

# The Scandal of the (Male) Evangelical Mind

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*By Mark Noll / Reviewed by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen*

The scandal of the evangelical mind, Mark Noll tells us, "is that there is not much of an evangelical mind" (p.3). The reasons he lists for this are many, and include evangelical over-emphasis on the emotionally-charged experience of conversion, an overly-populist approach to evangelism, a preoccupation with personal sanctification to the exclusion of concern for creation, for society, and for the institutions represented therein, and a fortress mentality left over from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. The minimal intellectual life that has survived in fundamentalism—affecting evangelicalism by association—has relied on an uncritical retention of nineteenth century "common sense" epistemology, with its reliance on intuition, its naive confidence in the existence of indisputable facts, and its appeal to Baconian inductivism as the route to sure truth in science and theology alike.

To a Kuyperian Calvinist like myself, much of Noll's critique is a case of preaching to the converted. Calvinism's strong creation theology, its insistence on the working of common grace even in the midst of pervasive depravity, its rejection of nature-grace dualism and conviction that all of life is to be redeemed—all of these have made for a solid appreciation of the life of the mind in the service of God's kingdom. Moreover, because of their more recent immigrant heritage, many (though certainly not all) North American Calvinists have been spared the polarizing fallout of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, retaining instead a continuous connection to more European and less naively-positivist, modes of scholarship.

## *THE INVISIBLE WOMAN*

However, in spite of such natural sympathy for Noll's "epistle (to evangelicaldom) from a wounded lover" (p. ix), I found myself continually troubled, as I read it, by a pervasive narrowness in the scope of its analysis. Let me begin my exegesis of this concern with an anecdote from another Christian scholarly gathering.

A few years ago my colleague Elaine Storkey, a British Christian philosopher and social critic, gave a lecture at Calvin College entitled "The Hidden History of Women in the Church." She began by referring to a talk she had given shortly before, at the request of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, on Scottish church history. In her extensive research for that talk, she told her audience, she discovered an amazing thing—namely, that aside from Mary Queen of Scots, "there were no women living in Scotland between the years 1170 and 1928."<sup>1</sup> Of course, what she actually found, and was reporting with mock seriousness, was that none of her sources on Scottish history *made reference* to any women in Scotland between 1170 and 1928 besides Mary Queen of Scots.

In their 1985 book *Women's Place in the Academy*, Marilyn Schuster and Susan Van Dyne describe the stages of curriculum transformation through which American educational institutions, disciplines and their textbooks pass as they begin to include the experience of women and other subordinate groups.<sup>2</sup> Stage One—and arguably the one best represented by Starkey's sources on Scottish history—is that of the "Invisible Woman"—so called because it rests on a historiography which assumes that only the public, institutional acts of powerful figures (political, economic, scientific, religious) are worthy of record. Stage One historiography embodies the oft-repeated, cynical assertion that history is written by the winners, the winners in this case being hegemonic males writing about themselves—quite unself-consciously, let alone self-critically—as if they represented generic humanity, in terms of both demographic and performance norms. In Stage One historiography, Schuster and Van Dyne tell us, "the absence of women is simply not noticed," sometimes not even by women students, whose "profound reaction to [the curricular] omissions occurs . . . only after graduation."<sup>3</sup>

#### *ADD WOMEN AND STIR*

It would be a mistake to say that Mark Noll's *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* represents Stage One of Schuster's and Van Dyne's typology, although it is a stage which is still all too common. Regrettably, some institutions (particularly Christian ones) have never progressed beyond it, and others (notably some secular ones) are determined to return to it under the rubric of resisting political correctness and returning to self-evident and immutable "standards of excellence." Noll does have (by my count) fourteen passing references to actual women scattered throughout his 250 pages of text (including the likes of Anne Bradstreet, Ellen White, Phoebe Palmer, Frances Willard and Dorothy Sayers), and he lists nine sources written by women scholars in his footnotes. But his choices in both cases would seem to put him in Schuster's and Van Dyne's Stage Two, which they characterize as "the Search for Missing Women," and which others have dubbed the "add women and stir" approach.

In this stage, professors and textbook writers become more aware of women *qua* women who are in their classrooms—perhaps in numbers equalling or surpassing men—and that in the interests of fairness (not to mention keeping enrollment statistics and textbook sales up) they should be exposed to role-models drawn from their own sex. Hence the search "for women figures good enough to be included on the syllabus"—namely, "the great women, the female Shakespeares, Napoleons, [and] Darwins"—women whose chief unstated claim to fame is their resemblance to men acting on the public stage. These include (among others) "queens, martyrs, suffragists, [and] female novelists with male pseudonyms."<sup>4</sup> In Noll's case they also include, in the body of his text, the rare evangelical women who are remembered for preaching, for doing creative, theological or historical writing, and for mounting social reform campaigns largely on the same terms as their male contemporaries. In his footnotes they include women scholars who appear to be comfortable with such a model of scholarship.

### *WIDENING THE SEARCH*

Schuster and Van Dyne rightly point out that this model of gender integration is inherently unstable, and in danger of regression to Stage One. The number of women who can be found to measure up to traditional standards will be few and, given the androcentric bias of those standards (in Henry Higgins' sung complaint, "Why Can't A Woman Be More Like A Man?"), it will be tempting to conclude that this is because of inherent individual and/or group female flaws which prevent them from living up to standards of "universal" value. According to Schuster's and Van Dyne's survey, what pushes teachers and textbook writers on to Stage Three (Women as Disadvantaged, Subordinate Group) is a greater concern for social justice and a willingness to look for structural, rather than just personal, explanations for the state of women and other less visible groups. "Instead of looking only at outcomes (actions, productions, or expression) of individual women, the typical questions [of this stage, often motivated by the frustrating search for missing women in the previous stage] concern causes: 'Why are there so few women leaders? Why are women's traditional roles of expression devalued?'"<sup>5</sup>

There are hints of this third stage of gender integration in Noll's book—hints which I wish he had developed further, at least in his footnotes. He refers to the Old Testament prophets "urg[ing] the faithful to establish justice in Israel" (p. 47), and to efforts of early Protestants "to make political and social organizations reflect the norms of justice they found in Scripture . . . [doing] what they could to make life in society reflect the goodness of God" (p. 39). He laments the seventeenth and eighteenth century Pietist's "morbid fixation upon the Christian's personal state at the expense of evangelism, study, or social outreach" (p. 49) and applauds William Jennings Bryan's "concern for justice to individuals along with dignity for communities" (p. 159). Though few in number, these passages show Noll's awareness that cultivating an evangelical mind goes hand in hand with the cultivation of biblically-based standards of social justice.

### *ACCEPTING WOMEN AS WOMEN, AND WOMEN AND MEN TOGETHER*

But one cannot think intelligently about social justice without going on to Stages Four through Six of a transformed historiography, all of which are conspicuously absent in Noll's book. In Stage Four, women and other marginalized groups are studied on their own terms, looking at their experience from within, and with sensitivity to differences of class, ethnicity, and religious tradition. In Stage Five, gender becomes an accepted and obvious category of social analysis, just as class has become during this century (and just as religion *should* become in all the humanities and social sciences). The academic disciplines are challenged with questions such as "Just how valid are current definitions of historical periods, of cultural products, and of norms for behavior?" Finally, in Stage Six (which needless to say, is still an eschatological gleam on the horizon of most institutions) there is a transformed or "balanced" curriculum, in which it is acknowledged that men have gender too, and that women's and men's experience must be understood in dynamic and relational terms, again with due attention to the moderating variables of class, ethnicity, religion and so on.

### *AVOIDING A "HOT TOPIC"?*

It remains now to speculate just why Noll has chosen to keep gender as a category of analysis so marginal in his book—and this despite the fact that the period of American church history on which he concentrates (eighteenth through the twentieth century) was marked by strong controversies about appropriate gender relations in the midst of the First and Second Great Awakening, the abolitionist movement, and the rise of fundamentalism, controversies covered in recent books by feminist historians, evangelical and otherwise.<sup>6</sup> The most obvious explanation is that no book can be all things to all people, and that Noll's evasion of gender issues is simply a case of specialization, not discrimination. But it seems to me that authors of well-crafted books on controversial social topics need at least to acknowledge the existence and importance of related areas and to steer readers in the direction of the relevant literature. Noll does not even do this much.

It might also be the case that Noll, having opened one can of worms, did not want to push his luck by opening yet another. There is strong pressure within all evangelical subcultures to preserve the illusion of sanctified social harmony.<sup>7</sup> It can be rocking the boat quite enough to take one's fellow Christians to task for the shallowness of their intellectual life without also challenging assumptions about gender relations which are already under scrutiny by secular academics, in-house feminist organizations, and the media. Schuster and Van Dyne point out that Stage Three writing and teaching, concentrated as it is on justice issues and the undeniable pervasiveness of women's past oppression, generates a lot of anger and defensiveness in the classroom as it begins to reveal the "invisible paradigms" on which earlier disciplinary approaches rested. Indeed, one could argue that many secular women's studies programs now under attack are ones which have not moved beyond the necessary but limiting Stage Three documentation of oppression to the more intellectually rigorous and nuanced approaches of Stage Four through Six.<sup>8</sup> But it remains the case that most evangelical churches and parachurch organizations have not yet moved beyond Stage One ("invisible women") or at best, Stage Two ("add women and stir"), and so any attempt to analyze gender relations at a deeper level is bound to bring evangelicals into the polarizing arena of Stage Three ("women as a disadvantaged group"). In the short run (though, of course, not in the long) it is more comfortable for most evangelicals to avoid a gendered analysis completely.

### *ANOTHER ANSWER?*

However, tempting as these two explanations are, I am inclined to think that something even more complicated is at work in Noll's evasion of gender issues. Various reviewers of his book have rightly pointed out that despite the detailed bluntness of Noll's critique, he offers no clear portrait of what the renewed "evangelical mind" would be like. I think that this vagueness has something to do with Noll's own ambivalence towards the epistemology of modernity. (I note in passing that "modern" is a term he uses close to three dozen times without ever defining or evaluating it). It is clear that he rejects Baconian inductivism as an epistemological basis for both science and biblical studies, but it is not so clear that he rejects the Popperian philosophy of science, with its overdrawn distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification, which succeeded Baconianism in the academy.

For instance, Noll pleads with evangelicals to be "less supernaturalistic" in a way that seems to preserve rather than transcend the dichotomies of fact vs. value, science vs. faith which post-modern epistemology has contested in showing that facts are theory-laden and theories are underdetermined by facts. Moreover if, as Nicholas Wolterstorff and other Reformed scholars have argued, *every* human being "reasons within the bounds of religion," then the road to better evangelical thinking is not to be "less supernaturalistic" but rather to articulate more clearly just what essential Christian control beliefs are, and how these should operate in the crafting and adjudication of theories within the various academic disciplines. For if our world views inevitably interact with theorizing, as postmodern epistemology now concedes, then the academy is no more justified in marginalizing competent scholars working within a Christian perspective than it would be in rejecting equally competent scholars working from a Marxist, radical feminist, or naturalistic atheist perspective.

What has this to do with Noll's evasion of gender issues in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*? Simply this: Historically, the modern separation of so-called "public" reason-based facts from "private" faith-based values went hand in hand with the *gendering* of public and private spheres. The "rational," fact-based male activities of scholarship, commerce, and politics were assigned to the public sphere. The "irrational," feeling-based, female activities of religion, friendship, sexuality and social reproduction were assigned to the private sphere. (Recall, for example, Freud's assertion that the domains of women were *kinder, kuche, und kirche*.) So it stands to reason that if you have only ambivalently transcended the Enlightenment-based fact/value dichotomy (as seems to be the case with Noll) then you may also find it difficult to set aside assumptions about the gendering of private and public life as well, and you will do your historiography accordingly.

#### *ANOTHER CHALLENGE*

Noll's failure to deal with the gendered aspects of his "scandal" (even in a footnote or in an introductory qualifier) has alienated not a few Christian women in the academy. Since its clear Noll wants all the help he can get in rebuilding the evangelical mind, it is regrettable that in his book he has largely treated half his constituency as if they did not exist. But since he also clearly has another book to write about the actual shape (as opposed to the absence) of the evangelical mind, then he also has the opportunity to plumb the depths of Schuster's and Van Dyne's Stages Four through Six. Let us hope that he takes up the challenge.

Notes:

1. Elaine Storkey, "The Hidden History of Women in the Church." Lecture given at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI, March 12, 1991.
2. Marilyn R. Schuster and Susan R. Van Dyne (eds.), *Women's Place in the Academy: Transforming the Liberal Arts Curriculum* (Rowman and Allenheld, 1985), ch. 2, "Stages of Curriculum Transformation," pp. 13-29.
3. Schuster and Van Dyne, *Op.Cit.*, "Stages of Curriculum Transformation," pp. 18, 19.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 20 (my emphases).
6. See for example Nancy F. Colt, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity* (Middlebury, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984); Janette Hassey, *No Time for Silence: Evangelical Women in Public Ministry Around the Turn of the Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Betty DeBerg, *Ungodly Women* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992); Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender 1875 to Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
7. See for example Carol J. Greenhouse, *Praying for Justice: Faith Order and Community in an American Town* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).
8. See for example Daphne Patai and Norella Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from Inside the Strange World of Women's Studies* (New York: New Republic/Basic Books, 1994).

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