Reflections on
Religion, Modernization and Teaching World History

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Last November, a few days after the election, as I uncurled from the fetal position, I plunged into a stack of unread historical journals. I found a forum entitled “Jonathon Edwards and American history.”¹ The lead essay was by George Marsden, whose 2003 biography of Edwards had won such wide acclaim. Marsden asked whether Jonathon Edwards and his successors could be reintegrated into the grand narrative of American history.

The question seemed pertinent. In the days immediately after last November’s vote, Mr. Bush’s success was widely ascribed his handling of the so-called values question. Karl Rove was celebrated (or decried) for successfully turning gay marriage into the decisive issue of the campaign without making his candidate look intolerant. Gary Wills titled his New York Times essay on the election “The Day the Enlightenment Went Out.” Rove, Wills noted, “understands what surveys have shown, that many more Americans believe in the Virgin Birth than in Darwin’s theory of evolution.”² Writing in The Guardian a few days later George Monbiot recalled R. H. Tawney’s Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, and declared that Bush’s ideology had it’s roots in 17th century Puritanism. In the 1600’s, argued Monbiot, the emerging propertyed classes had distracted the masses by creating “an obsession with terrorists [Irish and Jesuit in the 1700’s]…, [with] homosexuality and sexual licence, [with] the vicious chastisement of moral deviance, [and with] the disparagement of public support for the poor: swap the black suits for the grey ones,” Monbiot concluded, “and the characters could have walked right out of Bush’s America.”³

George Marsden’s message was more temperate. He objected to the general tendency to reduce Edwards and Evangelical religion to a mere rear-guard action in the face of science, secularism and progress.⁴ As a long-time teacher of the history of science, I found his views uncomfortably close to home.

The issue of religion and its place in society was, in November, particularly relevant for those of us living in Cobb County, Georgia, the home of

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evolution “sticker-shock.” I speak of course Cobb County Schools’ decision to place a sticker in the front of their biology textbooks warning students that “[e]volution is a theory, not a fact…”5 Meanwhile, the school board of Dover, Pennsylvania (my home state!) went farther. It mandated that the latest version of creationist thinking, so-called Intelligent Design theory, be introduced to their students.

I am happy to report both that the federal court in Atlanta held the Cobb County sticker to be unconstitutional and that biology teachers in Dover, PA refused to read the mandated statement on Intelligent Design to ninth graders. School administrators had to come into the classroom and read a statement on intelligent design to assembled thirteen and fourteen year old eighth graders instead.6 One can only imagine the deep impression that made on the students!

What Is To Be Done?

Nevertheless the events of last fall suggest that George Marsden is right to argue that those of us who teach history should look more carefully at religious responses to modernization, and not just in American history. Across the world “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” religious movements are an increasingly important phenomenon. Whether Islamic, or Orthodox Christian, or Jewish, or Hindu, or Catholic, or Protestant, the movements are deeply important to millions of individuals. In addition, followers of evangelical or fundamentalist movements are significant economic and political participants in societies across the globe. The Karl Roves of the world, indeed marketing specialists of all sorts, are doing their numbers and targeting their messages.

The evangelical tradition to which George Bush subscribes has its origins in the German Pietist movement that arose in the period after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. As a result of that peace, each sovereign price was permitted to determine the religion of his subjects, whether Catholic, Lutheran or Calvinist. Complete sovereignty meant that princes could require the confessional practices of their choice and were free to harass, persecute or expel any whose religion differed from their own. Worship in established churches quickly became a mandated ritual with meager spiritual

content. In response small groups of the devout began to meet outside established churches for study and prayer. The Pietists stressed the primacy of the individual’s personal experience of the Holy Spirit, untainted by formal ritual or theology, and unconstrained by religious authorities.\(^7\)

Pietism soon had a significant following in the Calvinist world as well as the Lutheran. As its followers sought refuge from the spirit-deadening hand of authority pietism spread to the Netherlands, Scotland, England and North America. In Britain and British America Pietism became linked to revivalist movements that stressed “simple biblical preaching in a fervent style” and so was often termed evangelical religion.\(^8\) The movement was very self-aware across differences of language, denomination and theology. In his thirty sermon series, *The History of the Work of Redemption*, Jonathon Edwards pointedly connected the awakening that he initiated in 1734-35 with the Pietist revival in Germany.\(^9\) About the same time, John Wesley’s encounter with the pietistic Moravians on coastal Georgia and later in London, left him “strangely moved.”

Such individualist, anti-authority devotional movements were, of course, not new in world history. The earliest Christians come to mind. The Bhakti response to Brahminical Hinduism followed much the same pattern in India. Sufism has at times played a similar role in Islam. It can even be said that Daoism’s relation to Confucianism is comparable. But a unique aspect of the Pietist/Evangelical movement of the late 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) centuries was that it coincided with another movement that was also powerfully dismissive of authority, namely the Scientific Revolution and its offspring, the Enlightenment.

One of the fascinations Jonathon Edward’s life is the way in which he painstakingly collected, recorded and categorized instances of God’s work in the world to make his arguments, exactly as a Baconian scientist amassed and utilized facts about nature.\(^10\) It did not occur to Edwards that science and true religion were in opposition. Nor was this view exceptional. Harvard and Yale found the new evangelical thinking too disrespectful of confessional orthodoxy, but the followers of the New Light did not turn

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away from higher education. They responded by founding Dartmouth, Brown, Princeton, and Columbia. And yet authorities Harvard and Yale were not entirely wrong. There was, and is, a strong anti-intellectual side of the evangelical tradition in which deeply felt individual experience was sometimes valorized above all else.\(^\text{11}\)

As Mark Noll and others have stressed, during the American republic’s formative years the Scottish enlightenment of Hutchinson, Hume and Smith gave intellectual confidence to new American elites, as did the related idea that America was the culmination of the history of human progress. Meanwhile, during the same period, the first two Great Awakenings privileged untutored individual experience, and portrayed America as the New Jerusalem. The combination of Enlightenment skepticism, evangelical individualism and both secular and religious New Jerusalem thinking may have been paradoxical, but it contributed substantially to the broad acceptance of the republic’s new egalitarian political ideas.\(^\text{12}\) The result, a sort of revivalist’s variation of a Whiggish view of history, saw America is chosen by God to carry the banner of true religion and liberty against false religion and tyranny. For George Marsden this view of history has become an important, though often sub-conscious, element of American folklore.\(^\text{13}\)

Plainly a key to George Bush’s success is his ability to play on this folkloric view of America’s place in providential history again and again without explicitly endorsing it and thus offending other nations. And also to do so without blushing.

But addressing evangelicals’ providential view of history in the classroom is considerably easier for most of us than treating their exclusivist claims, or at least treating them without disdain. As Marsden notes, “People who believe their religious views are correct and that all other views are dangerously wrong just do not seem to fit in.” Such thinking conflicts with most professors’ belief in, and hopes for, an ever more open, tolerant and inclusive society. And yet it is precisely such exclusivist forms of


\(^{13}\) Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, 112.
Christianity that are growing most rapidly as the pace of modernization accelerates.  

Obviously the development of an exclusivist religious counter-culture in response to modernization is not limited to the United States. Islamic and Hindu “fundamentalism” clearly play the same role, as does the Evangelical Christianity of an exclusivist stripe that is spreading rapidly in Latin America and Africa. There is a similar movement within the Orthodox tradition, especially in Russia. In some respects the semi-underground Home Church movements in China also seems to qualify.

There are many divisions within these movements worldwide. Politically the most important is perhaps the distinction between those on the one hand who are inspired by their pietistic faith to withdraw from corrupting secular society and, those, on the other, who become passionately engaged in public affairs. Professor Marsden defines a Fundamentalist in America rather neatly as “an evangelical who is angry about something.” One of the perplexities of assessing the political impact of such movements around the world is that in every society a different set of influences drives the competition between the pietistic withdrawal and fundamentalist activism.

Another fascination is the relationship between fundamentalist belief and modern science. In America, 18th century Calvinists like Jonathon Edwards took for granted that true religion and correct science would be entirely consistent. That is why the many church-related colleges so eagerly included natural philosophy, the 18th century term for science, in the curriculum. Yet by the late 19th century the coming of Darwinism and with it the professionalization of science, complicated that vision. It was precisely at this moment that the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy, the idea that the Bible must be literally correct in all things, became a central tenant of Protestant evangelical belief. But this was no rejection of science. It was rather the continued belief in a Newtonian version of science, where an unchanging universe operated according to precise divine laws. The Bible, long understood as brilliant with image, symbol, and metaphor, now came to be seen as containing the literal language of a scientific journal. An analog to this tangled relationship can be seen in India during the same decades. There the leader of the Hindu revival movement Arya Samaj founded

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15 Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism, 1.
16 Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism, 118.
academically rigorous schools for young people and exhorted his followers to eschew the modern world and “Go back to the Vedas.” Yet the Vedas they were going back to had been much reshaped by modern western scholarship.¹⁷

Those of us educated before the 1980’s have, I fear, often seen fundamentalist belief as a sort of farcical final resistance of the ill educated to the rising tide of science and personal freedom. The reptile handlers in the hinterlands, as it were. The case looks different to students today. The longing for certainty and to be part of a community of like-minded believers is not withering away, it is growing. Inclusivist so-called mainstream churches are losing members; exclusivist evangelical churches are growing rapidly. Around the world Osama bin Laden looms far larger than Desmond Tutu in students’ imaginations. Here in Georgia, Ralph Reed is rising and Andrew Young is the subject of a memorial park. It is not necessary that we approve of exclusivist religious beliefs, whether at home or abroad. But if we are to help our students make sense of the world in which they live, we must study and teach them, critically, to be sure, but also respectfully and with unfeigned curiosity.

Works Cited


