

Godly Ambition. John Stott and the Evangelical Movement

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Historians who would assess the careers of contemporary religious leaders are on a hiding to nothing. Take for example the recent reaction to an excellent collection of essays on Martyn Lloyd-Jones, perhaps the most significant British evangelical leader outside the Church of England in the last century, which has been excoriated both for slighting the memory of a revered figure and for asking the wrong questions.⁽¹⁾ In the first case, several of the reviews in the religious press have shown, in the words of one observer, an ‘apparent absolute commitment to maintaining a fundamentally uncritical, defensive and hagiographical approach [to Lloyd-Jones and his reputation that] does the church no favours’.⁽²⁾ For Iain Murray, one of Lloyd-Jones’ biographers, there is little point in examining the shades of evangelical anti-Catholicism in the 1960s, or the degree to which Lloyd-Jones could be described as a fundamentalist, without attempting to assess whether Lloyd-Jones was right in his theology. In Murray’s view, biographical scholarship that avoids the truth claims of its subject fails the basic test of utility for the Christian reader.⁽³⁾

That religious biography has been made to carry greater weight than other such writing is of course not new. From the medieval tradition of hagiography of the saints to the present, the lives of great Christian men and women have been written not merely as a record, but to edify, instruct, encourage, persuade, correct, chastise or caution the Christian reader as part of their ongoing Christian formation. For many, Christian lives are to be exemplary, and as such the biographer is faced with a peculiar set of expectations among potential readers. Into these choppy seas sails Alister Chapman’s splendid new study of John Stott, and it may be that Chapman has navigated through the obstacles as well as could possibly be hoped.

Readers who know Timothy Dudley-Smith’s two-volume biography may be surprised by the claim on the

dust jacket that the book under review is ‘the first scholarly biography’ of Stott. Chapman’s study is however both more and less than a biography. As Chapman acknowledges (p. 6), Dudley-Smith’s much lengthier study will remain essential reading for much of the detail. What is offered here is an interpretation of the man and his significance.

Everything in Stott’s background would have disposed him to expect to lead. Born in 1921 into the home of a Harley Street doctor; then head boy at Rugby, followed by a scholarship to Trinity College Cambridge and a first in theology, almost all doors were open to him. Ordination was followed by a quarter of a century in ministry at the socially important London church of All Souls, Langham Place; a period which coincided with his rise to be the single most influential evangelical in the Church of England. From 1970, as he stepped aside from parish ministry to concentrate on writing and preaching, to his prominence in England was added global Christian stardom, marked in 2005 by Stott’s appearance as one of only three religious leaders in *Time* magazine’s list of the one hundred most influential people in the world (alongside the present Pope Josef Ratzinger, George W. Bush and Oprah Winfrey.)

Chapman’s title is *Godly Ambition*, and the *leitmotiv* throughout is the tension between Stott’s natural assumption of his capacity for leadership, and the self-effacement customary in the exemplary Christian life. Chapman is anxious to protect Stott from a very secular debunking, and a search for his feet of clay. In particular, Stott is cleared of any charge of fakery: of naked ambition cloaked in pieties. Stott was ambitious that God’s kingdom on earth be fostered, but within that framework, ambition for one’s own personal success was legitimate, and indeed desirable, *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. At the same time, Stott’s very human struggle with his pride in his own achievements is sympathetically and expertly handled, and Chapman is clear-sighted and frank about the tactical mistakes and intellectual diversions inevitable in a long career in the public eye. It remains to be seen whether even this degree of frankness is as unacceptable to the followers of Stott as to those of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, although the early signs are positive.⁽⁴⁾

Unlike a conventional biography, Chapman adopts a thematic structure, albeit one that progresses in a broadly chronological way, which is highly effective. The chapter on ‘Conversion’ provides a useful case study of the path to evangelical faith of one young man, of evangelical life within the University of Cambridge, and of the crucial importance of his class background, which provides the key to understanding much of Stott’s later ministry. ‘Students’ sees Stott heavily involved in missionary work in the universities in the 1950s: an early outworking of a patrician vision of the conversion of England by means of converting the ‘activator class’ which would trigger a cascade of the message down the social pyramid.

‘Parishioners’ considers Stott’s ministry at All Souls Langham Place, from 1945 until (in effect) 1970. Readers may be familiar with some of the themes here from Chapman’s earlier article in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (5); but the chapter forms a most useful contribution to the local studies that are surely necessary to test the importance of the post-war period (and the 1960s in particular) in the secularisation of Britain. The limitations of Stott’s ‘top people’ approach to mission in a socially mixed parish is skilfully evoked, as is the disorientation caused to many evangelicals by rapid social and moral change simultaneous with loss of empire and of the Protestant core of national identity.

‘Anglicans’ and ‘Society’ both deal with Stott’s growing impact as leader within the wider evangelical constituency in England. The 1960s and 1970s saw a shift in Anglican evangelical attitudes towards their own church, with a greater level of constructive engagement following the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967; and a subsequent fissure in the constituency caused by a sense among some that that turn had been in the wrong direction. Stott shaped much of this movement, although his attempt at unity ultimately ended in failure. ‘Society’ describes Stott’s involvement in evangelical responses to the permissive legislation of the 1960s, and in the widening of the space available for evangelicals for action to ameliorate material need. ‘World’ describes Stott’s worldwide writing and preaching ministry which dominated his 20 years of semi-retirement after finally relinquishing his various positions in England, and which brought him the star status which he desired and with which he struggled.

If there is any criticism to be made of an otherwise admirable volume, it relates to Chapman’s own

perspective and its limitations. That Chapman himself writes from a position of considerable sympathy with Stott's own is apparent, and in itself can hardly be regarded as a difficulty; all historical writing is positioned, to at least some extent, and Chapman could hardly have secured such privileged access to Stott's papers without some mutual understanding. However, Chapman's occasional editorialising sometimes obscures as much as it enlightens, and it is most acute when discussing the rest of the Church of England, the non-evangelical majority. Consider the phrase on p. 90: Chapman argues that, despite Stott's definitive turn towards engagement with the Church of England, and a move away from the siege mentality common amongst conservative evangelicals, he nonetheless never became the kind of 'theologically fuzzy ecclesiastical pole-climber' which (we are to understand) was common elsewhere in the Anglican church. It was, and is, a regular rhetorical device to set evangelical 'clarity' and 'certainty' in theology against liberal vagueness and doubt; but an author more attuned to the breadth of discourse in the Church of England would have hesitated over such a phrase. Many in the Church of England, both then and now, would have argued that a degree of provisionality in theology was inevitable, and that the sort of certainty which Stott was so dedicated to providing was illusory.

One might make a similar point in relation to Stott and the office of bishop. It puzzles Chapman, as it did Dudley-Smith before him, that Stott, clearly the most prominent leader in the fastest-growing part of the Church of England for several decades, should never have been made a bishop. Chapman, like Dudley-Smith, puts Stott's exclusion down to Michael Ramsey, archbishop of Canterbury, and his reputed antipathy towards evangelicals. But to regard the episcopate in these quasi-parliamentary terms – as a representative body chosen according to the weight of party numbers in the wider church – is to miss the point. (That role was, in theory, fulfilled by the Church Assembly and its successor the General Synod, for election to which bodies Stott refused to stand.) In a theologically mixed church, with territorial governance by parish and diocese, the test for a bishop was not his particular churchmanship, but his ability to gain the confidence of all the parties represented on his patch. And for all Stott's success in shifting the centre ground within the evangelical constituency, when viewed from outside he still appeared to be a party man. He had form in defying his own bishop while at All Souls'; and whilst his *modus operandi* was more constructive after 1967, to many outsiders there appeared in view simply a better organised and more polite party, rather than more engaged Anglicans. Anglican evangelicals they remained, and not evangelical Anglicans. None of this is to argue that Stott should *not* have been made a bishop; but simply that his not being so elevated is readily explicable in terms of the nature of the Church of England itself, and that Chapman's study would have benefitted from a greater sense of its workings.

This is in part a function of the task that Chapman set himself; a task in which the work succeeds triumphantly. As a study of the importance of Stott in the internal development of the evangelical movement, it is hard to see how this book could be bettered. But it is a besetting sin of evangelical historiography to talk only to itself, an isolation that sometimes results in a lack of proportion. Chapman's treatment of the 'fundamentalism controversy' of the mid-1950s is the best we have, and it is in turn to be amplified by his own forthcoming work. Chapman clearly shows Stott's importance in ensuring a continued hearing for conservative evangelicals in the universities, where it mattered, but the reaction of John Burnaby, Cambridge divinity don and his former tutor, is telling. Despite Stott's best efforts to distinguish his own highly conservative view of the authority of the Bible from 'fundamentalism', Burnaby, looking in from outside, was still unable to see the difference (pp. 45–7). To many Anglicans, the controversy must have seemed an arcane dispute between views that appeared scarcely distinguishable outside the minority who held them; and it is this perspective that is sometimes lacking in Chapman's study. Largely absent are voices from outside the evangelical constituency, in connection with Stott in particular and evangelicals in general, and the book would have been enriched by a greater sense of them.

These cavils aside, when judged in its own terms this book is a splendid success. It is admirably concise, pithily written, and based on a wealth of manuscript and relatively obscure printed sources. It adroitly avoids hagiography on one hand and debunkery on the other, and is a model of engaged, sympathetic yet critical scholarship which is sure to find a wide readership. It is only to be regretted that Stott himself did not live to see it published.[\(6\)](#)

Notes

1. *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, ed. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (Leicester, 2011). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Reformation historian Carl Trueman, *Reformation21* <<http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2012/07/the-sin-of-uzzah.php> [2]> [accessed 26 August 2012]. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Murray, 'Review of *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones*', *The Banner of Truth* (June 2012), 30. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Colin Hansen, *Christianity Today*, 29 February 2012 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/february/john-stott-biography.html?start=3> [3]> [accessed 26 August 2012]. Carl Trueman, indeed, suggests that Chapman might have gone further: <<http://reformationanglicanism.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/carl-truman-review-of-alister-chapmans.html> [4]> [accessed 28/08/12]. See also David Ceri Jones <<http://davidceri.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/john-stott-one-man-magisterium.html> [5]> [accessed 28 August 2012]. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Secularisation and the ministry of John R. W. Stott at All Souls, Langham Place, 1950-1970', *JEH*, 56, 3 (2005), 496-513. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Stott died in July 2011. 'Obituary', *Daily Telegraph* <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/religion-obituaries/8668938/The-Rev-John-Stott.html> [6]> [accessed 28 August 2012]. [Back to \(6\)](#)

The author is grateful for this generous and perceptive review, and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

Gospel Coalition

http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/godly_ambition_john_stott_and_the_evangelical_movement [7]

Christianity Today

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/february/john-stott-biography.html> [8]

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/43194>

[2] <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2012/07/the-sin-of-uzzah.php>

[3] <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/february/john-stott-biography.html?start=3>

[4] <http://reformationanglicanism.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/carl-truman-review-of-alister-chapmans.html>

[5] <http://davidceri.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/john-stott-one-man-magisterium.html>

[6] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/religion-obituaries/8668938/The-Rev-John-Stott.html>

[7]

http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/godly_ambition_john_stott_and_the_evangelical_movement

[8] <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/february/john-stott-biography.html>