has also produced the perfect antibody for dealing with the microbes of criticism: any criticism can be seen as motivated by envy at American success and is thus actually more evidence of the superiority of the American way.

The American church should be ideally placed to act as the nation's conscience at this time, the role which Henry seemed to wish it to play in his manifesto. Yet too many churches are committed to being part of the myth rather than being the prophetic critics of the same. As if to symbolise this collusion, in many churches the American flag stands next to the pulpit. This is something which, in my experience of travel around the world, is a somewhat unique juxtaposition. It is bizarre given the constitutional commitment to separation of church and state. What is more the American way is routinely identified with God's will in sermons and on Christian television, sometimes in a rather worryingly direct fashion. Indeed, I have a colleague who prayed for world peace at a recent service and was admonished for praying an 'unAmerican' prayer. The fact that there is such a term as 'unAmerican' is itself interesting. There is no real equivalent as far as I know in other countries with which I am familiar: what would 'unDutch' or 'unBritish' mean, I wonder? This is because 'American' is not a term which speaks primarily of a geographical location or a birthplace but rather of a set of values. Such values can be defined in various ways; but, however that may be done, 'unAmerican' is regarded by all as a pejorative. That it can be used in a church context about a prayer for peace gives one worrying pause for thought. That these values can become implicitly (and often explicitly) nothing less than an eschatology is extremely disturbing.

The identification of America and the American way, with its freedom, democracy and free market philosophy, as identical with God's way probably owes much, at a sophisticated level, to the influence of the secular political mythologies of neo-Hegelians such as Fukuyama on certain leading Christian opinion-formers; at a popular level, I suspect the culprit is a basic human pride in anything that allows one to feel superior to others. That certain strands of evangelicalism have bought into this identification of right wing politics, the American way, and Christianity should be a cause for concern. Henry's call was for evangelicalism to take on a *prophetic* role, one of being involved in the political process but in such a manner that the politics of the secular world were not to be identified wholesale with the gospel. It was not to be there simply to baptise the politics of one party rather than another.

The relationship between the church and politics is always going to be complicated. This is not least because political thinking is a culturally specific, occasional activity, where the black and white moral categories of right and wrong do not always, or even often, apply. After all, every Christian who takes the Bible seriously should hate poverty and want the innocent protected from the violent and the oppressive. But is it necessarily sinful to believe that this is best achieved through free markets or through nationalised industries, or through particular configurations of tax burdens and welfare payments? Is one health care system biblical and another unbiblical? Only the crudest of Bible-thumping simpletons can possibly correlate the teaching of the Bible in a direct, no-nonsense way with the party political platforms of the early twenty-first century. British evangelicals need to remember this as they become increasingly active in their political involvement. They also need to be aware of the fact that the claiming of divine sanction for opinions which are, in themselves, morally indifferent or at least debatable, is the oldest trick in the book for foreclosing on intelligent discussion. Even black and white issues are not so black and white when it comes to specific party politics. Yes, God hates the slaughter of infants – but abortion is merely the most obvious way in which this takes place. Poor healthcare, unhygienic living conditions, lack of access to AIDS drugs, famine, sweatshops, unemployment, underemployment, war, environmental damage due to pollution and greed – these all kill infants too. Reflection on these makes party politics less black and white than many would wish. It is time for Christians to face up to these issues as well.

Looking at the world of 2004, one can therefore say that part of Henry's dream has been fulfilled: a professing Christian is in the White House; and evangelicals are involved in the formation of public policy. Yet the black and white, simplistic politics that have come to dominate large swathes of white evangelicalism in America are scarcely those for which Henry hoped. Modern American evangelicalism has neither critiqued nor transformed the political landscape. Instead it has largely bought into the polarised politics of the two party system and lost its ability to be critical of the American way. It has, if you like, become too worldly. Henry's original vision for politics has only partly been realised; and, lest this seem like more hackneyed America-bashing, let me stress that I say this because I like the country in which I now live and I long to see the church there become as strong spiritually and evangelistically as it is numerically.

This, of course, is the final problem with regarding a particular brand of politics as of the essence of the gospel. When individuals from other countries and cultures, with different political convictions, come to America, they are disenfranchised because the church has created unnecessary barriers to evangelism. Indeed, there is an unofficial colour bar which runs through American church life, particularly as it relates to whites and African Americans. This has roots deep in the history of the white churches' record

on slavery and more than a little to do with current economic and class divisions, and is not helped by the fact that most white evangelicals are identified as Republicans, while most African Americans are Democrats. Bluntly put, if I have to buy your political manifesto in order to buy your gospel, then your church is indulging in a dangerous confusion of categories and excluding individuals and groups from its congregation. They are excluded on grounds other than that of simply being outside of Christ. A gospel that is too American in this sense is no gospel at all.

This is where the work of Edward Said becomes something with which Christians should familiarise themselves. Said, a Palestinian intellectual who taught at the University of Columbia in New York for most of his career, was a controversial figure, not least for his articulation of the Palestinian cause in the United States. His scholarly contributions to literary theory and to classical music are noteworthy. It is, however, his insistence on the need for engaged intellectuals that is perhaps his greatest legacy to the wider world and one which the evangelical project of Carl Henry needs to hear.

Speaking the Truth to Power

Said, a dazzlingly brilliant and eclectic thinker, was deeply influenced by the work of, among others, Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist and fountainhead of much 'New Left' thinking, Michel Foucault, the French post-structuralist, and Frantz Fanon, the French-Algerian theorist of decolonisation.[8] From these he learned both the ways in which established power uses all aspects of wider culture in order to extend its own project of control and manipulation, and the need therefore to be critical of the culture in which one lives lest one be unwittingly co-opted into its wider agenda. His most famous articulation, perhaps overstatement, of this thesis was in his book *Orientalism*. Here he argued that 'the Orient' was a construct of Western ideology and thus part of the mechanism of Western imperial power.[9] Then, in his more nuanced work *Culture and Imperialism*, he studied Western literature with a view to demonstrating how even authors such as Jane Austen wrote literature which both reflected the social and political ambitions of the nascent British Empire and therefore helped to naturalise such ideas so as to lift them above criticism.[10]

Unlike Foucault, however, there is an underlying optimism in Said's work. This is probably drawn both from his own experience of political struggle and his reading of Fanon. Said is not simply mesmerised by power as if by some unavoidable, unopposable absolute; instead, he considers that resistance to power is both possible and desirable, nay, imperative.[11] And this is where the engaged intellectual has his or her role to play: intellectuals are not to allow themselves to be co-opted into the wider project of the imperialist establishment. They have no choice but to work within it. Yet they can offer dissenting, critical voices which offer alternative narratives and possibilities of resistance

8 A good, accessible introduction to Said's thinking is that by Shelley Walia, *Edward Said and the Writing of History* (London: Totem, 2001); see also David Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (Cambridge: South End Press); Gauri Wiswanathan, *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (New York: Vintage, 2001). His autobiography (to age 21) is also of interest to understanding his thought: *Out of Place* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

9 London: Penguin, 1978.

10 London: Vintage, 1993.

11 See his essay, 'Foucault and the Imagination of Power', in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 239–45.

to dominant powers. They are to learn to understand the way in which the media, scholarly guilds, indeed, all cultural institutions can be used to make the status quo appear as an absolute and all alternatives as mediocre. The engaged intellectual is 'to speak the truth to power', to stand against the popular tide and to offer prophetic criticism of the abuse of power, no matter how 'natural' that abuse may have been made to appear by the media or by the political and cultural traditions to which we may belong.[12]

Said identifies two aspects of modernity/postmodernity that are particularly lethal to this critical project. The first is the cult of specialisation whereby those who speak outside of the sphere of competence for which they have the culturally approved credentials are regarded as illegitimately crossing boundaries. As we British would say, they are speaking out of their hats. The example which Said uses on occasion is that of left-wing American social critic, Noam Chomsky. Chomsky has made significant, if highly controversial and hotly contested, contributions to the field of theoretical linguistics. It is this area where he has formal academic qualifications, and his work is taken very seriously by the scholarly establishment. He has also made major contributions to understanding how propaganda functions, how the West has frequently played a duplicitous game with regard to human rights abuses and geopolitical issues. Yet in this area he has no formal qualifications – his work is often denigrated. This is not by virtue of it being intrinsically wrong or bad, but on the basis that he has no formal academic qualifications which would entitle him to speak to these matters. In other words, Said would say that the culture of academic specialisation is being used by a political establishment to marginalise a dissenting voice. The academic culture effectively colludes in extending the power of the politicians by making illegitimate the contributions of those who do not possess the right membership card.

The second aspect of modernity/postmodernity which Said sees as lethal to the idea of the engaged intellectual is the fragmented and disengaged attitude fostered by the various forms of relativism. These present themselves as the vanguard of trendiness in the postmodern world.

Not for Said the simplistic metanarratival announcement of the 'death of metanarratives'. As with others on the Left, Said is both appreciative of the truly critical impulse which is to be found in aspects of such approaches but also deeply suspicious of the verbal Gnosticism and ultimate trivial sterility which has marked so much of this trajectory. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said gives passionate expression to this sentiment:

> As for intellectuals whose charge includes values and principles – literary, philosophical, historical specialists – the American university, with its munificence, Utopian sanctuary, and remarkable diversity, has defanged them. Jargons of an almost unimaginable rebarbativeness dominate their styles. Cults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism, deconstruction, neo-pragmatism transport them into the country of the blue. An astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history and individual responsibility fritters away attention to public matters and to public discourse.[13]

[12] Said's view of the role of intellectuals, indebted as it is to figures such as Gramsci, Mary McCarthy, and Noam Chomsky, is most clearly articulated in his Reith Lectures, published as *Representations of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1994).

[13] *Culture and Imperialism*, 366–67.

Said then lists racism, poverty, the environment, and disease as topics which receive less and less serious attention. The trivialisation of intellectual pursuits is thus seen as part of the overall programme of exalting Western society. Those who spend their time studying and lecturing on soap operas, cyberdating and the Simpsons, often do so without any reflective understanding of how these studies are themselves involved in wider cultural and poltical agendas. They are in danger of allowing the cultural relativism that is so loved by Western consumer society to destroy their capacity for criticism and to co-opt them into the project of ignoring the things that really matter. The intellectual is not there just to go along with the dominant ideological patterns; he or she is there to offer criticism of those patterns to the extent that that is possible.[14]

What can the Jerusalem of Henry learn from the Athens of Said?

The lessons for evangelicals from Said are profound. Speaking personally, of all the non-Christian authors I have read, Said is the greatest influence on my own thinking. I believe that his insights speak quite clearly to weaknesses which have emerged in Henry's vision for the new evangelicalism. Indeed, his voice is one which evangelicals can hear with profit (and, given his graceful style, with pleasure too).

First, Said's notion of an engaged intellectual is very close to Henry's call for evangelicals to be culturally and politically engaged. It is, of course, true that no-one can stand outside of culture; everyone exists in a particular time and place and is shaped by their environment. What Henry failed to anticipate in 1948 was the way in which the evangelical project would become part and parcel of the American project. He did not see how it would so identify with various American causes in a highly polarised political environment, that, to many outsiders anyway, evangelicalism would become identified with certain political positions, and that self-criticism in the evangelical community would be effectively non-existent. This is as true of the political right as of the political left in evangelical circles. The left are very quick to grab hold of culturally trendy – dare one say safe? – causes, such as racism and sexual egalitarianism. But less popular concerns, such as Third World Debt, the Palestinian question, the environment, and AIDS/famine in sub-Saharan Africa, are of little importance in the religious politics of the evangelical left, just as they are of little interest to the secular left.[15] To those who hold to the Pauline teaching on sin there would appear to be a horrible Pelagianism at work in such easy cultural accommodation. Said's notion of the engaged intellectual as one who sees the collusive nature of culture and power, is one thus which anti-Pelagians should understand and appreciate. The role of engaged intellectuals, the modern-day prophets, begins with root and branch criticism of the culture to which they themselves belong. We need theologians and church leaders who are prepared to look at evangelicalism and see how and where this is being co-opted and corrupted by the agenda and priorities of the wider world. For my part, I would suggest that in the West the enemy at the moment is consumerism, reinforced by the old mythology of Western

[14] This trivialisation of intellectual pursuits in the wake of postmodernism has been noted by Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2003).

[15] This is, of course, a very broad statement about the contours of general evangelical concerns. It is true that there are a growing number of exceptions: for example, the work by Gary Burge of Wheaton College, on the Palestinian question; the various writings of figures as diverse as Ron Sider and Os Guinness; magazines such as *Sojourners* and *Books and Culture*; and Joni Eareckson Tada's organisation, *Joni and Friends*.

superiority. These foes are deadlier in many ways than the Red menace if only because they are that much more insidious and seductive. The internal enemies, those which insinuate themselves within our own ways of life, are always harder to spot and more difficult to defeat. The prophetic voice *must* speak to this in the coming years if the church is not to become a religious form of wholly secular substance. Henry was very careful not to make his call for political engagement a partisan appeal. Given the current polarisation, it would seem that evangelicals need to heed the cultural criticism of a Said if they are to avoid a simplistic and idolatrous identification of Christianity with a particular political project, whether of the right or of the left.

Second, the cult of specialisation needs to be resisted. I must be careful here: it is not wrong for Christians to aim to be as good as they can be in their chosen fields, and that applies to theological studies as much as to anything else. Specialisation is acceptable, indeed, in many cases desirable. The *culture* of specialisation, however, must not be allowed to render any particular group immune by default from criticism by any other group. That creates a context for the abuse of power, through the disempowerment of those who do not possess the right membership card to a particular guild, not because what they say is intrinsically wrong. Henry's appeal for Christians to obtain the appropriate educational qualifications and to be involved at the highest level in scholarly discussion was right and proper and necessary. To achieve this, evangelicals needed to negotiate with the non-evangelical academy as it set the terms and determined the frameworks for debate. At times, though, this negotiation has come to look more like capitulation. One aspect of this is the way in which specialisation and disciplinary fragmentation has led to the erection of walls between scholarly guilds. An example of this can be the way synoptic scholars and systematicians feel unable to comment outside of their own fields and indeed resent any attempt by others to intrude on their own territory from outside. How this is to be overcome is not immediately obvious to me as I write; I am confident though that this is not simply a technical problem to be solved by training and expertise. It is also a deeper, cultural problem, and the solution will involve changes in attitude. It will also involve changes in vocabulary, since the generation of pretentious and opaque verbiage in many areas of specialisation is surely as much a function of trying to reinforce the mystique of specialisation as of the need to express oneself clearly and precisely in a technical context. If it is the latter which is the intention, someone needs to inform our hermeneutical brethren, preferably in words of just one or two syllables, this is certainly not what is actually being achieved. Specialisation which assumes to itself an invulnerability to criticism from outside is specialisation which has made itself, and the power it wields, unaccountable to no-one but those it chooses.

Finally, Said's warnings about the deleterious effects of the trivialising and absolute relativising power of various strands of postmodernism need to be grasped. New evangelicalism in America has grabbed hold of such strands with a vengeance, and some good has come from this. For example, a serious desire for engagement with popular culture; also an awareness that the past – even the writing of the past – is in many ways problematic; and an apparent sensitivity to our own cultural situatedness and the need to respect other cultures. But if Said's comments on the way such relativist philosophies ultimately collude with wider cultural trends, either by shrinking all issues down to the same trivial moral level or by removing any basis for social criticism are true, then we need to ask whether trendy evangelical postmodernism is anything more than a surreptitious and devastating attempt to 'defang', to use Said's term, the gospel of its critical power. Is Christian postmodern relativism simply another example of how

evangelicalism has mortgaged its soul to Western consumerism and now pays uncritical – and often unwitting – homage to the idol of Western values?[16] Again, the answer to the problem is not easy. An awareness, however, that postmodernism, in its crude, popular forms, may be part of the problem rather than part of the solution, will mark a starting point for further critical reflection on how it functions as an ideology in the contemporary Christian world and beyond.

Strange bedfellows indeed. One was the all-American Christian journalist with a vision for evangelicalism that shaped a generation. The other, the secular Palestinian intellectual and exile whose writings on politics and culture consistently challenged the ruling consensus and presented the claims of the marginalised to an indifferent or hostile world. Neither man, I am sure, would appreciate the company of the other. Yet Henry's ambitious project clearly needs the critical edge of a Said if it is to be faithful to its task of true engagement rather than mere cultural collusion. Henry spoke of the uneasy conscience of fundamentalism. Yet the various sects of modern American evangelicalism, while very angry with just about everybody else, too often seem very comfortable and at ease with themselves. Indeed, they seem to have the easy consciences of those Pelagians who see the enemy everywhere except their own hearts. And yet in this context there seem no creeds better designed to maintain this easiness of the modern evangelical conscience than those which rejoice uncritically in the Western way, whether right of left; or which delight in differences and offer no satisfactory basis for discerning the good from the bad, the vitally important from the utterly trivial; or which fail to see the way in which evangelicalism, often at the very point where it smugly thinks of itself as most engaged and cultural savvy, is too often the unwitting and uncritical ally of larger political and cultural agendas which have nothing to do with biblical Christianity. At this hour, we do not need yet another trendy pundit to salve consciences through superficial cultural commentary involving Christian approaches to Britney Spears, dental floss, or beer commercials. Such characters are next to useless in the struggles which Christianity faces at this time. Instead we need Christian Saids who will not waste time on junk but rather will dare to speak the truth to power in all circumstances and however uneasy it might make our consciences.

[16] I am also persuaded by the arguments of Frederic Jameson, Perry Anderson, and Terry Eagleton (and articulated in a Christian context by individuals such as Stanley Hauerwas) that there is a connection between postmodern relativist epistemologies and consumerism. If this is the case, then the rise of postmodern evangelical thinking, the entrepreneurial culture of American evangelicalism, and the apparent ideological chaos of an organ such as *ChristianityToday*, which I mentioned above, can be seen as part and parcel of one and the same agenda – a classic, Saidian connection of ideological, institutional, cultural, and economic power. On the whole, Christian postmodern pundits have not taken with sufficient seriousness the material conditions in which the various philosophies routinely catergorised as 'postmodern' occur.