Revival and Moral Philosophy: A Founding Vision for American Higher Education

_In these ‘revival colleges,’ the anti-slavery movement found a welcomed sanctuary, the largest foreign missionary movement in history found its origin, literature, art and the sciences found a home in the academic curriculum, resulting in a profound spiritual/intellectual synthesis throughout American society._

_by Gary David Stratton_

While most Christian traditions look to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the _historical_ birth of the church [1], seventeenth and eighteenth-century Puritans in England and colonial America emphasized the outpouring of the Spirit as God’s _ongoing_ means for awakening unbelievers to seek the Lord and reviving the spiritual life of believers.[2] The Puritans believed in religious education and the personal catechizing of every family in every parish every year,[3] however their pastoral experience warned them that such efforts would eventually fall upon deaf ears and hard hearts if not for the continual renewing work of the Spirit.[4] They developed an ecclesiology that all but demanded outpourings of the Spirit recur periodically for ongoing reformation of the church and society.[5]

_**Jonathan Edwards**_

No one did more to help set Old World revivalism on its feet in the new world, than Northampton, MA Congregationalist minister Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). A “towering intellectual figure”[6] often described as “America’s greatest theologian,”[7] Edwards viewed the outpouring of the Spirit as an acceleration or intensification[viii] of the Holy Spirit’s normal activity so that much is “done in a day or two, as at ordinary times ... is done in a year.”[9] Like all Puritans he held that such outpourings were God-granted events to be sought by ministers and their congregations as their only hope for advancing the gospel on the earth: “(F)rom the fall of man to this day wherein we live the Work of Redemption in its effect has mainly been carried on by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit of God.”[10] (See, _Do America’s Colleges Need ‘Revival’?_)
Edwards wasn’t talking in mere theoretical language. In 1734 over 300 men and women—nearly a quarter of Northampton’s population—professed conversion to Christ in a single six-month period. “There was scarcely in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world... The work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner... and the number of true saints multiplied... (until) the town seemed to be full of the presence of God.”[11] Edwards’ popular account of Northampton’s revival, *Faithful Narrative* (1737), caused churches across the colonies to pray for similar outpourings. It wasn’t long before the answer came.

**The First Great Evangelical Awakening**

The First Great Awakening was a broad religious awakening felt throughout much of the British Isles and American colonies from roughly 1734 to 1742. Early movements included field preaching revivals in the United Kingdom under the leadership of Methodist leaders John and Charles Wesley, a revival in the Connecticut River valley that eventually spread to Jonathan Edwards’ church, as well as revivals among Dutch Pietist immigrants in New Jersey under the leadership of Theodore Frelinghuysen, and New Jersey Presbyterians under the leadership of Gilbert Tennent. [12] The awakening reached its zenith in the theatrical preaching of British Methodist George Whitefield, whose evangelistic tour of the colonies in 1740-1741 became the first genuinely “national” event in American history.[13]

In ten weeks Whitefield spoke to audiences whose total attendance equaled at least half the population of the colonies he visited,[14] including “virtually every New England inhabitant.”[15] By the time the awakening subsided as much as twenty-percent of the total population of the American colonies had professed faith in Christ. [16] Due to the tremendous evangelistic impact of these revivals, leaders became known as *evangelicals* and the movement first became known the *Evangelical Awakening.* As Noll concludes, The Great Awakening, “marked the beginning of a distinctly evangelical history . . . (and) a consistent pattern of convictions and attitudes that have been maintained over the centuries since.”[17] (See, *The Great Awakening & the Birth of American Celebrity Culture*)

**Religious Affections and Religious Education**

Despite the apparent victory of revivalism, Edwards was convinced that the weakness of the First Great Awakening rested in ministers’ uncritical acceptance of revival experiences and mere professions of faith as signs of genuine conversion. Like his Old World forebears, he sought a thorough reformation of both the individual and society. He penned *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1743) to challenge ministers to guide those who professed faith away from short-lived counterfeit conversions and towards genuine faith. [18] Edwards believed that only an encounter with the “divine and supernatural light” provided by Holy Spirit was capable of transforming human affections out of the sinful lowlands of self-interest and into love of God for God’s sake.[19] This meant that the only uncounterfeitable fruits of genuine repentance were neither emotional experiences nor ecstatic visions, but rather a sacrificial love of others and passion to grow in the knowledge of Christ for no other reward than knowing his love. Parents and ministers were charged with catechizing the next generation, as well as reminding them of the glory of heaven and the ever-present
threat of hell, so that by rigorous discipline they might experience genuine conversion. [20] Edwards exhorted his congregation, “The religious education of children is one of the principal means of grace that God has appointed in his church.”[21] (See, Jonathan Edwards Goes to the Movies: Religious Affections and Story Structure.)

The Second Great Awakening

Revival Colleges

This quest to educate and revive an entire generation toward genuine faith and experiential knowledge of God drove Edwards’ spiritual descendants in the development of perhaps the most influential educational movement in American history—the revival college. When the faculties at Harvard and Yale rejected the First Great Awakening, friends of the revival (known as “New Lights”) founded a flurry of liberal arts colleges with a revival bent. Some, like Dartmouth,[22] Amherst,[23] and Mount Holyoke[24] were founded directly on Edwardsean principles. Others, like Williams,[25] Princeton,[26] Rutgers and the University of Georgia[27] were later captured by followers of Edwards’ educational vision. In the end, nearly all colleges of the era were eventually influenced by the Edwardsean project. As noted higher education historian and Edwards biographer George. M. Marsden notes, “Much of the antebellum collegiate education was shaped by New Englanders with an Edwardsean heritage, (who) controlled most of the nations leading colleges, including the state universities.”[28]

Timothy Dwight and Yale College

The power of the revival college movement was made possible in no small degree due to the influence of Edwards’ grandson, Timothy Dwight (1753-1817). Dwight was appointed president of Yale College in 1795 in a striking pro-awakening takeover of what had once been an anti-awakening institution.[29] Yale experienced four revivals under Dwight and these outpourings of the Spirit were clearly a welcomed and promoted aspect of the president’s educational program.[30] Yet Dwight was so committed to the life of the Spirit flowing through the normal day-to-day life of the college he refused to cancel classes during seasons of spiritual awakening, even when petitioned by the student body to do so. Dwight instead carefully guided them his students to a more holistic approach to the Spirit’s work in the life of college, an approach which eventually spread to many if not most of America’s colleges. [31] Under Dwight’s presidency Yale grew into the largest and most influential college in the Americas and the educational center of what came to be known as the Second Great Awakening (c. 1790-1840)—a society-wide transformation of much greater duration and depth than the more short-lived First Great Awakening.[32] (See, The College Chapel: Puritan Relic or Campus Hot Spot.)

Revival Colleges and Social Reform

The best of these revival colleges formed the intellectual backbone of a transatlantic revivalism that became a dominant theme in America from 1800 to 1860, and a “central mode of our search for national identity.”[33] In these colleges, literature, art and the sciences moved into the academic curriculum for the first time, the anti-slavery movement found a welcomed sanctuary, the largest foreign missionary movement in history found its origin, a vision for universal public education found a champion,
women and African-American students matriculated for the first time, Mark A. Noll notes that the leaders of these colleges were key to a “surprising intellectual synthesis” of revival and common-sense moral philosophy that dominated American thinking from 1790 to 1865 and which led to the remarkable “Christianization” of American society. Dramatic church growth among all revival-oriented denominations—particularly Baptists and Methodists led to the formation of nearly 500 new revival colleges across the Western frontier. These educators were revivalists first and foremost Their effectiveness as educators came, not in spite of their commitment to the work of the Holy Spirit in higher education, but rather because of it. (See, The Holy Spirit and the Liberal Arts)

Revivalism Ruined and Renewed

Sadly, the success of revivalism eventually led its undoing as churches and colleges began to rely upon periodic seasons of awakening to produce spiritual maturity in their members rather than ongoing religious education and discipleship. Highly voluntaristic conceptions of conversion and high-pressure tactics to secure decisions gradually eroded Edwardsean concerns regarding counterfeit conversions and safeguards to encourage the genuine fruit of Spirit-created repentance. The publication of Christian Nurture (1847) by Congregationalist minister Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) began an intellectual and practical backlash against revivalism’s overemphasis upon public professions of faith, and birthed the modern religious education movement.

While educational leaders such as A. B. Simpson (Nyack College), A. J. Gordon (Gordon), and V. Raymond Edmond (Wheaton), as well as Baptist, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, and Charismatic renewal movements preserved concern for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and even sparked modest revivals in many churches and colleges, modern evangelicalism has yet to produce a synthesis of revival and Christian education capable of effecting a society-wide movements on the level of the First and Second Great Awakenings.

Next: The College Chapel and American Higher Education: Puritan Relic or Future Hope

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Notes


Here’s a strange idea — what if a university marketed itself as a place to acquire an education?

their leadership as Inigo Montoya was with his sword.

En-garde!

-Gary & Sue

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Moral philosophy is the branch of philosophy that contemplates what is right and wrong. It explores the nature of morality and examines how people should live their lives in relation to others. Moral philosophy has three branches. One branch, meta-ethics, investigates big picture questions such as, "What is morality?" "What is justice?" "Is there truth?" and "How can I justify my beliefs as better than conflicting beliefs held by others?" Another branch of moral philosophy is normative ethics. It answers the question of what we ought to do. Normative ethics focuses on providing a framework for In A New Moral Vision, Andrea L. Turpin explores how the entrance of women into U.S. colleges and universities shaped changing ideas about the moral and religious purposes of higher education in unexpected ways, and in turn profoundly shaped American culture. In the decades before the Civil War, evangelical Protestantism provided the main impetus for opening the highest levels of American education to women. Between the Civil War and World War I, however, shifting theological beliefs, a growing cultural pluralism, and a new emphasis on university research led educators to reevaluate how college revival and moral philosophy: a founding vision for american higher education. the leaders of these colleges were key to a surprising intellectual synthesis of revival and common-sense moral philosophy that dominated american thinking from 1790 to 1865 and which led to the remarkable christianization of american society. by gary david stratton | february 6, 2019 | education, the holy spirit and the liberal arts | no comments |. read more. scripture and culture-making: what christian colleges could learn from rabbinic higher education. do 21st-century christian colleges hold the gospel of rabbi