

Evangelical Disenchantment

Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt

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Contents

Preface ix

1 Introduction

Evangelicalism and Disenchantment 1

2 George Eliot—Dr. Cumming’s Fundamentalism

Evangelicalism and Morality 19

3 Francis W. Newman—The Road to Baghdad

Evangelicalism and Mission 41

4 Theodore Dwight Weld—The American Century

Evangelicalism and Reform 70

5 Sarah Grimké, Elizabeth Cady Stanton,
and Frances Willard—Bible Stories

Evangelicalism and Feminism 92

6 Vincent van Gogh—A Hard Pilgrimage

Evangelicalism and Secularization 114

7 Edmund Gosse—Father and Son

Evangelicalism and Childhood 139

8 James Baldwin—Preacher and Prophet

Evangelicalism and Race 163

9 Conclusion

Enchantment and Disenchantment 187

Notes 199

Index 225

1 Introduction

Evangelicalism and Disenchantment

I never could understand the light manner in which people will discuss the gravest questions, such as God, and the immortality of the soul. They gossip about them over tea, write and read review articles about them, and seem to consider affirmation or negation of no more practical importance than the conformation of a beetle. With me the struggle to retain as much of my creed was tremendous. The dissolution of Jesus into mythologic vapour was nothing less than the death of a friend dearer to me than any other friend whom I knew.

—William Hale White, *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1881)

The idea for this book first occurred to me some thirty years ago when, as a research student in the University of St. Andrews, I spent the time between the completion of my Ph.D. dissertation and my oral defense by engaging in research for a journal article on the so-called crisis of evangelicalism in the 1820s and '30s. The article eventually appeared as “Evangelicalism and Eschatology” in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (1979), but more important than my rather pedestrian article was a riveting anonymous essay I read in the *Westminster Review* for 1855. What was striking about the essay was how beautifully it was written and how clever were its insights into the state of early Victorian evangelicalism. It was clearly written by someone of unusual

brilliance, and I soon found out that it was by George Eliot, who also happened to be the author of *Middlemarch*, which was then, and remains to this day, my favorite novel.

As is the way in scholarship, my research soon took a different turn, but the essay on evangelicalism in the *Westminster Review* continued to intrigue me, so much so that I collected everything I could find written by Dr. Cumming, the evangelical Presbyterian minister who was the object of the essay's attack. It was clear from a first read that Eliot's acerbic treatment of Cumming was motivated by more than mere passing interest. The prose leaps from the page, reflecting someone with an unusually personal engagement with the issues at stake. In fact it was written by Eliot as an ex-evangelical about the aspects of the evangelical tradition she came most to dislike. More than a commentary on Dr. Cumming, the metropolitan preacher, Eliot's essay is really a religious disenchantment narrative reflecting her own journey of faith.

In the years that followed my reading of Eliot's essay I became more interested both in what motivated people of all classes, colors, and genders to embrace evangelical Protestantism, and also in what caused some of them subsequently to repudiate that religious tradition. This book stems from that interest. It is not intended to be a subversive book of a great and multifaceted religious tradition or its devotees; nor is it meant to imply that disenchantment was anything other than a minority pursuit within the evangelical tradition, though that minority is probably more substantial than some might think. The great majority of evangelicals, past and present, have lived and died contentedly within their faith tradition. But many did not. In a book called *Leaving the Fold*, published in 1995, Edward T. Babinski produced a litany of testimonies by former fundamentalists who later became moderate evangelicals, liberal Christians, agnostics, or atheists.¹ Among those who remained as Christians of some stripe were the Harvard Divinity School professor and writer Harvey Cox, the distinguished religious journalist Tom Harpur, and the historian of Christian origins Dennis Ronald McDonald. Among those who became agnostics or atheists were Babinski himself, Charles Templeton, a one-time revivalist associate of Billy Graham, and the free thought activist Dan Barker. Although Babinski cites some historical figures in his book of testimony, including the influential nineteenth-century public intellectual Robert G. Ingersoll, his concern is more with contemporary figures and also with promoting the agenda of "leaving the fold" of fundamentalism. My intentions are rather different.

This book is about a collection of energetic and talented historical figures who once had close encounters with various species of evangelical Christianity, but who did not remain in that tradition. What attracted them to evangelicalism and what later caused disenchantment are intriguing questions that reveal much, not only about their own aspirations and limitations, but also about the strengths and weaknesses of the evangelical tradition. Perhaps there is no better way of understanding the essence of any religious tradition than by looking at the lives of those who once loved and later repudiated it. Put another way, it has been said that nothing reveals as much about the inner workings of institutions as their complaint departments. Evangelical disenchantment narratives are in reality referrals to the complaint department of the evangelical tradition. What motivated them, how they were handled, and what their outcomes were all tell a story about the nature and values of that tradition. In that sense this book is as much about the evangelical tradition and its struggles over important issues as it is about the biographies around which the book is organized.

I hope the following pages will be of interest to the countless millions who remain spiritually engaged in the evangelical tradition, to those who have left it, whether actively disenchanted or merely apathetic, and to still others who have wanted to know more about it but who have not found conventional historical treatments to be of their liking. Biography, or in this case multiple minibiographies organized around a single theme, is often a more accessible window into religious faith than are other kinds of historical analysis. As a social historian who has devoted much of my career to understanding and accounting for the popular appeal of evangelical movements to countless millions of people, I offer the following narratives as complementary, not alternative, materials for understanding the inner workings of a tradition that is now a rapidly expanding global phenomenon. Moreover, by concentrating on evangelical disenchantment it is not my intention to deny that most evangelicals remained enchanted with their religious faith or, as Timothy Larsen recently has shown, that a vigorous tradition of reconversion to orthodox Christianity existed among cohorts of Victorian secularists.² As a new generation of scholars disenchanted with old secularization theories is beginning to find out, in the ebbing and flowing of religious faith not all the water has flowed in the same direction. In that sense, this book makes no grand representative claims beyond the intrinsic interest of the stories themselves and what they reveal about the strengths and weaknesses of the evangelical tradition.

It also has become clear to me that disenchantment is almost inevitably a part of *any* religious tradition, Christian or otherwise, as noble ideals of sacrifice, zeal, and commitment meet the everyday realities of complexity, frustration, and disappointment. Another book could be written, for example, about those who became frustrated with the apparent accommodationism of more liberal brands of Christianity, which sometimes leaves its adherents with the perception that there is no longer left any solid ground upon which to stand. It may be, however, that disenchantment is a particularly marked characteristic of evangelicalism because so many are swept into the tradition at a relatively young age, and because the claims and aspirations are so lofty while the liturgical management of failure and dissatisfaction is so weak. Roman Catholicism, for example, has its symbols, rituals, and confessionals, and differential levels of religious commitment, whereas evangelical Protestants are often thrown back on the infallible word and the local church, which may in fact be as much part of the problem as the solution for those tasting the bitter fruits of disenchantment.

The Evangelical Tradition

From its inauspicious beginnings among the religious revivals that swept the North Atlantic, Anglo-American world in the early eighteenth century, evangelical Protestantism, broadly conceived, has become one of the most popular faith traditions in modern history. Given the difficulties of offering a precise definition, and the fact that it is a multid denominational tradition with many different styles and characteristics, it is difficult to offer a fully accurate assessment of its current numbers. Conservative estimates place the figure at around fifty million evangelicals in the United States and close to half a billion worldwide, but more expansive estimates suggest that the number approaches one hundred million in the United States and, if Pentecostals are included, as many as eight hundred million worldwide.³ The disparity in these figures shows how difficult it is to agree on definitions of evangelicalism, or to estimate the extent of its transmission, but even the conservative figures point to a remarkable worldwide expansion. Since most of this growth has been sponsored, not by armed states and military conquest, but by the voluntary activities of the evangelical faithful, it is evident that evangelicalism has been a remarkably successful conversionist movement, perhaps one of the most successful in the history of civilization. Although evangelicalism has benefited from large-scale population movements, and from being associated with two expanding empires of commerce and civilization, the British and

the American, its growth, on the whole, was largely self-produced and self-directed. Its expansion has benefited from, but was not caused by, favorable circumstances. Changes in global culture, associated with the rise of market economies and democratic structures, facilitated the growth of evangelicalism in the modern era. However, although evangelicalism's populist and democratic style was a good fit for the population migrations and economic transformations associated with modernity, its growth was produced primarily by the dedicated women and men who disseminated the evangelical message.⁴

Determining the content of that message, even in a particular place at a particular time, is a difficult matter, since evangelicalism has always been a broad church of theological traditions, social classes, religious denominations, and voluntary organizations. Definitions have nevertheless been attempted. It has become a commonplace for commentators to cite the historian David Bebbington's fourfold definition of evangelicalism as conversionist, biblicist, crucicentric, and activist.⁵ According to this scheme evangelicals have been those who have emphasized a conscious religious conversion over inherited beliefs, the Bible as an authoritative sacred text in determining all matters of faith and conduct, Christ's death on the cross as the centerpiece of evangelical theologies of atonement and redemption, and disciplined action as a way of redeeming people and their cultures. In each of these categories evangelicals have often disagreed about precise formulations of their beliefs and practices, but most evangelicals, past and present, would locate their faith tradition somewhere within the bounds of this quadrilateral. A rather different approach to defining evangelicalism, however, can be found in the recent work by the distinguished historian of early evangelicalism W. R. Ward. He suggests that early evangelicals, deriving from the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment, were broadly united in their embrace of a hexagon of religious ideas: experiential conversion, mysticism, small-group religion, vitalist conceptions of nature, a deferred eschatology, and opposition to theological systems.⁶ He also shows how profoundly nineteenth-century evangelicals departed from the tradition they claimed to inherit. Biblical inerrancy, premillennial dispensationalism, propositional systems of all kinds, and bureaucratic denominationalism all eroded what was once an engaging intellectual culture. An infallible text read with wooden literalism, an instant millennium, an absence of mystery, a lack of interest in nature, priestly personality cults, and modernist soteriological systems are not what the early evangelicals had in mind. Ward's approach has a particular resonance for what follows in this book, because it could be argued that some kinds of evangelical disenchant-

ment were caused more by what the evangelical tradition had become by the second half of the nineteenth century than by the principles of its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century founders and shapers.

Writing more specifically about the United States, George Marsden has defined evangelicals as those who believe in the final authority of Scripture, the historical reality of God's saving work as recorded in Scripture, salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, the centrality of evangelism and missions, and the importance of a spiritually transformed life. These propositions are very close to Bebbington's quadrilateral. But the evangelical tradition is not easily contained within a tidy geometrical structure, or a convenient statement of propositions. Some interpreters have emphasized the importance of religious experience and assurance of salvation. Others have drawn attention to the importance of an evangelical style—populist and pugnacious—as being almost as important as its core beliefs and practices. Still others have drawn attention to the way evangelicalism has both adapted to, and been shaped by, its surrounding culture and has therefore changed substantially over time and location. Sometimes perceived pressure from the surrounding culture has led sections of evangelicalism to morph into fundamentalism, which Marsden describes as an angrier, more militant, more conservative, more anti-intellectual, and more antiliberal species of evangelicalism. But whatever the disagreements on points of emphasis, there is no doubt that evangelicalism has been in the past, and remains in the present, an influential shaper of religious cultures, first in the North Atlantic region, and then throughout the world.⁷

Although evangelicalism was once a despised and little studied tradition, there is now no shortage of good scholarship on how, why, and where it expanded since the early 1700s. There is equally no shortage of biographies of leading evangelicals, even if women and people of color remain significantly underrepresented.⁸ There is also a luxuriant literature, from the eighteenth century to the present, of how evangelicalism has been excoriated by its opponents. Evangelicals have been lambasted for, among other things, weak-mindedness, naked enthusiasm, telescopic philanthropy, pervasive hypocrisy, financial fraudulence, sexual lasciviousness, anti-Catholic bigotry, and psychological manipulation.⁹ What is surprisingly lacking in the literature, however, and what this book hopes to address, is the question of how evangelicalism was viewed by those who once found it appealing, but who for a variety of reasons left its fold for greener pastures. Francis Newman stated that such a perspective was especially important because erstwhile evangelicals, having experienced the tradition as both insiders and outsiders, were in the best position to

evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. In some respects that is a highly contentious claim, since the disenchanteds are rarely dispassionate or disinterested observers.

As with all powerful religious traditions, evangelicalism has had its fair share of conscientious objectors and wounded lovers.¹⁰ What is surprising is not the truth of that statement, but the lack of research on its implications. One explanation is that because evangelicalism is not a formal religious denomination or a national religious tradition, its followers have been able to slide in and out of allegiance without requiring excommunication or formal disinheritance. Another reason is that evangelicals themselves have paid little attention to their disenchanteds. Not only has it been an activist tradition without much time or inclination for rumination and self-criticism, but also the assumption generally has been that those who fell by the wayside were either theologically heterodox or morally reprehensible, or both, and hence not deserving of much consideration, except as warnings to the faithful. The idea that disenchantment from a religious tradition is an interesting field of enquiry in its own right, as well as an unusual and potentially revealing vantage point from which to view that tradition, is what motivates this book.

Principles of Selection

It is scarcely surprising that a religious tradition that attracted the loyalty of millions of people worldwide should have failed to sustain the faith of some of its own converts or capture the imagination of some of its own children. Many of its most famous leaders have experienced the shock and grief caused by the alienation from the tradition of their own children. Charles Wesley, the greatest poet and hymn writer of the evangelical revival, penned some of his most melancholic verses in response to his son Samuel's conversion to Roman Catholicism.¹¹ Even the first great generation of English evangelicals associated with the Clapham Sect seemed unable to produce family dynasties of evangelical longevity. "There is some pathos," writes Ford K. Brown, "in the departure from the Protestant Reformation ranks of so many of the sons of the leaders—in the Protestant evangelical families or among those sons and daughters of the evangelicals who were brought up to write their names in England's records, almost all. They were brought up with Christian love and confidence that they would take their place in the front line."¹²

Yet the list of casualties is too impressive to be merely accidental: "In their university days, or before, or after, the children of the Clapham inner circle and the evangelical directorate elsewhere, and the children of the lesser known or unknown evangelical families who were also to become eminent

Victorians, depart steadily for High Church, Roman Catholic Church, or no church: Macaulay and De Quincey, the sons of Babington and Gisborne and Stephen, the four sons of Wilberforce, the three daughters of Patrick Brontë, Marian Evans who called herself George Eliot, John Henry Newman, the son or sons of Charles Grant, Lord Teignmouth, Buxton, Lady Emily Pusey, Benjamin Harrison, Sir James Graham, John Gladstone, Sir Robert Peel and William Manning.”¹³ Brown’s explanation for this great familial exodus is that the upper-crust leaders of the evangelicalism of the Clapham Sect, as befitted their social position, valued elegance, cultivation, and style as cohabitable companions with virtue, piety, and holiness. The evangelical generation that followed theirs, however, was dominated by the rising ranks of earlier populists who had an altogether different style. Having neither aristocratic panache nor populist honesty, the new generation of evangelical leaders, according to Brown, was altogether less appealing to the well-educated children of the Clapham Sect: “As means come more and more to be taken for ends, leaders become less important, followers more; genuine beliefs harden into doctrinaire convictions and once heartfelt truths become shibboleths. Great moral societies grow into huge moral bureaux, good parish priests become platform preachers, organizers and religious executives in ‘the bustle of the religious world,’” and “breeding, education, and good manners” become less valued commodities.¹⁴

As evangelicalism lost its style, the stylish lost their evangelicalism. Consider for example the career of the great Victorian art and social critic John Ruskin, who also abandoned the evangelicalism of his youth. Ruskin was raised in a fervently evangelical home on a diet of the King James Bible and the Scottish paraphrases of the Psalms. An inner civil war between the Puritanism of his religious sensibilities and the sensual appeal of much of the art he admired contributed to some psychologically tortuous views of his sexuality and body. Ruskin’s marriage to Euphemia Chalmers Gray, for example, was never consummated and was subsequently annulled amid a glare of unfriendly publicity.¹⁵ Ruskin’s disenchantment with evangelicalism is self-dated to his visit to Turin in 1858, when he contrasts his experience of viewing Veronese’s luscious painting *The Presentation of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon* with his visit to a dispiriting Waldensian church. His description of the little congregation of predominantly gray-haired women served by an unprepossessing preacher positively reeks of narrowness and sterility. Ruskin writes that the preacher “after leading them through the languid forms of prayer which are all that in truth are possible to people whose present life is dull and its terrestrial future unchangeable, put his utmost zeal into a conso-

latory discourse on the wickedness of the wide world, more especially of the plains of Piedmont and city of Turin.”¹⁶ Ruskin concludes his comparison of this desultory worship service with his sight of Veronese’s painting glowing in full afternoon light with the comment that his “meditation in the gallery of Turin only concluded the courses of thought which had been leading me to such end through many years. There was no sudden conversion possible to me, either by preacher, picture, or dulcimer. But, that day, my evangelical beliefs were put away, to be debated of no more.” Although it is clear from Ruskin’s letters that he was right to claim that he had been having doubts about his faith for years before his experience in Turin, Ruskin’s statement that he ended all engagement with evangelicalism in 1858 is not strictly true. Therefore his description of himself as a “conclusively un-converted man” is at least in part a deliberate and parallel reversal of the evangelical conversion narrative. If conversion was regarded by most evangelicals as an instantaneous event, so, according to Ruskin, could be its opposite.

In a letter to his father near the end of his momentous visit to Turin Ruskin attributed the evils of the world to two things, both of which could be regarded as characteristics of the evangelical tradition he abandoned: “1. Teaching religious doctrines and creeds instead of simple love of God & practical love of our neighbour. This is a terrific mistake—I fancy the fundamental mistake of humanity. 2. Want of proper cultivation of the beauty of the body and the fineness of its senses—a modern mistake chiefly.”¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, therefore, Ruskin’s disenchantment with evangelicalism was accompanied, and partly caused by, equally profound changes in his views about nature, art, and the history of architecture and painting. As Ruskin’s religious opinions changed, as with van Gogh, so too did his growing appreciation of art, form, color, and nature.

This leakage from evangelicalism of leadership, talent, and quality is not a purely English phenomenon. Allowing for the obvious differences in class structure and social mores, something similar happened in the United States in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Evelyn Kirkley has shown how many of the leaders of the American free thought movement, such as Moses Harmon and Samuel Porter Putnam, were converts to Christianity and ministers of churches before preaching the freethinking gospel. Harmon, who left the Methodist ministry over the proslavery stance of southern Methodists, later wrote that whoever “tries to hold himself to a creed or ‘confession of faith,’ stultifies his own reason, bars his future growth, denies and dishonors manhood, if he does not commit intellectual or moral suicide.” Putnam, who was an ordained Congregational minister, left the church because he considered it a bad insti-

tution “opposed to liberty, progress, and the highest morality. It was the influence of modern science and life that compelled the change.”¹⁹ The life of America’s most famous sex researcher, Alfred C. Kinsey, the man Billy Graham accused of doing more than any other American to undermine Christian morality, followed a similar trajectory. Kinsey was raised in a fervently evangelical Methodist home, the son of an autocratic father, and was a committed member of the YMCA during his college years at Bowdoin. Although there are some signs of a growing scientific materialism in his Bowdoin years, it was while he was a graduate student at Harvard that Kinsey’s Christian faith seems to have ebbed away. According to his biographer, Kinsey emerged from Harvard a changed man; “somewhere along the way, the young Christian gentleman had started losing ground to the hard-nosed young scientist who demanded proof for everything.”²⁰ Unfortunately Kinsey has left no records of the change in his religious convictions, and one can only speculate on the respective roles played by his difficult family background, suffused as it was in a harsher form of evangelicalism, his struggles with sexuality and sexual identity, and his growing appreciation of art and science.

Although the slowdown or absence of generational transmission within a religious tradition is one sure predictor of its incipient decline, evangelicalism throughout its history has generally imported more people from the bottom than it has exported from the top. Nevertheless, over the past three centuries there have been tens of thousands of ex-evangelicals who have slipped noisily or silently out of the tradition.²¹ Most of these were short stay tenants who were converted at emotional revival meetings and forsook evangelicalism before they had ever properly embraced it. One such was Herbert Asbury, the great-great nephew of American Methodism’s most famous leader, Francis Asbury, and the author of *The Gangs of New York*, who has left a bitter account of his “conversion” at a Methodist revival in his hometown of Farmington, Missouri, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Asbury was a cynical skeptic before his “conversion experience” and a more pronounced one after, but he has left a vivid account of the revival meeting at which he was press-ganged into the community of the faithful. “The thunderous cadences of ‘Nearer, My God to Thee,’ pealed from the organ, and I couldn’t stand it. I was being torn to pieces emotionally, and I staggered and stumbled down the aisle, sobbing, hardly able to stand. They thought it was religion, and the Brothers and Sisters who were pushing and shoving me shouted ecstatically that God had me; it was obvious I was suffering, and suffering has

always been accepted as a true sign of holiness. But it was not God and it was not religion. It was the music."²²

Asbury's encounter with the psychological battering ram of evangelical revivalism is vividly recounted and vigorously repudiated, and is far from unique. The history of popular evangelicalism is replete with Elmer Gantry stories of emotional revival meetings and the pressures that were brought to bear on the unawakened.²³ The purpose of this book, however, is not to revisit those stories, interesting though they are, but to look at an altogether different cohort. The people represented here are figures of some eminence who embraced evangelicalism for a season before repudiating it. I have selected people who have left sufficient written evidence of their entrance and exit from evangelicalism to show the power of the tradition they embraced, how it affected their lives, and the reasons why they left it. I have also selected individuals who point up a much bigger issue within the evangelical tradition and how it has related to issues of morality, mission (and comparative religion), political reform, secularism, feminism, childhood, race, and creativity. The aim has been to keep conjecture to a minimum and, as far as possible, to allow the writers, artists, and activists to tell their own stories, or at least to have their distinctive voices heard and interpreted. But interpreters of other people's religious trajectories are faced with a difficult, if not an impossible, task. The reasons supplied by individuals for believing or not believing in a particular faith tradition are not always to be trusted, not because of deliberate deception, but because their self-understanding is often restricted by upbringing, culture, relationships, hidden influences, circumstances, and public taste. Even exhaustively researched, full-scale biographies are merely representations of lives, seen through the eyes of another, not the lives themselves. How much more circumscribed, then, are the following rather brief biographical portraits, which concentrate chiefly on the subject's encounter with a particular species of evangelical Protestantism.

Aside from choosing figures who have left compelling evidence of their faith journeys, I have tried to select people whose stories are engaging, who write (or paint) with insight and aplomb, and who represent much larger and complex issues in the historic relationship between evangelicalism and culture. I have selected individuals whose faith transactions, creative output, and public exposure fall between the early nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries, though the preponderance falls in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. By then evangelicalism had passed through a century of prodigious growth in the British Isles and North America and

had achieved a sufficiently established position in the cultural landscape to be ripe for serious counterattacks from within and without. Who, then, became disenchanting and what caused their disenchantment?

The Disenchanted

It is sometimes assumed that at the heart and center of the long conflict between evangelicalism and culture lay new scientific claims about a long earth history and the theory of evolution by natural selection. The so-called war between the competing claims of Christianity and Science has attracted a great deal of attention, but specialists in the field generally agree that the military metaphor of war is overblown and that a great number of eminent scientists remained orthodox Christians. Moreover, many evangelicals, past and present, have been able to work out some kind of harmony between their faith convictions and their scientific understanding. It is therefore possible to identify large numbers of scientists who were also evangelical Christians, and large numbers of evangelical Christians who adapted their views of the natural order to take into account new scientific ideas.²⁴ With so much good work already written on this subject, I decided not to choose scientists as disenchanting evangelicals. More than just a tactical decision, it also reflects my view that as a percentage of their respective secular cohorts there were far fewer creative artists of real distinction (writers, novelists, poets, and painters) than there were scientists who were evangelical Christians. For all the well-known and oft debated problems associated with reconciling faith and science, the ability to reconcile artistic creativity with Christian orthodoxy has proved to be a much bigger stumbling block for the evangelical tradition. Part of the reason for that lies in the long-standing evangelical distrust of the evils of fiction, theater, and the visual arts, or indeed anything to do with those strictly imaginative pursuits that emphasize passion over piety.²⁵ That historical pattern is now changing quite rapidly within modern evangelicalism.

In addition to the tension between artistic creativity and evangelical religion, many distinguished figures who moved away from evangelicalism, such as William Ewart Gladstone and Mark Pattison, drew attention also to the intellectual limitations of the evangelical tradition. Pattison, who was brought up in a strict evangelical home, stated that evangelicalism “insisted on a ‘vital Christianity,’ as against the Christianity of books. Its instinct was from the first against intelligence. No text found more favour with it than ‘Not many wise, not many learned.’”²⁶ A tradition built on the absolute authority of the Bible and, as time went on, on propositional statements of faith has apparently left little creative space for intellectual pursuits or the unfet-

tered imagination. Hence, many of the figures selected in this study are either creative artists or independent thinkers and public intellectuals who increasingly chafed at the restrictive dogmatism of the evangelical tradition.

George Eliot was chosen to lead off the parade largely because she wrote one of the most savagely polemical essays ever written against evangelical teaching and also, confusingly, one of the most winning portraits of an evangelical character in all of literature.²⁷ Eliot was also a polymath, one of the most widely read and deeply learned women of the nineteenth century. Her diaries, letters, and critical essays, quite apart from her brilliance as a novelist, mark her as an intellectual of real distinction. She not only pioneered the translation of German Higher Criticism of the Bible into English, but was also aware of intellectual trends in history, philosophy, and the sciences. It is difficult to think of another figure who was as aware as Eliot of the sheer range of attacks on traditional evangelical orthodoxy, especially on the reliability of the Bible as a sacred text. There is also no one who so deeply appreciated the strengths and weaknesses of the evangelical temperament as Eliot, or who was able to invent fictional characters who so compellingly represented those strengths and weaknesses, sometimes in the same personality. Her rejection of evangelicalism was partly an intellectual transaction, partly a protest against evangelical morality, and partly an expression of her position as an unmarried woman flouting the marital conventions of Victorian England.

Francis Newman, the brother of the more famous John Henry Newman, was a contemporary of George Eliot. Although not close associates or friends, they met and read one another's work. Newman, one of the brightest Oxford undergraduates of his generation, later became a university teacher, writer, and public intellectual. His career is particularly interesting because of his early encounter with John Nelson Darby, the father-founder of the theological tradition of dispensationalism, which has exercised such a profound influence on American evangelicals/fundamentalists and their perceptions of events in the Middle East. Newman was also one of the earliest evangelicals to grapple seriously with Islam and therefore with the whole issue of Christian uniqueness and comparative religion. His journey as an evangelical missionary to and from Baghdad, both geographically and intellectually, is one of the most intriguing episodes in the history of evangelicalism. Newman's career is also illuminating for what it reveals about styles of discourse within evangelicalism as the full extent of his heterodoxy became clear to his family, friends, and mentors. Newman's temperament and fierce desire to get at the "truth" did not permit him to withdraw silently from the evangelical tradition. His rejection of the tradition was noisy, controversial, and attention

grabbing. It was also born out of the disappointment of a grand youthful idealism that dared hope for the conversion of the world and the improvement of humankind. He was not the first Westerner, and most certainly not the last, to have those hopes dashed amid the religious and cultural realities of Palestine and Persia.

In the same decade that Francis Newman was coming under the influence of the romantic figure of John Nelson Darby, an Anglican clergyman with a roving mission to the Irish poor in the Wicklow Mountains, Theodore Dwight Weld, was inspired by a yet more influential figure in the evangelical tradition on the other side of the Atlantic, Charles Grandison Finney. Weld owed his evangelical conversion to Finney and soon identified black slavery and the racist assumptions upon which it was built as the principal defining issues of nineteenth-century America. Unlike Finney, his faith mentor, Weld first came to the conclusion that evangelical conversions alone could not eradicate the evil of slavery, and later came to accept that no amount of moral reformism could end an institution so deeply embedded in the economic and social structures of American life. Weld's faith in the evangelical remedies of conversionism and activism declined in proportion to the growth of his conviction that only a terrible conflagration could end an evil in which so many were personally invested. But Weld's disenchantment with evangelicalism, as with the others in this study, was no simple matter. Personal disappointments, marital influences, family problems, disillusionment with the moral frailties of the evangelical tradition, and wider cultural changes that he barely understood all played their part in his inexorable drift toward more liberal versions of the Christian tradition. Indeed so complex were the operational factors in Weld's particular faith journey, many of which were too personal to write about, even in private letters, that some degree of agnosticism is appropriate in the interpretation of his religious life.

As with Weld, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was also converted to evangelicalism in the context of Finney's revivals in New York State. Although her conversion was short-lived, Stanton, along with many other nineteenth-century feminists, including Sarah Moore Grimké, Lucy Stone, and Frances Willard, had to negotiate the varied residues of their evangelical faith with their aspirations as feminists and social reformers.²⁸ Although Stanton's skepticism and rejection of all forms of Christian authority paved the way for her crusading zeal on behalf of oppressed women, she could not afford to ignore the influence of evangelicalism on the women she hoped to liberate. Not only were women a substantial majority in the evangelicalism that Stanton believed oppressed women, but also evangelical women formed the majority

of those enlisted in movements of social reform. Here was a paradox that Stanton found hard to resolve, not least because she regarded the myths propagated by religion as major contributors to male domination. It was partly to resolve these ambiguities that Stanton made *The Woman's Bible* the subject of her last great project. The very Scriptures evangelical women held dear, and to which many attributed their superior status to women of other world religious traditions, were, according to Stanton, inherently and irredeemably patriarchal.²⁹ Stanton, Sarah Grimké, and Frances Willard all experienced conventional evangelical conversions, but their subsequent faith journeys were very different. Willard, like Stanton, came to see that male biblical hermeneutics were disastrous for women, but her continuing affection for the Midwestern Methodism of her youth put a brake on her skepticism. While Willard challenged male interpretations of the Bible, Stanton thought the Bible itself was the real stumbling block to female emancipation.

It is hard to think of a greater contrast between Willard, America's most famous temperance crusader, and the subject of the subsequent chapter, the very intemperate Vincent van Gogh. Yet both were evangelical believers (van Gogh only for a short time), both struggled with inner demons, both fetched up in Paris for short sojourns within a few years of one another in the late 1860s and early '70s, and both had a tough time with the male leaders of churches and evangelical organizations. But van Gogh's life was infinitely more complex, marked as it was with serious bouts of mental illness and tortured relationships with family, women, and fellow painters. Van Gogh's flirtation with evangelicalism was characteristically intense and unstable. To his own mental instability were the added pressures of coming of age in a period of remarkable social, economic, and intellectual change in Western Europe. Van Gogh moved around fast-growing European cities in the age of great cities, fell afoul of the commercial machinations of the art market, which both employed him and spat him out, and participated as a reader and an artist in a period of almost unprecedented intellectual instability. With all the considerable ardor of which he was capable, van Gogh was attracted first to Christ's love, then to Christ's followers, and then to Christ's poor, but soon found the whole ecclesiastical superstructure of seminaries, theological education, and mission boards to be deeply depressing. Despite, and partly because of, the intensity of his evangelical phase when he devoured the Bible and sought out opportunities for heroic Christian service, van Gogh was a poor candidate for any creed that emphasized deference to authority, literalness of interpretation, and acceptance of respectable social mores. Evangelical disenchantment and van Gogh were almost bound to find one another.

Although born four years before van Gogh, Edmund Gosse, who among other things was an eminent art critic, comfortably outlived him, producing his most famous work, *Father and Son*, in 1907. It is an autobiographical account of his childhood. He was raised as an only child by his father, Philip Henry Gosse, a distinguished naturalist and contemporary of Charles Darwin, and his mother, Emily Bowes, a prolific evangelical tract writer. Gosse's parents were members of an austere evangelical sect called the Plymouth Brethren (John Nelson Darby was one of its founders), and his upbringing was designed to help him flee from the world and make secure his eternal destiny. While it would be a mistake to regard Edmund Gosse's tightly controlled upbringing as typical of evangelical families and patterns of child rearing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is suggestive—in its highly colored way—of tendencies that were more widespread in evangelical culture. The desire to protect the children of the godly from the ravages of secularism and immorality is a repeated refrain in the evangelical tradition, from John Wesley's rules for the education of children to the modern popularity of evangelical schools and homeschooling. The passing of the baton of evangelical faith from parents to children is one of the most highly prized aspirations of the tradition. Rarely has it been pursued with such single-minded devotion as in the Gosse household, even after, or perhaps especially after, the premature death of Gosse's mother. Whether entirely accurate or not (a point more fully discussed later in the text), Gosse's *Father and Son* is perhaps the most powerful evocation of an evangelical childhood ever penned. It is also a liberation struggle, as Edmund negotiated the space he needed to realize "a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself." What rescues Gosse's *Father and Son* from being merely an embittered rant against fundamentalist excess is the obvious affection he had for his father and the fact that, whatever his other weaknesses, Philip Gosse was no hypocrite. What he believed, he believed intensely and consistently. Indeed that was what made Edmund's liberation struggle so painful.

A different kind of liberation struggle (also partly against a fervently Christian father), but with some of the same intellectual components, is represented in the life of James Baldwin. Baldwin, unlike the other figures represented in this book, was not born into a relatively comfortable bourgeois household but rather was the eldest of nine children born in Harlem on the eve of the Great Depression. He absorbed, then chose, then preached for, and then rejected a holiness Pentecostal variety of black evangelicalism that has contributed much to the shaping of black religion in the United States. Evangelicalism has been to black religion what jazz and blues have been to black

music; it has largely determined the religious style, rhythm, identity, and expression of an oppressed people. Baldwin was a complex, interstitial figure—puny, bisexual, and an American writer in European exile—which enables him to look at black evangelicalism through unusual lenses. He could not, and did not wish to, deny the importance of evangelicalism in shaping American black identity, but he also hated its manifold petty hypocrisies, its collaborationist instincts, and its propensity to avoid the tough issues in facing up to the realities of the black experience in America. If Gosse left the Plymouth Brethren to fashion his own inner life and to write free from the shackles of evangelical dogmatism, Baldwin left the black church to become “an honest man” and as a writer to explore the black experience without the “safety” of evangelical social ethics as his guide. The desire for intellectual and moral liberation among the creative misfits of the evangelical tradition is one of the underpinning themes of this book.

The biographical portraits that follow are not meant to be comprehensive essays on their characters’ intellectual and artistic development; rather, they concentrate on their enchantment and disenchantment with evangelicalism. They also seek to say something about how evangelicalism shaped their thoughts and habits, even after formal disenchantment was expressed. Disenchantment did not usually result in a complete abandonment of their religious faith and an embrace of atheism. More common was a renegotiation of their religious sensibilities. Sometimes it is not entirely clear what they ended up believing and practicing, for one of the benefits of repudiating evangelicalism was not seeing the need to produce a clear statement of faith or to defend a codification of dogmatic principles. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the subjects examined here ended up as defenders and purveyors of an insipid moral relativism and behavioral libertinism. Although Eliot, van Gogh, and Baldwin were capable of outraging religious and social conventions, they were anything but casual in their advocacy of honesty, truth, and love. Whether moral earnestness was the cause or the consequence of their attachment to evangelicalism (persuasive evidence could be presented for both), their encounters with evangelicalism intensified it to such a degree that it remained with them for the rest of their lives.

The book that follows is designed to be a work of history, not a comment on the current state of evangelicalism in any particular part of the world. It is nevertheless the case that the themes addressed in this study continue to be of relevance to the present generation of evangelicals or to those who abandoned the tradition for reasons not too dissimilar to those of their predecessors. For example, the dispensational fundamentalism pioneered by the Plymouth

Brethren, which so afflicted the young Edmund Gosse, also characterized the education of Christine Rosen, whose *My Fundamentalist Education* was a recent best seller. Rosen's account of her education, although of a much less traumatic kind than Gosse's, nevertheless similarly combines an ability to evoke the absurdities of some fundamentalist emphases with an admiration for many of its core values. Although writing from an avowedly secular perspective, Rosen acknowledges that her fundamentalist education nurtured in her a respect for her fellow human beings, taught her the dangers of pride, gave her a love for the Bible, and developed in her a lifelong devotion to language and music. Nevertheless, as her life unfolded Rosen found herself turning more to scholarship than to the Bible for answers to her deepest questions. She wanted to be more engaged in the world, not less, and to understand and appreciate culture, not avoid it or fight against it.³⁰ Rather like Edmund Gosse a century and a half earlier, she chose the individual's right to forge her own inner and outer life free from the dogmatic constraints of fundamentalism.

A less lighthearted trajectory, perhaps more in keeping with the earnest intellectual tradition represented in this book, is the self-described faith journey of Evelyn Kirkley, author of *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen*. Raised as an evangelical Southern Baptist, Kirkley had her faith nourished by campus evangelical groups before finding a home as a feminist evangelical working for social justice and human rights. A combination of theological education—which raised more questions than answers—the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in the early 1980s, the rise of what came to be known as the Religious Right, and other more personal factors persuaded her to abandon the evangelicalism of her youth and write about the rise of free thought in America.³¹ There are thousands of such stories, past and present, that lie buried in unvisited tombs. What follows are the stories of nine of the most eminent members of this buried tradition. Aside from their intrinsic interest as the faith journeys of a distinguished group of creative artists and public intellectuals, their stories hopefully will provoke reflection both in those who proudly remain evangelicals and in those who have become disenchanted with a tradition they once embraced. How a tradition treats its casualties, past and present, is, after all, as revealing of its values as its more public success stories.