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Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts

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David Bebbington?s latest book endeavours to shed light on the subject of Victorian revivalism by means of a series of case studies into various religious awakenings which took place between 1841 and 1880. The author?s research has not been confined to Britain; instead his objective is to demonstrate that there was ?a common revival culture that bound together people on opposite sides of the globe? (p. 262). This, of course, is in keeping with recent trends in the historiography of revivalism, which has emphasised the existence of a ?transatlantic community of saints?.(1) For this reason, he has chosen to analyse instances of revivalism in various parts of the English-speaking world. Hence the book considers the Baptist Revival at Washington-on-the-Brazos, Texas in 1841; the Wesleyan Methodist Revival in Cornwall, 1849; the Primitive Methodist Revival in Weardale, County Durham in 1851; the Presbyterian Revival at North Carolina, 1857; the Ferryden Revival, Forfarshire, Scotland in 1859; the Moonta Mines Revival, South Australia in 1874; and the Baptist Nova Scotia Revival, 1880. By covering such a broad geographical basis, the book should appeal to scholars interested in similar awakenings which occurred contemporaneously with the specific revivals examined here. For instance, those concerned with the 1859 Revival in Ulster will benefit by comparing it with the awakening in Forfarshire. Hence this is an important volume for those engaged in comparative studies, especially within a transatlantic context. It may be wondered why the author has chosen to examine

several instances of revival, as opposed to simply offering a general survey of evangelical awakenings. Professor Bebbington basically maintains that the study of localised instances of revivalism helps us to accurately comprehend the true nature of such phenomena. The author points out that a micro-history approach has been successfully employed in other areas of religious history, the most conspicuous recent example being Eamon Duffy?s portrayal of the Reformation in an English village.(2) Consequently, it is a false dichotomy to assume that micro-history and macro-history are opposed to one another. As long as one keeps in mind the broader context, micro-history can be immensely valuable in demonstrating how broader ideas were lived out and movements experienced in local situations.(3) This helps the historian avoid reductionist conclusions and sweeping generalisations, which are often a problem with more general surveys. It really is only a matter of common sense that specific detail, based on diligent empirical research, is required in order to understand a revival in any depth (p. 229).

Of course, a review of a monograph of this nature immediately raises questions as to what type of revivals are being considered and how revival is being defined. In this volume, the author?s over-riding concern is with revival among evangelicals. He does, nevertheless, recognise that non-evangelical groups had their own variants of revivalism (the Anglo-Catholics being one example).(4) Unlike other commentators on revivals, Professor Bebbington is aware of the fact that various self-confessed evangelicals were not entirely committed to all forms of popular revivalism.(5) Recognition of this, however, does not obscure the general principle that revival was at the core of evangelical Protestant identity throughout the Victorian era. In terms of definition, revivals were usually considered to be periods when the church received a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which resulted in the revitalisation of the church and the conversion of sinners to Christ. It is helpful that Professor Bebbington?s opening chapter (?The trajectory of revival?) includes an interesting taxonomy of how revival was defined in various traditions. He claims that revival, in the modern sense, was a discovery of Scottish Presbyterianism in the 17th century. It is argued that these revivals were orderly, carefully controlled by the parish minister, and whenever excitement did threaten to break out it was quickly restrained.(6) Other patterns of revival subsequently emerged, often associated with Methodism, which stressed the need for immediate conversion and permitted uninhibited self-expression. During the 19th century, such separate denominational approaches did not remain intact; instead there was a process of synthesis as a result of the exuberance at Kentucky in 1801 and the emergence of Charles G. Finney?s new measures. Professor Bebbington argues that this led to the rise of a homogeneous evangelical approach to awakenings, which retained many features of Methodist revivalism, but also attracted people from other denominations owing to their common evangelicalism.

Victorian Religious Revivals contributes significantly to the historiographical debate concerning the interpretation of the revival phenomenon. The first ideological outlook that the author critiques is the providentialist school of history, often associated with J. Edwin Orr?s work on revivals.(7) Professor Bebbington does not dispute the validity of appealing to the supernatural, but the failure of historians belonging to this school to adopt a sufficiently analytical method. In particular, he suggests that Dr Orr spent too much time focusing on what revivals had in common, rather than what distinguished them. On the other hand, a more recent contributor to this school of thought, Iain H. Murray, has argued that the failure to account for the supernatural explains why historians have been unable to elucidate the difference between the revivals associated with the First Great Awakening and the revivalism associated with Charles G. Finney.(8) The historical theologian, R. Scott Clark, has noted that this perspective effectively poisons the well by assuming what it has not proved. It presumes that one cannot come to the conclusion that revivals have been unhelpful to the church if one is a believer in providence.(9) This perspective is self-defeating, because surely the revivals which Mr Murray designates as spurious also came about in the providence of God as well. Thus it is inadequate to appeal to providence in order to determine which revivals are good or bad. This observation further confirms the analysis of the ecclesiastical historian and Reformed scholar, Carl Trueman. In his recent book on historical method, *Histories and Fallacies*, Professor Trueman refers to the 9/11 attacks as an example of the insufficiency of appealing to providence to explain the secondary causes of historical events. He states, ?[m]ost believers in providence, when pushed, would agree that all things are providential; thus, if the Twin Towers had not been attacked that day, it would still have been providential?.(10) Hence the recognition of divine providence as the universal cause of why everything happens does not

tell us why specific historical episodes occurred in the way that they did, which is what the historian has to do when analysing particular events.

The next school of thought Professor Bebbington considers is the ?psychological interpretation? offered by historians such as F. M. Davenport and Elizabeth Nottingham. This school, working on the suppositions of Social Darwinism, argued that revivals should be assigned to a low stage on the scale of civilisation, in which people had their imaginations inflamed as a result of mob psychology to the point that they reverted to ?primitive? characteristics.(11) The obvious problem with this is that not all preachers who sought to work up a revival were successful, thus such an over-arching explanation is insufficient. Likewise, the ?Frontier thesis? is also rejected, as it fails to account for revivals which took place in localities with developed agrarian economies. The English Marxist historian, E. P. Thompson, regarded revivalism (especially of the Methodist variety) as a form of social control in which working-class people were submitted to ?psychic exploitation? and ?emotional violence? in order to divert them from radical social action through a ?psychic process of counter-revolution?.(12) Although it may be the case that some revivals were the work of elites trying to control the masses, this in no way justifies the reduction of revivalism to social control. In other contexts, as the laity felt sufficiently empowered to throw off clerical shackles, evangelicalism and revivalism were populist movements that led to the democratisation of Christianity.(13) It could even be argued that movements such as the 1859 Ulster Revival were actually examples of religious anarchy, as opposed to being instances of authoritarian social control.(14) A related approach to revivals is the assertion that they were the products of economic change. The difficulty with this view is establishing a definite link between economic conditions and revivals. Clearly the 1857?8 Revival in America was stimulated by a financial collapse (15); however, there are other cases were revivals took place in a context of economic prosperity (p. 32). Indeed, Eric Hobsbawm acknowledged there was no inextricable link between economic depression and revivalism, as he recognised that revivals did not normally occur when the economy was at its worst.(16) Finally, the social integration thesis, that presents revivals as events which consolidated the nation in which they took place, does appear to have some substance. It is true that people such as William Wilberforce regarded evangelicalism as essential to national well-being.(17) The 1859 Revival in Ulster, furthermore, was a boost to Protestant self-confidence and it may have contributed to the estrangement of the province from the rest of Ireland. Obviously, this is important in terms of understanding the emergence of the Northern Ireland state. There may be other examples where this is also true, but this will have to be determined on a case-by-case basis, and not on an ideological assumption that revivalism is a tool of nation building. Hence David Hempton and Myrtle Hill correctly warn that revivalism cannot be reduced to mere cultural and sociological categories, as it has an internal dynamic of its own.(18) All of the above approaches may have some relevance to specific instances of revivalism, but to suppose that all revivals can be explained in such terms is crudely reductionist.(19) Professor Bebbington?s critique of the existing historiography would seem to confirm that this case-by-case approach is correct.

In addition to the above historiographical critiques, there are various other major interpretative issues addressed in this volume. First, the empirical evidence does not appear to support a sharp dichotomy between ?prayed down? and ?worked up? revivals. Using the examples of the Cornish Revival in 1849 and the revival at Moonta Mines in 1875, it appears that popular zeal for revival was a major reason why such events occurred.(20) In relation to the 1859 Revival in Ulster, Janice Holmes concludes that revivalism ?gloried in the abandonment of rationality?.(21) This, however, was not the case in all revivals. Professor Bebbington points out that even the revival among the Primitive Methodists at Weardale was led by the ?cerebral figure? Colin McKechnie. Moreover, he was assisted by various lay people who also placed a high value on learning and displayed evidence of considerable intellectual discrimination. One of McKechnie?s associates, John Snaith, even published a monograph on the philosopher Hegel (pp 123-9). Thus, in the minds of these revivalists, there was no antithesis between self-improvement and revivalism. In light of this, one is reminded of E. P. Thompson?s comment, ?We are often tempted to forgive Methodism some of its sins when we recollect that at least it gave children and adults rudimentary education in its Sunday schools?.(22) So although revivalism has often been associated with irrationalism, it is unsafe to assume that every outbreak of revival can be characterised in this way. Professor Bebbington also argues that revivalism should not be assessed in terms of appeals to gender differences. In relation to the revival at North Carolina in 1857,

he argues that women made no specific emotional input to the revival (p. 152). On the other hand, in his assessment of the Ferryden Revival, the author admits that contemporary accounts of physical manifestations among men and women may have been distorted by those with a vested interest in not wishing to convey the impression that the movement was an outburst of female hysteria (p. 173). It also appears from Kenneth Jeffrey?s research on the 1858?62 Revival in the north east of Scotland that there were some cases where women were more prone to the physical manifestations than men.(23) This point raises important methodological questions concerning the use of sources, especially those written by revival-supporting clerics who wished to downplay the more exotic expressions of revivalism. Distinguishing between rhetoric and reality in these cases is not easy, and requires the historian to exercise considerable discernment.

A recurring theme in this volume is the clash between the evangelical Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement, with the latter?s emphasis on emotion as opposed to reason.(24) The author suggests the Ferryden Revival was an instance of radical evangelicals, influenced by Romanticism, placing greater emphasis on instant conversion and immediate assurance, while showing more tolerance towards the physical phenomena than moderates who still adhered to Enlightenment rationality. This divergence goes a long way to explaining why moderates generally held a dualistic concept of revivals (they were good, but were also accompanied with some regrettable incidental physical evils), while the radicals held a monistic view that the physical manifestations were part of the work of God (pp. 176?9, 185, 191). Furthermore, he claims that the view of holiness taught at Moonta, that sanctification was not a matter of strenuous effort but of peaceful trust, was tinged with Romanticism. Indeed, it appears that ?[t]hey were practising Keswick spirituality before Keswick began? (p. 224). These are fine examples of how trends in theology were shaped by wider cultural and intellectual movements. Another interesting example of the interaction between religion and society is the relationship between urbanisation and revivalism. Professor Bebbington argues that urbanisation promoted the synthetic approach to revival, being neither explicitly Calvinist nor Arminian. Since revival meetings in urban centres were often funded by local business elites, it was important to appeal to the widest possible audience (pp 13?14). This raises interesting questions concerning the relationship between evangelism and commercial practices in the 19th century. The above examples adequately highlight how refusing to reduce the explanation of revivalism to social, cultural, economic or political factors does not require the historian to only examine religious history in theological terms. At the same time, a failure to adequately understand theology is surely fatal to the correct understanding of the history of belief. Professor Bebbington?s grasp of theology and his working knowledge of the Bible are clearly evident in this book. This should be expected of all historians of evangelicalism: after all, to write political or economic history without an adequate comprehension of politics or economics would surely be irrational.

In conclusion, *Victorian Religious Revivals* is a crucial source for the study of revivalism and evangelicalism. Although the employment of a case-studies approach could have been problematic, the author?s decision to examine the revivals in chronological order significantly contributed to the book having a more holistic feel than is sometimes true of works of this nature. While the reviewer was primarily interested in the historiographical and interpretative questions which the book addressed, the analysis of the specific revivals is of a high order. Each chapter is based on analysis of the primary sources related to the different revivals. This is a considerable feat when one considers that seven different movements, on three continents, have been examined. The present reviewer is of the opinion that the chapter on the Weardale Revival was the most significant, owing to its correction of the myth that Methodists were all raving fanatics. There are, nonetheless, a few places were the reviewer would perhaps diverge from the author. Professor Bebbington?s characterisation of the Scottish Presbyterian approach to assurance perhaps needs to be qualified further. He says that ?[t]here was often less firmness about the teaching of assurance of salvation than in several other traditions. It was sometimes considered to be an actual advantage to be uncertain about being accepted by God, because then a sinner would persist in seeking salvation until the goal was definitely reached? (p. 4). I suspect that he means that Scottish Presbyterians denied that assurance was of the essence of faith or that infallible assurance could be immediately conferred upon new converts. If so, that is basically what the Westminster Confession teaches on the issue.(25) Nevertheless, it would be helpful to stress further that early Scottish Presbyterians placed great emphasis upon the possibility of the

Christian having full assurance (even if they believed that infallible assurance was not meant for new converts). The National Covenant of Scotland (1638), for instance, condemns the Pope for ?his general and doubtsome faith?.(26) Covenanter divines such as George Gillespie and David Dickson, moreover, associated sceptical views concerning the possibility of the assurance of salvation with Roman Catholicism, Laudian Prelacy, and Arminianism.(27) It is also debateable if there is really as much difference between Presbyterian and Methodist revivals as is sometimes supposed. The awakenings at the Kirk O?Shotts in 1625 and at Cambuslang in 1742 do not appear too dissimilar to revivals among Methodists (p. 5).(28) While the reviewer would concur that E. P. Thompson?s theory of social control cannot pass the test of empirical research, one would question whether or not the decline in popularity of such interpretations should be so closely linked to the fall of the Soviet Union (p. 31). If this is correct, then it appears to be a weak basis upon which to reject Marxist interpretations. Many Marxists (especially Trotskyites) disagree with the variant of Marxism represented by the Soviet Union; thus the latter?s fall alone cannot represent conclusive evidence of the weakness of Marxist history. Aside from these minor points, in the judgment of the current reviewer Professor Bebbington has successfully integrated analysis of specific revivals into a broader study of international revivalism in the Victorian age. The book should be carefully perused by all scholars of revivalism and evangelicalism, and the chapters on specific revivals are a good model for those writing journal articles on similar themes.

Notes

1. For examples of what Professor Bebbington is referring to, see Susan O?Brien, ?A transatlantic community of saints: the great awakening and the first evangelical network, 1735?1755?, *American Historical Review*, 91, 4 (October 1986), 811?32. Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790?1865* (1978; Milton Keynes, 2006). John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Leicester, 2006), p. 84.Back to (1)
2. Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, CT, 2001).Back to (2)
3. As an example of weaving together the study of piety and culture, Professor Bebbington recommends A. R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770?1840* (Oxford, 2006). Back to (3)
4. For more on Anglo-Catholic revivals, see John Kent, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London, 1978), pp 236?94; P. B. Nockles, ?The Oxford Movement as religious revival and resurgence? in *Studies in Church History 44: Revival and Resurgence in Christian History*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Rochester, 2008), pp. 214?24.Back to (4)
5. For examples of evangelicals who either opposed or had significant reservations about an evangelical awakening, see A. R. Holmes, ?The Ulster Revival of 1859: causes, controversies and consequences?, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 63, 3 (July 2012), 505?7.Back to (5)
6. There was significant debate about this among Ulster evangelicals in the 19th century. In response to the claim that the 1859 Revival was the modern equivalent of earlier Scottish revivals, the Reverend Isaac Nelson (while recognising some credulity among early Presbyterians) vehemently denied this. Conversely, an Anglican critic of the movement, the Reverend William McIlwaine, traced the extravagances of 1859 back to the early Scottish Presbyterians. Cf. Isaac Nelson, *The Year of Delusion: A Review of ?The Year of Grace?* (Belfast, 1860?6), pp. 10?13; Daniel Ritchie, ?William McIlwaine and the 1859 Revival in Ulster: a study of Anglican and evangelical identities?, forthcoming article.Back to (6)
7. J. E. Orr, *The Second Evangelical Awakening in Britain* (London, 1949); idem, *The Fervent Prayer: The Worldwide Impact of the Great Awakening of 1858* (Chicago, 1974).Back to (7)
8. I. H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Revivalism 1750?1858* (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. xvii-xx. Mr Murray regards the revivals which he approves of as true ?revivals?, but rejects the revivals based on Finneyite principles as ?revivalism?.Back to (8)
9. R. S. Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg,

NJ, 2008), pp. 81?2.Back to (9)

10. C. R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL, 2010), p. 167.Back to (10)
11. F. M. Davenport, *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals: A Study in Mental and Social Evolution* (New York, NY, 1917), pp. vii?ix.Back to (11)
12. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 411, 418?19, 428?30.Back to (12)
13. N. O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT, 1989), pp. 9? 10.Back to (13)
14. See the outbreak of 1859 in Holmes, ?Ulster Revival?, pp 492-3.Back to (14)
15. Richard Carwardine, ?The religious revival of 1857?8 in the United States?, in *Studies in Church History 15: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford, 1978), pp. 396?7.Back to (15)
16. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1968), p. 32.Back to (16)
17. Mark Hutchinson and John Wolffe, *A Short History of Global Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 63.Back to (17)
18. David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740?1890* (London, 1992), p. 160.Back to (18)
19. Cf. S. J. Connolly, ?The moving statue and the turtle dove: approaches to the history of Irish religion?, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 31 (2004), p. 17; R. F. G. Holmes, ?The 1859 Revival reconsidered?, new introduction to J. T. Carson, *God?s River in Spate: The Story of the Religious Awakening in Ulster in 1859* (2nd edn, Belfast, 1994), p. xii.Back to (19)
20. Holmes, *Shaping*, p. 313.Back to (20)
21. Janice Holmes, *Religious Revivals in Britain and Ireland 1859?1905* (Dublin, 2000), p. 40.Back to (12)
22. Thompson, *English Working Class*, p. 389.Back to (22)
23. K. S. Jeffrey, *When the Lord Walked the Land: The 1858?62 Revival in the North East of Scotland* (Carlisle, 2002), p. 207.Back to (23)
24. The issue of Romanticism is discussed in some of the author?s other writings. See D. W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester, 2005), pp. 139?72; idem, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), pp 80?1.Back to (24)
25. Daniel Ritchie, ?Presbyterian opposition to the 1859 Revival in Ulster? (M.A. thesis, Queen?s University Belfast, 2010), p. 36.Back to (25)
26. The Scottish National Covenant, 1638 <http://www.constitution.org/eng/conpur023.htm [2]> [accessed 25 September 2012].Back to (26)
27. George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the Church of Scotland* (1637; Edinburgh, 1844), p. 34; David Dickson, *Truth?s Victory Over Error: Or, the True Principles of the Christian Religion Stated and Vindicated*, ed. J. R. DeWitt (1684; Edinburgh, 2007), p. 113.Back to (27)
28. Cf. M. A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Leicester, 2004), pp. 104?5. It is interesting that, over 20 years later, the Seceders condemned the ?awful work upon the bodies and spirits of men? carried out by George Whitefield. *Act of the Associate Presbytery, for Renewing the National Covenant of Scotland, and the Solemn League and Covenant of the Three Kingdoms in a way and manner Agreeable to our Present Situation and Circumstances in this Period* (Glasgow, 1763), pp. 34?5.Back to (28)

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