

## Book Notes

### **Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History**

**Riley B. Case**

*Nashville: Abingdon Press*

*2004, 320 pp., paper, \$25.00*

*Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins*

American evangelicalism is seldom aptly defined. Often its critics give new meaning to the terms “stereotype” and “caricature” in their assessments. For the most part such critics end up telling us more about the non-evangelical theological movements in which they participate than about evangelicalism itself. And when Methodist evangelicalism, itself, is under review the problem is actually compounded due to ascertaining the substance of the “Methodist” component in the midst of some many fads, agendas and ideologies that vie for attention. Riley B. Case has entered this difficult and contested environment and has written, remarkably enough, a work that is balanced, supported by significant research, and helpful in its conclusions.

The central thesis of *Evangelical and Methodist* is that the Good News movement of the United Methodist church is not suitably defined when it is seen as a “conservative reaction” to the social and political unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, to define any movement as a “reaction” stacks the deck in a prejudicial way by suggesting that one’s own group preferences are (and should be) the leading ones (with initiative, foresight and creativity), and all other groups are therefore reactions, perhaps even annoyances, to such “progressive” leading. In developing his thesis whereby the Good News movement might be more accurately defined, Case distinguishes two forms of Methodism: populist and establishment. The former embraces moral crusades, circuit preachers, revivals and camp meetings. The latter includes tall steeples, rented pews, robbed choirs, denominational journals, colleges and bishops. The history of Methodism, then, can be understood in a more populist fashion as the tension between these two leading movements.

Charles Keysor, one of the early lights of the Good News movement, was galvanized into action upon reading the 1969 issue of the *United Methodist Teacher I and II* which stated: “The drama of Jesus would be far

stronger and make a far greater appeal to this post-Christian age without all this supernatural claptrap brought in at the end with a dead man suddenly brought back to life again.” Indeed, frustration over the church school curriculum essentially launched the Good News movement. In time other crises emerged in terms of doctrine, faith and even the mission of the church itself. In this problematic context in which establishment Methodism basically sought hegemony, often silencing evangelical voices (despite public expressions of diversity), evangelical Methodism not only tried to come to a common understanding of such essential doctrines as original sin, the Incarnation, the Atonement and the new birth, but it also wanted to distinguish itself in the process from sacramentalism (the essence of the faith was in the sacraments), confessionalism (the essence of the faith was in the creeds), and liberalism (the essence of the faith needed to be adjusted to the ways of modern thinking).

Despite its detractors, populist Methodist evangelicalism, of which Good News is a part, has neither retreated nor died. Instead it thrives in a number of parachurch structures such as The Institute of Religion and Democracy, The Mission Society for United Methodists, Aldersgate Renewal Ministries, A Foundation for Theological Education, Transforming Congregations, Lifewatch, The RENEW network for women, Bristol House Publishers, The Confessing Movement, and, of course, Good News Itself. In light of this and other factors, Riley’s conclusion to this readable and engaging history is more than warranted: “populist evangelicalism. . .is alive and well and represents one of the best hopes for renewal in the United Methodist Church.”

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## **God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything**

**Christopher Hitchens**

*New York: Twelve Press*

*2007, 307 pp., paper, \$14.99*

*Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins*

Several books on atheism have emerged of late and a few have even made it to the New York Times bestseller list. The “new atheists” as they are called, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris among them, have been joined most recently by Christopher Hitchens, contributing editor of *Vanity Fair*, whose own contribution to this genre is supposedly the second most popular book in North America as I write this review.

Though this new cultural trend attempts to wrap itself in the mantle of intellectual honesty and free thinking, what the reader actually encounters in these books, especially in that of Hitchens, is a diatribe against religion in

which no attempt at being fair is ever made. “Throw enough mud, with the hope that some will stick,” aptly characterizes the basic approach throughout. All of this is quite surprising especially since Hitchens has been hailed as one of the top 100 intellectuals in the West (he was number 5), but his most recent work does not even compare favorably, in terms of either style or content, with much earlier attempts, that of Celsus in the third century, or of Ludwig Feuerbach, in the nineteenth. An equal opportunity critic, Hitchens finds little value in Judaism, Christianity, Islam or in the various Eastern religions. Indeed, the relation that holds between astrology and astronomy [sic] (the work unfortunately has its typos), is supposed to characterize that between religion and philosophy as well. Religion is a dangerous illusion (reworking Freud’s thesis), so we are warned, and it often has destructive consequences.

In Hitchen’s distorted world, resembling a carnival mirror, believers are ignorant; slavery was of religious design; religion, despite much evidence to the contrary, does not cause people to behave in a more civilized manner; the Old Testament is a “nightmare,” (a judgment that verges on anti-Semitism especially when ancient Jews are referred to as “Yokels”) and the New Testament supposedly “exceeds the evil of the Old one.” In each case, however, Hitchen’s has mistaken a much touted claim for an actual reasoned argument of which there is surprisingly little in this oddly drawn book. In fact, in the chapter on the New Testament, one finds a careful consideration of neither how oral tradition prepared the way for the later written works, nor how diverse genres emerged. Instead, the chapter is dominated by a discussion of Mel Gibson’s views on Christianity, a consideration of a second-rate radical New Testament scholar’s work, and a foray into the Roman Catholic church’s teaching on Mary, little of which (the Immaculate Conception and Assumption into heaven, for example) is actually found in the pages of the New Testament itself! However, Hitchens is so eager to criticize religion in general and Christianity in particular that he apparently has forgotten the basic principle of good judgment: first understand, then assess; first describe, then criticize. To be sure, the complicated, profound and sophisticated nature of both the Old and New Testaments floats by Hitchens like a blur. Given his premises, he has no explanation as to why the Bible is and remains the best seller of all time.

The credibility of the book is further undermined by repeated factual error. In a way similar to Sam Harris’ book, *The End of Faith*, Hitchens stumbles when it comes to the history of Christianity and the Bible. Thus, in criticizing the celebration of Christ’s birth at the turn of the millennium, a timeframe that Hitchens derisively calls “an odometer for idiots,” he repeatedly insists that Christ was born in 4 A.D. though most competent NT scholars would argue for a date of about ten years earlier, that is, either 6 or 5 B.C.

Moreover, when Hitchens derides the Millerite movement in America in the nineteenth century (which eventually issued in the Seventh Day Adventist denomination), he insists on referring to its leader as George—not the correct William—Miller. Add to these missteps Hitchens' penchant for making unsupported blanket statements such as “the metaphysical claims of religion are false,” and “faith. . .that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason is now plainly impossible,” and it becomes abundantly clear why readers will become disappointed if they are actually looking for carefully laid out arguments in this book.

What arguments do emerge, however, in this work are more akin to name-calling and ad hominem attacks than anything else. For example, the entirety of American evangelism is dismissed as a “heartless con” in which “second-string characters” (has Hitchens ever heard of the names Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Phoebe Palmer?) bilk the people. The exclusive lens that is employed here is “Elmer Gantry comes to town,” in which the following precept (the stuff of which stereotypes are made) ever holds true: “You saps keep the faith. We’ll just keep the money.” And in terms of the intelligent design movement (which by the way is repeatedly confused with creationism, though intelligent design does not *necessarily* imply theism), Hitchens never once cites the careful and well-nuanced thought of someone like William Dembski, a key leader in the field, but simply refers to this movement as a “stupid notion” and considers its adherents to be “boobies.” However, no matter how strongly felt or asserted a sentiment is, contempt is not an argument. If the intelligent design movement is intellectually problematic, then cite the reasons why this is so. But this is something Hitchens never does, perhaps because he is unable to do so.

The unending negative perspective, the evident melancholia that becomes increasingly tedious and downright boring as the work progresses, is not only directed at movements but also at individuals. Key leaders in the church such as Augustine, Aquinas and Newman are all described as “laughably ignorant” (Has Hitchens ever read the *Summa Theologiae*?); Billy Graham, that icon of American evangelicalism, is derided as a man “whose record of opportunism and anti-Semitism is in itself a minor national disgrace”; and little of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s social and political achievements are explored; instead, the focus is on his moral failings.

Given the rambling, disjunctive form of thinking present in *God is not Great*, one is stunned by the conclusion of the book in which Hitchens calls for a “new Enlightenment.” Not liking very much the postmodern tendency to include all groups, even religious ones, in the conversation, Hitchens much prefers the good old days when religion was excluded in the name of scientific objectivity and rationality, and when separation of church and state was understood principally as a separation of church and culture with the result

that that nothing less than a naked public square emerged. Hitchens does not want to debate theologians or historians. He wants to silence them. So much for “free” thinking.

In the end, careful, fair-minded readers will likely conclude that Hitchens has either mis-titled his book or else he has let the theme entirely get away from him. To be sure, Hitchens never tackled the philosophically challenging topic of God. Instead, he focused simply on *believers*. His proposition, then, that the “proper study of mankind is man and woman,” is something of a puzzle since he has given every indication that he despises with all the invective he can muster so very many of those men and women. The book then is not actually about the pros and cons of belief in God. Rather it is an excellent illustration of why misanthropes should not write books that purport to be about theology.

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### **Sanctified Sanity: The Life and Teaching of Samuel Logan Brengle** **David Rightmire**

*Alexandria, Virginia: Crest Books*

2003, 235 pp., paper, No price given.

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins

It is now more than 70 years since the passing of that great paladin of holiness, Samuel Logan Brengle, commissioner of the Salvation Army. Sensing that most of the secondary literature on Brengle is now dated and lacks a significant treatment of his theology, David Rightmire has produced a very readable book that addresses both of these issues.

*Sanctified Sanity*, a title that suggests something of the purity and balance of Brengle’s ministry, is divided into two sections. The first one treats Brengle’s life and ministry in which readers learn that his holiness classic *Helps to Holiness* was originally penned as a series of articles for the Salvationist Magazine *War Cry* while the leader was recuperating from an injury caused by a brick-throwing malcontent. The pivot of this first section, however, is not the injury done to this man of God but the second blessing of entire sanctification that Brengle received on January 9, 1885 in his room in Boston. It is this date that Brengle, himself, referred to repeatedly throughout his life as his day of days, revealing the importance he attached to experience in his overall theology. And the young Brengle was prepared for this rich reception of grace, in part, by sitting under the teaching of none other than Daniel Steele.

The second section of this book considers Brengle’s holiness theology as a re-balancing of holiness doctrine in the tradition of Wesley. That is, by stressing both an instantaneous reception of entire sanctification (since this

grace is available to the children of God *now*) as well as the process often entailed before one receives an assurance of this heart purity, Brengle's teaching on entire sanctification can be seen in some sense as a corrective of Phoebe Palmer's altar theology. Nevertheless, Brengle departed from the tradition of Wesley, in some respects, by laying down the requirement of witnessing to the second blessing as a *condition* of keeping it. In light of this and other concerns, Brengle's chief significance for contemporary readers may not be his faithful and careful explication of John Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification as Rightmire seems to assume (for that we must look elsewhere), but his great and apparently abiding influence on the holiness teaching of the Salvation Army, an influence that is best understood not in terms of eighteenth century England but in terms of nineteenth (and early twentieth) century American holiness theology.

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## Wesley and Men Who Followed

**Iain H. Murray**

*Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust*

2003. 270 pp., paper, \$27.00

*Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins*

Biographies of John Wesley have been written by authors who have been critical of Evangelicals (Henry Rack), by atheists (Roy Hattersley) and by freelance writers who contribute regularly to the Ship of Fools website (Stephen Tomkins), so why not have a biography by a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Australia who currently lives in Edinburgh? Iain Murray's *Wesley and the Men Who Followed* is just such a work.

Murray's interests, however, are far more than biographical and the book itself is divided up into four main sections: 1) Wesley; 2) Men Who Followed (William Bramwell, Gideon Ouseley, and Thomas Collins); 3) Against Unquestioning Following—a section that includes treatments on justification and Christian perfection; and 4) Methodism, With and Without the Holy Spirit. Concerning the first section, that is, material on Wesley, Methodist readers will be happily surprised to learn that this Presbyterian author clearly identifies it as a problem that in some circles George Whitefield has often been represented to the disadvantage of John Wesley.

In terms of Wesley's spiritual journey, at first glance it appears as if Murray is offering a conservative reading of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience since he claims that "Had he died before 24 May 1738, his name would have been unknown to history." In addition, Murray rightly notes that the Evangelical Revival was concerned with the question not only how one

becomes a Christian but also what is the evidence that such a Christian profession is *real*. However, a further glance reveals the substance of his view especially when Murray contends in an abrupt way that the “once-popular assumption that Wesley was ‘converted’ at Aldersgate begins to fall apart.” The problem here, of course, is that the author does not detail the theological reasoning to substantiate such a claim. For one thing, he fails to indicate that Wesley understood the faith of a servant not simply in one way, but in two key ways, one of which does not imply either justification or the new birth since such servants are under the “spirit of bondage,” in other words, they remain under the “power or dominion of sin.” Moreover, when the standards of what it means to be a (real) Christian that Wesley laid out in his sermons, “The Marks of the New Birth,” and “The Great Privilege of Those who are Born of God,” are brought to bear on the Georgia narrative, it is simply impossible to claim that Wesley then had “the proper Christian faith.”

Murray, however, is far more able in his analysis when he considers Wesley in the context of his many theological disputes. He points out, for example, that Wesley may have misunderstood some of his controversial dialog partners, James Hervey for instance, because he repeatedly viewed their work through his own ongoing fear of antinomianism (lawlessness). For one thing, Hervey had argued that the Christian’s standing in the righteousness of Christ, “yields new and nobler motives to all holy living.” Beyond this, Murray makes yet another contribution to the field in his refreshing honesty in an analysis of the contemporary scene. He points out, in a way that will surely roil establishment Methodism, both in Britain and North America, that “twentieth century Methodism was as weak as the religion it initially challenged.” Clearly, Murray’s diagnosis is accurate. However, he fails to understand the theological shifts, some of them quite subtle, that led to such a weakened state.