

**TAKING THE SURPRISE
OUT OF THE SURPRISING
WORK OF GOD:**

An Examination of the Historiography of Revival in North America

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INTRODUCTION

From the time of the first Great Awakening (1730's - 1740's) to the present, the subject of revival has attracted the attention of both Christian and secular historians alike. This is because the great revivals of the past have had a tremendous impact on one of the major concerns of history: the development of culture. Today, a growing number of historians have recognized that in order to understand the social, political, economic, and religious milieu in which we find ourselves today (at least in North America), it is essential to understand the formative role that religious revivals have had on our culture.

Unfortunately, however, the perspective with which many of these historians view revival is not altogether accurate. This is because most historians tend to treat revival as a purely sociological or psychological phenomenon. In their view, revivals serve simply to meet some basic psychological or emotional need. On a broader scale they function merely as a catalyst for social, religious, political and economic change and the means by which society can adapt to these changes. In making these arguments, scholars have effectively stripped revival of its essentially spiritual and religious character. Thus the explanations they advance are not at all satisfactory.

How did this happen? In order to understand how and why historians today treat revival the way that they do, it is necessary, first of all, to understand something of the development of the historiography on this subject up to this point. In the introduction to his recent book, *Revival and Revivalism*, Iain Murray notes that in the historiography of revivals in the United States, the understanding of the subject of revival has passed through several distinct phases. The first phase, he notes, extended from the 1620's to about 1858 - the year which marks the last general religious awakening in North America. During this period, revival was generally understood to be a "special season" in which sinners, on a scale much larger than normal, are brought to a saving knowledge of Christ and the experience of religion in general is heightened among the people of God. Such seasons, it was held, were bestowed by God at such times and places as He, in His sovereignty saw fit to determine. Thus, Jonathan Edwards, writing about the revival of religion which occurred in Northampton, MA in 1734 (which, significantly he entitled *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*), wrote that "God [had] so ordered the manner of the work in many respects as very signally and remarkably to show it to be his own peculiar and immediate work, and to secure the glory of it wholly to his almighty power and sovereign grace." Although Edwards is but one example, dozens of others could be cited to demonstrate the widespread nature of this view.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, a new view of revival came generally to displace the old. This is best evidenced, Murray notes, in the shift in vocabulary used in connection with revival. "Seasons" of revival became "revival meetings" and instead of being "surprising", they came to be announced in advance. Although no one in the previous century had known of ways to secure a revival, a system devised by so-called "revivalists" came to be

popularized whereby, under certain conditions, a revival could be created almost at will.

This shift in understanding the nature of revival can largely be attributed to Charles Finney. In his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1834-35), Finney insisted that "a revival [was] not a miracle." In his view, a revival consisted "entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature." "The connection between the right use of means for a revival", he wrote, was "as philosophically sure as between the right use of means to raise grain and a crop of wheat."¹ Under Finney and his followers, the old view of revival as a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit came to be replaced by one which saw revival essentially as a work of man cooperating with the Holy Spirit to produce the desired result. "Revival", in other words, became displaced by "revivalism". It is this view of revival which has dominated the thinking of the evangelical church (most of the books during this period being written by those who upheld this view) with the result that the very word fell into disrepute and revival as a legitimate subject for historical inquiry fell into abeyance.

A third phase in the study of revivals, according to Murray, began in the late 1950's with the publication of books on the subject by Bernard Weisberger (*They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact Upon Religion in America*, 1958) and William G. McLoughlin (*Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*, 1959) - the latter of whom we shall examine in more detail later. These authors pleaded for a serious and what they thought was a scientific examination of the subject of revivals and an assessment of their impact on American culture. Unfortunately, in their quest for scientific objectivity, both authors made the same mistake as those of the second phase, namely failing to distinguish properly between revival and revivalism. In their view, revivalism constituted no real departure from the revival tradition of the early 18th century. Hence, they reasoned, if revivalism could be explained in purely human terms, so could revival.

But while they agreed on this point with their nineteenth century counterparts, they profoundly disagreed with them on something more basic. Whereas the former regarded both revival and revivalism as supernatural, Weisberger and McLoughlin see the power of God in neither. Thus in his book Weisberger makes the following frank statement: "I want to emphasize that this is a book about religion, not a religious book. In the past most histories of revivalism looked no further for explanation than the sovereign pleasure of God. As a historian, I have tried to interpret revivals in purely secular terms." Weisberger's view stems from a philosophy of history, which seeks to explain all historical events apart from any reference to divine providence. According to Weisberger, history is simply what results when man, of his own free will, reacts to certain circumstances. There is no divine power directing all of history to a specific goal. Whatever happens happens on account of man exercising his own free will. This view stems from the rationalism and humanism of the 18th century "Enlightenment" which sought to explain all natural phenomena in terms which accorded with human reason, i.e. without reference to the supernatural.

The problem with this view, as Murray rightly points out, is that it "is tantamount to saying that if God is in history at all, that fact lies outside the bounds of serious historical discussion. Such a standpoint seeks to open a door into the meaning of history when the key to its significance has already been discarded." Sadly, this same criticism could be leveled against most of the historical literature on revival during the last half of the 20th century.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how a number of modern historians have attempted to explain the origin, nature, and impact of religious revivals in North America. We will do so by examining the works of three leading historians of revival in Canada and the United States. They are as follows: William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (1978), S.D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (1948), and George Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit* (1984) and *Wrapped up in God* (1988). In choosing these historians I realize that I have overlooked other (perhaps even more important) authors on the subject. But this small sampling should suffice to demonstrate the thesis that any attempt to explain revival apart from the

sovereign power of God and the supernatural working of His Holy Spirit will only result in a serious distortion of the phenomenon itself and a fundamental misunderstanding of its historical significance and impact.

The first work we wish to examine is S.D. Clark's *Church and Sect in Canada*.

Unlike the other authors we have selected, Clark is not so much a historian (although his study is very much historical in nature) but a sociologist. In Clark's view, sociology has much to gain from a greater use of historical material and methods of inquiry. "Neglect of developments of the past", he writes, "has limited perspective and has led to a narrowing of sociological theory."² As such, Clark's study is the first serious attempt at a sociological analysis of Canada's religious history.

Given his interest in sociology, it is not surprising that Clark should view revivals primarily as a catalyst for social and religious change. According to Clark, the social development of Canada is characterized by a succession of religious movements of protest which have found expression in a series of breaks from the established religious authority (which Clark defines as the "church") and in the emergence of new religious forms (which he defines as the "sect"). What ensues, he argues, is a perpetual conflict between the church and sect forms of religious organization. "The church", he writes, "dependent as it is upon a condition of social stability, gives way to the sect form of religious organization when such a condition is not present."³ The church, therefore, grows out of the conditions of a mature society whereas the sect is a product of "the frontier conditions of social life."⁴

The frontier plays a very major role in Clark's paradigm; it is in the frontier that the sectarian form of religious organization develops. As the frontier is pushed further and further back and the newly settled territory becomes more and more "civilized", the influence of the sect wanes and the church becomes the dominant religious force in the community. This pattern repeats itself, Clark argues, throughout the development of Canada's religious history.

The catalyst to this whole process is the religious revival. Revivals, according to Clark, serve to accelerate the formation of the sect by highlighting the contrast between the dead formalism of the church and the spiritual vitality of the sect. In support of this thesis, Clark examines various revivals which occurred in different parts of Canada from 1760-1900. Although it would be profitable to examine how Clark applies this argument to different periods and to different regions of Canada, we will limit ourselves to his discussion of what he calls the "Great Awakening" in Nova Scotia (1760-1783).

Clark's thesis that revival serves to accelerate the formation of sect-type churches over and against more established churches is apparent at the outset of his discussion. According to Clark, the significance of the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia is that it "produced the leadership necessary to break with the authority of the established Congregational churches and to establish the sect form of religion."⁵ He writes:

The Great Awakening of the revolutionary period established the sectarian tradition in the religious life of Nova Scotia, and under its impact the Congregational churches were forced to give way to churches organized on the New Light [i.e. sectarian] plan. The Great Revival of the later period extended the influence of the sectarian tradition and completed the disruption of the formal institutions of religion.⁶

Having stated his major premise, Clark proceeds to demonstrate how this shift from church to sect occurred. In the process he makes some interesting and insightful observations regarding the appeal of the Great Awakening to the Nova Scotia population. Clark organizes his discussion⁷ under the following three themes: the social appeal, the ascetic appeal, and the cultural appeal. We will examine each in turn.

Clark argues that the appeal of Newlightism to the population of Nova Scotia can partly be explained by the fact that it met certain basic social needs. Newlight preaching, he suggests,

was directed against the cold, formal services which had come to characterize the increasingly "respectable" Congregational churches. "It was a religion of inspiration and feeling; the appeal was to the emotions rather than to reason. Thus religion was given a new meaning in the life of the community. Its close functional relationship to the community structure was re-established, and it became social unification - the individual gained significance through his identification with the invisible church."¹⁵ This dual appeal of individualization and socialization, Clark argues, reflected strong social tendencies in the rural village of Nova Scotia at this time. "In the intense emotional experience of conversion, the individual gained a new consciousness of his own worth and of his relationship to his fellow men."¹⁶

Clark develops these arguments when he moves on to discuss the "social" or "class" appeal of Methodism in Nova Scotia. He argues that the highly emotional and ascetic content of Methodism tended to antagonize "respectable"¹⁷ elements of the population. The fact that Methodism gained its chief support from humble fishermen, farmers and runaway slaves but made little headway among government officials, army officers, well-to-do merchants, and the landed gentry inevitably influenced the character of the movement and accounted for much of its strength. "Though no clear-cut class ideology emerged, the bias in Methodist teaching tended to an association of virtue with the way of life of the ordinary folk and of sin with the habits and values of the privileged classes."¹⁸ Clark concludes, therefore, that one of the most appealing features of Methodism and the revivalism which it espoused (and undoubtedly one of the main reasons for its popularity) was that "[it] offered to the masses a means of securing status and social recognition which were denied to them within the traditional structures of the community."¹⁹ He writes: "At a time when little support could be found for rational methods of thought, the evangelical movements restored to religion its significance as an explanation of man's relationship to that which was outside himself."²⁰ Thus, according to Clark, the role of the revival and the evangelical movements which espoused them was simply to offer to the socially-dislocated segments of the Nova Scotian population a means of interpreting their relationship to society as a whole. He writes:

Directly, evangelical movements strengthened bonds of fellowship in revivalist meetings, prayer meetings, confessional gatherings, and religious conferences. The emotional excitement aroused by evangelical preaching, the exhortation of laymen, and the recitation of private experiences broke down the reserve of the individual and led to the establishment of intimate relationships...the evangelical movements, through their religious appeal, served to breakdown the feeling of isolation of the individual and to develop a sense of identification with something outside himself.²¹

In its emphasis on separation from the world, Clark argues, the sect imparted a strong sense of social solidarity to those who felt themselves detached from the rest of society. The sect gave the convert an identity, a sense of belonging, a feeling that he was part of a community - a community of saints. As Clark comments:

Instead of feeling isolated, the convert was made to feel he was one of a privileged group; the person unconverted was the abandoned wretch, leading a solitary existence without the benefit of faith. Conversion secured the status of those who lacked status in the traditional culture. By 'giving themselves up to God', they became one of the elect.²²

It was this role of securing a re-integration or strengthening of the social organism that, according to Clark, partly accounted for the rapid development of the evangelical movements and, by way of implication, for the appeal of revivalism among the Maritime community. Thus he concludes: "the evangelical movements were essentially movements of social reorganization or social unification."²³

To summarize, Clark views revivals as the engine of social and religious change. Revivals highlight the differences between the church and sect forms of religious organization, leading to increased conflict and the eventual establishment of the sect as the dominant religious force in the community. The appeal of revivals varies depending on the strength of existing social supports. Communities with weak social supports are more likely to be attracted to revivals because they serve to inject into the community a new sense of group solidarity. They provide the common man with a renewed sense of belonging, a feeling that he is part of something outside of himself. In so doing, they offer him a means of interpreting his relationship to society and the world in which he lives, thereby satisfying his basic need to understand the purpose of life and his role in it.

Although Clark offers much insight into the appeal of revival to various segments of the population, his study has the tendency to sociologize and psychologize religious experience to the point that revival loses its fundamentally spiritual character. While sociology can be helpful in trying to understand the appeal of revivals, the spiritual dimension cannot be ignored. Any attempt to explain revival without taking into consideration the spiritual forces at work is an incomplete picture. Clark's failure to deal with this dimension of revival makes his study less than satisfactory.

The same criticism can be applied with equal force to William G. McLoughlin's *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*. Like Clark, McLoughlin views revivals in cultural-sociological terms. His essay is an attempt to establish the thesis that "awakenings" function as the vehicles for social change and cultural revitalization. McLoughlin defines an "awakening" as "a period of cultural revitalization that begins in a general crisis of beliefs and extends over a period of a generation or so, during which time a profound reorientation in beliefs and values takes place."²⁴ Such reorientations, he believes, are essential to the cultural and historical development of the nation (in this case the United States). Without periodic transformations of beliefs and value systems, cultural and historical development would cease altogether.

In setting forth this definition of awakening, McLoughlin has consciously departed from the traditional Protestant understanding of an "awakening" as a period of mass religious revival. In his view, the old definition was much too restrictive. "What we need", he writes, "is to rid ourselves of the old Protestant definition of revivalism and awakenings and think more sociologically and anthropologically about religion."²⁵

With this in mind, McLoughlin proposes "to view the five great awakenings that have shaped and reshaped [American] culture since 1607 as periods of fundamental ideological transformation necessary to the dynamic growth of the nation in adapting to basic social, ecological, psychological, and economic changes"²⁶ (p. 8). McLoughlin identifies these awakenings as follows: the Puritan Awakening (1610-40); the First Great Awakening (1730-60); the Second Great Awakening (1800-30); the Third Great Awakening (1890-1920); and the Fourth Great Awakening which began in the 60's and will probably continue into the 90's. Each of these awakenings, he asserts, brought about an ideological transformation resulting in a fundamental shift in American cultural and historical development. Thus the Puritan Awakening led to the beginning of constitutional monarchy in England; America's First Great Awakening led to the creation of the American republic; the Second to the solidification of the Union and the rise of participatory Jacksonian democracy; the Third to the rejection of unregulated capitalistic exploitation and the beginning of the welfare state; and the Fourth appears headed toward a series of regional and international consortiums for the conservation and optimal use of the world's resources²⁷. In short, McLoughlin writes, "our five awakenings came about when, by the standards of our cultural core and the experiences of daily life, our society deviated too far from the moral and religious understandings that legitimized authority in church and state...[resulting in] a period of drastic (once truly revolutionary) restructuring of our social, political, and economic institutions."²⁸

McLoughlin's concept of awakening is adapted from a formulation of cultural change developed by the anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace in his essay "Revitalization Movements".

In this essay, Wallace contends that "an awakening occurs when a society finds that its day-to-day behavior has deviated so far from the accepted (traditional) norms that neither individuals nor large groups can honestly (consistently) sustain the common set of religious understandings by which they believe (have been taught) they should act."²⁹ When this happens, a "crisis of legitimacy" occurs. The effort to cope with such a crisis lies at the beginning of what Wallace and McLoughlin call a "revitalization movement."³⁰

Such movements normally follow the same pattern of evolution. First there is a period of great personal stress when "one by one people lose their bearings, become psychically or physically ill, show what appear to be signs of neurosis, psychosis, or madness and may either break out in acts of violence or become apathetic, catatonic, incapable of functioning."³¹ Then there is a period of "cultural distortion" in which people begin to blame their problems on the failure of government and religious institutions to adapt to changing circumstances. This in turn leads to "political rebellion in the streets and schismatic behavior in the churches to which the authorities can react only by more sanctions, more censures, more punishments."³² Just at the point of mass revolt, a "prophet" appears on the scene with a vision for a new social, political, economic, and religious order. By his charismatic personality and persuasive speech, the prophet manages to secure a large and often fanatical following and proceeds to reconstruct society along radically different lines. Thus in typical Hegelian fashion, the thesis and antithesis of the revival generation produces a new synthesis which serves to propel culture and history forward.

Although the Wallace-McLoughlin paradigm outlining the evolution of a revitalization movement is helpful in some respects, like Clark, McLoughlin totally ignores the spiritual dimension of revival. In his view, a revival is strictly a cultural phenomenon. Hence it can be analyzed using the same tools one would use to analyze any cultural phenomenon. Such a view, however, does not deal honestly with the essentially spiritual character of a revival nor is it consistent with historical reality. It would be difficult, for example, to envision Jonathan Edwards reflecting on the great revivals which occurred under his ministry as simply the result of "a critical disjuncture in our self-understanding." Something much more was involved than a mere "crisis of legitimacy". McLoughlin's self-declared attempt to think "more sociologically and anthropologically about religion"³³, therefore, is doomed to failure since religion, by definition, is not anthropological.

The best attempt to treat revival on its own terms (i.e. as a fundamentally spiritual phenomenon) is exemplified in the work of George Rawlyk. More than any of the historians we have examined so far, Rawlyk has attempted to take the spiritual character of revival seriously. In his foreword to Rawlyk's book *Wrapped up in God*, George Marsden writes:

Most contemporary interpreters of revivals have explained them in terms of their social and psychological functions and effects. Rawlyk recognizes the importance of such themes, but he avoids the temptation to reduce revivals to what else they do. He does not take the common academic approach of assuming that revivals are important only if they can serve some higher (or lower) purpose, such as providing people with a sense of identity, self-value, liberation, community, moral superiority, political zeal, emotional release, sexual interest, personal power or economic gain. While Rawlyk looks at such multi-faceted dimensions of revivalism, he also makes clear that the people involved regarded their religious experiences as valuable in their own right.³⁴

While, in the main I agree with Marsden's assessment of Rawlyk's work, as we shall see, Rawlyk's treatment of revival is still far too accommodating to sociological and psychological analyses.

This is clearly evidenced in his book *Ravished by the Spirit*, which is an analysis of the so-called "Great Awakening in Nova Scotia" and its major "point man", Henry Alline. According to Rawlyk, Alline's major contribution to the Great Awakening and the factor which accounts most for its appeal was his forging of a new identity for the people

of Nova Scotia (especially the newly arrived settlers from New England) at a time of social and cultural dislocation. In making this argument, he follows closely on the heels of Clark (and, to a lesser extent, McLoughlin) who, as we have seen, makes a similar argument in his own discussion of the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia.³⁵ Briefly, the argument runs as follows: Cut off from their homeland and caught up in the social and political chaos of the American Revolutionary War, the "Yankees" of Nova Scotia experienced "a disconcerting collective sense of acute disorientation and confusion,"³⁶ He notes for example that "bizarre but emotionally satisfying ways of relating to God and to others became increasingly widespread as many Nova Scotians sought a renewed sense of 'community belonging' in order to neutralize the powerful forces of alienation then sweeping the colony."³⁷ What the people of Nova Scotia were searching for, Rawlyk suggests, was a new sense of identity, a new set of loyalties to replace "the disintegrating loyalty to New England and the largely undermined loyalty to Old England."³⁸ Alline's great contribution to the Great Awakening, he argues, was in giving them this identity. He writes:

In his sermons preached as he criss-crossed the colony, Alline developed the theme that the Nova Scotia 'Yankees', in particular, had, because of the tragic backsliding in New England, a special predestined role to play in God's plan for the world.. Drawing deeply on the Puritan New England tradition that viewed self-sacrifice and frugality as virtues, [Alline] contended that the relative backwardness and isolation of the colony had removed the inhabitants from the prevailing corrupting influences of New England and Britain. As a result, Nova Scotia was in an ideal position to lead the world back to God. As far as Alline was concerned, the revival was convincing proof that Nova Scotians were 'a people on whom God had set His everlasting love'³⁹ - a people highly favoured of God.

Alline's role in creating and popularizing this new identity is, according to Rawlyk, one of the chief factors accounting for the appeal of the Great Revival to the population of Nova Scotia. As he himself states, "by his frequent visits to the settlements, [Alline was able] to draw the isolated communities together and to give them a feeling of fragile oneness."⁴⁰ This feeling of oneness gave the people of Nova Scotia a sense of sharing a common experience and a common vision. Almost singlehandedly, Alline had transformed "the social, economic, and political backwater that was Nova Scotia...into the centre of the Christian world. Nova Scotia", writes Rawlyk, "had replaced New England as the 'City on a Hill'."⁴¹

Alline's contribution to the Great Revival, however, does not stop here. Rawlyk admits that at one time in his career he thought it did⁴², but upon rereading Alline's *Journal* and his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, as well as his two theological treatises *Two Mites* and *The Anti-Traditionalist*, it became clear to him that "there was probably something more in the First Great Awakening than the mere resolving of a collective identity crisis there was also a spiritual and religious dimension" which, he admits, had not been adequately dealt with in his earlier work.⁴³ This realization is clearly reflected in Rawlyk's observation that "Alline also preached the simple, emotional, Whitefieldian evangelical gospel of the 'New Birth' - without its Calvinism - and thus provided a powerful new personal and spiritual relationship between Christ and the redeemed believer in a world where all traditional relationships were falling apart."⁴⁴

Although Rawlyk here makes an attempt to appreciate the spiritual dimension of revival, he (rather unfortunately I think) falls back on a sociological interpretation when he states that the believer's union with Christ was appealing not because it met a basic spiritual need for forgiveness and acceptance before God but because it offered them a means of restoring broken human relationships. In other words, Rawlyk suggests that the reason why so many people found the Awakening so appealing was because it met their need for a sense of belonging. "Alline," he writes, "was a man who was especially sensitive to disintegrating relationships and one who

therefore could relate to his fellow Nova Scotians who, too, were preoccupied with disintegrating relationships.⁴⁵ His obsession with the mystical union with Christ and fellow believers led him to believe that "a personal relationship to Christ was a means of resolving all the difficulties arising from a myriad of disintegrating human relationships."⁴⁶ Conversion, Rawlyk suggests, was thus perceived as "the short-circuiting of a complex process - a short circuiting which produced instant and immediate satisfaction, solace, and intense relief."⁴⁷ The possibility of obtaining such relief, he argues, was an irresistible attraction for many Nova Scotians seeking healing from broken relationships. As such it helps to explain the widespread popularity of Alline's preaching and the appeal of the revival to various segments of the population.

Rawlyk illustrates this appeal with reference to two groups which were particularly affected by Alline's preaching: women and young people. Both of these groups, Rawlyk argues, were almost overwhelmed by Alline's "spiritual *hubris*" - that is, "his conviction that he had, in fact, seen paradise and had communicated with Christ face to face."⁴⁸ Such a claim, says Rawlyk, created a certain aura or mystique about Alline. It was believed by many that the charismatic preacher had obviously had a unique experience "which could not be explained in any other terms than the ones he assiduously used to define his special authority."⁴⁹ According to Rawlyk, during times of confusion and uncertainty, unsure people look for leadership and direction from those whom they feel know for certain what is best for everyone. The people of Nova Scotia (particularly women and young people) were no exception to this general rule. Lost and disoriented, they flocked to Alline because he claimed to possess an "omniscient eye" to discover "a map of the disordered world"⁵⁰ - a map which many Nova Scotians believed could explain where they came from and where they were going. Hence part of the appeal of the Awakening was its ability to re-orientate people, to give them a sense of direction and purpose.

Rawlyk's examination of the role of Henry Alline in the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia contributes much to our understanding of what appears to have been a great work of God among the people of Nova Scotia. However, while Rawlyk has set out to write a sympathetic account of revivals and to take seriously the religious experience of those who participated in them, he too tends to explain away this experience in sociological or psychological terms. Rather than explaining the appeal of Alline's emphasis on union with Christ as "a means of resolving all the difficulties arising from a myriad of disintegrating human relationships", for example, Rawlyk might have argued that the reason why this doctrine was so appealing to the Nova Scotians was because it was exactly suited to a deep-seated and longstanding spiritual need. But he does not do so. Instead, he explains its appeal in psycho-sociological terms. Such an explanation, while possibly valid for some, does not do justice to the purely spiritual concerns of others. As such, Rawlyk's interpretation is not consistent with his stated aim and leave the inquiring reader with more questions than answers.

To summarize: In this paper we have examined how three secular historians have dealt with the subject of revival. What we have seen is that all of them - to a greater or lesser extent - tend to explain (in some cases explain away) revival using psychological and/or sociological theories. This should not surprise us. The Word of God tells us that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). Unless a man has tasted of the work of the Holy Spirit in his own soul, he will never be able to comprehend the Spirit's work in others. This is especially true when it comes to understanding revival.

But there is another reason why secular scholars treat revival the way that they do. The problem is with their epistemology. In the secular academic world, the only reality is that which can be empirically validated. Since God, spirituality, religious experience, etc, cannot be empirically validated, they do not exist. Therefore, the only way to explain a "spiritual" phenomena (such as revival) is to "psychologize" or "sociologize" them. This is exactly what secular historians have done with revival - even those (like Rawlyk) who are fairly sympathetic

to the evangelical tradition.

Although I do not condone this tendency, to a certain extent it is understandable given the prevailing climate in our secular educational institutions. A scholar who wishes to be respected in his or her field simply cannot talk about spiritual realities without compromising their academic integrity. Those who try are either dismissed as crackpots or banished to a life of academic mediocrity at some obscure Christian College or seminary. I am encouraged, therefore, when scholars like George Rawlyk and others (and there are many others, e.g. George Marsden, Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, et al.) openly declare their Christian commitments (even if during the course of their writing this commitment is somewhat obscured) regardless of the impact this will have on their standing in the academic community. To me this is a positive development - especially for those Christians who desire to work in this field.

Having said that, I think it is high time for religious historians (Christian and non-Christian alike) to take a further step towards a sympathetic understanding of the evangelical tradition. If, as Richard Lovelace has said, history is a football game in which half the players are invisible, then the time has come for historians to attempt to understand the game plan of the invisible team - or at the very least, recognizing that there is an invisible team and a game plan. As George Marsden states: "It is basic Christian doctrine that there is an awesome distance between God and his creation, and yet that God nevertheless enters human history and acts in historical circumstances."⁵² This does not mean that God simply intervenes in history from time to time. On the contrary, it implies a belief that God controls history from beginning to end and that whatever happens happens not by chance but in accordance with his sovereign will and plan. For this reason the Christian historian seeks the meaning of history in the sovereign God who is its ultimate point of reference. As Dr. Robert D. Knudsen wrote:

This is the ultimate perspective from which the unity of history must be understood. It cannot be understood immanently; it cannot be grasped in terms of anything within the cosmos itself. As outstanding Reformed thinkers have taught us, we must attain a standpoint that is really transcendent if we are to understand the unity of our experience in general.⁵²

This standpoint, of course, is to be found in the Bible as the Word of God. Again, quoting from Knudsen:

In his authoritative revelation God discloses to us the only vantage point from which we can survey all of experience in its ultimate unity. This is the case because the biblical message reveals man to himself in the root of his existence, in his relationship to his Creator, to other men, and to the world. He is revealed as having been created by God in an integral, harmonious relationship in these three directions, as having fallen into sin in Adam, and as having been redeemed in Christ Jesus. Because the Biblical message discloses the point at which all the lines of man's life converge in the centre of his being upon the sovereign, creator, God, it is possible to attain a standpoint from which the entirety of experience may be seen in its unity. All other views, rejecting this biblical insight, fall into an idolatrous elevation of one part of the cosmos at the expense of another, and in the resulting conflict the unity of perspective is lost.⁵³

This is precisely where secular history has gone wrong. As we have seen in the works of Clark and McLoughlin (and to a lesser extent in Rawlyk as well), the tendency in secular history is to elevate one part of the cosmos (the physical) at the expense of the other (the spiritual). In so doing they have become uni-dimensional in their perspective; they ignore the other aspects of human experience and thus are not able to deal honestly or accurately with that which lies outside the physical realm but which is nevertheless real.

This view, however, is totally inadequate when trying to understand the origin and nature of religious revivals. Any attempt to arrive at a proper understanding of the nature and impact of religious revival must begin with the recognition of the existence of God and the reality of the spiritual realm. Failure to do so will only result in interpretations which are neither true nor accurate. ^

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Endnotes

¹ Quoted in George A. Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit*, (Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1984), p.132.

² S.D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), p.vii.

³ *Ibid*, p.xii.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*,p.18.

⁶ *Ibid*,p.64.

⁷ While Clark's discussion here has to do with the appeal of Newlightism, I have applied what he says to Revivalism as a whole since he virtually equates the two.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.37.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.38.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*,p.86.

¹⁸ *Ibid*,p.87.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

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²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, p.89.

²³ Ibid, p. 88.

²⁴ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.xiii. ²⁵ Ibid. ²⁶Ibid, p. 8.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 11. ²⁸ Ibid. ²⁹Ibid, p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, p. 13.

³³ Ibid, p.7.

³⁴ *Wrapped up in God*, p.vii.

³⁵ Whether Rawlyk has borrowed this idea from Clark directly is uncertain but he would probably attribute it to Turner or Wallace whose influence he acknowledges in his thinking about revivals. See *Wrapped up in God*, pp. 141-6. ³⁶George A. Rawlyk, *Champions of the Truth*,

(Kingston: McGill-

Queen's University Press, 1990), p.16.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *Ravished*, p.8.

³⁹ Ibid,p.10.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.9.

⁴¹ Ibid,p.10.

⁴² Ibid, p.8.

⁴³ *Wrapped up in God*, p.148.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid,p.50.

⁴⁹ *Wrapped up in God*, p.50.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.50.

⁵¹ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 229.

⁵² Robert Knudsen, *History*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary), p. 21.

⁵³ Ibid.