

Review: Holiday Reading – Recommendations?

My family and I are just about to go away on holiday. I'm going to not be blogging (or rss feed reading) for a month!

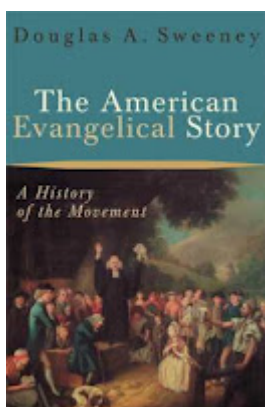
But... I will be reading books and writing reviews (which I find useful for myself and my own thoughts) and publishing them later.

And... I will be visiting Ridley College bookshop at the beginning of the holidays.

So... Anybody got any recommendations for books that I can read while I'm away?



Review: The American Evangelical Story



Of all the sorts of books that I've read since leaving College six and a half years ago books about church history have been in the minority.

It's rather strange really – I enjoyed studying church history and have found it of immense importance when considering future and present church issues, particular church planting

and “fresh expression” strategies. I find a lot of church planting theory irrelevant and/or paternalistic – description invalidly turned to prescription. In general, you can learn more from a good account of real stuff that has happened.

And so I picked up Douglas Sweeney’s *The American Evangelical Story* on special one day. It is a short book, an overview. It was cheap, relatively light, but a good way back into this part of the discipline. I chose the topic because the contemporary American church is so important but I do not understand it’s roots well. After reading this book my understanding his improved.

It helped remind me that there is nothing new under the sun.

- We see young guns in 1741 failing to keep connected to the previous generation (“James Davenport... denounced New Haven’s minister from the pulpit of his own church – while he was sitting in the audience!” Page 56).
- Charismatic experiences of the ilk of the Toronto Blessing are not new (“Signs and wonders appeared all around, as hundreds of worshipers, slain in the Spirit, barked like dogs, jerked uncontrollably, fell into trances, danced, and shouted.” Page 72)
- The tendency to compromise the gospel for pragmatic purposes is not new (With reference to preaching to slaves, “Some of them promised never to preach on God’s deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage to the Egyptians... the pact they made with these masters led to distortions in their preaching and wound up helping the masters more than it did the slaves.” Page 110)
- We even have reference to Old and New Calvinism – not in 2009, but 1700’s! (Page 58).

I was already partly familiar with the early chapters – it is covered in most histories of the Reformation and also the Wesleyan times. It was the last two chapters that I found particular helpful. These deal with the rise of

Pentecostalism, and neoevangelicalism – the two broad aspects of American Evangelicalism which have direct effects today.

With regard to Pentecostalism I was intrigued with how the ancestry of Pentecostalism derives quite clearly from Methodism and the influence of the Great Awakening. The characteristic of a “second blessing” spirituality is present:

“The early Methodists maintained a goal of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, which they believed could had by faith during a supernatural “second blessing” from God. After conversion, Wesley taught, God continues to work within us, putting to death the deeds of the flesh and consecrating our lives for him. However, there comes a point for many when, dissatisfied with incremental progress in the faith, they seek and receive a second work of uniquely supernatural grace that lifts them to a new level of evangelical piety. Now entirely sanctified, they no longer want to commit sin.” (Page 135)

I had not realised this link from the Holiness movement through the likes of Charles Parham, linking up with the momentum of African American spirituality in William Seymour, producing the Azusa Street revival that is considered the “birth” of American Pentecostalism. It was useful to see it and Sweeney does well to show how the Azusa Street revival drew from many differing aspects of the Awakenings that preceded it, crossing denominational, gender, and race boundaries as it did so.

Sweeney continues the path into the post-second-world-war era and shows the impact of Pentecostalism on the mainstream in the Charismatic Movement. We can see the roots of the likes of John Wimber and Fuller Seminary. This is a good perspective. He doesn't go much beyond this, however, and we do not get an insight into the upsurge in prosperity doctrine moving churches away from classical Pentecostalism in the 1980's and

90's.

The final chapter, unpacking the "fundamentalist controversy" of the early twentieth century, gave me insight into the groundwork of "neoevangelicals" like Billy Graham after the second world war. I did not realise the issues that both separated and connected these two generations. Sweeney speaks of

"those who stayed in the mainline until the early twentieth century defending their faith – and seeking to keep control of the mainline Protestant churches – in an age beset by new mental and social challenges (fundamentalists); and those who regrouped after they lost the mainline Protestant institutions, building their own, mainly parachurch, web of evangelical ministries from which they would succeed in reengaging American culture (neoevangelicals)" (Page 156)

It was in this last chapter that I could see a direct influence on, and a parallel to, the controversy within the Anglican Church at the moment. Here are evangelicals wrestling with the priority of gospel ministry, the place of politics and institutional power-games, and the unchanged points of attack from liberalism. Niehbuhr's quote about liberalism – "a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." (Page 161) – speaks from that era to this time.

Not that the evangelical side is completely lacking in blame, however. I was intrigued with the portrayal of how the influence of dispensationalism and premillennialism on the evangelical gospel over-spiritualised it and removed it from grassroots activities and social reform that had previously been motivated by the "postmillennial hopes of many early evangelicals" (Page 163). I think this is a particular aspect I would like to explore further.

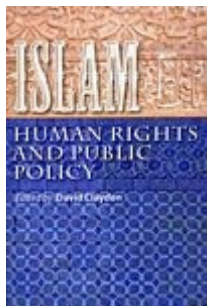
Sweeney's conclusions are strong. In particular his point that

“at its best, evangelicalism functions as a renewal movement within the larger, universal church” (Page 184) should be taken as an exhortation to “stay in” and reform: “Otherwise we will lose our impact on the larger Christian church.” (Page 184).

I’m glad I read this book and getting my feet back into the pool of Church History. Sweeney’s overview was a good place to begin.



Review: Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy



I was handed a copy of *Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy* by my Bishop, John Harrower, who is one of the contributors to this book. I came to the book as one who is aware only in general terms of the values of Islam and the application of Islamic religion and spirituality in the public sphere. This book informs, clarifies, warns, exhorts.

The book is far from some Christian compendium of anti-Muslim tracts. The contributors are respected, studious, academic, serious leaders. None of them promulgate a phobic line that is sometimes used elsewhere; there is no emotive placing of Christianity as a victim in a crusade-like framework where the Kingdom of God is threatened by hordes of heathen. Rather here is genuine concern about society in general, not just the Christian church. It is an apology for pluralism – but pluralism done well, in freedom.

Peter Day catches the program somewhat in his chapter,

Australian Public Policy: Examining the Foundations:

"It should be clear that excessive Islamophobia is a poor foundation for the development of public policy in any field. And it is an especially poor foundation for the development of the sound knowledge bases... on which sound policy ultimately depends." (page 27)

This book gave me new awareness of aspects of Islam. An example of this is *dhimmitude* – the tolerance of non-Muslims allowed to live (as *dhimmi*) in subjugation to Muslims. Mark Durie applies it by considering the tendency of Western tolerance to unquestioningly affirm all spiritualities.

"This is not a healthy way to engage with Islam for those living in liberal democracies. It establishes a framework in which Islam takes on the role of a dominator that expects to be praised and admired. The reaction to deserved criticism, when it manages to find a voice, can be shock, denial and outrage." (page 34)

The exposition of the subtleties of *sharia* law were also worthwhile. The apostasy laws, preventing a Muslim from converting to another religion on pain of severe punishment including death are often cited (amongst other things) as an indicator of the "fundamental areas of conflict between Islamic law and Western democratic human rights" (page 66).

A common conclusion was that even partial recognition of *sharia* within secular society is unhelpful. Abdallah Bahri shows in his chapter on *Aspects of Sharia Introduced into Non-Islamic States* how concepts of religious freedom and human rights are being undermined because the end-game of *Sharia* is always towards a "complete way of life."

"Many Muslim leaders teach that humanly determined laws are not God's laws and therefore do not need to be obeyed." (Page

184)

"It is this complete way of life that is embodied in the Sharia. It prescribes everything from the personal and the family to the state level." (page 185)

And finally the concept of *da'wa*, or "invitation", which is often portrayed as the "real" face of Islam as opposed to *jihad* – persuasion or invitation instead of coercion or force. Paul Stenhouse argues that *da'wa* is "Jihad with a Velvet Glove" and warns about being

"deceived, as many in the West are deceived, into thinking that abandonment of overt violence means abandonment of the goals of violence... a change of policy, not a change of heart... Through da'wa it hopes to achieve by stealth what will ultimately prove to be unattainable by brute force." (pages 222, 224)

Bishop John's chapter, *Religious Policy, Multi-Faith Dialogue, and Australian Values* looks at the difficulties of the engagement with Islam in "multi-faith" conversations. He notes that the tendency of Government to "promote multi-faith dialogue as a means of developing a spirit of harmony" rests on certain assumptions, and

"Where one or more of these assumptions are not agreed to by the proposed participants, the resultant 'dialogue' becomes an opportunity for advocacy of one's own world view and the dialogue makes no contribution towards a spirit of harmony... Experience in interfaith dialogue has shown to date that the attempt to develop harmony through dialogue is an idealist's hope that is not often realised." (page 247)

This is a worthy recognition of the tendency in Western society to insist that religion submit to a pseudo "civic religion" empty of all diversity or proclamation. Bishop John

puts forward a better framework.

“Public policy on promoting harmony should be pursued in the context of promoting the nation’s values, rather than requesting discussions between religious groups... The religious context carries with it, inevitably, an agenda for advocacy and the need to protect one’s doctrinal position. What can be encouraged, however, is a secular dialogue on values.” (pages 251-252)

This book isn’t a wrestle or a debate. The issues are *handled* but not *grappled* with in the sense that there is very little to-and-fro, exhortation, rebuttal, response. It is primarily educated opinion and observation.

Therefore, the value is for us who have not had the opportunity or the insight to observe these things about Islam or consider them in that way. The things noted are real, relevant and will become increasingly so in the future as worlds collide. It motivates myself, for one, to be further applied to the teaching of Biblical truth that it may find many voices in times ahead.