

Horton Lays an Egg

By Roger Schultz

Made in America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism, by Michael Scott Horton (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 198 pages.

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In civilized countries, Benjamin Franklin once said, it is not necessary to beat your mother to prove your manhood. Michael Scott Horton's *Made in America* is best read as this type of exercise and would be more aptly subtitled “the trashing of American Evangelicalism”. Despite its good points, the book sounds like another example of the neo-evangelical assault on the evangelical right.

The book's intention and basic theological presuppositions are sound. Arguing that the evangelical tradition, which was originally Reformed and constantly reforming according to the Word of God, has “calcified into a base conservatism that eschews correction and is too proud for self-examination”, Horton hopes to examine the relationship between “biblical teachings and the contemporary realities ... shaping American evangelicals”, and lead a “pilgrimage” back to an evangelicalism worthy of its apostolic heritage. Horton, a former Westminster student and current Reformed Episcopal preacher, swears allegiance to Reformed principles, admires B. B. Warfield, J. G. Machen, and old Princeton, and endorses Biblical inerrancy, propositional truth, and theological orthodoxy.

Horton charges that evangelicalism is inundated with problems: rationalism, individualism, pragmatism, secularism, pietism, experientialism, rationalism, and consumerism, and has created a privatized, personal fetish religion with no impact on the modern world. (Although Horton clearly is uncomfortable with the way the New Right is trying to change the modern world.) Much of this is true and thought-provoking. But instead of thoroughly substantiating his charges, Horton is content with huffing and puffing and tossing out evangelical shibboleths. Just what is this “civil religion”, for example, of which evangelicals are supposed to be guilty? Horton nowhere defines this term, about which much has been written, and naively equates it with religious pragmatism. (pp. 52, 164)

Made in America includes a grandiose, omniscient treatment of the past, reminiscent of Schaeffer's approach to history—but lacking Schaeffer's keen theological and cultural insights. Horton bounces over hundreds of years of American and European history in a few pages, seemingly straight from his Western Civ. class notes. There is a dualistic theme: rational theology is good, emotionalism is bad. The Puritans were bad, since in stressing conversion experiences, they forced a Halfway Covenant, and thus secularization. But the Great Awakening was good, because its emotionalism and crisis experiences were prompted by Jonathan Edwards' eloquent and well-reasoned sermons. The American Revolution was bad Horton argues, relying on the tired Wheaton thesis about an “*unChristian America*”, because the faith of the founding fathers was “not a biblical faith, but a mixture of Enlightenment deism, Arminianism, and the secularized traces of the older Biblical faith”. (p.35) The Enlightenment was, of course, bad, although to prove how rotten it was, Horton insists on trotting out Voltaire, who had little influence on America and certainly very little on the development of evangelicalism. And worst of all is the Second Awakening, where evangelicalism was hopelessly corrupted by Charles G. Finney and rampant Arminianism. Although Horton's evaluation of this Awakening is probably correct, people should note that Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* offers a much different perspective on the period.

What good insights on American religion Horton does offer are often overshadowed by instances of evangelical bashing. Discussing Christian consumerism, for instance, Horton suggests we have exchanged a Creator-creature relationship for that of Producer-consumer. He proceeds to ruin his good point by complaining about Billy Sunday guaranteeing conversions at “two dollars per soul”, and D.L. Moody being only a shoe salesman, who “just switched products”. Criticizing the emphasis on growth in contemporary mega-churches, he adds a section on “Jesus' Church-Shrinking Program”, apparently betraying an amillennial assumption that real churches will decline and disappear.

What really annoys Horton, who edited *The Agony of Deceit*, is the evangelical Right, and the “Televangelicalism” of the electronic church. And these folks do make easy targets. They still use Brillcream, wear polyester instead of wool tweeds, never discuss B.B. Warfield, and pronounce Jesus with three syllables. Yet one wonders if they are really part of the evangelical mainstream. Outside of Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, how much influence do Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland have? How many evangelicals pine after Robert Schuller (Horton's one non-fundamentalist target from the electric church)? Horton saves a little Dave Huntish-New Ager baiting for Pat Robertson, charging that he accepts the “new paganism”, “denies the reality of matter altogether”, and “endorses the 'mind over matter' philosophy of Transcendentalism”, all because Robertson accepts Einstein's $E=MC^2$ formula.

Those waiting for as vigorous a critique of mainstream evangelicals will be disappointed. Horton has nothing to say about such icons as Wheaton College, *Christianity Today*, or

Ronald Sider. When Horton does get a worthy target, such as Clark Pinnock, he loses heart and recoils from the mark. Pinnock, a self-professed, nationally-known evangelical, is a notorious Arminian, who has reportedly abandoned the Biblical doctrines of inerrancy and hell. After noting that Pinnock leans toward Process Theology, Horton drops the subject. It is evidently easier to make fun of T.V. preachers than criticize the evangelical left.

And much of Horton's analysis depends on the left. His major sources are surprisingly portside in orientation: Michael Harrington, Richard Hofstadter, H. Richard Niebuhr, Martin Marty, Gary Wills, Harvey Cox, and Mark Hatfield. Only one evangelical in the bunch, and that a squishy one. Horton's usual technique is to introduce one of these authors and tediously explain what he said. (If I wanted to know what Harvey Cox says about everything, I would buy his book.)

The style of *Made in America* is one of its most glaring problems. Why the sycophantic appeal to all these experts? (And since when is C.S. Lewis an expert on Puritanism?) The long strings of quotes remind one of a term paper. As does the repetitious nature of the chapters. How often must we be reminded that Hofstadter received a Pulitzer Prize, or what "Calminian" means, or that Moody was a shoe salesman? The book is full of annoying glitches. (H. Richard Niebuhr taught at Yale, not Harvard. Baker should have edited this book more carefully, both to clean up the typos and hack it down to half its present size.

Though attempting to offer a fresh, biblical perspective on current issues, Horton inevitably parrots the standard evangelical line on social policy. Real Christians, we are told, opposed slavery in the 19th century, had progressive views of Watergate, Vietnam, and the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and speak out against apartheid and homelessness today. Nothing too prophetic about this—you can get the same stuff from Sam Donaldson on T.V. And when Horton has the chance to bring a Biblical perspective to current issues, he slips into a hand-wringing *Christianity Today* mode so that nobody will confuse him with Bible thumpers. Hear Horton on abortion and the contemporary relevance of the Bible:

The Bible doesn't offer us simple solutions to our political, financial, or physical ills. Many of us, I'm afraid, fall prey to the popular notion that even the most intricate political dilemmas have a simple solution presented in the form of a slogan or a Bible verse. For example, abortion is our generation's holocaust; nevertheless, do we on one hand condemn abortion and on the other encourage it by ignoring economic and societal factors which contribute dramatically to such an alternative.

This is standard evangelical gobbledygook. As much as he hates pietism, Horton repeatedly advances the pietistic argument common among evangelicals that the Bible is about relationships, primarily one's relationship with God, and has little to say about life's problems or fixing society.

Nor is Horton clear about how the Bible will fix the church. Sometimes he insists that the church is too emotional and experience-oriented; sometimes that the church is too heady and rationalistic. When only one student at a fundamentalist school volunteered that she had heard of “justification”, for instance, Horton concluded that Christianity's main problem was ignorance of theology. Two pages later, Horton opined that Christians are too concerned about having a “correct” view of Christ, and that they are “so preoccupied with learning about God that [they] grow cold and insensitive to God himself”. (pp. 153, 155) So what is the problem? Too much emotional pietism? Too much doctrine? Maybe both. If it is difficult to identify the problem, it will be hard to offer a solution. For Horton, the answer to our dilemma is in a more sincere, heartfelt religion (undoubtedly true, but not a ground-breaking observation), in learning the Apostles' Creed, and in using the Book of Common Prayer.

It took me a while to figure out why I was so disappointed with this book, especially since I share both Horton's Reformed faith and his concern for the direction of the church of Christ. I guess its because *Made in America* reminds me so much of evangelicalism. Like evangelicals, Horton's heart is in the right place, and he knows what he believes, but he is too confused to articulate it. In sum, I do not recommend this book, unless you want a first hand example of what's wrong with modern American evangelicalism.