The Dominance of Evangelical Millennialism, 1970–2000

Evangelicalism in its modern guise, and especially in North America, is very much a creation of the 1970s. By the beginning of that decade, and ‘almost by sheer tenacity,’ the theologians and churchmen who had attempted to create an alternative movement to the Fundamentalism that had pulled conservative protestants from the cultural mainstream had succeeded in fashioning a ‘new religious identity, and evangelical was its designation.’¹ While this new evangelicalism claimed the lineage of historical protestant orthodoxy, it owed much to the ‘neo-evangelical’ attempt to reformulate the role of conservative religion in an increasingly secular America, and, like the Fundamentalism it sought to replace, fashioned itself reactively but very much in conversation with the cultural moment of its emergence. In America, the new movement’s rise to prominence was so rapid and its appeal so immediate that Newsweek designated 1976 as the ‘year of the evangelical.’ And there were good reasons for this claim: in the 1976 election, 34 per cent of Americans responding to a Gallup poll identified themselves as ‘born-again’ or ‘evangelical,’ and their number included each of the major candidates in that year’s presidential election.² These events in the mid-1970s set the pattern for the movement’s continuing influence. A series of presidents, including Jimmy Carter (president, 1977–81), Ronald Reagan (president, 1981–89), Bill Clinton (president, 1993–2001), and George W. Bush (president, 2001–9), indicated their commitment to evangelical faith as they issued public confessions of sin and pursued foreign policy goals that reflected, to a greater or lesser extent, the expectations of the dispensational eschatology with which they were most familiar or to which they found it expedient to allude.³ The movement has continued to generate wide popular support: in 1998, 47 per cent of respondents to a Gallup poll identified themselves
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as ‘born-again’ or ‘evangelical,’ and numbers have not much declined since. Many of these believers maintain robustly millennial hopes. Hal Lindsey’s pop-dispensational block-buster, The late great planet Earth (1970), which turned out to be the best-selling non-fiction book of the decade, set a pattern for the shape of the political re-engagement of American evangelicals in the final third of the twentieth century. In 2004 it was reported that Pat Robertson (born 1930) and Jerry Falwell (1933–2007), two televangelists who shared a commitment to a politicized premillennial worldview, were claiming to communicate with 100 million supporters every week. By the first years of the twenty-first century, its critics feared, the American dispensational lobby was ‘probably’ the ‘most powerful’ grassroots coalition in the United States.

But the period that marked the numerical success of North American evangelicalism also witnessed its terminal European decline. In Britain, church membership statistics peaked in the later 1950s, and ever since have continued to fall. British and Irish evangelicals have none of the political clout of their American brethren, and, increasingly, have come to repudiate the eschatological tenor of their faith. Since the 1970s British believers have grown away from the premillennialism that dominated in large sections of the movement in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, and have developed and embraced a range of eschatological positions that have drawn more clearly on the confessional formulations of the reformation. The polemical tone of a number of British interventions, such as Stephen Sizer’s Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon? (2004), would have startled many American dispensationalists, who were more used to hearing its kind of robust critique of dispensationalism and its political implications from denizens of the secular left.

The increasing difference between American and European evangelicalism should not obscure their continued interaction. There is some evidence that the European critique of dispensationalism has fed the growing instability of this quintessentially American faith. Since the 1980s a number of prominent intellectuals from within evangelicalism have reflected upon its origins, development and goals, and their criticisms have repeatedly returned to concerns about the movement’s eschatological predilections. The public outcry surrounding the scandals associated with prominent televangelists in the 1980s was followed by the subtle and internal deconstruction of the movement these erring saints were believed to represent. The credibility and coherence of the evangelical faith was questioned in a series of powerful and often insightful critiques that were published on either side of the Atlantic,