

## Chants of Conversion

### Inspiration, Individualism and Adherence in American Evangelicalism<sup>1</sup>

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#### A Review Essay

##### Introduction

[1] Converts often scorn their former faith with the same zealotry and tenacity with which they embrace a new one. An apostate from the Evangelical and Reformed heritage that reared him, Frank Schaeffer certainly repudiates, ridicules, and lambastes much of his former inheritance in his religious memoir *Crazy for God* (2007). Here Schaeffer chronicles the obsession of his parents, legendary Evangelical champions Edith and Francis, with “the Work” of their Swiss mission community of L’Abri, which they founded in the 1960s and 1970s, and their combined role in forging the religious right – crystallized in anti-abortion – during the late 1970s and 1980s. Schaeffer, though, is only one of a number of American Evangelicals who have emerged critical of their tradition and have either sought refuge in more ecclesiastical and liturgically robust traditions or abandoned the faith altogether.<sup>2</sup> He is one manifestation of a prominent trend and impulse.

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<sup>1</sup> For comments, criticisms and contributions, in which they admirably attempted to salvage my own inchoate thoughts, I am thankful, first, to Prof. Randall Balmer and also to Nichole Flores, Rob Snider, John Boyles, and Nathanael Homewood. For some of the sources and some of the concluding ideas in broad stroke I relied on Matthew Milliner, to whom I owe a deep intellectual debt – *et descendit pluvia et venerunt flumina et flaverunt venti et inruerunt in domum illam et non cecidit fundata enim erat super petram.*

<sup>2</sup> The term “Evangelical” is notoriously nebulous and requires further clarification. A recent attempt at self-definition that is both robust and helpful is found in *An Evangelical Manifesto*. I have followed their usage of capitalizing Evangelicalism, though this is problematic. As a foundational model of Evangelicalism, there is still no better than the fourfold: *conversionism* (belief that lives need to be changed), *bibliocentrism* (Scripture as the only and inerrant source of truth), *activism* (commitment of all believers to evangelism, service, and mission),

[2] The trickle of apostates has become a torrent. “The Evangelical faith that nurtured me as a child and sustains me as an adult,” as Columbia religion scholar and wounded Evangelical Randall Balmer voices the sentiments of many of the disenchanted, “has been hijacked by right-wing zealots who have distorted the gospel of Jesus Christ, defaulted on the noble legacy of nineteenth-century evangelical activism, and failed to appreciate the genius of the First Amendment” (2006b: ix). Whether political, socio-cultural, or theological-liturgical-doctrinal motivations take precedence, younger and second generation Evangelicals especially are disgruntled (see McKnight; Noll and Nystron). So the waters of the Thames, the Tiber, the Bosphorus, and the Rhone, not too mention those of no confession at all, are populated with Evangelicals splashing about.<sup>3</sup>

[3] Of course, the movement of conversion is reciprocal. Many still flock to Evangelical faith as its proselytization rate worldwide ranks highly among other religious movements. Evangelicalism still flourishes; it is alive and well and influential. Megachurches, among other examples, such as Lakewood Church (Houston, TX), North Point Community Church (Alpharetta, GA), Willow Creek Community Church (South Barrington, IL), and Saddleback Community Church (Lake Forest, CA) still draw tens of thousands of regular adherents to vibrant and lively communities of faith with scopes of influence that extend far beyond their walls (Church Relevance). Although there are problems of definition and methodology, the *Barna Group*, which conducts rigorous studies on American religious beliefs, still estimates that 38% of the adult American population, about 84 million, self-identify as Evangelical – though the number drops to 8-10% when Barna places nine ostensibly standard doctrinal parameters on the term Evangelical.<sup>4</sup> In the specific case of Catholics and Evangelicals as an example, for every Evangelical “scholar, pastor or writer [or private communicant] who, after years of study and reflection, was compelled to convert to Catholicism,” there are many who, like former president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) and recent convert Francis Beckwith, “as a young Catholic was drawn to the love of Jesus he or she found in Evangelical Protestant communities” (Beckwith: 13-14). Manifold examples exist of movement back and forth between confessions. Yet precisely because of its enduring influence, those who have distanced themselves from the Evangelical fold, like Schaeffer and Balmer, provide a particular prism through which to view the spectrum of Evangelical triumphs and tragedies. Here I would like to explore some of the strengths, weaknesses and

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and *crucicentrism* (conviction that the crucial aspect of the Christian story was the substitutionary atonement of Jesus on the cross for our sins) (see Noll 2003: 19). The co-determination of historical factors is also essential. The confluence of *doctrinal Puritanism*, *continental Pietism*, and *high Anglican reformism* coalesced as antecedents to the emergence of this experiential phenomenon (Noll 2003: 60-69). Iterations of Evangelicalism are usually some configuration, to a greater or lesser degree, of these three historical factors.

<sup>3</sup> For conversion to one of the older traditions, the *locus classicus* remains John Henry Newman. For a fascinating account of apostasy, see Templeton. On conversion generally, see Allitt; Connor; Madrid; Chesterton (1986, 1990); Knox; Lunn; Howard; Hahn; Gillquist.

<sup>4</sup> The distinction here is between *self-identification* as Evangelical and what Barna considers *traditionally Evangelical held beliefs*. Also note that “Evangelical” is one circumscribed subset of the larger American population which would describe themselves as “born-again,” which is a further subset of those who would identify simply as “Christian” (see: Barna).

potentialities of the Evangelical religion in American society using Schaeffer's account of disillusionment in particular, but also that of others, as a frame.

### **Inspiration: Narratives of Conversion**

[4] Schaeffer's own tale begins with L'Abri itself. L'Abri was an epicenter of Evangelicalism of the 1960s and 1970s. And, for that reason, I would see it as representative of broader trends in that generation (though since then, its influence has been questioned; see Worthen). Its early genius was its authenticity. A unique fusion of retreat center, communal living experiment, and intellectual forum, the chalets in the Swiss Alps of Huemoz beckoned weary, inquisitive or yearning sojourners to spiritual exploration. Francis and Edith Schaeffer masterfully and distinctively integrated sincere cultural engagement and sophistication with robust, Christian apologetics and doctrine in an attempt to quench the thirst of thousands of parched seekers: *students* (visitors) who spent from one day to three months in their orbit probing deep questions of worldview. No question remained unasked, no area of inquiry uncharted. In particular, Francis Schaeffer's ability to interact dynamically with his interlocutors, to engage inquirers of all persuasions, to respond proficiently and directly to even the most cynical and pointed questions, and "to hold forth" on big religious ideas was the essence of L'Abri's burgeoning influence. In many ways, the Schaeffer's thinking and L'Abri's ethos became architectonic for the maintenance of strict theological and doctrinal purity, combined with the serious translation into the idiom of the culture, characteristic of Evangelicalism till our time.

[5] Reflecting on his experience with his parents, Frank Schaeffer traces in his book the arc of his parent's ministry from an earlier rigid, pietistic pseudo-fundamentalism to the time when "L'Abri was at its zenith in 1968" (2007: 207). It was during this time that L'Abri was most passionate about interculturalism with contemporary trends. The Schaeffers embraced much of the 1960s counterculture's critique of "mainstream" society, "bourgeois" religiosity, and "plastic" materialism. But they also provided dissidents with a new answer, a Christian answer. Instead of the 1960's recourse to sex, drugs and rock and roll, which left many adrift and empty on the sea of nihilism, the Schaeffers sought to anchor the critique in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Christian West. The synthesis was explosive.

[6] "Hippies and other assorted 'seekers' were thronging to the community." Frank Schaeffer's dad, Francis, now clad with long hair, a goatee, Nehru jacket, and hiking attire, "evolved into a hip guru preaching Jesus to hippies, a precursor to, and the spiritual father of, the Jesus Movement" (2007: 207-208). But they were rebels with a purpose; they were rebels for Jesus. They were hippies with Christian truth and morality as their unshakeable foundation. This produced a fascinating commentary on Evangelicals' wariness of and yet obsession with respectability, in which, "The more famous, the more hip the convert, the more 'the Lord could use that person.' There was a type of unofficial aristocracy. A born-again Wheaton College Student . . . who showed up just to do Bible studies and to 'deepen her walk with the Lord' was low on the totem pole compared to, say, a British heroin addict-artist who was hanging out with Keith Richards" (2007: 211).

[7] Personal conversion – prioritized over form, structure, or even doctrine – had become the prominent theme of the new Evangelical religion long before L'Abri and Schaeffer. Early on in colonial religious life, the celebrated preacher and revivalist George Whitefield (1714-

1770) argued in Boston to an assembled cadre of clergymen of the Church of England, “It was best to preach the new birth, and the power of godliness, and not to insist so much on the form; for people would never be brought to one mind as to that; nor did Jesus Christ even intend it” (458). But more than that, as Schaeffer’s anecdote reveals, American Evangelicalism has tended to celebritize the conversion experience and almost to apotheosize the celebrity or radical conversion narrative, though this appropriates vestiges of the Christian tradition that harkened back to Augustine, who was regarded so eminently and seen as such a powerful testimony to the truth of the gospel partially because he was, as the story goes, “such a great sinner who became such a great saint.”

[8] Conversion has always been a trope in the Christian movement – for one of the earliest calls of Jesus of Nazareth was “to repent,” or more forcefully, “to change your mind and purpose,” “to turn away from one’s previous way of life,” and “believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Yet the theologian Bernard Lonergan noticed shortly after Vatican II, how the shift toward conversion had become the *fundamental* matrix, medium, even method in which Christian thought operated:

Fundamental to religious living is conversion. It is a topic little studied in traditional theology since there remains very little of it when one reaches the universal, the abstract, the static. For conversion occurs in the lives of individuals. It is not merely change or even development; rather, it is a radical transformation on which follows, on all levels of living, an interlocked series of changes and developments . . . Not all conversion is as total as the one I have so summarily described. Conversion has many dimensions. A changed relationship to God brings or follows changes that are personal, social, moral and intellectual. But there is no fixed rule of antecedence and consequence, no necessity of simultaneity, no prescribed magnitude of changes. Conversion may be compacted into the moment of a blinded Saul falling from his horse on the way to Damascus. It may be extended over the slow maturing process of a lifetime. It may satisfy an intermediate measure (65-67).

For Lonergan, the whole process of Christian reflection on its own story had shifted from the abstract to the experiential in the modern Western world: “First, then, theology was a deductive, and it has become largely an empirical science.” He concluded that conversion would supply the renewed method for Christian theology in our time for, “theology, and especially the empirical theology of today, is reflection on religion. It follows that theology will be reflection on conversion. But conversion is fundamental to religion. It follows that reflection on conversion can supply theology with its foundation, and indeed, with a foundation that is concrete, dynamic, personal, communal, and historical” (67).

[9] The Evangelical hyper-emphasis on the conversion experience, then, resonates strongly with this broader and ecumenical shift to inductive, experiential, and contextual theology, even though Evangelicals tend to highlight the compacted moment or sudden dimension of conversion to the neglect of the slow, mature, lifetime, and developmental dimension of conversion, thus projecting a tightly circumscribed and limited model of the antecedents, consequences, and magnitude of conversion onto the experience. This turning in on

experience and its limitation to a single event has tended to facilitate a rampant anti-intellectualism, which Mark Noll famously decried as scandalous (1994). Nevertheless, Evangelicalism's evaluation of the personal and individual appropriation of the faith has been one of its triumphs. The Evangelical message, style, and calls to conversion were not only successful, as Grant Wacker writes, the "evangelical stirring would rank as the largest, strongest, most sustained religious movement in U.S. history," and it would prove eminently adaptable to the new forms and sensibilities of the emerging Republic (Butler, Wacker, and Balmer: 171; see Noll 2002). Detractors often woefully neglect this triumph. They forget the factors that have led Evangelicalism in American history to such a swell of influence.

[10] And Frank Schaffer's book is one example of those who distort the resilient power of Evangelical religion. Indeed *Crazy for God* seems to lust after controversy. Many Evangelical Christians found it uncharitable, offensive, and stereotypical. In one review, Os Guinness, a former family friend of the Schaeffers and one of the Evangelical leaders whom Frank describes dismissively his book (2007: 213), calls it a fundamentally disingenuous portrayal of his parents and their ministry. "For all his softening," Guinness responds, "the portrait he paints amounts to a death-dealing charge of hypocrisy and insincerity at the very heart of their life and work." Because the critique was not only inaccurate but also dishonest, Guinness felt compelled to vindicate the family's image against malicious attacks from one inside it: "It pains me to say, then, that his portrait is cruel, distorted, and self-serving, but I cannot let it pass unchallenged without a strong insistence on a different way of seeing the story." Guinness suggests that lingering in Frank's person from his L'Abri days was a "combination of neglect, guilt, nepotism, and spoiling," which produced a "toxic brew" that distorts the true and admirable legacy of that institution and its founders and gives "perverse comfort to those who already dislike the Christian faith, or evangelicalism, or conservatism." Frank, in turn, responds, ever cantankerous, by dismissing the hidden motivations and partiality on the part of Guinness' review in his own psychologizing personal attack (2008).

[11] While we may certainly appreciate the lucid prose, sardonic wit, brutal honesty, and invigorating transparency that animate Schaeffer's writing – especially his skillful use of profanity and his unabashed and candid exploration of Evangelical masturbation and sexual exploits, all of which are subjects that too often go unacknowledged – his account readily, and all too easily, degenerates into a dismissive and reductionistic caricature and cruel distortion of a vibrant and dynamic tradition that has radically inspired many. Schaeffer and other converts sometimes misrepresent the faith when they retroject their own personal denunciations and criticisms onto it. Frank, nevertheless, thinks that his own personal experience is symptomatic of the dichotomizing between personal and public life that plagues Evangelicals and especially their leaders. He finds this disingenuous and, ultimately, repulsive. His views on this phenomenon pervade the book. His trenchant personal criticisms, therefore, are the source of his scintillating insight, but they are also the source of his analytical astigmatism.

[12] Evangelicalism is in many ways America's great "folk religion," a grass roots and democratizing movement. As Randall Balmer observes, it is one of the great "patchwork quilts" of the American experience. Schaeffer neglects the importance of *belief* in Evangelicalism. He undervalues it as a locus for community and cohesion, to make up for the deficiency of creed, liturgy, procedure, tradition, episcopacy or structure, all of which act

as centripetal forces in other Christian communities. “Evangelicals unite instead,” Balmer argues, “behind a charismatic leader, a common spiritual experience, or a set of doctrines – and, more than likely, some combination of the three” (2006a: 335, 337). The belief, experience, and charisma around which Evangelicals coalesce, have often provided the boundaries, limits, morality, and certainty for which people yearn, to some degree at least, in an epoch of unwieldy complexity, relativism, skepticism, and reductionism (Balmer 2006a: 335-42). And Schaeffer also disregards the *transformative* power of Evangelicalism. Beliefs like these engender change in people. It makes the weak mighty; it sets the captive free. It challenges adherents. It breaks them down, equips for morality, renews lives. Against disingenuousness, Evangelicalism often manifests the radical authenticity and repentant conversion, which, as Ben Harper croons, alone belong to the aftermath of the “power of the gospel.”

[13] In many ways, indubitably, Frank Schaeffer’s book is deeply flawed. He renders the story essayistically and sensationally – albeit admittedly so. In terms of scope, he completely and misleadingly conflates *Evangelicalism* with *Fundamentalism*. Whereas both of these movements would have found particular elements and forms of the Reformed Calvinism, out of which the Schaeffers’ Christianity truly emerged, as either morally objectionable or theologically heretical.<sup>5</sup> He greatly hyperbolizes his own political prominence. That is not to say, of course, that the Schaeffers were not pivotal to the movement. But his claim that, “it was my father and I who were amongst the first to start telling American evangelicals that God wanted them involved in the political process,” obviously neglects the role of those such as Ed McAteer, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Paul Weyrich, and other predecessors, while his attribution to Francis and himself as “the father[s] of the religious right,” is clearly overdrawn (2007: 289).

### Individualism: Narratives of Disenchantment

[14] For all its serious defects, however, *Crazy for God* remains a triumphant work. We must, first, take into account Schaeffer’s own view of his project. It is neither a biography nor a work of scholarship. It is not an objective account. It is the protestations and lamentations of a wounded son. It is part reminiscence and part self-examination. Clearly this is evident from Frank’s prefatory material, where he writes,

“I’m sure I have placed some events in the wrong years or have written that something happened in one place when it happened in another. This is a *memoir*, not a biography . . . To footnote this story or to have done research into dates and places and to correct the chronology would have been to indulge the conceit that my book is an objective history. It is not. What I’ve written comes from a memory deformed by time, prejudice, flawed recall and emotion” (2007: 6, emphasis original).

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<sup>5</sup> The conservative Presbyterianism out of which the Schaeffer’s Christianity emerged should not be categorically equated with either, although they would become foundational for later evangelicals and had resonances with fundamentalist theology, relating to the modernist controversy in American Protestantism of the 1920s. On the one hand, evangelicalism antedates and transcends fundamentalism. On the other hand, the Schaeffer’s themselves would have been found morally objectionable by some contemporary evangelicals and theologically heretical by fundamentalists for their robust engagement in and interaction with culture.

His view of Evangelicalism is jaundiced in its spurning – and he is aware of that. He writes, in that classic phrase, as a “jilted lover” (Balmer 2006b: ix). And this means he is aware that his critical story is *not* the entire story. This is one aspect that Guinness, along with many others, utterly failed to consider in their critical reviews.

[15] Frank’s portrayal of his parents, and ultimately Evangelicalism in general, is *ambivalent*, not condemnatory. He still emphasizes their virtues: “My parents’ compassion was sincere and consistent. And they never allowed their belief to make them into bigots.” Their incorporation of homosexuals and minorities into the community, Schaeffer recalls, was radically comprehensive and progressive. “My parents,” he defends, “spoke hotly against racism and practiced an all-encompassing love for every human being” (2007: 76-77). His dad’s perpetual opening of his home and gracious hospitality, despite his introverted and isolationist inclinations “was a brave and wholly admirable thing” (2007: 139). Even when he is critical or skeptical, or when he is interrogating the very authenticity of his parents’ public persona, the son still writes glowingly of his parents, nostalgically of his dad’s hikes, private discussions, and unpretentious spirituality and laudably of the fact that “what moved him wasn’t theology, but beauty” (2007: 140). His father was unlike the uncultured and extremists with whom he increasingly became associated due to the pro-life work in which Schaeffer was embroiled. And Frank makes clear to differentiate and to vindicate – sometimes to the point of strain – his dad’s legacy with regard to those with whom “you can be cobelligerents, but you don’t have to be allies” (2007: 315). Other Evangelicals may have condemned the *wrong* people, but “L’Abri *welcomed* the wrong people. Mom and Dad’s idea of the Christian life was *not* to retreat behind high walls” (2007: 332, emphasis original). At times, then, he still fawns over his parents.

[16] The Schaeffers, though, have been mythologized and lionized by their followers and devotees in the Evangelical world, as happens to many such leaders. Frank’s major task is simply to strip the altars a bit. For myths, as always, incite iconoclasts. Although he may trumpet their sins, there is another side to Edith and Francis than the sanitized version found in devoted circles. That was not the entire story. They had very real flaws – Francis Schaeffer’s manic-depression, for instance, and his abusive personality – as any Evangelical leader does, and which their followers often fail to acknowledge. And Frank seeks to expose those flaws, while to his credit he does not use them to exculpate himself or for his own aggrandizement, even though he presents a kind of distorted self-flagellation. In the end, Francis and Edith Schaeffer were excellent leaders, who also transgressed and doubted and suffered. It is essential for us to learn from Frank, not in an obsessive way but in a humanizing way, that his father had an irrepressible temper and physically abused his mother and that his mother applied a spiritualizing and pietistic grid to everything and left many young women, including the Schaeffer’s own daughters, in the dust with her indefatigable, workaholic tendencies.

[17] For, as Frank Schaeffer renders it, “Every human being has a dark side” (2007: 100). With this insight, he not only shows us a more complex and accurate picture of his parents but also is able to denounce many other popular and canonized leaders of the movement (all of whom desperately need nuance in our understanding): He describes Billy Graham as “a very weird man indeed who lived an oddly sheltered life in a celebrity/ministry cocoon” (2007: 315), and “just plain bizarre” (2007: 100), and whom he faults for auctioning off one

of his daughters out of Wheaton College into a marriage with a middle-aged wealthy donor. He calls James Dobson, “the most power-hungry and ambitious person I have ever met,” and talks of, “the unreconstructed bigot reactionary” Jerry Falwell, and “Pat Robertson, who would have a hard time finding work in any job where hearing voices is not required” (2007: 315). Yet this exposition is not an end in itself. It gets at something deeper, more synoptic about this particular subculture.

[18] The enduring brilliance of the book will be that it gets at the essential flaw, not of certain people, but rather at the heart of Evangelical Christianity itself: its *individualism*. The primal iniquity of Evangelicalism is that it is a personalist and individualist cult. It is, fundamentally, a religion of the *self*, and not the self in relation to the other. It is a creed of free markets, industrial revolutions, and political republics, of detached persons, isolated rationalities, continuous innovations, geographic dislocations, and frontier mavericks – corresponding to the historical situation out of which it emerged. Despite communal remnants, and church entities – though really nothing more than federations of autonomous local bodies made up of autonomous single members – it is a religion that hyper-emphasizes personal appropriation: the individual conversion experience, the individual relationship with God, the individual role in salvation, the individual role in mission, the individual worship, all of which, to a greater or lesser degree, have become hallmarks of Evangelicalism at least since the time of Finney’s Armenian shift and Christian tent revivals as “the work of man.”

[19] Schaeffer recognizes and portrays this condition eminently. It is an analysis embedded throughout his story and reflection. The leaders, therefore, have to be great individualists – like Francis Schaeffer. Evangelicals, in particular, are desperate for leadership and need remarkable leaders, as their penchant for idealization of those leaders necessitates. So in a penetrating insight, Schaeffer surmises,

The paradox is that sometimes the less it makes sense, the better it works. And the less one knows about the “holy” people we follow, the better. One of the mysteries of human need is that religious leaders must become more than the sum of their fallible, sometimes awful, parts, because other people *need* them to be more. This does not make the religious leader a hypocrite; it just shows that the rest of us are desperate (2007: 102-103, emphasis original).

And Julie Ingersoll has recently demonstrated the detrimental effects of this blindness to the faults of leaders, the vast majority of whom are male, for the life and psyche of Evangelical women in particular, over against some of the recent benign or empowering interpretations of gender and leadership roles for women in this subculture.

### **Adherence: The Question Lingers**

[20] While a hyper-individualism may be the sin of Evangelical religion, two recent and important articles by Evangelical intellectuals have called Evangelicals not to abandon the faith lest they exacerbate the very individualism that they lambaste (Jenson; Anderson). Departure from the faith based on individual preference for history, tradition, community, they argue, entails the same decisionism from which they attempt to extricate themselves. So Anderson comments,



The renewed focus on community and on institutional structures is still grounded in the decisionism that has always marked evangelicalism. The fact that we are born . . . as evangelicals – is unimportant. What is important is that we *choose* to be patriotic, that we *choose* to be Republican, that we *choose* to be evangelicals (or emergent, or Catholic, or Presbyterian) – and that we make that choice independent from and irrespective of any tradition that may have shaped us.

Far from renewing the Evangelical tradition or breaking out of modernistic paradigms, Anderson provocatively suggests, this trend, instead, suggests a capitulation:

While younger evangelicals may claim to be above the partisan fray politically, they are increasingly segregated into self-selected niche communities from which they derive – or better, create – their respective identities. Despite its claim to reject modernity, the communitization suggests the triumph of western liberalism over the evangelical mind.

So those like Schaeffer who leave end up vitiating tradition and community for the *sake* of tradition and community, ostensibly for intellectual integrity, but also, perhaps, perpetuating the same individual agency that is foundational to Evangelicalism itself.

[21] Evangelicals should instead “remain evangelical” because we “need to continue to be saved *from* and *in*” our own Evangelical selves (Jenson, emphasis original). In a poignant and penetrating passage, Anderson views the torrent of Evangelical departures as a failure of Christian virtue, of intellectual resilience, and of commitment: “In the face of declining partisanship, patriotism, and eroding family ties, young evangelicals have increasingly turned away from their roots in search of a sense of grounding and stability. They have the intelligence to notice the flaws, but often lack the charity and the patience to work to fix them.” This line of argumentation culminates in the strong claim, “One could reasonably argue that the distinctives of evangelicalism are such that it is exactly where intellectuals ought to be, and that they have an obligation to remain evangelical.” While this argument for obligation – especially for intellectuals – is compelling in some ways, there are, however, other paradigms with which to view conversion from Evangelicalism than either Schaeffer’s model of categorical repudiation or Anderson’s model of responsibility and consistency to remain within the fold.

[22] In a recent work, as evidence of one such more nuanced paradigm, the philosopher Francis Beckwith describes his own fascinating intellectual journey as he left the Presidency of the *Evangelical Theological Society* (ETS) to join the Catholic Church, although his case is different because he returned to the Catholicism of his youth. While Beckwith does reevaluate the Evangelical notion of justification by faith, his most important contribution is his apologia for remaining “Evangelical and Catholic” and, more specifically, for allowing Catholics to participate in ETS. He utterly disdains any Catholic “temptation to triumphalism,” and attempts to uphold a vision whereby he is an *Evangelical* Catholic because he confesses “the *Evangel*, the Gospel, the Good News, and that it is a gift from God that ought to be embraced and lived by everyone. . . I have an obligation to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ” (12). And he is an Evangelical *Catholic* because he confesses that “the Church is universal and that its continuity is maintained throughout history by the whole of

its membership, the Body of Christ, and not *merely* as a collection of isolated individuals in personal relationship with Jesus” (128, emphasis original). So, from Beckwith’s vision, it is possible to see the migration between confessions neither as a complete repudiation nor as a shirking of obligation. Beckwith sees his move to Catholicism himself as a *deepening*, not discarding, of his own Evangelicalism in the sustained and magnifying, gradual yet vacillating, process of maturation over a lifetime of which Lonergan spoke in his second dimension of the conversion experience. And perhaps this is one paradigm by which to evaluate Evangelicalism and conversion itself. I am reminded of the sagacious statements of the late Richard Neuhaus upon his own conversion from Evangelical Lutheranism to Catholicism: “If, as I am persuaded, my communion with Christ’s Church is now the fuller, then it follows that my unity with all who are in Christ is now the stronger,” and he reassured his old friends and former communicants, not as a valediction but rather as a renewed genesis, “We travel together still” (14).

[23] In the end, the introspective conversionism, rampant individualism, isolated decisionism, doctrinal rigidity, historical discontinuity, and liturgical and aesthetic deprivation of contemporary Evangelicalism may not be everlasting. Certain so-called emergent movements are already in the process of rectifying many of these deficiencies – even if in an arbitrary and intellectually inconsistent manner (see Bell; McLaren). These new types of Evangelical movements, as well as Frank Schaeffer’s book *Crazy for God*, as one account of disenchanting Evangelicalism, may sometimes degenerate into an anti-intellectualist, anti-doctrinal diatribe. They also suffer from an exaltation of ambiguity; Schaeffer, in particular, reacts to his parents’ unbearably strong dogmatism, so that everything dwells on *grey* street, with no certainty or clarity. We might ask him in response: Would he apply this same ambiguity to the basic doctrines of his recently adopted Greek Orthodox faith? Here they embody the symptomatic condition of the postmodern gospel in which ambiguity itself becomes a dogmatic fundamentalism of its own: For, as David Bentley Hart so brilliantly describes, we do not have in postmodernity the end, but rather, “the culmination of the critical tradition of modernity . . . [which itself] becomes a meta-metanarrative, the story of no more stories . . . This is where the temper of the postmodern often proves wanting in courage and consistency. The truth of no truths becomes, inevitably, truth” (6-7).

[24] Despite these and all its other failures, *Crazy for God* is an intrepid and nuanced book – much more than its detractors have acknowledged. Frank Schaeffer reminds us of the dark side of us all, including our celebrated leaders. He cautions us about the potential abuses inherent in the individualist cult at the heart of Evangelicalism. And his work provokes discussion about the questions of inspiration, individualism, adherence, and conversion that are essential to the vibrancy of the faith. These considerations reveal the triumphs, tragedies, and potentialities of Evangelical religion. For those, therefore, who have departed – though never fully – and for those who have arrived, for those who once were found and yet now are lost, for those who were once lost and now are found, and for those who remain faithfully and patiently participating in renewal and resurgence, these analyses, which Schaeffer’s book facilitates, will remain essential as long as Evangelicalism remains an influential force in American politics, society, and religion.

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