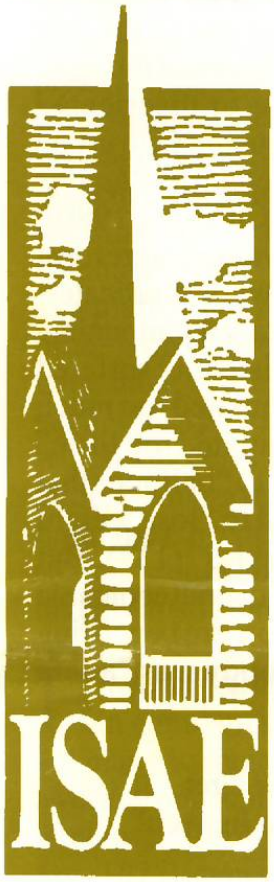
EVANGELICAL STUDIES BULLETIN



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Moody and the Eleventh Commandment

Bruce J. Evensen. *God's Man for the Gilded Age. D. L. Moody and the Rise of Modern Mass Evangelism.* Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 256 pp., $27.50.

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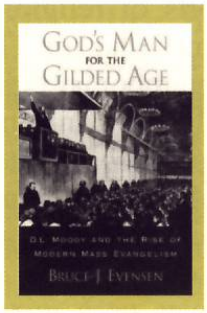
History books often tell about births. Whether it's the birth of a new religious culture, of a celebrity or of a new time period, these births can be recounted in at least two ways. Every small detail will be scrutinized or just some windows will open up much like an Advent calendar. Bruce J. Evensen's book falls into the second category. Evensen's innovative study of evangelist Dwight Lyman Moody (1837-1899) comes at the right time but let's be clear, it is not a complete biographical examination of Moody's life, like James F. Findlay's *Dwight L. Moody, American Evangelist, 1837-1899* (Chicago, 1969). A definitive work on Moody, in the style of what George Marsden has recently written on Jonathan Edwards (Yale University Press, 2003), is yet to come. But this takes nothing away from the merit and worth of this book, for its' true object is the birth of an evangelical "star" between 1873 and 1877. When Dwight L. Moody started his revival meetings in Britain in 1873, he was little-known outside Chicago. An evangelist and a social worker, the ex-shoe salesman was early-on nicknamed "Crazy Moody" in the Chicago media because of his fervor and his love for self-promotion. But within a few years, Moody had become an icon of religious America, an amazing Protestant star whose name rose above Jesus Christ Himself in the newspaper's religious columns. How did this happen?



A Professor in the Department of Communication at DePaul University, Evensen traces the influence of the popular press on Moody's rise to fame between 1873 and 1877. By focusing on urban revivals in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, New York City, Chicago and Boston, he points out that Moody and the newspapers used each other to accomplish their own purposes: the mass-evangelist gained free and huge publicity, according to the Eleventh Commandment –"Let there be advertising"– just as the press gained many new readers with their epic reports on the

revivals. These relations between Moody and modern mass media are the main subject of the book. Meanwhile, Evensen opens several fascinating windows onto the famous evangelist. Let's have a look into some of them.

Moody's social context: The cities, "highest hills in America"

Two fascinating windows–among others–can be opened on to Moody's social context. The first is the urban and industrial explosion characteristic of the end of the nineteenth century. "Water runs down, and the highest hills in America are the great cities. If we can stir them we shall stir the whole country" said the evangelist (51). Evensen demonstrates how Moody's modern methods fit the new urban context by breaking with the logic of parochial belonging favoring instead large, publicity-driven gatherings. His Evangelical culture favored chosen identity rather than traditional belonging and was the main ingredient of his success. The urban way of life directly contested tradition and encouraged personal choice. As London's *Evening News* chronicled: "where our bishops have reached tens, this man has reached thousands" (10). Against the new urban Philistines, Moody appeared as a new David far more efficient than the established church rulers. Although often criticized for his conservative and old-fashioned theology, Moody illustrated through his crusades an Evangelical modernity that has not lost its vitality since.

This first element of context is linked to a second one: the disturbing degree of secularization among the new working class. Religious needs change along with physical space, and sometimes, they just fade. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the big industrial towns were less and less WASP-dominated and more and more open to all sorts of religions, ideologies, agnosticism, even sometimes atheism. The diversity of the gods in American contemporary cities described in a recent book[1] is certainly more amazing now than what it was three generations ago, but it is nothing totally new. At the end of the nineteenth century as well, the urban ideological and spiritual market was opening wide. Evensen's portrait of Moody between 1873 and 1877 gives us a mixed picture of his ability to reach the unchurched urban working class. As in the case of Billy Graham, a century later, most of the newspapers emphasize the fact that the crowds who came to listen to Moody have already been christianized, at least in part. But how can we be sure of this? The sources in this area are quite sparse and do not lead to a clear-cut conclusion. What appears to be clear though is that to many business and media tycoons Moody was seen as an ally in the moralization of the working masses, in spite of the moderate success his campaigns seemed to have had with the totally unchurched. In the moral and ethical crisis produced by the industrial and urban revolution, Moody was one of the rare beacons able to shine forth a new frame of thought, of conduct and life, a new hope to disoriented populations. In the "symbolic adjustment to urban life ", as Peter Williams described it (in *Popular Religion in America*, Urbana & Chicago, 1980), Moody played a key role. He wanted to reform workers, not institutions, labor laws or syndicates. This does not mean that he encouraged plutocrats–far from it. In Moody's eyes "Christianity suffered more from those who have accumulated too much than from those who have accumulated too little" and he also compared the wealthy to "balloons that have too much ballast" which had to "lose weight before they can hope to reach the skies" (117). But these critiques never chalienged the overall economic and social hierarchy. To those who were benefiting from the new industrial order Moody was "a safe friend."

The spread of the message: No "thorny, flinty road to heaven"

Moody's social context is only part of the story: what can be said about his message? Evensen's fine analysis opens another pair of windows on this topic. First it must be said that he did not intend to explore Moody's theology–other books can be much more helpful[2]. However, one dimension of Moody's thought Evensen highlights is his emphasis on simplicity, on day-to-day reflections, and fresh stories rooted in "real people's lives." Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1963) has recounted the hostility of popular evangelists such as Dwight Moody (and Billy Sunday later on) to anything resembling a complicated idea. But Evensen rightly seems to suggest that this emphasis on simplicity was not so much a hostility toward intellectuals as an essential feature of his religious identity. Almost all the papers Evensen quotes, even the most hostile, underline the sincerity and direct simplicity of the evangelist's appeals. "Even Moody's great opponent recognizes that Moody's fervent common sense makes bad

men a little better and does no injury to the good," admitted the *Times* in Chicago (159). This mention of "common sense" is revealing. It directly links Moody's theology to one of the greatest influences on the Americanization of God throughout the nineteenth century: the common sense philosophy, as Mark Noll described it in his recent book, *America's God* [3]. Although he is frequently linked to the paleo-fundamentalist movement, Moody's reception by the press seems much closer to a mild common sense Christianity which was described in these terms by the Chicago press in December 1876: Moody had not preached "a thorny, flinty road to heaven over which we must travel on bleeding feet" but instead had emphasized the "common ground" that should serve as a platform for the future of the church" (158). In other words, Moody's message fit quite well with what most of the opinion makers wanted to hear. In such a perspective, Mark Noll's final conclusion, which suggests that while "American Protestants almost converted the nation, so too did the nation mold the Christian gospel in the contours of its own shape"[4] could apply quite well to Moody, in spite of his calvinistic tones.

However "simple," this evangelical theology rooted in common sense reached millions of people and led many to their "rebirth." It also paved the way for a very strong Ecumenical dynamic (let's open this new window). During his Chicago campaign (Oct.1876 – Jan. 1877), ninety-eight participating churches from various congregations sent volunteers to every Chicago household in the week before the tabernacle campaign (139). Like Billy Graham one century later, Moody is described by Evensen as a remarkable man of unity. Just as in his ministry with the Young Men Christian Association, Moody's evangelistic work was always interdenominational. His preoccupation was conversion and not the denomination the new convert would later join.

Moody as a star: "I prefer sensation to stagnation"

Evensen's book also rewards us with a wealth of information on the impact of this "unexpected evangelist" (13). For a "newspaperuled people," as Walt Whitman described Americans (57), new heroes were needed. One of the windows that should be opened on this topic is the way Moody constructed, through mass evangelism and publicity, the evangelical "star figure", that Billy Sunday and years later, Billy Graham, would develop with other, more advanced means.

Of course evangelism as mass entertainment did not make its first appearance with Moody. As Harry Stout has shown with the first Great Awakening's George Whitefield[5], self-promotion, publicity and careful stage planning was not unknown to revivalists in the earlier century. But none other had gone so far as Moody in using publicity at a time when the popular press was entering its golden age. He can be considered as the first Evangelical "patron saint of the press" (41). This transaction was not without cost: if Moody used the media, the media used him, and one strength of Evensen's book is to describe this complex and dialectical relation. In his last sermon, Moody was quoted saying: "I prefer sensation to stagnation every time. A seaman does not fear a storm much as a fog." At that time, the *Foxboro Reporter* suggested that at his death, "D.L. Moody was more familiar to the people of the United States than any other man" (182). Considered by many as God's man for the Gilded Age, Moody "set a standard for the use of organization and the power of publicity in getting the gospel out," concludes Evensen (183). In the rich history of American Evangelicalism, there is a *Before* and an *After* Moody.

Another major dimension of Moody's impact is speculation about the number of conversions he truly produced. How far did Moody challenge secularism? But Evensen's book does not really address this issue. When Moody's campaign in New York started at Barnum Hippodrome on Madison Avenue, it brought "the largest audience ever seen in the city" (105). We might try to imagine how big the "harvest" was. But it is a tricky path. Much like Billy Graham later on, the press highlighted the fact that in spite of big crowds, he mostly preached to people "willing to be convinced," while the masses of New York's poor, for instance, "had not been reached" (149). This did not prevent many contemporary observers from claiming Moody's preaching had reduced "the population of hell by a million" (3).

If there was a last window to open it would be the one looking out on the transatlantic ties Moody established in Britain. Evensen's study on Moody's ascension to fame demonstrates great mastery of British and American sources and sheds remarkably

balanced light on the reasons for the evangelists' success on both sides of the Atlantic. As the author recalls, "industrialization and urbanization had helped produce a democratic marketplace on both sides of the Atlantic with a daily press at its center" (46). All of the second chapter ("Moody in Britain, June 1873-August 1875") is a particularly noteworthy piece of social and cultural history. Though focused on the press it explains all the steps through which Moody (accompanied by his singing colleague, Ira D. Sankey) emerges as an Anglo-Saxon "superstar" (37), transforming the shape of the churches and creating new Ecumenical dynamics within British Protestant circles. Along with Moody, we discover key figures like Henry Drummond or John Farwell, concerned Evangelical leaders who deeply believed in the potential fruit of such an Anglo-Saxon cooperation. Although Moody belongs entirely to American Evangelical history, as well as he is part of its British counterpart[6], he is, above all, a transnational figure. This profile, however, does not make him a global star. He did not reach the non-English- speaking world. Unlike Spurgeon, who came to France many times (where he died at the Hotel Beau Rivage in Menton), Moody did not cross the Channel, apart from a brief sojourn, eight years before his death. In spite of being nicknamed "the Napoleon of revivalists" (136), Continental Europe was not really on his agenda. *Alas* for Continental historians, who because of this absence are prevented from collecting the kind of spicy remarks Billy Graham stirred up in the French press years later!

Nevertheless, his revivalist culture did not totally identify with a single national culture and reveals once again that "trans-national networks" are definitely not a discovery of twentieth century social sciences. Another fascinating point is that Moody is probably the last major Evangelical star whose notoriety had been built in Europe first. When Billy Graham, in 1954, started his first big crusade in London, he had already been crowned as an American "star" for about five years. Moody, on the contrary, largely built his fame in Britain: "When D.L. Moody left the United States in the spring of 1873 to embark on his British campaign, it was in relative anonymity. But when he returned in the summer of 1875 he was celebrated as the greatest evangelist in the English-speaking world" (46). This reminds us of the relativity of the "geography of fame." Once leader in the star-making process, with Moody as a last example, secular Europe has left her status to the United States during the XXth Century. Until another unpredictable shift? Many continents are waiting on the list.

The few windows we tried to open do not exhaust all the substance of Evensen's fascinating study. Based on a huge volume of primary sources every historian can admire, this masterful book is also very well-written, and (last but not least) its structure will delight all Inspector Columbo admirers. As all Peter Falk's fans know so well, the "Columbo" TV series was built around a similar structure and plot formula. The viewer always discovers the death of the victim at the very beginning. The outcome is revealed from the onset, just as Evensen does in his chapter One ("The End: Moody in Northfield, December 1899," 3 to 13). But knowing the end does not prevent us from the pleasure of going further, opening, step by step, the windows which help us to a better understanding. In doing so, with the precious help of detective Evensen, the initial knowledge of the death slowly fades, bringing the main character to a kind of new birth.

Sébastien Fath
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Endnotes

[1]Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *Gods of the City : Religion & the American Urban Landscape*, (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1999).

[2]See Stanley Gundry, *Love Them in : The Proclamation Theology of D. L. Moody* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976).

[3]See Mark Noll, *America's God, From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93-113.

[4]Mark Noll, *America's God, op. cit.*, 443. Such a cultural synthesis leads the author to this stimulating hypothesis : "The key moves in the creation of evangelical America were also the key moves that created secular America." In other terms, contemporary Evangelicalism inaugurated by Moody could be interpreted as a secularized form of the old Puritan canopy. Though often described in terms of hostility to secularization, contemporary Evangelicals "Moody-style" would not be exempted from internal secularization.

[5]Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist : George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[6]A lively description of Moody's British impact, his "anecdotal style, like the paraphernalia of inquiry rooms and all-day meetings" is found in David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1995), 163.