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## STUDYING THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM THROUGH JONATHAN EDWARDS: VERSIONS OF "AMERICA'S THEOLOGIAN" AT MID-CENTURY

In Germany, and presumably in other areas of Continental Europe as well, interest in Jonathan Edwards has been largely confined to academia.<sup>1</sup> Although considerably smaller, Germany also has its subculture of evangelical Protestantism (often still associated with the traditional term Pietism) with its own ministries, seminaries, and publishing industry. So far, however, few have shared American evangelicals' fascination with Edwards as a theological and devotional author.<sup>2</sup> At

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a modified and annotated version of a 2011 lecture held in Heidelberg, Germany, and Wrocław, Poland.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards did receive more attention from German-speaking Pietists in the eighteenth and nineteenth century than has been hitherto assumed. For new insights, see my "Halle Pietism and its Perception of the American Great Awakening: The Example of Johann Adam Steinmetz," in *Awakened Christians in the Atlantic World: Proceedings of an International Symposium on the Occasion of Henry Melchior Mühlberg's 300<sup>th</sup> Birthday in 1711 at the Franckesche Stiftungen, Halle*, eds. A. Gregg Roeber, Thomas Müller-Bahlke, and Hermann Wellenreuther (Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen), 213-46. However, neither the "Edwards Renaissance" after World War II in the U.S. nor the current wave of enthusiasm for the colonial theologian among American evangelicals have carried over into Germany, although some new interest in Edwards as a devotional author is detectable. For instance, Edwards' biography of David Brainerd, repeatedly printed in German translations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has just come out in a new edition, along with new German translations of *Religious Affections* as well as a selection of Edwards' evangelical writings. Also, Iain H. Murray's pious biography was recently translated into German. See Jonathan Edwards, *Das Leben des David Brainerd: Tagebuch*

the same time, the German academic interest in Edwards is highly compartmentalized. For the most part Edwards is studied in the context of American literature programs for his contributions to various intellectual and rhetorical traditions.<sup>3</sup> German theologians and church historians who are at all familiar with Edwards know him only as a revivalist and author of *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* and *Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God*. In other words, they primarily perceive Edwards as an early eighteenth-century Calvinist preacher of the new birth, whose significance lies in the role he played in the awakenings that swept the British colonies in America during the 1730s and 1740s.<sup>4</sup> Edwards hardly figures at all in the fields of systematic or historical theology. Only recently some attention has been given to his *theologia experimentalis* for its unique blend of Enlightenment ideas and Pietist tendencies and for the lines of continuity connecting it with later affection-centered approaches to religion by figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher.<sup>5</sup> But this is where the appreciation of Edwards in German departments of theology usually ends. Most German theologians would be much surprised to learn that on the other side of the Atlantic Edwards is widely regarded as one of the country's greatest philosophers and almost universally acknowledged as "America's theologian."

eines Indianermissionars (Waldelms: 3l Verlag, 2011); Jonathan Edwards, *Sind religiöse Gefühle zuverlässige Anzeichen für wahren Glauben?* (Waldelms: 3l Verlag, 2012); Jonathan Edwards, *Aus Edwards Schatzkammer* (Hamburg: C.M. Fliss Verlag, 2008); Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: Ein Lehrer der Gnade und die große Erweckung* (Bielefeld: CIV, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the interpretations of Edwards in Ursula Brumm, *Die religiöse Typologie in amerikanischen Denken: Ihre Bedeutung für die amerikanische Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte* (Leiden: Brill, 1963); Winfried Herget, "A Culture of the Word: Puritanism and the Construction of Identity in Colonial New England," *(Trans-)Formations of Cultural Identity in Colonial New England*" eds. Jochen Achilles and Carmen Birkle (Heidelberg: Winter, 1998), 15-25; Frank Kelleter, *Amerikanische Aufklärung: Sprachen der Rationalität im Zeitalter der Revolution* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Edwards the revivalist is briefly mentioned in many German textbook accounts or encyclopedia articles dealing with the age of revivalism or American church history. He has received somewhat more substantial, if still tangential, treatments in, among others, Peter Kawerau, *Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1958); Peter Kawerau, Martin Begrich, Manfred Jacobs, *Amerika* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963); Erich Beyreuther, *Die Erweckungsbewegung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977); Ulrich Gäbler, *Auferstehungszeit: Erweckungsprediger des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: Beck, 1991) and "Die Anfänge der Erweckungsbewegung in Neu-England und Jonathan Edwards 1734/1735," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 34 (1978), 95-104; Michael Hochgeschwender, *Amerikanische Religion: Evangelikalismus, Pfingstertum und Fundamentalismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2007); Andreas Urs Sommer, "Weltgeschichte und Heilslogik: Jonathan Edwards' History of the Work of Redemption," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 53 (2001), 115-144. The best recent summary accounts in German are offered in A. Gregg Roeber's chapter "Der Pietismus in Nordamerika im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Geschichte des Pietismus: Der Pietismus im 18. Jahrhundert*, eds. Martin Brecht and Klaus Deppermann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 668-699, and in Mark Noll's *History of Christianity in North America*, translated into German as *Das Christentum in Nordamerika* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Caroline Schröder, *Glaubenswahrnehmung und Selbsterkenntnis: Jonathan Edwards theologia experimentalis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997); and Thorsten Dietz's current book project, *Religiöse Gefühle: Religion und Emotion bei Jonathan Edwards und Friedrich Schleiermacher*.

Advocating for Edwards as a source for systematic or historical theology in Germany is a task I will leave to others more qualified in this regard. This essay seeks to make a case for Edwards' great potential as an interpretative lens for studying the diverse traditions and trajectories of American Protestantism in their larger cultural contexts. While the interest in American religious history and especially evangelicalism is growing, German scholars working in this area have mostly overlooked this potential of Edwards both for research and for the classroom. To students of the colonial period, Edwards' life and work offer a fascinating window into a crucial moment in the evolution of American Reformed Protestantism when Puritanism transitioned into modern evangelicalism.<sup>6</sup> It provides unique opportunities to examine, among many other things, the transatlantic dynamics of colonial revivalism and the birth of the modern missionary movement in America. However, the national and international reception histories of Edwards arguably offer even richer possibilities.<sup>7</sup> Already shortly after his death, Edwards' influence became such that the development of American Reformed theology into the second half of the nineteenth century, as it branched out into new competing schools (such as the New Divinity school, the Old Calvinists, or the New Haven Theology), can be fruitfully examined as struggles over

<sup>6</sup> The literature on colonial revivalism and the development of American evangelicalism is vast. Good recent treatments of Edwards in this context (with further literature) include Patricia Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980); Michael Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in its British Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); as well as the relevant chapters in two new excellent biographies: Philip Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005) and George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). For the transatlantic context, see the two studies by W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott's recent *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) has an extensive chapter on "Legacies and Affinities: Edwards's Disciples and Interpreters" that offers an in-depth examination of the appropriations of Edwards in the history of American theology. The most comprehensive survey of Edwards's American reception between 1750 and 1900 is provided by Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). A very helpful short overview from the colonial period to the present is M.X. Lesser, "Edwards in 'American Culture,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 280-299. D.W. Bebbington offers an introductory sketch to his international reception history in "The Reputation of Edwards Abroad," in the same volume, 239-261. See also the collection by Barbara B. Oberg and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards, and the Representations of American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and the volume by David William Kling and Douglas A. Sweeney, eds., *Jonathan Edwards At Home and Abroad: Historical Memories, Cultural Movements, Global Horizons* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), in particular the essays in Part Two, "Edwards and American Culture," and Part Three, "Edwards Around the World."

the Edwardsean legacy, its authority, and appropriate interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, to follow the changing views on Edwards after the Civil War presents rich insights into the rise of theological liberalism and secular modernism in the United States.

While the ascendancy of liberalism and modernism made Edwards' theology more contested than ever and temporarily diminished his standing, by no means did it bring to an end his influence. As today's widespread usage of the honorary title "America's theologian" suggests, he is now indeed a very powerful presence in the religious and theological landscape of the United States. Edwards' voice resonates strongly in American history and literature departments, but even more so in theology departments and Protestant seminaries across the country. For decades the numbers of dissertations, books, and articles on Edwards have been steadily increasing, especially in the various areas of theology.<sup>9</sup> The enthusiasm for Edwards, however, is by no means a purely academic phenomenon in America. Especially in evangelical circles, he is widely promoted and read as a devotional author, and serves a cultural and religious hero for many pastors and laypeople.<sup>10</sup> The cover of the September 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*, the most important organ of American mainstream evangelicalism, featured a T-shirt emblazoned with the words: "Jonathan Edwards Is My Homeboy." As Mark Noll remarks, "In the breadth of his learning, piety, and intellectual rigor, Edwards is more comprehensively alive today than ever in his own lifetime or since."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England between the Great Awakenings* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1981); Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); D.G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols, eds., *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Douglas S. Sweeney and Allen C. Guelzo, eds., *The New England Theology, 1734-1852: America's First Indigenous Theological Tradition, From Jonathan Edwards and the New Divinity to Edwards Amasa Parks* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney, eds., *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of New England Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> On the developments in Edwards scholarship, see Kenneth P. Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004), 659-87 and Kenneth P. Minkema and Harry S. Stout, "Jonathan Edwards Studies: The State of the Field," in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary: Essays in Honor of Sang Huyn Lee*, ed. Don Schweitzer (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 239-59; Sean Michael Lucas, "Jonathan Edwards Between Church and Academy: A Bibliographical Essay," in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition*, eds. D.G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 228-48. To cite just one numerical indicator from these studies, since World War II the number of dissertations on Edwards completed during each decade has grown rapidly from 20 in the 1950s to 76 in the years 2001-2010. For approximately the last 20 years, the largest growth in numbers has been in constructive theology and the study of church growth. The most comprehensive bibliography of Edwards scholarship is M.X. Lesser, *Reading Jonathan Edwards: An Annotated Bibliography in Three Parts, 1729-2005* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, "Evangelical Tradition in America," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 217-38.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Noll, "Edwards's Theology after Edwards," in Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *The Princeton Companion*

The now truly gigantic stature of this eighteenth-century clergyman, particularly in conservative areas of Protestant theology, must be understood as the result of what is called the “Edwards Renaissance.” This ongoing recovery and reinvigoration of the Edwardsean legacy in different strands of American Protestantism had its tentative beginnings in the 1930s and took off after World War II with the launching of the Yale Edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* in 1957. It reached new heights at the turn of the millennium with the tercentenary of Edwards’ birth in 2003.<sup>12</sup> In this essay I wish to revisit the beginnings of the Edwards Renaissance between the 1930s and 1950s and demonstrate how much we can learn about these important decades in the religious and cultural history of the U.S. by scrutinizing the birth of today’s iconic Edwards and the different facets of this icon. By offering such an exemplary case study, I hope to contribute to a new awareness among German and European scholars of how fruitful Edwards Studies can be also for those who are neither colonialists nor wish to revive Edwardsean theology for the present but rather to study and teach the religious dimension of the American story from the national period to the present.

Focusing on the formative years of the Edwards Renaissance shortly before and after World War II, when the basic patterns of Edwards’ current reception were established, I will pursue the following questions: Why did Edwards rise to such popularity? What were the developments in American religious and cultural history that, first of all, created the need to construct an iconic American theologian and that made Edwards such an attractive figure for many? Secondly, I want to take a closer look at the contested religious reception and often conflicting theological interpretations of Edwards. In elevating Edwards to the status of America’s theologian, what normative conceptions both of “true Christianity” and of Americanness were ascribed to Edwards by the different interpretative communities involved in the Edwards Renaissance? For reasons of space, I will have to restrict myself to explicitly religious or theological interpretations of Edwards during the period and will not be able to cover the equally fascinating trends that emerged in the fields of historical or literary scholarship on Edwards at the same time.<sup>13</sup> In the world of mid-century Protestantism, I will distinguish three major interpretative communities that were essential in the theological recovery of Edwards: First, I will discuss neoorthodoxy, as the most prominent intellectual school in

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to *Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 292-308, 306.

<sup>12</sup> See Donald Weber, “The Figure of Jonathan Edwards,” *American Quarterly* 35 (1983), 556-64, and “The Recovery of Jonathan Edwards,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 50-70.

<sup>13</sup> On Edwards and the American Studies movement from Perry Miller to Emory Elliott, see Philip F. Gura, “Edwards and American Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 262-279.

American mainline Protestantism at the time. The essay will then turn to the popular mainstream of the modern evangelical movement (sometimes referred to as neoevangelicalism) that emerged in the postwar era, as epitomized by the great revivalist Billy Graham. Finally, I will look at a branch of modern evangelicalism that, in contrast to the mainstream, is deeply invested in preserving the confessional heritage of the Reformed churches in America and can therefore maybe best described as “neoconfessional.”

What, in brief, was the historical and theological context in which the Edwards Renaissance took place? Until the Civil War, American Protestantism had been overwhelmingly evangelical in orientation, and virtually all of the most influential American schools of Reformed theology during the antebellum period, in one way or the other, drew on the legacy of Edwards’ teachings. But in the last third of the nineteenth century the movement of theological liberalism and modernism, which had first found programmatic expression and organizational shape in Boston-centered Unitarianism, was growing increasingly powerful and popular, not just in colleges and seminaries but also in the ecclesiastical institutions and pulpits of major Protestant denominations across the country.<sup>14</sup> It has been estimated that around the time the fundamentalist-modernist controversies tore through many Protestant churches in the 1920s, a liberal outlook “had become accepted and respectable in more than a third of the pulpits of American Protestantism and in at least half the educational, journalistic, and literary or theological expressions of Protestant church life.”<sup>15</sup> Among the cultural and academic elite and in academic discourse in particular, there was widespread endorsement of the cluster of liberal ideas and ideals that William R. Hutchinson has defined as the heart of theological modernism: Central among these was the belief in a benevolent God, approachable through humanity’s rational and moral faculties. This God was not radically transcendent but immanent in man’s nature, and progressively revealed himself through the development of human culture toward ever-higher stages of enlightenment and moral self-perfection. Out of immanentism grew the notions of cultural evolutionism and accommodationism, according to which Christianity, like all religions, was inevitably tied into the larger historical evolution of human culture. To keep Christianity relevant for a new age, its theological legacy had to be consciously adjusted to modernity, embrace modern expansions in scientific and historical knowledge, and be made compatible

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<sup>14</sup> The best overview of the rise and development of liberal Protestant theology in the U.S. is offered by Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 3.

with enlightened views of a loving God and of man as a moral, self-determined being. American Puritanism seemed to contain little that could or should be incorporated into such a self-consciously modern, progressive Christianity. And thus Edwards' star, along with that of most other representatives of early American religious history, sunk dramatically between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1930s.

It was not that Edwards would have been forgotten or neglected.<sup>16</sup> His status as a figure of great historical significance seemed largely secure even at this point. However, most liberal theologians who wrote on Edwards during this period argued that in terms of religious orientation America needed to leave him and his outmoded form of Calvinism behind because it was denigrating to both God's and man's true characters. Even more aggressive attacks came from progressive historians such as Vernon Louis Parrington and Henry Bamford Parkes, who denounced Edwards as a hopeless and embarrassing anachronism in modern American thought. Other liberal theologians were inclined to think that Edwards had his merits as an unwitting originator of later developments. If one only stripped away the time-bound dogmatic superstructure from his writings, the underlying essential beauty of Edwards' mystical vision of God was exposed, which in many ways anticipated the Romantic panentheism of a Schleiermacher or Emerson. These gracious acknowledgments notwithstanding, even sympathetic liberal theologians had little real use for Edwards and, for the most part, gladly handed him over to the church history and literature departments, where the American Studies movement was beginning to form.

This was the situation when a countermovement to liberalism arose in academic theology that generated a very different interpretation of Edwards. In many ways akin to, and strongly influenced by "crisis theology" or "dialectical theology" in Continental Europe, this movement came to be known by the (somewhat misleading) term "neoorthodoxy." Among the main representatives of this diverse and far-flung movement were the brothers Reinhold (1892-1971) and Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), second-generation immigrants from Germany who grew up in Missouri, and the German *émigré* from Nazi Germany Paul Tillich (1886-1965).<sup>17</sup> Although deeply disillusioned with theological modernism, neo-

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<sup>16</sup> This section is strongly indebted to Stephen D. Crocco, "Edwards's Intellectual Legacy," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 300-24. Crocco offers the best account so far of the intellectual contexts in which the Edwards Renaissance occurred and the reader is referred to this study for more bibliographic details.

<sup>17</sup> On neoorthodoxy and the Niebuhr brothers in particular, see Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986); James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Lanham: University Press of

orthodoxy did not reject the Enlightenment heritage, or deny the findings of modern science and historical-critical method, but rather sought to recover for modernity the existential truths of the biblical revelation and the Protestant tradition. For this project, neoorthodox theologians drew on many Old World sources: the Fathers, the great leaders of the Reformation, Søren Kierkegaard and, of course, Karl Barth. But several of them also rediscovered Edwards as an—or *the*—American theologian, who deserved to be heard not because he in some oblique way was as an unwitting predecessor of Romantic idealism, but because he offered a powerful alternative vision of what neoorthodoxy liked to call “Christian Realism.” Besides serving as an inspiration, Edwards was also of great importance to these thinkers in the sense that he provided them with a native genealogy for their own theology in a cultural situation where European, especially German theology, was seen as obscurantist and dangerously “foreign” by the wider American public.

The pioneering figure in the recovery of Edwards for the purposes of “Christian Realism” was in fact Joseph Haroutunian (1904-1968), an American Presbyterian clergyman and theologian with Armenian roots. In his dissertation, published as *Piety vs. Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (1932), Haroutunian made a passionate plea for a new appreciation of Edwards and Puritanism as a profound alternative to the immanentism and accommodationism of modernist theology. The most profound and influential neoorthodox reading of Edwards, however, was undertaken a few years later by H. Richard Niebuhr in his *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). Using Edwards as a central reference point and normative touchstone, in this early work Niebuhr outlined the main themes of a theology that he would later develop more fully in his other major books, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), *Christ and Culture* (1951), and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960).<sup>18</sup> *The Kingdom of God in America* was basically intended as an exploration of “the meaning and spirit of American Christianity” from an explicitly theological perspective that was concerned with normative reorientation rather than sociohistorical explanations. For Niebuhr, the essence of American culture had been molded by Protestantism and American Protestantism, understood as a broad-based movement rather than a specific denomination and had its center in “the prophetic idea of the kingdom of God.”<sup>19</sup> But over the course of America’s

America, 1985); Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995); Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of “Neoorthodoxy”* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

<sup>18</sup> See Leo Sandon, Jr., “Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr,” *Religious Studies* 12.1 (1976), 101-115.

<sup>19</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America, with a New Introduction by Martin E. Marty*



history, different aspects of that central idea of God's kingdom had been emphasized as American Protestantism moved through various "hot" stages of revolutionary fervor and "cold" stages of institutional petrification and accommodation to the larger culture. In colonial New England Puritanism, Niebuhr argued, the "kingdom of God" had primarily meant the "sovereignty of God." For the revivalists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the kingdom first and foremost had been the advancing "reign of Christ" to be joined by those who opened their hearts to Him, while for the kind of liberalism that became prevalent after the Civil War it primarily had come to signify a "kingdom on earth." To Niebuhr's mind, however, Christianity was originally based on a dialectical understanding of God's relation to man and human culture through Christ in which all three aspects of the kingdom vitally belonged together. When they were separated or seen in isolation, as had happened in the various historical phases of American Protestantism, different distortions, errors and malformations resulted. From these insights Niebuhr would later develop in *Christ and Culture* his famous typology of different ways in which Christianity related to culture over the course of its history. At the time, he was most concerned with pointing out the faults and dangers inherent in the view of God's kingdom as a progressive earthly utopia which had become so widely accepted under the reigning liberal establishment in America.

With its mistaken understanding of God's progressive self-realization in history, Niebuhr claimed, American liberalism had lost sight of humanity's sinfulness or alienation from God, and thus of man's need for reconciliation. As a consequence, liberalism had falsely detached the central idea of gospel Christianity and Protestantism, the prophetic vision of God's kingdom, "from the ideas of sovereignty and redemption." "Since no reconciliation to the divine sovereign was necessary the reign of Christ," the liberal interpretation thus

involved no revolutionary events in history or the life of individuals. Christ the Redeemer became Jesus the teacher or the spiritual genius in whom the religious capacities of mankind were fully developed. . . . Evolution, growth, development, the culture of the religious life, the nurture of the kindly sentiments, the extension of humanitarian ideals and the progress of civilization took the place of the Christian revolution.

In essence, as Niebuhr put it in a now-famous aphoristic phrase, liberalism

preached about how “[a] God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>20</sup> In the context of this scathing critique of liberalism’s naïve anthropocentric optimism, for Niebuhr Jonathan Edwards served both as a historical source of polemical criticism and as a positive countermodel of a truly theocentric thinker, yet one who had simultaneously emphasized the dynamic and culture-transforming power of Christianity.

In what was surely a gesture of calculated provocation, Niebuhr even paid tribute to *Sinners in the Hand of Angry God*, Edwards infamous sermon that was so “often pointed to as the example of the offensive character of his [Calvinist] theology, or as something to be apologized for or ‘gotten over’ before he could be appreciated.”<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Niebuhr wanted Edwards’ hellfire preaching to be taken as an expression of his anthropological realism, his “intense awareness of the precariousness of life’s poise, of the utter insecurity of men and of mankind which are at every moment as ready to plunge into the abyss of disintegration, barbarism, crime and the war of all against all, as to advance toward harmony and integration.” Edwards, in Niebuhr’s view, “recognized what Kierkegaard meant when he described life as treading water with ten thousand fathoms beneath us.”<sup>22</sup> The colonial minister thus anticipated the tragic vision of life and disillusionment with Enlightenment dreams of progress that the neoorthodox theologians saw as the essential characteristics of the *conditio moderna*. In Niebuhr’s existentialist reading the deeper truth behind Edwards’ Calvinist diatribe about man’s totally depravity and his literalist vision of hell, was a profound sense of humanity’s need for redemption and its inability to save itself from itself.

In opposition to the modernists, who naïvely maintained that evil was the product of error or ignorance, Edwards knew that human nature was fundamentally flawed or sinful in a way that could never be wholly overcome by education, reflection, or human action. Because of his profound understanding of man’s sinful nature in terms of a binding of the will by its concerns for the self and the temporal world to which the self is related through its desires, hopes, and fears, he recognized “that the problem of human life was not the discovery of an adequate ideal nor the generation of will power whereby ideals might be realized, but rather the redirection of the will to live and the liberation of the drive in human

<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 152, 192, 193.

<sup>21</sup> Crocco, “Edwards’s Intellectual Legacy,” 302. On the reception history of *Sinners*, see *Jonathan Edwards’s Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God: A Casebook*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, Caleb J.D. Maskell, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 137-38.

life from the inhibition of fear, conflict and the sense of futility."<sup>23</sup> More importantly, Edwards vigorously insisted on the fundamental Christian truth to which, in Niebuhr's view, liberal theology had become oblivious: that this redirection of the will cannot be achieved by man's own strength. Especially in Edwards' theological masterwork *Freedom of the Will*, Niebuhr found a reinterpretation of the Reformed teachings on the bondage of the will through sin that he praised for its philosophical depth and psychological sophistication. Whereas liberalism dreamed of man's progressive deification through self-culture, Edwards understood that the turning of the will to the good, the shift from our natural self-centeredness to a life centered in the "Being of beings," the shift from the practical polytheism in which men worship the transitory gods of self and world, to a genuine monotheism, could only occur by an existential revolution set into motion by the grace of a transcendent God alone.<sup>24</sup>

According to Niebuhr, by demonstrating the necessity of divine initiative in bringing about the Christian revolution in the life of an individual human, and also in the historical world at large, Edwards had preserved the original Protestant idea of the kingdom of God as sovereignty. He had done so even as he developed an increasingly dynamic vision of how this kingdom expanded through religious revivals in which great numbers of people would open to Christ's redeeming love. Ultimately, however, "[o]nly the action of God himself is sufficient to effect the transfer, and so the divine sovereignty stands at the gate of the kingdom of Christ. Unless it opens the portals they remain closed and closed the tighter because man presses against them in the wrong direction."<sup>25</sup> For Niebuhr, Edwards and some of the other early evangelicals embodied an almost perfect theological equilibrium between an acute sense of God's absolute transcendence, on the one hand, and a hopeful belief in his gracious presence in history on the other; between a humble recognition of man's flawed nature and an experiential faith in the regenerative love of Christ. In Niebuhr's words, they

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>24</sup> Anticipating some of the basic ideas that he would later pursue in *Radical Monotheism*, Niebuhr continues his exegesis of *Freedom of the Will*: "The human will is always committed to something and that so long as it is not committed to the universal good it is attached to the relative. The will, said Edwards, is as its strongest motive is. 'In all such offerings, something is virtually worshipped, and whatever it is, be it self, or our fellow men, or the world, that is allowed to usurp the place that should be given to God, and to receive the offerings that should be made to him.' Life never begins in a vacuum of freedom, but awakes to its tacit commitments. It is always loyal to something and its problem is how to transfer its loyalty from the ephemeral, the partial, and the relative, which by assuming absoluteness becomes devilish, to the eternal, universal and truly absolute." Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 103.

presupposed or reaffirmed the rule of God as the basis of all they believed about the kingdom of Christ. [And] Jonathan Edwards, the greatest theologian of the movement, comes to mind at once as one in whom faith in regeneration was solidly founded upon a supreme conviction of the reality of divine sovereignty. It would be difficult to find in all religious literature a more moving confession of loyalty to the kingdom of God than the one in his *Personal Narrative*, or to discover more illuminating statements of the principle than those which abound in his writings.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, the implicit message of Niebuhr's argument was that this balance needed to be restored in American Protestantism and that the Edwardsean legacy could be instrumental in achieving this. But he was not at all interested in reestablishing Edwards' theology as a historical system. As we saw, he rather engaged in a fairly free-wheeling existential appropriation of Edwards' teachings. He was not only unconcerned with the particulars of his Calvinist scholasticism; Niebuhr also did not share Edwards' orthodox scripturalism. Accordingly, Niebuhr spoke of the enduring theological truths embedded in "the mythology of Edwards" when he gave a celebratory address on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of Edwards' death in 1958.<sup>27</sup>

Niebuhr's approach to Edwards illustrates some of the basic tensions that characterize the neoorthodox project more generally. While Niebuhr and his fellow travelers wished to preserve and revitalize the core insights of Reformation and post-Reformation theology, they did not believe that it was desirable or even possible to maintain as a whole the dogmatic systems of Luther, Calvin, or Edwards for that matter, under the conditions of modernity. Indeed, Niebuhr, as much as Tillich, distanced himself from "an atavistic Protestantism [that] shuns the ardors of adventure with the social gospel, flees the problems which historical and psychological criticism have posed for faith and out of dream stuff reconstructs a lost Atlantis of early Protestant thought."<sup>28</sup> But it turned out that most Americans were not ready to, or found little sustenance, in embracing such a stance; rather, they felt increasingly attracted by the certainties promised to them by the new varieties of evangelicalism that made their appearance after World War II. While neoorthodoxy continued to be a significant presence in some circles of American academia,

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards," in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 123-34, 131.

<sup>28</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, intr. Douglas F. Ottati (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3.

its popular influence, which had always been rather limited, dramatically waned after the mid-1960s. What had happened?<sup>29</sup>

During the heyday of liberalism in the early twentieth century the community of conservative evangelicals had, in large parts, withdrawn into itself, and formed an increasingly closed-off, religious subculture often referred to as Fundamentalism. Deeply suspicious of liberal theology, the natural sciences, and the culture of modernity as a whole, this community kept its distance, as much as possible, from the perceived corruptions of “outside” society and its churches. But in the 1930s there emerged a group of evangelical theologians and church leaders, including figures such as Harold John Ockenga (1905-1985), Edward John Carnell (1919-1967), and Carl F.H. Henry (1913-2003), who sought to overcome the rigid sectarianism and anti-intellectualism of their community, and who wanted to reengage American society and politics in a constructive fashion. Through the efforts of these men, American evangelicalism during the 1940s and 1950s redefined itself as a faith for the American mainstream, and quickly gained new strength, not least through the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (1942) and the Evangelical Theological Society (1949).

Although bound together by a desire to leave the Fundamentalist ghetto, this rejuvenated evangelicalism, which increasingly challenged and then overturned the liberal ascendancy in the postwar period, was theologically quite diverse. Nevertheless, an enthusiasm for Jonathan Edwards as the founding father of American evangelicalism was shared almost across-the-board. As they had done in the first half of the nineteenth century, evangelicals since World War II have “championed Edwards more wholeheartedly—less hesitantly, and often much less critically—than has any other group.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, while neoorthodoxy set the Edwards Renaissance into motion, it was only with the triumphant return of evangelicalism to the mainstream of American culture that the Edwards Renaissance gathered the broad momentum that carries into the present. The evangelical constructions of Edwards, of course, differed widely from the neoorthodox vision of America’s theologian. For many evangelical theologians and preachers, Edwards, in the words of Niebuhr, constituted such “dream stuff” out of which they hoped to reconstruct

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<sup>29</sup> The study of modern American evangelicalism has produced a veritable scholarly industry. Important general works include Randall H. Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991); Barry Hankins, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of a Mainstream Religious Movement* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, “Evangelical Tradition in America,” in *The Cambridge Companion*, 217-38, 217.

“a lost Atlantis of early Protestant thought,” even as they inevitably adopted his thought to fit the need of the present and their own agendas.<sup>31</sup>

For all the consensual passion for Edwards as the iconic embodiment of good and pure “old-time religion,” twentieth-century evangelicals were quite divided from the beginning over how much loyalty was due to the fine points of Edwards’ Calvinist theology, especially when it came to such contested doctrines as double predestination. The main force behind the spectacular comeback of evangelicalism was a popular urban revivalism that deemphasized dogma in the service of mass conversionism, and in many ways was deeply at odds with Edwardsean sensibilities. This popular revivalism, more than anything, is today associated with the term neoevangelicalism, and its most important representative is, of course, Billy Graham (b. 1918).<sup>32</sup> No one was more successful in evangelizing America’s growing white-collar middle-class and in making evangelicalism culturally respectable in large segments of the population than this Southern Baptist preacher. Graham fully committed himself to his evangelistic work immediately after the war, and 1949 in many ways was the *annus mirabilis* of his career that marked his breakthrough to popular success. In the summer and fall of that year, he conducted the first of his great urban crusades in Los Angeles, in which he spoke to an estimated total audience of 350,000 people, and according to the *Los Angeles Times* made 3,000 new converts, bringing another 3,000 more “back to Christ.” Towards the end of the L.A. Crusade, Graham did something quite remarkable and without precedent in his career: he preached another man’s sermon, and significantly he chose Jonathan Edwards’ famous homily *Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God*. A closer look at this unusual performance will not only reveal Graham’s own rather equivocal use of Edwards’ theological authority but will call attention to what I regard as a deep-seated ambiguity in the neoevangelical relation to its great Puritan forebear.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Neorthodox intellectuals were generally highly skeptical of the new evangelicalism, which to them was basically an atavistic Protestantism that had accommodated itself to consumer capitalism, and the new lifestyle and psychological demands of a growing suburban, white-collar middle class, from which it recruited the majority of its converts. Conversely, evangelicals saw in neo-orthodoxy “but a confusing form of modernism,” especially dangerous because it claimed to defend the Protestant tradition, but had cut itself loose from literalism and “a propositional view of biblical revelation.” Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972). 944.

<sup>32</sup> On Graham, see William C. Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); William C. McLoughlin, Jr., *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press, 1960); John Charles Pollock, *Billy Graham, Evangelist to the World: An Authorized Biography of the Decisive Years* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) and *To All Nations: The Billy Graham Story* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> This section of the essay owes much to Andrew Finstuen’s online essay “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ Reprised: Billy Graham and the Los Angeles Crusade of 1949,” featured on The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University Web site. <http://edwards.yale.edu/education/billy-gra->

Graham's preaching of Edwards should be read as a highly symbolic gesture, even if Graham, at the time, was only partly conscious of this symbolism.<sup>34</sup> It is a gesture that reveals as much about Graham's theology and aspirations as a revivalist as it does about Jonathan Edwards' status in evangelical culture. It is also a gesture that at the very beginning of the postwar revivals anticipates how this movement would embrace Edwards as its founding father and *spiritus rector*. In the neoorthodox reading of a Richard Niebuhr, Edwards was a prophetic figure from the past without any legitimate heirs amongst modern revivalists. In performing Edwards to more than 6,000 people in his overcrowded "Canvas Cathedral," Billy Graham, in defiance of such views, assumed for himself the mantle of the American Elijah. At the same time, Graham's actual approach to Edwards' text was informed by a spirit of pragmatism rather than a spirit of reverent faithfulness to the original. For one thing, he only preached about half of Edwards' sermon, which he obviously thought too long for modern attention spans. Moreover, he substantially edited the text and revised the diction in order to make it more accessible. Finally, he added a lengthy, contextualizing introduction and several impromptu asides (for instance, on the sinful pleasures of the Sunset Strip and the gambling dens) that related Edward's strictures to modern life in urban Los Angeles.<sup>35</sup>

In the extemporaneous introduction to the actual sermon Graham created a general sense of historical continuity between the Great Awakening of Edwards' time and his current evangelical mission: He evoked the year 1740 when "revival fires were spreading very much as they are at present time in America." Then he beseeched God that the "Holy Ghost" would "move again tonight in 1949 and shake us out of our lethargy as Christians and convict sinners that we might come to repentance." More specifically, Graham constructed for himself and the new evangelical movement a genealogy, and through it, an image of intellectual respectability: "Jonathan Edwards," he (mistakenly) told his audience, "had his Ph.D. from Yale University. He was later to become the eminent President of Princeton University. Jonathan Edwards was one of the greatest scholars that America ever produced, one of the greatest preachers . . . , a man we look back on

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ham. See also Andrew Finstuen, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 127-28.

<sup>34</sup> Finstuen, has pointed out that there were pragmatic reasons for Graham's decision as well: after 72 days of crusading, in which he had preached 65 sermons, he had exhausted himself. But there is certainly more to it, for if pragmatism had been the key factor there would have been easier choices than a two-hundred-year-old sermon written in an antiquated language.

<sup>35</sup> A full transcript of Graham's rendition of Edwards' sermon is available at: <http://edwards.yale.edu/education/billy-graham>. It is based on an audio file at the Billy Graham archives, Wheaton, Ill. ©1949 Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

today and revere, and pray God might raise up again such men on the American scene, that will not compromise, but will preach the word of God seriously, like Jonathan Edwards . . ." Implicitly, of course, Graham here expressed the hope that he might be one of these new American prophets.

Throughout the sermon Graham repeatedly interspersed comments such as "this [is] the past President of Princeton University speaking," especially when he reached the parts where Edwards speaks about the factual reality of hell and eternal damnation:

Unconverted Men walk over the Pit of Hell on a rotten Covering, and there are innumerable Places in this Covering so weak that they won't bear the Weight, and these places are not seen. Walking in this tent, down that sidewalk, out on the street, every step you take, on every rock and cover, and underneath, is so weak that any step you might fall through and be into eternity, so says Jonathan Edwards, the President of Princeton University.

While this insistence on Edwards' intellectual credentials constituted in part a way to assert the credibility of his message to modern ears, it was also a strategy of self-authorization in a situation in which Yale and Princeton were in the hands of mainline Protestant intellectuals who tended to reject literalist interpretations of hell and damnation and looked down on the atavism of the evangelical community that still upheld them.<sup>36</sup>

Theologically speaking, the Edwards to which Graham laid claim was not only quite different from the neoorthodox Edwards, but he was also quite different from the orthodox Edwards, that is to say from Edwards' own understanding of himself as an orthodox Reformed theologian. Especially in some of his later writings Graham would claim that he wholeheartedly supported the traditional Reformed emphases on God's free and sovereign grace. But his actual evangelizing techniques and his preaching style, all aiming to produce mass conversion through a spontaneous decision for Christ, at least stand in tension with these emphases. This is also evinced by his rendition of *Sinners*, which becomes apparent if one looks carefully at the many revisions which Graham made to the original

<sup>36</sup> The invocation of the authority of Edwards in the context of the L.A. crusade also had other political overtones, of course. Significantly, the motto of the revival crusade was "Christ for the Crisis," by which Graham not only meant the crisis in the nation's moral life, but also the "Red" crisis, i.e., the standoff with atheist communism at the beginning of the Cold War. Through the iconic historical figure of Edwards, evangelical religion and American nationalism were thus brought together. Graham's preaching of Edwards suggested that evangelicalism had been America's religion from the nation's very beginnings in the colonial period, and that the revitalization of this religious and intellectual legacy was the remedy for the Communist threat now.



text, changes which frequently go well beyond mere rhetorical modernizations. Andrew Finstuen has argued that “Graham softened Edwards’ strict Calvinism,” to make “it more palatable to [his] mid-twentieth century audience” but sees “no radical departure.”<sup>37</sup> In my opinion, Graham modified the substance of Edwards’ original Calvinist teachings and he did so in ways that reflect the general theological development of American evangelicalism since the nineteenth century. This is not to deny that in many areas the continuities and affinities between Graham and Edwards are strong. Like most neoevangelicals, Graham goes along with Edwards’ scripturalism. In contrast to Niebuhr, he is very comfortable with the literalist vision of hell that Edwards’ sermon creates in lurid detail, and with the understanding of the devil as a personal entity. As a revivalist, Graham also shares the sense of urgency with which Edwards warned the unconverted of their precarious situation before God who is rightfully angry with them on account of their many sins that might bring them into everlasting damnation at any moment.

Yet with regard to several central tenets of post-Dortian Calvinism, Graham swerves away from Edwards, thereby overriding the latter’s radical emphasis on divine sovereignty and human passivity in the salvation process. Edwards vehemently defended the view that the imputation of the original fall made the corruption of natural or unregenerate man so complete that he was morally unable to really direct his will towards God and embrace a saving faith in Christ. In accordance with this understanding of total depravity, supernatural regeneration must precede even the gracious acts of genuine repentance and believing as the first steps in the conversion process. Because man’s will was bound by sin, there was nothing that he could do to earn forgiveness. Atonement was the unmerited gift that a sovereign God unconditionally bestowed upon His elect. However, in his revisions of and extemporaneous additions to Edwards’ sermon, Graham repeatedly shifted the accent to each person’s ability to decide his or her own fate, to either continue in wickedness or turn to Christ. In repeated asides, for instance, he would warn his L.A. audience not to “reject Jesus Christ and turn down God’s way of salvation” lest their decision would bring eternal perdition upon them. This, of course, implied that humans have the freedom to make such a decision.

Graham’s assertion of human freedom contra Edwards becomes most obvious in the formulaic altar call with which Graham concluded the performance of the sermon. In this addition to the original, he reminded the audience of its sin, and how “every one of us are hanging over the pit of hell” and then held out the unabashedly universalistic promise that in giving themselves over to Christ everyone’s sins could be taken away:

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<sup>37</sup> Finstuen, “‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ Reprised,” 5.

. . . I'm glad to tell you this, that the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary, and that God loves you with an everlasting love, and the mercy of God is everlasting. And I don't care who you are tonight, man, woman, boy, or girl, it makes no difference who you are tonight, the Lord Jesus Christ can cleanse you from sin, and you can be assured you're going to heaven, and every man, woman, boy, and girl in this place to know they're saved before they leave this place. Wouldn't it be wonderful to walk out with peace in your heart, and that [as] you walk alone not be afraid of the next step, not be afraid that some place along the way tomorrow you are going to drop? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have the glorious peace and joy in your heart, knowing that your sins are cleansed, and that you're ready to meet God? Well you can know it right now. Right this minute, You say, how long does it take? Only an instant. You say, what do I have to do? All you have to do is let Jesus in, right now where you sit. You make certain that you are ready to meet Lord God.

To say, "All you have to do is let Christ in your heart," of course implies that the bondage of the will is not total, and that atonement is not quite unconditional. By foregrounding human agency in the redemption process, Graham also effectively undercut Edwards' understanding of double predestination. For Edwards, Graham's revisions would, in short, have been guilty of the Arminian heresy which he fought against so hard throughout his career. Moreover, Graham in effect promised instantaneous assurance to his audience; something that very much contradicted Edwards' scrupulousness about detecting the marks of genuine grace or signs of salvation that could usually be found only after a prolonged process of conversion.

What Graham was doing here, was reinterpreting Edwards along the lines of a popular, free-will evangelicalism that had first risen to prominence in America during the mass revivals of the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century and reached its apex in the mass revivalism of a Dwight L. Moody or Billy Sunday, who had called upon large anonymous urban audiences to abandon their wicked ways, instantly turn to God and seek holiness. This developmental line of American evangelicalism, which is often claimed to be more consistent with American culture and its emphasis on self-reliance, reform and perfectionism, had also shaped Graham's religious background, and he carried it very successfully into the modern era. While Graham certainly admired Edwards and found it useful to invoke his authority, Graham's performance of *Sinners* shows that he expe-

rienced much difficulty with actually using Edwardsean theology in evangelical practice and in fact had to read it against the grain in certain core areas to make it serve his purposes.

Although Graham is undoubtedly the most popular American evangelical of the twentieth century, not everyone in the broader evangelical movement was happy about his tremendous influence. Reformed theologians in the more confessionally-oriented seminaries criticized Graham and his followers for their too-easy peace with the larger culture and for their lack of Calvinist commitments. Significantly, already in the postwar era, prominent theological representatives of this neoconfessional evangelicalism also turned to Edwards as an authoritative resource for how to reconcile evangelical activism and the Reformed dogmatic tradition without compromising the purity of the latter.

My example here for this third pattern of interpreting America's theologian which emerged after World War II is John H. Gerstner (1914-96), one of the trailblazers of the evangelical Edwards Renaissance, who over the course of his long career published a good number of theological studies on Edwards, beginning with *Steps to Salvation: The Evangelical Message of Jonathan Edwards* (first publ. 1959).<sup>38</sup> A conservative Presbyterian, who ended his career in the Presbyterian Church in America, Gerstner taught Church History at Presbyterian Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Knox Theological Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical School. Here, he was a vociferous apologist of post-Reformation Calvinist orthodoxy, as defined by the Synod of Dort, which, to his mind, was the purest embodiment of the gospel truth. To Gerstner, Edwards was the most ingenious interpreter of the Reformed heritage for modern America. In *Steps to Salvation*, Gerstner called Edwards America's premier "intellectual evangelist" who engaged with modern philosophy and the sciences, while simultaneously arguing with great rigor "the fine points of salvation" and the "controversial issues of theology."<sup>39</sup> For Gerstner, and those who would follow after him, Edwards was simultaneously guardian of orthodoxy and an innovator, who, in their view, had successfully harmonized Calvinist teachings about total depravity, unconditional election and limited atonement with the evangelical priorities of practical piety and evangelizing as many people as possible.

Most importantly, Edwards seemed to offer a convincing answer to the great conundrum of evangelical Calvinism: how can you emphasize the responsibility

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<sup>38</sup> Over the course of his long career Gerstner published a good number of further theological studies on Edwards, including *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987); *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (3 vols; Orlando: Ligonier, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> *Steps to Salvation* was later reissued under the title *Jonathan Edwards, Evangelist*. Here I am quoting from a recent reprint (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995), 189.

of Christians to actively seek God in their lives and of working to spread God's word without falling into the Arminian trap? And how can a preacher engage in the practice of "indiscriminate gospelizing," i.e., in extending the gospel promise to everyone in the audience, without compromising, as Graham seemed to be doing, the belief that Christ died only for the elect? In his *Freedom of the Will*—the same work that Niebuhr admired so much—Edwards had worked out in great detail the distinction between the natural ability (constitutional capacity) to respond to the gospel offer and turn to God with contrition that everybody had, including the nonelect sinner, and his or her "moral inability" (or ineradicable unwillingness) to actually submit one's will to God and embrace a saving faith in Christ. As Gerstner puts it: "Men are unable to do any good thing, whether in the direction of salvation or in any other way. But they are able to hear the Word and they are able to do certain outward deeds that possess a nonmeritorious 'negative righteousness.'" While always emphasizing God's complete sovereignty in the salvation process, Edwards, according to Gerstner, "never let up in insisting that they do what they could."<sup>40</sup> With this distinction in place, Edwards could argue that it was the church's responsibility to make itself a willing instrument of Christ's redemptive work in history by indiscriminately spreading the gospel to the nations, through which saving faith was carried forth, while avoiding the erroneous presumption that revivalists could actually save anyone except those chosen by a sovereign God before the beginning of time. He could call on the responsibility of every man to repent, seek God, study the Word, while avoiding the false presumption that such human activities could have any saving power. So Gerstner praises Edwards for having never offered any false certainties (unlike the Arminians), and for restricting himself to holding out a hope to be amongst the elect on whom the gift of regeneration would be bestowed.

Neither did he ever cease to remind them that all they did was of no true value at all, could in no way recommend them to God, and did not in itself bring them one bit whit closer to the Kingdom than they were without it. In other words, he preached human ability and responsibility with as much insistence as any Arminian would do, but without a trace of Arminianism or the slightest compromise of his Calvinistic convictions.<sup>41</sup>

Gerstner and those who would follow after him thus held up Edwards as a historical corrective to counter the continuing tendency in post-war American evan-

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<sup>40</sup> Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards*, 190.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-91.

gicalism to undercut, if not in teaching then in practice, the Reformed teachings on divine sovereignty and human passivity in the salvation process.

It is worth noting in conclusion that over the past half-century the interest in Edwards as a constructive theologian for the modern age has been almost exclusively concentrated in the evangelical camp. As Douglas Sweeney has pointed out, evangelicals “now produce the bulk of scholarship on Edwards’ theological activity.” They “convene the largest conferences, dispense the most literature and audio-visual material matter, build the most popular websites, and raise the most interest related to Edwards’ life and theological ministry.”<sup>42</sup> The world of American evangelicalism has of course, changed dramatically and become a good deal more complex since the post-war era. Yet I would argue that as far as current appropriations of Edwards are concerned, the basic bifurcation between a dogmatically less pronounced, more ecumenically-minded, and stylistically popular, “Grahamesque” revivalism on the one hand, and a self-consciously and programmatically confessional evangelicalism on the other remains visible. If one wanted to name a single successor to Graham, who would come close not only in style but also in status, it would probably have to be Rick Warren (b. 1918), pastor of the Saddleback megachurch in Lake Forest, California and author of the enormously successful *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002). Like Graham, Warren has drawn a lot of fire from Reformed evangelicals concerned with his perceived doctrinal laxity. At the same time, he too has expressed his great appreciation of Edwards. In an interview he said: “Edwards is, without a doubt, the most brilliant mind America ever produced. . . . And he used his mind—I have read through the complete set of Jonathan Edwards . . . —He clearly was an influence on me.”<sup>43</sup> As with Graham, however, Warren’s enthusiasm for America’s most brilliant mind has not translated into any strict commitment to the intricacies of Edwards’ defense of Dortian orthodoxy.

While “influence” is admittedly always hard to quantify, it would seem that over the last three decades or so in which there was a general resurgence of traditional Reformed theology in the U.S., the neoconfessional advocacy of Edwards has gained the most ground. Gerstner alone created a veritable dynasty of Edwardseans. His most prominent disciple is R. C. Sproul (b. 1939), who has advocated Edwards in many of his writings and the influential *Ligonier Ministries*, which reaches a large following through seminaries, radio programs, a monthly

<sup>42</sup> Douglas A. Sweeney, “Evangelical Tradition in America,” 229. See also, D.G. Hart, “Before the Young, Restless, and Reformed: Edwards Appeal to Post-World War II Evangelicals,” in *After Jonathan Edwards*, 237-53.

<sup>43</sup> “Script of Interview with Pastor Rick Warren and Pastor John Piper. May 1, 2011,” available at <http://pastors.com/piperinterview/>. Link valid on 27 Feb 2013.

magazine, and the Internet.<sup>44</sup> Somewhere in-between Warren's more generic evangelicalism and the ardent confessionalism of Sproul we find several highly successful preachers who are often labeled "neo-Calvinists" but who operate in the world of megachurch evangelization and mass media outreach with the ease of Warren. Virtually all have extolled their love for and loyalty towards Edwards. Besides Tim Keller (b. 1950) and Mark Driscoll (b. 1970),<sup>45</sup> today John Piper (b. 1946) is arguably "America's most famous Edwardsean minister" who recently retired as senior pastor of a megachurch in Minneapolis (Bethlehem Baptist Church), and "publishes widely popular books on Edwards' thought and spirituality, and heads a national center, named *Desiring God Ministries*, devoted in part to sharing Edwardsean views with other evangelicals."<sup>46</sup> If one looks at these recent evangelical publications of a "Classical Calvinist" orientation, they praise many aspects of Edwards' work: his Trinitarian metaphysics; his analysis of religious affections in the conversion process and revivals; his teachings on gender roles in the church, on family issues, and on Christian education; his missionary activities; his ministry, and his personal piety. Ultimately, however, he is probably most important to those invested in the Reformed heritage who see him as an intellectually respectable model for how to be what Gerstner called a "predestinarian evangelical."<sup>47</sup>

#### A b s t r a c t

Primarily geared toward a European audience, this essay seeks to create an awareness of the significant potential of Edwards' national and international reception histories as an interpretative lens for studying the diverse traditions and trajectories of American Protestantism. As an example, the essay revisits the beginnings of what is often called the "Edwards Renaissance" from the 1930s to the 1950s to demonstrate how much we can learn about these important decades in the religious and cultural history of the United States by examining closely the different appropriations of Edwards. The focus is on three major interpretative communities essential to the theological recovery of Edwards: the movement

<sup>44</sup> See, among others, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986); *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); with Archie Parrish, *The Spirit of Revival: Discovering the Wisdom of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Keller most explicitly acknowledges Edwards' influence in his bestseller *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008). Driscoll has cited Edwards as America's greatest theologian and a major influence in the book he co-authored with Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), as well as in other places.

<sup>46</sup> Sweeney, "Evangelical Tradition in America," 230-31. Among Piper's Edwardsean publications are *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters: Multnomah, 1986); *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters: Multnomah, 1991); *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998); *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. with Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Crossway, 2004); *Finally Alive* (Minneapolis: Desiring God Foundation, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards*, 13.

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of neoorthodoxy, represented by H. Richard Niebuhr, the popular mainstream of the neo-evangelical movement as embodied by Billy Graham, and the kind of "neoconfessional" evangelicalism advocated by John H. Gerstner.

Kurzfassung:

Dieses primär an ein europäisches Publikum gerichtete Essay will einen Beitrag dazu leisten, die vielfältigen Möglichkeiten ins Bewußtsein zu rücken, welche in der Erforschung von Edwards' nationaler und internationaler Rezeption als Zugang zur Geschichte des amerikanischen Protestantismus mit seinen vielfältigen Traditionen und Entwicklungslinien liegen. Als Beispiel werden die Anfänge der „Edwards Renaissance“ zwischen den 1930er und 1950er Jahren in den Blick genommen, um zu zeigen, wie viele Einblicke man in diese so wichtige Epoche der U.S.-amerikanischen Religions- und Kulturgeschichte gewinnen kann, indem man die verschiedenen Anverwandlungen von Edwards in dieser Zeit untersucht. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf drei Deutungsgemeinschaften, die für die theologische Wiederentdeckung Edwards' maßgeblich waren: die theologische Bewegung der sogenannte Neorthodoxie, als deren Vertreter H. Richard Niebuhr betrachtet wird, die populäre Hauptströmung des neuen Evangelikalismus nach dem Krieg, wie sie von Billy Graham verkörpert wurde, und schließlich ein neo-konfessionalistischer Evangelikalismus, wie ihn John H. Gerstner vertrat.