

“Evangelicals and Education” by Dr Khim Harris: a review article.

Note: this review is written by TISCA member **Daniel Young**, to whom we are grateful for its submission.

The details of the book under review are as follows:

EVANGELICALS AND EDUCATION, by Dr. Khim Harris

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I must start by declaring a personal bias in favour of this book, published in October 2004 by Paternoster Press as one of their “Studies in Evangelical History and Thought”. Its charming Australian author stayed with my wife and me on more than one occasion while he was researching it. I was at that time the Chaplain of Dean Close School in Cheltenham, and both town and school feature in the book. Khim and his family have subsequently more than returned the hospitality during my Sabbatical stay in Perth.

As far as I can judge, his book has at least two great strengths. Firstly, it is a meticulously arranged history of its subject, which is evangelical Anglicans and middle-class education in nineteenth century England, and it sets that subject in a wide context. Dr Harris covers a lot of ground, and there is much of general interest to historians of the period, when many of our independent schools were founded.

Secondly, this book must surely have lessons to teach us, if we are involved both with evangelicalism and education today. This may not have been the author’s intention, but the very fact that it took an Australian to write this book says something. Are we sufficiently mindful of our heritage? In our very different times, are we as faithful to the Gospel as were our forerunners; and can we also learn from and avoid some of the mistakes they made?

Dr Harris begins with a chapter on the emergence of evangelicalism in the nineteenth century Church of England, in the context of other changes both theological and sociological. He then shows how there was a general concern in Victorian society for the education of the middle-classes, which led to various initiatives. Because of the relationship then between church and society, most of these initiatives had an ecclesiastical flavour of some sort; and the most successful of them was spearheaded by Nathaniel Woodard.

Woodard was a committed Tractarian, and he and others set up a string of schools founded on an Anglo-Catholic basis. Several of these are still very prominent independent schools. The Evangelical counterpart to this movement needed a figure-head, and Francis Close of Cheltenham provided this. He set up a teacher training college there on firmly evangelical lines, and had a hand in founding both the Boys’ and Ladies’ Colleges, though neither remained evangelical after he left Cheltenham.

Close was the movement's spokesman; but the actual founding of evangelical schools nationally had a varied history. Some were founded largely by individuals: Talbot Greaves at Weymouth, Francis Wright at Trent College, and Francis Pocock of Monkton Combe. Others came into being as a result of committee work. One of these is now known as St Lawrence College, Ramsgate; and another is the school founded in Cheltenham as a memorial to Francis Close, who had gone from there to be Dean of Carlisle.

Dr Harris shows in his conclusion that the spirit in which these schools were founded varied considerably. He also implies that a weakness in the movement was its lack of unity of purpose. Whereas Woodard was single-minded and immensely influential, Francis Close had other priorities. Evangelical organisations came and went; individual founders handed on to others who did not always share the original vision. Our author does not actually spell this out, but the Evangelicals were clearly less successful than the Anglo-Catholics in the schools they founded. There were fewer Evangelical foundations; not all of them have survived; and of those that are still in business, not all remain clearly evangelical today.

After reading the book, I thought a little more about why this might be so. I wonder if the reason is a theological one, which is of more than historical interest. An Anglo-Catholic foundation is distinctive in its religious observance. Woodard set up detailed rules for the Chaplains of his schools, and the implementation of these rules would be clear and measurable. Evangelical foundations were sometimes defined in reaction against this "ritualism"; but it was less easy to observe what they stood for positively. This is because at the heart of evangelicalism is a message, the Biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a message which, in Christ's own words, demands a response: "Repent and believe the Good News." [Mark 1: 15]. This is obviously far harder to institutionalise. It is surprising that, according to Dr Harris, only one of the evangelical schools mentioned the word "evangelism" in its founding documents; and yet history shows that unless evangelism is the main purpose of a community, whether church or school, it will sooner or later cease to be evangelical in any meaningful sense. There is a challenge here for some of us today.