

Unconnected

RE215 Assignment 1 G.D.Madden

Investigate the truth of the claim that "revivalism" has been at one time both the most invigorating and the most disruptive force in American Protestantism.

"Americans, are you here? Look I'm sorry about this... apparently God had some fracas with your founding fathers and damned the entire race in perpetuity. He sends his particular condolences to the Mormons who he realises put in a lot of work..."

Rowan Atkinson as the Devil welcoming
everyone to Hell. (Live in Belfast, 1980)

The contention that revivals have been the most disruptive force in American Protestantism is supported by the regular divisions such movements have caused. Revivals have excited a polarisation of views and inevitable conflict between those who felt "moved" and those who thought that enthusiasm was dangerous folly. While it is important not to ignore certain positives to come out of the earlier American revivals, the invigorations claimed for revivals have been neither sustained nor generalised. Revivals seem unable to be a sustainable power for invigorating American Protestantism, due to a tendency to oversimplify theological questions, a susceptibility to personality cults, idiosyncratic readings of scripture, adventist movements, and more latterly a slide into Fundamentalism. Much of revival culture in America has a frontier and a nativist dynamic which has sat uneasily once removed to a cosmopolitan urban society.

To the extent that revivalism has been implicated in the astonishing and seemingly inevitable fissiparousness of American Protestantism, it can be seen to be a disruptive influence. The theology and methods of individual revivalists have caused much dissent and perceived excesses of groups under the actions of "the Spirit" have provoked an anti-enthusiastic response which ^{now} at times robbed Churches of any life at all. The disruptions caused by revivals have been justified as a fair price to pay for the harvest of souls they produce and the invigoration given to the Church. These injections of energy provided ^{to} American Protestantism by the revivals, especially in the events known as Great Awakenings, have however done nothing to bring the Church back to a central role in American life and indeed over time have contributed to the marginalisation of Christianity in the current century in America.

To examine the extent of invigoration and disruption revivalism has visited upon American Protestantism, I will take examples from three of the five awakenings postulated by McLoughlin. (1) He proposes an initial puritan awakening, which does not involve revival, and a recent awakening which hardly existed, so I will largely limit my analysis to those he lists as "the First Great Awakening (in America), 1730-60; the Second Great Awakening, 1800-1830; [and] the Third Great Awakening, 1890-1920." (2) McLoughlin reveals his inheritance of the millennial dreams of Americans when he emphasises the positive aspects of revivals on his ^{country's} history and suggests against the evidence that revival is not a "social neurosis." (3) He also tends to try ^{to} and find generalisations between the periods to justify his contention that revivalism is part of an awakening process in which outmoded and dysfunctional belief systems are changed. While this has occurred at times, this neglects the possibility that revival ^{has} can and ^{has also worked} to perpetuate dysfunctional belief systems making the adherents of such beliefs incapable of functioning in the modern ^{world} and unable to contribute anything to the progress of American Protestantism. By looking at the differences between the effects of revival through time, it is possible to chronicle the

process in which revival moves from being the first unifying experience of the young colonies to more latterly a factor in creating a subculture of "permanent" revival as seen amongst fundamentalist churches in America today.

Ahlstrom lists amongst the achievements of the Great Awakening: being the first movement to involve all the colonies, an increase in Church membership and an increase in the gravity with which religious issues were perceived. (4) The gradual loss of intensity in Church life from the time of first settlement had left a formalised institution compromising to the perceived declining standards of society with such backdowns as the halfway covenant and Stoddard's open table. Previous local revival was not unknown but the Church was galvanised by the small revival of Edwards at Northampton and the more widespread effects of the itinerants who made the experience generalised for the colonies. Once the colonies were engulfed people had to decide for or against revivalism, creating a conflict that required a decision even from those previously comfortable in the mainstream churches.

The reason such a "pouring out of the Spirit of God" (5) was viewed with such suspicion, was the accompanying enthusiasm. There was a fear of heresy associated with the past similar movements even as recently as that of Anne Hutchinson in Massachusetts (6) and those of sundry other Ranters and Quakers. (7). As movements involving enthusiasm had always been outside the orthodox Church, it was difficult to approve of enthusiasm as being the new way for the Church in general, yet those experiencing the revival insisted that the :

the movement was something new and different which must be understood on its own terms, that extraordinary times demanded extraordinary methods. (8)

Jonathan Edwards, who gave the first awakening theological credibility, was convinced that there was a special role for America as a prelude to the latter days (9), and felt that the opponents of revival were wrong in their assumption that the existence of false affection in religion should rule out the possibility of true affections. (10) Contemporary accounts of the reaction to the famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," detail the effect of Edwards preaching:

before [the] Sermon was done there was a great moaning

and crying out throughout the whole house: what shall I do for a Christ, etc. The shrieks and crys were piercing and amazing. (11)

If Edwards managed isolated uproar and answered his critics in largely measured words, George Whitfield was less worried about opposition and was the first evangelist to use new technology as a tool. His use of newspapers, pamphlets and a gift for self promotion presaged many of the techniques of later revivalists like Finney. (12) His prodigious talents for working a crowd are exemplified by an occasion in Boston when he managed to combine serendipitous weather with extemporary sermonizing to produce the "Thunderstorm Sermon," using clouds, thunder, lightning and finally a rainbow to illustrate his points. (13) Even a Diest like Benjamin Franklin admired him, gave him favourable coverage in his paper, and gave him credit for increased piety in Philadelphia. (14) However his flamboyant style and more particularly his claims that the New England clergy were spiritually dead attracted much criticism from the many of the established clergy (15). His tour of New England was followed up by Gilbert Tennant, who had warned of "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry," (16) to a similar theme, which continued to fan the opposition's flame. James Davenport, who at one stage burnt books of writers such as Charles Chauncy, claiming Chauncy would soon be in Hell, provided just the ammunition needed by the more traditionally minded to condemn the movement (17). Chauncy for his part called Davenport the "wildest Enthusiast he had ever encountered" (18).

The disruptions caused by this awakening were felt in organised Churches because of the perceived threat of enthusiasm, the general involvement across the whole spectrum of denominations and the activities of itinerants who did not necessarily seek the blessing of local clergy. Whitfield is reported to have addressed crowds by asking Father Abraham whether there was in turn any Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, Seceders, New Sides, Old Sides and Methodists in

Heaven, only to answer himself, of course, that Abraham knew none of those names, only Christians. (19) This undermining of traditional churches is complained of by Chauncy, who says that due to such undermining of local pastors:

many of our Churches are so crumbling to pieces, that there is a call almost every week, for the help of Ecclesiastical Councils, in one place, or another. (20)

The positive effects of the first great awakening as far as enthusiasm giving new energy to Church life waned quickly. Revival was not able to survive long in established Churches, witness Edwards' expulsion from his parish. Secular authorities were inclined to favour its suppression, in some cases prohibiting itinerants on grounds of civil order. Reaction against enthusiasm was such that in the embryonal Methodist revivals later in the century, Devereux Jarrat can voice disapproval of "loud outcries, tremblings, falling,[and] convulsions." (21) The influence of those who had opposed enthusiasm was instrumental in strengthening the cause of Unitarian and even diestric thought. That it can be claimed that the Revolution was "the secular fulfilment of the religious ideals of the First Great Awakening," (22) suggests much of the positive flow on from the event went on outside American Protestantism, strengthening the diestric enlightenment based ideals of the mindset which produced the Declaration of Independence.

Revivalism during the Second Great Awakening leads to much practical concern for missions and morals, but also to much dissension within the Churches, as the conflicts are no longer just over enthusiasm and which shade of Calvinism ^{you are} you're painted with, but with much larger theological gulfs and calls of heresy all round. Part of the impetus which gave the movement success was indeed the difficulty of squaring the Calvinist ideas of total depravity with the new confidence of the liberated States and the age of enlightenment, and certainly here ^{too} we can see revivalism as a tool to restructure the beliefs of Americans to fit with new conceptions of America's destiny.

Initially this revival was anti-enlightenment in thrust, beginning with Timothy Dwight's campaign against infidelity at Yale and continuing with the work of many of his pupils. (23) The initial phase was exemplified by Asahel Nettleton whose effect on one of the many communities he "revived" was noted as:

a solemnity and seriousness pervaded the community, which had not been experienced for years before. There was no bustle - no array of means. All was orderly, quiet and scriptural. There seems to have been an increased solemnity while the work continued. (24)

This quieter revival style ran headlong into the revivalist style of Charles Finney, which was given a theological basis by Taylor and Beecher's reappraisal of the calvanist conception of man's total depravity to one in which man has a choice. (25) ¹⁸²⁵ Much controversy and division was centred on Finney's "new measures" such as "all-night prayer meetings, praying for sinners by name, allowing women to pray and exhort while men were present...irreverent familiarity with God...and employing an 'anxious seat'." (26) According to traditionalists these were producing a "revival of anger, wrath, malice, envy, and evil speaking," (27) as congregations and ministers were claimed to be being broken down to accept the innovations. These controversies and the challenge to Calvinism led to further splits within the Presbyterians and to Finney leaving them with the comment that, "no doubt there is a jubilee in hell every year

about the time of the meeting of the General Assembly." (28)

To a certain extent, Finney had brought the frontier style of boisterous revival back east, feeding on the influence of the Kentucky revival at the beginning of the century, in which rowdy revival meetings lasting several days achieved much in taming the more brutal aspects of backwoods life, at the expense perhaps of bequeathing future generations a fairly primitive Christianity to be idealised as "old time religion." Less welcomed but springing from similar soil were such sects as Cochranites who were accused of, "sensational worship, bizarre healing rituals and deviant sexual practices." (29) The "adventist" movements, especially that of William Miller, who preached an imminent return of Christ, sprang from similar revivalist origins. The threat of the second coming became a tool of revival. Many people left their Churches to join adventist movements as dates for the end neared, and became disillusioned with religion when the dates went. (32)

The more optimistic view of Man postulated by revivalists like Finney combined with a strong tradition drawn from Jonathan Edwards phenomenally successful *Life of Brainerd* of, "radical disinterested benevolence," (30) and provided a grounding for the various societies for peace, temperance, missions and the abolition of slavery and dueling. The Post-millennial feeling of the time suggested that it was possible to build America as a, "righteous empire," (31) truly one nation under God and an example to the heathen. Without doubting the sincerity nor the humane intentions of the groups, such schemes to change the world by persuasion largely failed, such that one temperance writer bluntly put it in 1852 that "moral suasion is moral balderdash." (33) The nativism associated with the American millennial feeling had negative effects, as revival began to be used as a weapon against Catholic "encroachment" upon the cities. Many benevolence movements used blatantly anti-Catholic propaganda which provided the environment in which violence against Catholic institutions became common. (34)

The Second Awakening left the Church rich with new denominations, splits in the Presbyterians, the Plan of union abandoned, Finney contemplating perfectionism at Oberlin and much of the Church indistinguishable from secular do-gooders. And if America had now to tolerate revival as old time frontier religion grafted onto technology on a Finney model, at least the emphases of post-millennialist theology had encouraged attempts to counter injustice in a way later revival largely ignored.

McLaughlin speaks of the Third Great Awakening as the change in American thought that led to the acceptance of evolution and industrial progress (35). The revivalist part of this process is mainly felt as a reactionary force as the movement buttressed itself from the threats of the modern age. Instead of acting as a factor to make belief appropriate and meaningful to the coming century, revivalist thought, just as its methods had, became set in concrete. Interestingly, as much as the stream that was to become fundamentalism defined itself by rejecting higher criticism and Darwin, the Awakening McLaughlin refers to was accomplished by the actions of majority of Americans in rejecting Fundamentalism.

Revival as such was in decline towards the end of the century. The postmillennial optimism was difficult to maintain in the face of squalid cities full of dirt-poor immigrants. The crusades of Dwight L. Moody, largely financed by industry (36), did not succeed in convincing the ¹⁸⁷⁰poor in the cities, who were being crushed by Moody's sponsors, that the system was fine but their very poverty showed their lack of faith. The frontier spirit of revivalism, as represented in its last gasp by Moody, resisted the common sense that the frontier scarcely existed anymore, and exhortations from Moody that farming was always an alternative in "a land flowing with milk and honey" (37) did not achieve miraculous success amongst the unemployed of the cities. The arrival of John Nelson Darby in 1862 with his concept of premillennial dispensationalism found a receptive audience amongst American evangelicals. (38) With its emphasis that the world was becoming increasingly evil and awaiting judgement, premillenarian dispensationalism ¹⁸⁰⁰obviated the need for social action as a priority, just as other sections of the Church were discovering it. (39) This approach was poles apart from that of the social gossellers who, in bringing the spirit of optimism and benevolence to industrial society, were making attempts at relevance to the world without abandoning Christ. That sections of the Church with both pre-millennialist and middle class sympathies could not get excited about improving the lot of the working

class probably rescued the Church from more relevance in the Twentieth century.

The revivalist strain of the Church having been assailed by evolution and higher biblical criticism and the liberal movement within the Church, had also become increasingly unnecessary to mainstream Christian life. Christian education through Sunday schools had become the standard entry to the Church rather than revival meetings, although efforts to perpetuate revivalism, in their desperateness, did little to help the situation. (40) In the public imagination those who desperately clung to revivalist methods were represented more and more by the outlandish, discredited adventist and faith healing communities like that set up at Zion City, Illinois by John Alexander Dowie. (41) Instead of being a vital part of mainstream ecclesiastical and secular life, evangelicals by the time of the fundamentalist-modernist clashes of the twenties were becoming separate, with separate institutions, especially for education, and even a separate Scofield Bible with appropriately premillenarian marginal notes.

Revivalism is not in the long run the most invigorating factor in American Protestantism. As with most things American a degree of prosperity, moral superiority and raw power over others, hopefully to do good, fuels many an American organisation, with the difference that a Church can get a very occasional jump start from the heady brew of revivalism. James Davenport's brother-in-law, a Massachusetts minister called Stephen Williams, lived through the Great Awakening, heard Edwards preach and saw the results of revival in his parish. His journal for the forty years following the events of the early 1740's scarcely mentions revival again:

For Stephen Williams, the Great Awakening served him and his parish in that it brought a worldly congregation more closely to pious heal; but like all religious upheavals, its intensity lasted only for the moment. In the long run, Williams confided in his journals, it was an abundant crop, the good health of his family, or a providential rain in a season of dryness that brought more "cheerfulness and pleasantness to [the] countenances," of his own congregation than did the emotional rhetoric of Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the hands of an Angry God." (42)

Or to put it another way, a fulfilling Christian life need have nothing to do with revival. If you want something as vast as American Protestantism to function effectively it doesn't hurt to have some modest material rewards to fuel its progress and this would seem to be something more invigorating to the American Church in the long run than revival. While America was growing and progress seemed inevitable the Church could feed off the success of the country to and to that extent the Church was invigorated.

Revivalism's success was for the country when it had a slightly frayed edge on its frontier. This sort of religion provided an easily assimilated internal authority which improved quality of life where little other authority existed. When the enthusiasm succeeded, in for example the Kentucky revivals, admittedly the Church grew rapidly. When enthusiasm failed as with the Cochranites, the secular authorities cleaned up the mess.

Revivalism's failure to be a consistently invigorating force in American Protestantism over time can be explained by some of its flaws, such as a tendency to become theologically shallow. Initially this was a consequence of the anti-intellectual emphasis which comes from a "heart" religion and the temptation for revivalists to oversimplify things to an unambiguous call to a decision. (43) But by locking into the ineffability of the scriptures to combat higher criticism and enlightenment, theology became even more limited in scope and tended towards a proof text driven trivia fest along astonishingly scholastic "rationalistic" lines, such that today there are "groups organised to prove the existence of God, to supply evidences for miracles, proofs for the resurrection, and even to propagate something called 'scientific creationism.'" (44) These are symptoms of the lack of adaptability left in this sort of Christianity which far from invigorating the Church, require the construction of the artificial world of a subculture to prevent the whole facade toppling.

Revivalism is prey to the charismatic leader who can hold such a scaffolding together and "construct a reality for his followers." (45). This has the consequence that grace is downplayed, because the revival doesn't begin until the evangelist with the big reputation arrives. It means that the tendency to be a bit unbalanced amongst such people leads to strange affections, idiosyncratic readings of scripture, and so to multiple sects and debilitating hair-splitting disputes and schisms. A cult of personality also does nothing for continuity when the great man of the movement goes to his inevitable reward.

At the heart of the problem for revivalism as a consistently invigorating force is the practical problem that in essence revival has to be an individual enlivenment, albeit part of a shared experience. Since not everyone in the Church is similarly moved the disruptions caused by revival tend to be institutional and organisational and so effect the running of the Church, its pastoral side and the things by which its relevance to the world are judged. If the Spirit has moved people to

revival in America, its ulterior motive may well have been to keep the Church humble.

The disruption to American Protestantism caused by revival movements is easy to document and it is not easy to think of a more disruptive influence. As a phenomena there was undoubted benefit to the community from some of the early revivals and a degree of revival did invigorate Churches which had become formalised. Revival itself became formalised under the influence of the technology of revival and the move towards Fundamentalism without apparently becoming any less disruptive. The issue of enthusiasm is clouded by the subjectivity of the experience but the objective results suggest the Church could do without it. Yeats in his appropriately titled "The Second Coming" knew something of this in another context, saying that: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." (46)

END NOTES

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