



Book Review of *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, Barry Hankins, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008, 272 pp.

My friend Ron Dart asked me to review this book. As it turned out I read Ron's well-marked copy. In that it was published in 2008, there have been many reviews. One from a peace theology perspective by Ted Grimsrud is excellent: [Barry Hankins, Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of ...](#) It summarizes in greater detail than I the three phases of Schaeffer's ministry.

So what can I "add"? Nothing. Well, a personal angle: which multiple thousands of contemporary Evangelicals can as readily do, Ron Dart included. Nonetheless... I hesitated. I delayed in reading the book; in beginning the review.

Why? I had long since thrown away all Schaeffer's publications, all formerly devoured, some repeatedly, that had been published prior to 1974. No later publications were read, though I saw the 1977 movie *How Should We Then Live?*, and perused the book by that title, that Hankins claims was Schaeffer's "best (p. 167)". 1974 was the year of a visit for several weeks to both Swiss and Dutch *L'Abri*s. It was also the year I had limped back (just after the two *L'Abri* visits) to Canada from a two-year short-term missionary experience in West Berlin that had gone spiritually sour. Perhaps saying my nickname had been "Francis" amongst friends and missionary colleagues the previous few years might explain. Schaeffer had begun that year to be a guru gone sour too. In 1975, Schaeffer gave the commencement address to (Vancouver) Regent College's "Diploma" graduating class of which I was part. That cinched the disenchantment. I have had no yen since to revisit Francis Schaeffer.

Why further? I explored this in a larger context in a novel, [Chrysalis Crucible](#), that started out as a reflective story on that question with reference to my Plymouth Brethren "quintessential fundamentalist" (Ernest Sandeen) upbringing. The protagonist though fictional gets jokingly called "Francis" and does travel to *L'Abri* as well.

Schaeffer held out for two kinds of founding mythologies that ultimately rang false to "honest answers to honest questions", for all his insistence upon that term and undertaking, and his term (curiously) "'true'" truth". *First* the United States of America was not founded by noble Christians advancing truth against all odds in an idyllic Golden Age of culturally dominant Reformed Theology, only to be nefariously hijacked by "secular humanists" in the 20th century. *Second*, the cosmos was not founded by a Creator in seven 24-hour days for which the early chapters of Genesis are the theological scientific residue, a "true" truth claim hijacked by those same godless secular humanists.

Books theologically challenging those founding myths are reviewed here: [Captain America](#); [The Lost World](#). Sadly, Schaeffer to his dying day was fighting even fellow Evangelicals in doomed defence of these mythologies. More sadly, his legacy was an ascendant Christian Right ultimately embracing the neo-Manifest Destiny of a George W. Bush presidency foisted on a for-or-against-us, "them/us" world; was a Christian Right embracing the neo-Pharisaical savagery of a [Left Behind](#) world devoid of eschatological mercy, grace and truth.

Ted Grimsrud sums up what may be Schaeffer's bequeathal in relation to the very Christianity he so desperately sought to promote: "However, given the enormity of his influence in encouraging powerful anti-intellectual dynamics among Christians and a politics of division and coercion that culminated in the disaster of the George W. Bush presidency, it's hard not to conclude that ironically and tragically, the deepest legacy of Francis Schaeffer was to hasten the diminishment of the standing of Christianity in our world (<http://peacetheology.net/2009/04/15/barry-hankins-francis-schaeffer-and-the-shaping-of-evangelical-america/>; last accessed June 10, 2014)."

Barry Hankins allows irenically that Schaeffer's "arguments have not stood the test of time in terms of their historical veracity or philosophical soundness. He was not the scholar, philosopher, or great theologian that his publishers liked to claim on his book jackets (p. xv)." In fact, though Hankins does not pursue this, he acknowledges: "It is highly unlikely that Schaeffer ever actually read Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard, and the other modern thinkers he would later critique in his lectures and books. It is doubtful that he even read Barth in depth. Schaeffer's knowledge of these thinkers was superficial and as mentioned above, he made mistakes with regard to the details. Schaeffer was a voracious reader of magazines and the Bible, but some who lived at L'Abri and knew him well say they never saw him read a book (page 43)."

There is something therefore deeply troubling in this regard when Hankins indicates "that the diversity of his legacy, and the tension it arouses, makes Schaeffer second only to Billy Graham in terms of evangelical importance in the late 20th century (<http://qideas.org/articles/the-mark-of-a-schaefferite/>; last accessed June 10, 2014)." A legitimate question to pose is: What does this say of the intellectual authenticity of wider (at least American) Evangelicalism during this phase of that religious phenomenon, that a kind of frankly intellectual charlatan should impact so widely Evangelicalism?

As with Billy Graham and an array of prominent American Evangelical names, Hankins further asserts that "Schaeffer's life illustrates the interesting and complex ways that American evangelicals harmonize their theological commitments with their cultural and national loyalties (p. 228)." He contrasts this singularity with current Christian leaders in other global regions. Though the Nazi era certainly evidenced such amongst "German Christians" who embraced German culture and nation wholesale under Nazism and concomitant justification of mass violence against the Jews. One can argue that the cultural experience of being generically a citizen of (any) Empire can tend to elicit this. This explains somewhat Saint Augustine's horrified response to the sacking of the Eternal City in 410 and aspects of related origins of Christian "Just War" theory so remote from Jesus' teaching.

The biography is organized according to Francis Schaeffer's chronology of Christian ministry in three phases, carried out against the backdrop of "America in the 1930s and 1940s, Europe from 1948 to 1965, then America again from 1965 to 1984 (p. xiii)." During these three distinct ministry periods, Schaeffer remained adamantly "fundamentalist".

This commitment started out with demonstration of great evangelistic zeal and his being "nearly obsessed with the militant defense of the faith against the threat of theological liberalism, but with almost no distinctly political or even cultural message (pp. 228 & 229)."

However his move to Europe and founding of the independent ministry *L'Abri* in Switzerland led to a break with noted fundamentalist extremist Carl McIntire. Schaeffer in that context demonstrated a consequent more enlarged vision of the faith while only loosely holding to a defence of evangelical theology according to its American Christian base and context. *L'Abri* for thousands of lost 60's and 70's youth was journey's end/beginning in the joy of new found, or rediscovered Christian faith.

Upon return to America, Schaeffer fully re-embraced this Christian base as it became ascendant in Republican Party politics. That orientation dominated the last 20 years of his life, something Hankins, quoting historian George Marsden, named "fundamentalistic evangelical (p. 233)". Hankins previously had explained that while all Fundamentalists could be considered Evangelicals, it was not necessarily so *vice versa*. Fundamentalism according to Marsden was the "militant and separatist form of Protestant evangelicalism (p. 231)."

While Schaeffer embodied this separatism in the final two decades of his life, he also represented an "apologetic evangelism (p. 231)" that nonetheless was tempered by and built on a European experience of welcoming hospitality and unconditional love to despairing secular, agnostic, and atheistic youth. This hospitality grounded evangelistic impulse proved significantly at odds with his increasing cultural and political captivity to Republicanism once back home in America.

Hankins' Chapter Eight, "A Manifesto for Christian Right Activism" is a painful read that documents Schaeffer's descent into Christian Right politics, and his definitive break with Evangelical scholars who attempted to forestall that trajectory.

We learn from this study that Schaeffer's evangelistic arguments so privileged "reason", he (ironically!) appeared an almost Enlightenment apologist in this regard during what Hankins dubs "the last gasp of modernity (p. 235)", as philosophically the world tilted then moved definitively towards postmodernism with its multiple sources of truth, not simply that of "reason". Schaeffer in this respect by life's end became irrelevant within Western thinking, "... a period piece at the level of ideas (p. 236)." Even theologically, Schaeffer's ideas "seem quaint remnants of a bygone era (p. 238)." Hankins contrasts Schaeffer with a contemporary, C.S. Lewis. Ron Dart has many times written about Lewis. One such "[C.S. Lewis: the Culture Wars](#)" points to Lewis' deft avoidance of alignments on either side. Frank Faulk does similarly in his two-part CBC *Ideas* series: [C.S. Lewis and The Inklings](#).

Still further, in that Schaeffer "often wrote and spoke as if the western rational articulation of Christianity were Christianity itself (p. 236).", "While he viewed the de-Christianization of the West as a catastrophe, he could not have foreseen the de-westernization of Christianity and the possibilities that phenomenon has created (p. 236)." Hankins does not expatiate. But he points towards the amazing rise of southern Hemisphere Christianity and beyond, in all its vast theological diversity and richness. This is Western cultural captivity of the faith in process of untethering according to Jesus: "... *you will know the truth, and that truth will give you freedom* (John 8:32)."

The publication is part of a series, "Library of Religious Biography", that in 2008 had twenty titles already. One reviewer regretted that the biography was too short due to a likely series

length prescription. Hankins' offering appears to be well researched, without guile in straightforwardly presenting and assessing Schaeffer. It is a very well written enjoyable read.

The study is an important piece of biography to help understand better the phenomenon of 20th century (American – but wider) Evangelicalism. Hankins convinces that Schaeffer was profoundly shaped by and helped synergistically profoundly shape 20th century American Evangelicalism.

I felt the pull of Schaeffer's apologetics at a time in high school and university I needed reassurance that Christianity was not ostrich-head-in-the-sand religion. I had begun to discover this already in C.S. Lewis' writings, eventually in historical apologetics, then in Schaeffer. But in the same year I parted ways with Schaeffer, I rediscovered Jesus for the very first time (a Marcus Borg theme) as model for and answer to the question of "how should we then live?" – title of Schaeffer's first movie and previous book. In that year I was introduced to John Howard Yoder's "*Politics of Jesus*". With Ted Grimsrud,

Very quickly, though, Yoder won a decisive victory over Schaeffer. The key issue was his attention to the story of Jesus and his utterly persuasive case for the present-day normativity for Christians of Jesus' politics. I came to see in Schaeffer just another version of political Constantinianism and a theological (or Christological) evasion of the core elements of Jesus' message (including, at its heart, pacifism) (<http://peacetheology.net/2009/04/15/barry-hankins-francis-schaeffer-and-the-shaping-of-evangelical-america/>; last accessed June 10, 2014)."

It has been salutary though distressing to revisit "Francis Schaeffer" and a form of Christianity that presents as remote from Jesus "the Way" yet still so strident in America. It reminds one of abuse victims long after divorces who are tethered nonetheless to their abusers and further abuse because of abusers' ongoing access to the children. Not long after Schaeffer's death, John Alexander dedicated a book, *Your Money or Your Life: A New Look at Jesus' View of Wealth and Power* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), to his pastor father thus: "He is an unusual fundamentalist; for he believes that inerrancy extends to the teachings of Jesus."

One could have wished that for Francis Schaeffer and the "Evangelical America" he helped enduringly shape in the 20th century.