Philanthropic Funding, the ISAE, and Evangelical Scholarship

D. Michael Lindsay’s *Faith in the Halls of Power* (2007) describes a thirty-year journey in which evangelicals moved from the cultural margins into the American elite. A quarter of the book is about mainstream academic and intellectual circles, and Lindsay shows how in this arena the most strategic evangelical initiatives were underwritten by the Lilly Endowment and The Pew Charitable Trusts. There are ironies aplenty in this (more on these in a moment) which go a long way toward explaining why Wheaton College is now shutting down the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE) after thirty-two years.

If the Lilly and Pew funding was a camel, the nose under the edge of the evangelical tent was the ISAE. Timothy L. Smith (Johns Hopkins), the first evangelical historian to make a mark in the secular research university, introduced some younger historians, including Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, to Robert Lynn, who directed the Religion Program at the Lilly Endowment. Lynn was impressed and in 1979 gave Hatch and Noll $15,000 for a historical conference on “The Bible in America.” Because Noll was on the faculty at Wheaton College, and Hatch and Noll were both alumni, they decided to hold the conference at Wheaton.

The irony here is that not everyone at Wheaton was happy about this. The subject matter of the conference was much contested in evangelical circles at the time. Wheaton had always affirmed the inerrancy of the Bible, but in 1971 Fuller Seminary removed the clause from its faith statement saying the Bible is “free from all error.” In opposition to this Harold Lindsell, former editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote two books about what he called *The Battle for the Bible*. Lindsell was also a Wheaton trustee and he objected that some of the historians invited to the conference had unsound views of scripture. But Wheaton president Hudson Armerding and trustee Billy Graham said that scholarship did not demand ideological purity, and the conference went forward.

The conference resulted in a book (*The Bible in America*, 1982) published by Oxford University Press. Lynn was so pleased that he followed up in 1982 with a $200,000 grant to launch the ISAE. Hatch and Noll continued to lead its Board of Advisors, and historian Joel Carpenter came from Trinity College in Deerfield, IL to serve as the first Director. Wheaton College provided office space and modest support for a skeleton staff, which had to raise all its program money from outside sources. Subsequently, Lynn and his successors at Lilly channeled over $2 million to the work of the ISAE. The irony here is that the Institute’s goals have always included encouraging evangelical scholars and expanding evangelicals’ awareness of their heritage—but Lynn’s goal in supporting the ISAE was to strengthen mainline Protestantism by learning about why evangelicalism was thriving.

In the long run, therefore, Lynn thought The Pew Charitable Trusts might be a better match for the ISAE. The oilman J. Howard Pew had a long history of supporting evangelical enterprises, like *Christianity Today* and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The irony here is that he did so less for religious reasons than because he thought a stronger evangelicalism would help roll back the New Deal and make the world safe for unfettered capitalism. When he died in 1971 The Trusts continued to support evangelical causes but the professional staff—which included no evangelicals—were increasingly uneasy with this. At this juncture Lynn introduced the ISAE to Martin Trimble, a Pew program associate in religion. Trimble convened a pair of meetings that included a number of the historians associated with the ISAE.

Like Lynn before him, Trimble was impressed.
(Here I should note that I have twice used the word
“impressed” partly as a euphemism for “surprised.” It is clear from their accounts of these first meetings with evangelical scholars that many mainstream scholars and foundation officers were expecting to meet Gomer Pyle and surprised to find themselves in the company of Flannery O’Connor.) Trimble persuaded his Pew colleagues that supporting these scholars would be a way to continue The Trusts’ heritage mission of supporting evangelicalism while at the same time climbing the foundation world’s respectability ladder. The irony here is that Pew was more interested in solving an internal institutional dilemma than in what evangelical scholars might ultimately learn from their researches.

So Pew awarded a planning grant to Hatch and elevated Religion to full program status while importing original ISAE director Joel Carpenter as Pew’s first Religion Officer. During the 1990s Pew spent over $15 million on a series of programs in support of evangelical scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and theological disciplines. A small portion of this grant money went to support ISAE programming, but by far the largest share went to initiatives sited at the University of Notre Dame where Hatch was a senior administrator. These included the Pew Evangelical Scholars Program and the Pew Younger Scholars Program. The irony here, of course, is that Pew’s flagship programs to strengthen evangelical scholarship were run out of a Roman Catholic university when prominent institutions like Wheaton—then and now—defined evangelical Christianity in a way that excluded Catholicism.

By the early 2000s the flow of Lilly and Pew money slowed considerably. Lilly shifted away from supporting scholarship to supporting programs designed to give more immediate practical help to mainline Protestant churches and seminaries. To a certain degree the ISAE was able to continue developing programming under Lilly sponsorship by adding components that would disseminate its scholarly findings to broader audiences. Meanwhile at Pew, when Carpenter left to become Provost at Calvin College (his alma mater) in 1996, Trust officials concluded that their grant-making for evangelical scholarship had accomplished its goals. This was the end of their initiatives targeted specifically for evangelicals as they turned to more respectable interests.

The ISAE’s record of accomplishment was best summed up by James Turner, one of the deans of American intellectual history. “The ISAE has established itself as the intellectual and organizational center of the New Evangelical History.” Its historians “haven’t just told us about evangelicalism. They’ve told larger stories of American history” that have revealed “the centrality of evangelicalism in the wider American past.” The fact that American historians in all fields have begun to incorporate this theme into their writing is “evidence of a revolution worked within the last generation of professional historians.” “I can think of no other center for American historical scholarship in my professional lifetime,” concluded Turner, “that has worked quite the influence of the ISAE.”
Why, then is the ISAE having to close its doors? Perhaps the ironies that have attended its entire life give some clues. As Turner noted, the ISAE’s truly remarkable accomplishment has been a scholarly accomplishment—but scholarship was not the main concern of either its benefactors or its host. Lilly mainly cared about evangelicalism as a provider of lessons for how to strengthen the mainline. J. Howard Pew liked evangelicalism for its free enterprise orientation. For the Pew Trusts evangelical scholarship was a halfway house as they distanced themselves from evangelicalism. And Wheaton’s leadership has always been ambivalent about mainstream scholarship in general, and exploring its own history, in particular.

Turner in 1999 and sociologist Alan Wolfe in 2000 wrote widely-read articles for non-evangelical audiences about the awakening/opening of the evangelical mind. Like Turner, Wolfe singled out the ISAE for special praise, but he tempered his appreciation for evangelical scholarly accomplishments with a cautionary note. After spending substantial time on the campuses of Wheaton, Baylor and Pepperdine, he suspected that “evangelicals will be unable to equal the accomplishments of the generation that brought us Marsden, Noll, Plantinga, and Wolterstorff.” He saw at those institutions too many bred-in-the-bone fundamentalist reflexes. He particularly noted the dogged persistence of scholarly self-referentialism and self-marginalization. Had he longer experience with evangelicalism he might have seen that these reflexes stem from a long-standing evangelical conviction that the purpose of scholarship is not to learn new things but to explain and defend things already known. For a season, non-evangelical funding helped evangelicalism overcome its lack of curiosity, its subcultural self-satisfaction, and its defensive stance toward the non-evangelical world.

Ideally this funding would have primed the pump by showing evangelical benefactors the value of supporting serious scholarship. But more than a decade after Turner and Wolfe’s essays, this appears not to be the case. Evangelical philanthropy for scholarship has, arguably, increased, but with a discernably culture-wars orientation. Its purpose is not discovery of unknown truth but rather to wedge truths already known into non-evangelical venues. If this is correct, the closing of the ISAE may indicate that in the future, serious evangelical scholars will continue to depend on non-evangelical support for their work of learning new things about the world.

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