Who's great? Billy Graham and John Paul II: Billy Graham and John Paul II

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Billy Graham and John Paul II are indisputably great men. However much of what they accomplished should be attributed to their own actions and however much is due to other factors, these two must be considered significant actors in 20th-century history. For Billy Graham in 1957 to invite participation at his New York City evangelistic campaign from representatives of all willing churches—thereby opening up a wide array of ecumenical possibilities for former fundamentalists, new-style evangelicals and many mainline Protestants—was indisputably an important action. But even that significant action will probably receive less attention in the history books than John Paul II's trip to Poland in June 1979, when millions of his compatriots ignored official disapproval to attend masses and other Catholic services—and so accelerated, or maybe sparked, the shaking that eventually brought down state-communism in Eastern Europe.

But what can responsibly be said about such "great" persons? Can concentration upon the lives of the "great" stand up against the current heightened concern for the previously marginalized, or—in Christian terms—for "the least of these," whom the scriptures repeatedly describe as central to the purposes of God? Should one talk at all about great men among Christian groups, given that most of the time and in most places churches have been chiefly populated—and chiefly kept functioning—by women?

These questions have had sharpened implications for historians. The once-regnant ideal of history—that it features elite males as the main actors in political and military narratives—is now in tatters. One discerning study of modern uncertainties about historical practice, by Joyce Appleby, Margaret Jacob and Lynn Hunt, even began by pointing out that their own participation in the historical profession, as women from nonelite social backgrounds, could not have happened without the intermingled social and intellectual changes of recent decades (*Telling the Truth About History*).

To these authors it is a good thing that what once counted as “absolutisms” have faded away. Such absolutisms included a heroic myth about U.S. history, interpreted as the rise of “the successful male white Protestant, whose features were turned into ideals for the entire human race.” Another was a mythic reverence for the intellectual purity of science in which, once again, individual great men were responsible for what was truly significant.

Against these absolutisms have arisen various ways of writing history that concentrate on once-marginalized populations (women, African-Americans, workers, immigrants) as themselves important historical actors. The history writing that results from these new perspectives is anything but placid, since competition among champions of the various groups can be severe. But the new perspectives are responsible for an almost entirely new attitude toward what constitutes historical importance.

And yet, if simplistic assumptions about great men and history have been abandoned, interest remains high in what significant individuals have done. While historians have welcomed Appleby’s nuanced study of how the War for Independence altered the lives of ordinary Americans (*Inheriting the Revolution*: *The First Generation of Americans*), an even broader and more appreciative audience has made David McCullough’s biography of John Adams a run away best seller. Expert books by a number of scholars on the shock troops of the civil rights movement have revealed how many different kinds of people from many walks of life in many different localities contributed to the struggle. But books featuring Martin Luther King Jr., such as the two splendid volumes by Taylor Branch, still remain the most read, most influential and most memorable.

Complicating even the academic terrain are a number of initiatives reasserting the importance of individual actions, even when undertaken by elite Caucasian males. Christian Smith, for instance, introduces an important new collection of essays on *The Secular Revolution* with a bold statement about the importance of personal agency: “The central claim of this book is that the historical secularization of the institutions of American public life was not a natural, inevitable, and abstract by-product of modernization; rather it was the outcome of a struggle between contending groups.” The essays in Smith’s persuasive book mostly concern how one collection of influential males (the new academic secularists) successfully wrested control of the institutions of national culture from another collection of influential males (the old Protestant leaders).

James McPherson's riveting account of the battle of Antietam, *Crossroads of Freedom*, is one of the first volumes in a new series called Pivotal Moments in American History. The premise of the series, as explained by editors McPherson and David Hackett Fischer, is its focus on "contingency," or the awareness that important historical developments do not take place inevitably. In their view, books stressing contingency "offer a way forward, beyond the 'old political history' and the new 'social and cultural history' by a reunion of process and event." In other words, what individual people did—perhaps especially people who filled leading public posts—may be as genuinely significant as the ordinary forces acting upon ordinary people.

In Christian perspective, it can be affirmed that the created realm reflects the being of its creator, and so is immeasurably more complex than any single human, or any single school of historical analysis, can fathom. Similarly, however, and again because of God's gracious bestowments upon his creatures, most individuals and most schools of historical analysis can see some things clearly about the past. Bringing together into a coherent whole the valid insights of different individuals and schools of analysis is the hard part.

A Christian vision of history need not, in principle, be opposed to the idea of "great person" history—for much the same reason that it need not, in principle, be opposed to history focused on the marginalized. The reason, though offered as much by faith as by sight, is that in Jesus Christ, as the apostle put it to the Colossians, "all things hold together," even the well-publicized actions of well-known figures and the day-to-day activities of ordinary people carried on with never a thought about the scrutiny of history.