

Lecture 4: Protestantism in America

1. The Anabaptist Model Triumphs

The bewildering complexity of schismatic diversifying Protestant traditions in Europe pales into insignificance when considering North America. Even so, the distinction between the Magisterial Reformation and the Radical Reformation remains here as well - at least initially. This is hardly surprising since American Protestantism began as a patchwork quilt of the faith traditions of the early settlers.¹ However, it can be maintained that the Radical Reformation eventually triumphed in one important respect. Even those who brought with them the churches of the magisterial Reformation - Calvinists and Lutherans, abandoned the idea of a State sponsored religion as unworkable, then as undesirable and finally as unacceptable. All American Protestants eventually subscribed to the notion of a radical constitutional separation of Church and State; the prevailing Anabaptist position in Europe. Enlightenment values hastened this process of legislative indifferentism as to faith.

2. Revivalism and the Great Awakenings

The other key aspect of the Radical Reformation taken up, perhaps surprisingly by Calvinists, was Pietism. The marriage of these two traditions in a firmly eschatological context gave birth to what we now know as Revivalism in which itinerant preachers brought the message of God's hatred of sinners and his completely underserved mercy to thousands of vulnerable souls. This movement definitively set popular American religion on a course away from organised religion, ritual, sacrament and tradition. It has thereby profoundly shaped the profile of American Protestant Christianity from the early 1700's down to the present day. Propagated by what are popularly known as the three Great Awakenings, Revivalism created strands variously identified as evangelicalism, restorationism,

¹ An excellent guide to the History of American Protestantism is available on line:- "Protestantism in America – a Narrative History" by Jerald C. Brauer ... here ... <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=1663>

adventism, dispensationalism, fundamentalism and later in the 20th century the mega-churches and the emergent churches of post evangelicalism.² What these all share is a strong personalist piety emphasising a decision for salvation that cannot be undone, the imminent end of the world and the second coming of Christ - which itself can be hastened by evangelistic effort. Only 20th Century post evangelicalism has largely abandoned this eschatological emphasis and become both consumerist and self-help in character, the exact theological antithesis of the movement's Calvinist inception.

The First Great Awakening in 1734 in Massachussets was more or less strictly Calvinist and inspired by Jonathan Edwards, the archetypal "fire and brimstone" preacher. In this he was assisted by the visiting Anglican preacher, George Whitfield. Edward's infamous sermon:- "*Sinners in the hands of an angry God*" preached on 8th July 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut captures this movement precisely.³ It is relentlessly focussed on the justifiable wrath of God laid upon the wicked and the absolute impossibility of anyone being saved apart from His mercy. The sermon lasted an hour but Edwards was unable to complete it on account of the great wailing, trembling and groaning it provoked amongst those who were cut to the quick by its message. Whitfield experienced similar responses to his preaching in England. This extract is typical. It is revivalist hyper-Calvinism in classical mode:-

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in His sight, you are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him infinitely more than ever did a stubborn rebel his

² For a comprehensive treatment of these strands of revivalism, see: Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick, "*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*" (Chesterton, IN, Conciliar Press, 2011 pp. 120-131)

³ The full text may be found here:-
<http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbj9uZXdwaGlsby9nZXRvYmplY3QuGw/Yy4yMTo0Ny53amVv>

prince – and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.”

In the [Second Great Awakening](#) a century later, Revivalist Calvinism was supplanted, in part, by a decidedly more Arminian approach. The emphasis shifted somewhat from God’s initiative to the human response ... the importance of making a decision for Christ which by itself would save. This version of Revivalism also took on a much more eschatological Adventist aspect.⁴ The preachers of the Second Great Awakening really did believe that society was living through the End Times and did not cease to prophecy with great precision about when and how this would happen. The temporal and doctrinal casuistries that were employed to adjust Adventist expectations when these hopes were not fulfilled may astonish us now, but upon these “adjustments” the very fortunes, (vocational and financial), whole movements, churches and preachers depended.

A founding father of this movement was a convert from Enlightenment Deism, a certain Walter Miller. His followers were called Millerites and Seventh Day Adventists consider him to be one of their founders. Miller became convinced through his idiosyncratic biblical studies that the world was going to end in 1843. He later extended to this to 1844 but he of course remained disappointed. This did not stop his successors reviving the project as many still do to this day. In 1843 some 50,000 or more Protestant believers abandoned both homes and jobs to follow Miller in waiting for the Apocalypse.

Adventist preachers moved with the expanding westward frontier and preached their message with altar calls in tent and camp meetings. New denominations were spawned along the way all varying according to their founders’ chiliastic interpretations of the millennial reign of Christ. In the classical denominations, Methodists and Baptists took their lead from these new movements and began to grow significantly, eclipsing in importance the Calvinist and Puritan religious traditions of the first Awakening. The Second Awakening

⁴ Modern American Protestantism’s infatuation with all things eschatological is given exhaustive treatment in T.L. Frazier’s “A Second Look at the Second Coming” (Ben Lomond, California, Conciliar Pres, 1999).

also began to empower the movement for freedom amongst slaves in the American south, paralleling in some ways abolitionist movements growing out of contemporaneous Evangelicalism in Britain.

In the [Third Great Awakening](#) at the beginning of the 20th Century, Holiness Revivalism (derived from the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification) evolved into Pentecostalism. This revivalism taught the necessity of a second superior baptism to that of water alone - a baptism in the Holy Spirit - for which the gift of speaking in tongues became the characteristic sign of this so-called "second blessing." Parallel revivalist movements, once more intersecting with those in America occurred in Europe as well, and especially in Britain. For example, although the Methodist offshoot from Anglicanism later distanced itself from these movements, its own beginnings shared the spiritual enthusiasms characteristic of the classical American revivals. The Welsh Revival happened simultaneously with the Third Great Awakening. Pentecostalism was in fact being propelled onto a global stage.

By the 1960's Pentecostalism had penetrated both the churches of Magisterial Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church in the more inclusive Charismatic movement. In some traditions this movement allowed for a much more liturgical and sacramental expression of a Holy Spirit-based approach to Christian worship and life, eroding some of the classical aspects of non-incarnational, anti-sacramental American Revivalism. However it is these aspects of Revivalism in the Great Awakenings that concern us in this study and we shall now therefore examine some of its underlying assumptions, all of which are heretical from an Orthodox perspective.

3. Revivalism – its Underlying Assumptions

Revivalism occurs in Protestant Christianity when a particular combination of factors comes into play in any given society with sufficient social and religious momentum. Revival may

be ascribed by its adherents to the inscrutable will of God but in truth it is almost predictable when these factors are present. We should also not forget that conditions of rapid social change and societal stress are often implicated, especially in the eschatological aspects of revivals. An Orthodox response is indicated for each factor involved in a predisposition to revivalism:-

- a. **Individualism** – In revivalist Christianity this is the belief that the individual alone has both the capacity and the necessity of acquiring salvation direct from God together with the guidance from Him that follows on from such conversion. This is sometimes called “soul competency”. Orthodoxy teaches that we are saved together not alone. Salvation without commitment to one another in the household of faith, which is the Church, is impossible. The abjuring of the Church and her traditions is simply a *hubris* of the ego masquerading as piety. Seen in a Reformation context, this individualism (which if anything has its roots in the Renaissance), is a long and not yet fully played out story. As Sartre once wrote (ironically or otherwise) – hell is “other people.”⁵ Orthodoxy says: “No, I am my brother’s keeper.”⁶
- b. **The Invisible Church of the Elect** – This holds that no visible single church is necessary for salvation since the saved, being known to God alone, have all that they need in this invisible communion. Church communities may be useful for mutual support but nothing more. Orthodoxy teaches that Christ founded the Church to be his Body, a visible divine society where the celebration and reception of the sacraments are indeed necessary to salvation. “Invisibilism” is a long term project of the Radical Reformation – a marginalisation of Church life, sacraments, ordination, and with these, any coherent, apostolic confessions of faith other than the individual’s own illumination from Scripture - or even simply from his or her own religious experience. All these tendencies and manifestations Orthodoxy resists most strongly. The Church is both identifiable and necessary.

⁵ From “*No Exit*”

⁶ Genesis 4:9

- c. **Pietism or Enthusiasm** – This is the belief that doctrine is secondary and that experience is the only sure criterion of Christian truth and salvation. The signs and wonders that are allegedly manifest in the elect are also taken to be indications of the impending judgement that is imminently coming upon the world. Orthodoxy teaches that a heartfelt faith must also engage the brain and that the Orthodoxy of one's confession is inextricably tied up in and embedded within a saving faith.
- d. **Dualism** – Dualists believe that the soul's salvation has no bearing on the fate of the physical world which is either to be dismissed as unimportant or rejected as evil. The doctrine of the Rapture is an eschatological example of this teaching whereby the elect are supposed at the Second Coming to rise up with him into the air, leaving the world behind to its own destruction.⁷ Orthodoxy teaches that the Word became flesh in the Incarnation because the world as a whole, and indeed the Cosmos, is the object of God's love no less than each and every human being. Orthodoxy believes in the resurrection of the body and not at all in any supposed liberation of the spirit from that body. Moreover we cannot trash creation if this is also to be redeemed!
- e. **Chiliasm** – This is the belief that there will be a literal 1000 year reign of Christ sometime (teachings vary) within the timeframe of His Second Coming. This has to be seen against the background of American revivalist eschatology in which literalism is applied to biblical texts, especially the book of Revelation. Orthodoxy teaches that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead (as the Nicene Creed asserts) but that this world will be “without end” (again in the Creed) which was inserted to combat chiliasm in the early Church. The fever of eschatological prediction in such chiliastic interpretations of Scripture in antiquity made the churches of the East initially cautious about Revelation and although it was eventually accepted as canonical Scripture, it is not to this day read liturgically in Church.

⁷ Sometimes Revivalism has rejected this dualistic approach to the world and heaven. Many of the preachers of the Second Great Awakening and of contemporaneous Evangelicalism in Britain believed (as had Calvin before them) that the elect had a duty to live honourably in this world and reform it along Christian lines. So although Whitfield in the First Awakening supported the slave trade, some of the preachers of the Second Awakening worked for its abolition.

f. **Gnosticism** - Proponents of revival usually confuse faith with knowledge. This supposes that it is what you know and give assent to that saves you. In classical Gnosticism this knowledge was held and transmitted in secret. Protestant Gnosticism subscribes to quite the opposite view but it is similar in its other teachings about saving gnosis. In the Reformed Tradition, saving knowledge must be openly presented to as many people as possible and a decision made, by one and all, for or against Christ. In revivalism the minimalist expression of this saving gnosis is in the so-called “sinners prayer” which, said sincerely, and from that moment, opens the door of Paradise to the believer, assuring him of salvation whether he perseveres in a life of holiness or not. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, teaches that salvation is a process that happens in the Church through acts of continual repentance, reception of the sacraments, prayer and sacrificial service.

4. Revivalism – its Legacy

What revivalism has offered the English speaking world is a radical, portable, mass movement form of pietistic Protestantism that has more or less replaced or at least significantly modified the classical 16th Century Reformation traditions, even of the Anabaptist type. This revivalism has over time gradually shifted its focus from God to God meeting peoples’ needs ... the inspiration of the American mega-churches. With this has arrived the application of consumerism and market research to the church growth movement and the whole-hearted endorsement of prosperity theology, designed to take away any residual guilt associated with usury and materialism. The only ‘guilt’ that is left now is golden ... in the form of the ‘gilt’-edged bank accounts of the mega-pastors and tele-evangelists. We should also not be surprised that these variants of Revivalism have also fathered the emergent churches of post-evangelicalism which have abandoned any doctrinal coherence in favour of a smorgasbord, pick and mix spirituality; all designed to make people happy. Jonathan Edwards is doubtless turning in his grave!

We have been considering American Protestantism but we should not think that such excesses are limited to the United States. These forms of Protestantism have also been marketed (quite literally) and exported all over the world and they have eclipsed for good the moribund liberal Protestant churches that have remained within the historical folds of the Magisterial Reformation on both sides of the Atlantic. Throughout the 19th century those liberal Protestant churches that resisted revivalism and continued on their scholastic and sceptical, post-critical paths towards a simple ethical monotheism have never made any significant inroads into popular Christian or cultural consciousness. They have simply bequeathed a legacy of failed and declining denominations, unable to withstand the ravages of secularism and the Enlightenment, with which they themselves have been in league. On the other hand, although revivals come and go, they keep coming back, albeit in more and more bizarre forms.

5. Revivalism its - Deformations

The freedom to reinvent Christianity was facilitated (as we have seen in the previous lecture, no. 3) by the separation of the “Sola Scriptura” model of biblical authority from any received confessional interpretative tradition. The final step in eccentric departure from apostolic Christianity involves either a radical re-envisioning of the biblical text itself or the acquisition of new texts that consolidate the teaching of new self-declared prophets. Provided that the new cult leader has natural leadership charisms, he or she has every good chance of creating a new religion and calling it “true Christianity.” Of course, these so-called prophets care nothing about those who have gone before. The Great Apostasy carries all before it and leaves only them standing. Examples of these New Religious Movements include on the American side include Unitarian Universalism, Mormonism, Christadelphianism, Christian Science and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.⁸ That even the most freewheeling of Protestants in America do not consider them to be Christian is noteworthy.

⁸ For a comprehensive treatment of these post-Christian New Religious Movements, see: Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick, *“Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy”* (Chesterton, IN, Conciliar Press, 2011 pp. 134-156)

Even more surprising is the fact that in a supposedly secular State, many Christians on the right rejected with disdain the 2012 Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney, simply because he was a Mormon. Clearly, even American Protestantism has its boundaries and limits. Apparently, even the separation of Church and State is not the last word on who gets to be elected. In America, what you believe still does matter. This of course is deeply ironic considering how diverse American Christianity has in practice become. This diversity of course includes Roman Catholicism which is still by far the largest Church in North America (which may surprise some) registering some 47% of the US and Canadian Christian population in 2012.* (see Appendix)

In the next lecture we shall consider the Reformation in Britain and the subsequent development of Christianity in the British Isles and Ireland over the following 500 years. This is a story of the emergence and transformation of Anglicanism together with those dissenting Christians and churches for whom the British Reformation did not go far enough.

***Appendix: Christian Adherence in America Today**

Largest 25 Denominations/Communities from the 2012 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.

Total church membership reported in the 2012 Yearbook is 145,691,446 members, down 1.15 percent over 2011.

1. The Catholic Church 68,202,492, [ranked 1 in 2011] , down 0.44 percent.
2. Southern Baptist Convention 16,136,044, [ranked 2 in 2011] , down 0.15 percent.
3. The United Methodist Church 7,679,850, [ranked 3 in 2011] , down 1.22 percent.
4. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 6,157,238, [ranked 4 in 2011] , up 1.62 percent.
5. The Church of God in Christ 5,499,875, [ranked 5 in 2011] , no update reported.
6. National Baptist Convention , U.S.A. , Inc. 5,197,512, [ranked 6 in 2011] , up 3.95 percent.
7. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 4,274,855, [ranked 7 in 2011] , down 5.90 percent.
8. National Baptist Convention of America , Inc. 3,500,000, [ranked 8 in 2011] , no update reported.
9. Assemblies of God 3,030,944, [ranked 9 in 2011] , up 3.99 percent.
10. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2,675,873, [ranked 10 in 2011] , down 3.42 percent.
11. African Methodist Episcopal Church 2,500,000, [ranked 11 in 2011] , no update reported.
12. National Missionary Baptist Convention of America 2,500,000, [ranked 11 in 2011] , no update reported.

13. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod (LCMS) 2,278,586, [ranked 13 in 2011] , down 1.45 percent.
 14. The Episcopal Church 1,951,907, [ranked 14 in 2011] , down 2.71 percent.
 15. Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Inc. 1,800,000, ranked 15 [ranked 17 in 2011] , up 20 percent.
 16. Churches of Christ 1,639,495, [ranked 15 in 2011] , no update reported.
 17. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America 1,500,000 , [ranked 16 in 2011] , no update reported.
 18. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church 1,400,000, [ranked 18 in 2011] , no update reported.
 19. American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. 1,308,054, [ranked 19 in 2011] , down 0.19 percent.
 20. Jehovah's Witnesses 1,184,249, [ranked 20 in 2011] , up 1.85 percent.
 21. Church of God (Cleveland , Tennessee) 1,074,047, [ranked 22 in 2011] , down 0.21 percent.
 22. Christian Churches and Churches of Christ 1,071,616, [ranked 23 in 2011] , no update reported.
 23. Seventh-day Adventist Church 1,060,386, [ranked 24 in 2011] , up 1.61 percent.
 24. United Church of Christ 1,058,423, [ranked 21 in 2011], down 2.02 percent.
 25. Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. 1,010,000, [ranked 25 in 2011] , no update reported.
- Total membership in top 25 churches: 145,691,446, down 1.15 percent.

Membership figures reported in the 2012 Yearbook were collected by the churches in 2010 and reported to the Yearbook in 2011.

Nine of the 25 largest churches did not report updated figures: the Church of God in Christ; the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.; the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America; Churches of Christ; the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.; the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; and Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.

The 2012 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches reports on 228 national church bodies. The Yearbook also includes a directory of 235 U.S. local and regional ecumenical bodies with program and contact information and provides listings of theological seminaries and bible schools, religious periodicals and guides to religious research including church archive listings.

For more information, or to purchase a copy of the 2012 Yearbook, see www.yearbookofchurches.org