

Becoming Non-Rational: *Christianity Today* And The Evangelical Response To Science

—Bruce Hiebert

The following is an excerpt from the transcript of Bruce Hiebert's lecture of February 13, 2003, at SFU.

Transforming Beliefs

“Theology is the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.” So begins Augustus Strong’s 1907 edition of *Systematic Theology*. (1) It was a view that put Strong at odds with both the opposition to science emerging on the most conservative side of the Western Protestant theological spectrum and the “separate but equal” views of science and religion on the liberal side of the spectrum. Instead Strong argued that all science had as its goal the reasoned, empirical understanding of God’s objective revelation. And science was therefore the foundation for all faith and practice. (2) In the middle of the century, as evangelicals began to separate themselves from fundamentalism, they took Strong’s position to heart and used it to hammer out an intellectual platform that separated them from their fundamentalist predecessors and allowed them to engage the forces of Western culture. They intended a carefully reasoned attack on what they perceived to be an errant and increasingly irrational civilization. Following Strong, the Bible was the divinely revealed, rational, and absolute guarantee of truth and the foundation from which a confident evangelicalism could call North America to account.

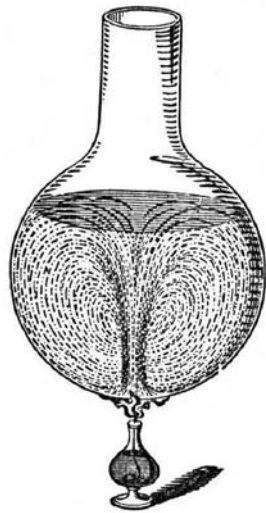
The intellectual centre of this new evangelicalism was Fuller Theological Seminary in California. Founded in 1947 under the leadership of Harold J. Ockenga (1905-1985), the school combined strong academics with a commitment to engaging American culture. At the same time, the evangelist Billy Graham emerged from fundamentalism and into popular American culture with a message of

evangelical conversion. Throughout the United States he held large public meetings that combined entertainment and an address by Graham in which he called on those in attendance to come forward and commit themselves to Christ and an adoption of evangelical beliefs. After the press coverage of his 1949 campaign, Graham became a recognized national figure and the central figure of the new evangelical movement. Building on his presence as a public figure, he encouraged the formation of a global network of evangelical intellectuals. In order to provide a cohesive vehicle for these intellectuals and their point of view, together with his father-in-law, L. Nelson Bell, and Fuller faculty member and theologian Carl Henry, he founded *Christianity Today* magazine in 1956. As Graham said in the 40th anniversary issue, “Repeatedly in [the 1940’s and 1950’s] I came across men and women in virtually every denomination who were committed to the historic biblical faith, believing it was not only spiritually vital but socially relevant and intellectually defensible. And yet they had no standard around which they could rally....” (3) With substantial foundation support Graham and his associates set out to produce a mass appeal magazine with solid academic credentials that would present an evangelical point of view on news, events and issues of the day. The initial publication schedule was for 25 issues per year. Contributors, almost without exception, held earned doctorates and included the Dutch theologian G.C Berkouwer, the English and subsequently Canadian theologian J.I. Packer, and the American theologian Bernard Ramm.



In 1956, the year *Christianity Today* began publication, Western society was anxious about the H-bomb and the cold war. Urbanization was expanding rapidly and the US economy was booming, though there remained deep fears of a return to the depression of the 1930’s. Within science and philosophy, the determinism of Darwin and the naturalism of Dewey were being confronted with the indeterminism of Heisenberg and the collapse of Logical Positivism. Within Western Christian theology, the neo-orthodox works of Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr were giving way to an existentialist liberalism framed by the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann.

Over the next 45 years this American publication would face the election of a Catholic President, the Vietnam War, waves of economic boom and stagnation, the sexual revolution, environmental degradation, and the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War. In the sciences Thomas Kuhn would deconstruct the idea of scientific progress; Kurt Gödel would prove that mathematics was a “religion;” astronomers would declare that the universe had an “origin;” and sociologists and psychologists would find positive correlations between religious beliefs and personal and social



well-being. Philosophy moved from existentialism to deconstructionism. Christian liberals moved from existentialist theologies to varieties of liberation theology, to “post-liberal” theologies. Post-modernism, only a bud in 1956, was in full anti-foundational¹ bloom by the end of the century.

Christianity Today changed over the same period by reducing its publication schedule from 25 to 15 issues per year and becoming less academic in content and more popular in style. In part this was the necessary response to a shift from foundation to advertising-based funding in the 1970’s. The magazine’s publishers also spun off a family of associated journals and magazines, and eventually established a major web site, ChristianityToday.com. Through their home computers, by 2001, interested evangelicals could have a daily news update delivered; participate in web forums; buy books, videos and other merchandise; join a matchmaking service; search for a job; or donate to international causes. And they could subscribe to *Leadership* or another of the additional eleven magazines published by Christianity Today International. Along the way Christianity Today International developed its position as the leading source of evangelical news, opinion, and information in the English-speaking world. *Christianity Today*, with a paid circulation base of over 150,000

subscribers, (4) remained its flagship publication. In 2001 its list of editors and contributors included leading theologians and academics such as the Canadians Loren Wilkinson, John Stackhouse, Jr., and J.I. Packer, and the Americans Mark Noll, Thomas Oden, Richard Gallup, Jr., Nancy Murphy, Michael Novak, and Richard John Neuhaus.

While Strong’s rationalist, scientific conceptualization of Christianity undergirded the initial approach of *Christianity Today*’s editors and contributors, the subsequent 45 years

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of cultural change left their mark. This is evident by the contrast between the use of the concept of science in the major articles, columns, lead book reviews, and editorials (5) in the first ten full years of publication (1957 to 1966), with its use at the end of the century (1992-2001). While far from representing all of the evangelical community, or even all the voices audible within the *Christianity Today* (6) of this period, this approach tells us how the leading voices in the evangelical world wanted evangelicalism to be perceived by its adherents. Reviewing references to

science shows that while by the end of the century a post-evangelical theology had not emerged in the pages of *Christianity Today*, there were clear signs of major theological transformation. The evangelicalism of *Christianity Today*, in a move that demonstrates the impact of the postmodernism of its cultural context, had become non-rational. (7) While it continued to call a straying culture to truth, at play in its pages were both an encultured fideism (8) and a post-modern narrative constructionism. (9) The foundational rationality of Strong had become only history.

In the next two sections of the full text of his paper, Hiebert examines for comparative purposes two decades of publication of Christianity Today, what he calls the early years, 1957-66, and what he calls the contemporary period, 1992-2001. In his concluding section, he summarizes his findings, and concludes with a consideration of the future of the “evangelical project.”

Transformations

Over the 45 years covered by this study there are a number of obvious changes. Between 1992 and 2001 in any specific issue, readers are far less likely to come across references to science than in the earlier period, 1957 through 1966. But those references readers do come across in the later period are more likely to be descriptive of specific scientific research, especially social scientific research. In addition we find that references to Christian perspectives on science, by far the most common type of reference in the early period, have declined by a power of 10 in the later period (from 114 to 15). The gross numbers suggest that in contrast to the early years, it is not science itself, but the results of scientific research, that interest evangelicals at the close of the 20th century.

However, on closer reading, this misstates the gap between these two periods. In looking at the results of the scientific research, contemporary readers are likely to be given the ethical

implications of the research or told that the research supports an evangelical worldview. So while the subject matter seems to have changed, in fact, the reporting is still primarily concerned with the relationship between science and evangelical faith. The locus has shifted from theoretical concerns to the practical, but still, evangelicals want to know where science and evangelical faith do and do not work together. And in both periods, the editors and contributors to *Christianity Today* want their readers to read and believe that there is no fundamental conflict between science and evangelical faith. Looking at the articles on Galileo in both periods suggest that in fact any opposition that is now perceived to exist is the result of the internal inconsistency and confusion of science and not the necessary result of Christian beliefs.

There has also been no change in the way evolution is covered. In both periods it is attacked as poor science and poorer morality. Nor has there been a change in the intensity and level of the coverage. Readers are just as likely to find a strong attack on Darwinian evolution in any later issue as they were in the earlier period. There is something about Darwinian evolution that still represents a threat to evangelicalism, despite almost half a century of scientific and religious change.

But some things have dropped out of the discourse. Significantly, no longer are readers told that theology *is* a science. Readers are also not exposed to formal theological reflections on science, or analyses of how perspectives on science influence contemporary theology. Nor is there a significant formal discourse on the relationship of science to western culture, though the informal material on this relationship suggests that in the later period, as in the earlier, evangelicals perceive science as having a negative impact on culture.

The pattern that can be discerned within this constancy and change suggests that something profound is happening

within evangelical faith, that there is a transition in the basics of the faith that are being reflected in the way science is articulated. The existence of the complementary model of relations between evangelicalism and faith, in place of the earlier “theology as science” model of relations, implies that the foundationalism of the earlier evangelical project is gone. By adopting a complementary model evangelicals are accepting that Christian thought is in important respects different from

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scientific thought. But this is not a move toward deconstructionist post-modernism. Gordon Clark’s work on science in the early 60’s was clearly deconstructionist but there is no extension of Clark’s approach in later work. Instead the model adopted by the contributors appears to be something closer to critical realism: both science and evangelicalism speak of reality in ways that correspond approximately, reasonably, and usefully to reality. This may be why the editors, unlike those of

thirty years earlier, are now prepared to publish material that posits an unbridgeable gap between evangelical faith and the world depicted by science.

Two articles from the later period stand out in the clarity with which they illustrate this pattern. In 2001 *Christianity Today* published Walter Wangerin’s “Small Beneath the Firmament.”(10) The article is full of references to the first three chapters of the book of Genesis as Wangerin describes the connection to the land experienced by his farmer father-in-law. Wangerin is a minister and storyteller and this story is about the truth of the world as God’s creation. But, at no point does Wangerin enter into dialogue with rationalist, naturalist, or propositional approaches to the biblical texts he invokes. Instead with great power he evokes a sense of transcendence out of the utterly ordinary. A sensitive reader experiences awe at the transcendence he finds hovering between the molecules of ordinary existence. The other article is J.I. Packer’s 1999 contribution, “Did God Die on the Cross?” Packer is one of the leading evangelical, propositional theologians, a distinguished member of the *Christianity Today* editorial board, and one of the few people to have made contributions to both portions of this study. In this late contribution, Packer makes a claim for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus based upon a cross-cultural consensus regarding life after death. He says, “On the nature of postmortem life there are great differences, but on its reality, agreement has been so widespread that current Western scepticism about survival seems a mere local oddity.”(11) On the surface this appears to be another empirically based attack on the religious blindness of Western culture. But, for such a prominent evangelical to base his attack on widespread cross-cultural agreement, rather than on the basis of an *a priori* Christian truth claim indicates that the Bible no longer functions as the only foundational insight into reality even within the evangelical community.

Even the critique of Darwinian evolution shows this transition. While both earlier and later periods call it bad science, later criticism includes prominent mention of the concept of “Intentional Design.” Intentional design is the theoretical position that the planetary geological and astrophysical data are best made coherent by positing an intelligent designer of the cosmos who continues to intervene in the development of the universe at all levels in order that life may prosper and intelligent life may grow. While the concept was not ignored in the earlier period, its prominent presence in the later period suggests, once again, that a Christian *a priori* has given way to either a “bottom-up” empirical attempt to create a religiously directed consensus, (12) or a complementary approach where evidence from nature speaks as an independent source of divine information. However, as Van Till’s response to the concept of intentional design indicates, not all evangelicals are prepared to embrace this approach. Van Till continues to hold the traditional priority of the biblical worldview. But by doing so without the support of an independently revelatory nature, Van Till is supporting a new approach to evangelical understandings of truth. In keeping with Hengel and Burge’s responses to other facets of science, he places science and evangelical faith in a hierarchical relationship, with evangelical faith taking precedence.

The complexity of this transformation and the range of views encompassed within it, support Ian Barbour’s contention that applying typologies to the conceptualizations of the relationship of science and religion is a point well made. (13) The relationship between evangelical faith conceptualizations and science is a complex and not necessarily a consistent affair. Instead the views reflect religious *a priori*’s and a wide range of views can be held and change based not on the evangelical community’s study of science but on the range and transformation of the underlying body of beliefs. Thus Henry

and Clark or Wangerin and Packer reflect not alternative views about the relationship between science and evangelical beliefs, but alternate strategies for working out the implications of evangelical belief commitments.

An evangelical community deploying empiricism is an evangelical community seeking power. There is an historic connection between evangelicals and the religious right in the United States. (18) In this context, the appearance of empirical validation of evangelical beliefs supports evangelical political claims within the arena of American public life, especially when science is one of the few shared languages.

The future of the evangelical project

These strategic deployments of the concept of science in *Christianity Today* in two ten-year periods reveal two emerging and opposed strategies for a post-modern evangelicalism. The first strategy, based on a complementary understanding of science and Christian faith, is a bottom-up empiricism that looks at current science for indicators of the truthful nature of reality as already described by evangelical theology. Thus a “big bang” origin of the cosmos is seen as in keeping with the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine of divine creation. The anthropic principle is suggestive of a God who places human beings at the pinnacle of creation. Statistical correlations of evangelical beliefs with human health, marital longevity, happiness, and prosperity, are indicative of the truthfulness of evangelical

understandings of humanity as God’s creation and Jesus as the source of the good life.

This bottom-up empiricism is a strategy very much in keeping with the empiricism of contemporary evangelicalism’s founders, Ockenga, Henry, Smith, and Ramm. Both earlier and later evangelical strategies accept that science is an avenue for human perception of God’s reality. Where the more recent writers differ is that, having let go of the biblical foundationalism of the founding fathers, science is now used to add plausibility to the worldview of an evangelical community of belief. This is a sharp change from the earlier period where science was true because it revealed a world consistent with the world God made and revealed through the Bible. This explains why evolution remains such a point of conflict. As an empirically validated meta-narrative, evolution calls into question the legitimacy of an evangelical community that intellectually has come to depend on empirical validity. Inasmuch as evolution is a coherent and popular, non-miraculous explanation for all-that-is, it is not only bad science but more truly evil religion. This also explains why in the later period the evolutionary agnosticism of an Addison Leitch and the deconstructionism of a Gordon Clark no longer appear. Because a specific set of scientific perspectives is now the intellectual support for a community of belief, any questioning of those perspectives threatens the community itself.

Scientist and theologian John Polkinghorne has argued for a similar approach to Christian theology. (14) Based on his review of the findings of science he has suggested ways of reconceptualizing traditional Christian dogmas so that they remain coherent in a world where science is a powerful set of practices. However, Polkinghorne has in the process found it necessary to conceptualize the God who stands behind Christian dogma in ways that are not in keeping with traditional evangelical points of view.

Polkinghorne's God has set in motion a dance of chance and necessity, a dance where God takes risks. This breaks away from traditional evangelical dogmas of the all-knowingness of God, and, for some evangelicals, the predestined nature of human life. (15)

At this point the evangelical community does not seem amenable to the direction of Polkinghorne, despite his affinity for much traditional dogma. This suggests that there is a fideism (16) at work despite the apparent empiricism. Evangelicals who confess a bottom-up empiricism in fact have an irrational commitment to a specific faith perspective, and science is a construct deployed to cover up this irrationalism. As those familiar with the work of Michel Foucault will immediately recognize, deployment is an issue of power. (17)

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would dissipate and evangelicalism would become one fideism among many fideisms.

However, the political gains of this strategy risk opening evangelicalism to "natural theology." Once scripture and science are seen as complementary, with science legitimating current practice—the balance between them can quickly shift from the "biblical" to the "scientific." Especially as science expands its explanatory power and coherence, its validating function could become directive of the community's practice. Church history is littered with



the remains of theologies that have suffered this consequence. "Scientific" justification for current practices is a tool that moulds its user in subtle and destructive ways. For example, evangelical thought is currently wedded to a position that homosexual behaviour is an absolute aberration, because it says so in the Bible. But what happens to this doctrine when the scientific research indicates that homosexual orientation is in some respects a genetic trait, and thus a "natural" part of divine creation? Must evangelical scientists work to debunk these research results and produce science that supports traditional anti-homosexual doctrines? And what if such research results are not generated? Do evangelicals abandon their doctrine? Or worse, what happens when "science"

appears to support eugenics programs, or racism, or the use of nuclear weapons, or foreign wars of aggression, all actions that are not literally opposed by the Bible? Must evangelicals follow this "science"? These are not actions that "biblical" Christians have found easy to resist in the past, and in the future, more tightly-argued "scientific" rationales could raise up these or similar terrors to haunt evangelical orthodoxy.

This strategy, as approached by some practitioners, also risks leading evangelicalism into becoming "post-Christian." The obvious attraction of

some evangelicals to the concept of "intelligent design," as a hypothesis for cosmic and human origins, suggests that this is not trivial speculation. Intelligent design practitioners are attempting to develop a "scientific" frame of reference that allows "God" back into the cosmos as the necessary source of what are determined to be otherwise inexplicable data. But, it is a concept that claims validity without a specific religious framework such

as Judaism or Christianity. Therefore the constructed god of intelligent design, as based on the gaps in naturalist explanations, may ultimately have no relationship to evangelical convictions about God. (18) At that point evangelicalism faces the choice of either accepting this empirically-validated god and becoming post-Christian, or of dramatically reconstructing evangelicalism's meta-narrative in ways that do not need empirical justification—a difficult task for a community that has refused to disclose its fideism.

The alternative strategy, one I call narrative constructionalism, (20) is found in the work of Van Till, Hengel, Burge, Willimon, and Wangerin, and may

be more likely to provide the longterm direction for evangelicalism. (21) By positing the Bible as the source of evangelical faith and practice and identifying science as one practice within this worldview, the possibility exists of creating a community that has integrity, plausibility and direction. (22) The broad public plausibility of the scientific meta-narrative, however, means that science will have to be integrated carefully, with special attention paid to the points of conflict that are certain to arise. The religious framework within which science will be required to function must be coherent, must integrate most scientific findings, and must be plausible at least to evangelicals working within the sciences. Evolution, as the most powerful of science's meta-narratives, will need clear critical integration. However, by arguing biblical precedence, this point of view faces attack from three points of view. First, it is non-rational in its core practices (23) and thus reduces its own plausibility in a conceptual world where modernist discourse is still prevalent. Second, the institutions that nurture science will in all likelihood object strenuously to any efforts to place their endeavours within religiously determined perspectives. Third, the Bible that forms its core will be subject to deconstruction from a wide range of existing linguistic, historicist, and theological perspectives.

The risk also exists that the tension between the evangelical faith and practice so enjoined and the world as described by the sciences and manipulated by technology will be so great as to make the belief-construct untenable to its practitioners. While human beings can hold together much that is contradictory, the dissonance can become so great that one set of beliefs is discarded. In order to manage the risk this approach will require great sensitivity to the changing world of science and the willingness to constructively modify the operative understanding of biblical faith and practice. The community must develop accepted practices for theological

modification. This will not be easy because evangelicalism was built upon a foundational conviction that the Christian faith, as interpreted through the Protestant Reformation, is unchanging. If the only emphasis in continuity between this perspective and evangelical tradition is the text of the Bible, and that in ways that would appear unimaginable to the tradition's founders, then this road runs in a direction that can only be called post-evangelical.

On the other hand, from within this framework the possibility exists that (post-) evangelical theology can work creatively with science by suggesting new areas of research based on the conviction of the practicing community that its narrative accurately indicates the fundamental nature of the universe. A biologist functioning from such a perspective might start looking, based on their understanding of God's actions through Jesus, for places where life forms sacrifice their existence so that new forms of life can come into existence. (24) A sociologist functioning from such a perspective might look for the ways in which prayer changes the emotional make-up of individuals and communities in constructive ways.

As we have seen, looking at the way the concept of science is used in the pages of *Christianity Today* has opened a window into the way a community of religious practice has profoundly modified its discourse. The evangelical community in Canada and the United States has not remained static in the face of the massive changes in Western culture over the last half of the 20th century. Instead it has modified its internal discourse in response to the philosophical and cultural forces at play, essentially abandoning the modern project and exploring competing modes of future self-articulation. Despite obvious similarities in the way the concept of science has been used over that entire period, the differences indicate that radically different conceptual systems are being worked out, and, ironically for a community with its origins so solidly in the modern

project, these new conceptual systems reflect not the carefully reasoned intentions of the founders but the non-rational constructs of the emerging post-modern culture.

On the one side we see an encultured fideism: an ideological belief-construct attempting to deploy itself as empirically validated and therefore able to remain engaged with North American culture as a normative force. But evangelicalism goes this route at the loss of the priority of the Bible that was the foundation of the tradition.

On the other side we see a narrative constructionism that seeks to build a biblically centred community of practice. But this approach risks losing internal coherence and abandoning formal engagement with the broader culture of North America.

That there are two competing conceptual systems indicates that the final direction of community transformation has not yet been selected. Given that other approaches have been tried and discarded along the way, neither of these may yet be the way forward for North American evangelicalism. Regardless, evangelicalism over the last half of the 20th century changed from being a modern to being a post-modern enterprise. The most conservative rationalists of Western Christianity are now firmly, and probably permanently, non-rational.

NOTE: A complete list of notes works cited in this document, but not included here, is available from the editor; e-mail grahama@sfu.ca

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