

Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) on property, liberty, and the national covenant

Gerald R. McDermott

1. Who was Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)??
 - a. Greatest American religious mind
 - i. *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Yale University Press)
 1. 73 vols.
 - b. Greatest American philosopher before the 20th century

2. The National Covenant
 - a. God deals with whole societies, not just with individuals
 - b. He blesses or punishes that people in proportion to their fidelity to the terms of that covenant
 - c. It is about *this* life, not the next
 - i. Not immediately, but eventually: God will “favor a righteous nation” and punish nations “for every act of unrighteousness”

3. Jonathan Edwards and the National Covenant
 - a. Believed that most of New England’s fortunes, good and bad, could be explained by reference to God’s covenant with it.
 - b. Successes were unmerited blessings, results of God’s mercy, perhaps even warnings to repent (since “the goodness of God is meant to lead to repentance”)
 - c. Defeats and disasters are visitations of God’s anger, warnings to repent

4. Edwards on the purposes of government
 - a. protect property
 - b. keep order
 - c. ensure justice
 - d. provide national defense
 - e. promote common morality
 - f. ensure minimum level of material prosperity
 - g. give friendly but distanced support to true religion

5. Church and state
 - a. Government has no right telling pastors what to preach
 - b. No strict separation, which would damage both church and state
 - i. Religion is necessary for morality
 - ii. Morality is necessary for a healthy society
 - c. Neglect of religion brings immorality and injustice
 - i. Which invite the wrath of God
 - d. Therefore the state should promote belief in God as transcendent judge

6. Religious revival and the judgment of God
 - a. Religious renewal does not necessarily indicate divine approval
 - i. It could signal coming judgment
 - b. The primary sin of any society is ingratitude—presuming that life and prosperity are automatic or self-made
 - c. When government tells the church how to practice its faith, it is a sign of divine judgment

7. Liberty and God's law
 - a. Freedom is liberty bounded by and toward God's law
 - i. We are bound by the common good
 - ii. The market can provide for the common good by the curious way in which self-interest is used by a free market
 - b. Freedom is the ability to do God's will, not the liberty to do what one wants
 - c. The state should get out of the way of the churches so that they can fulfill their calling
 - i. For only the gospel multiplies moral virtue in a way that counteracts the natural attrition of virtue in the absence of virtue
 - ii. Without moral virtue even the best constitution will be of no avail in the long run

8. The national covenant in the 19th and 20th centuries
 - a. 20th century: H. Richard Niebuhr, American theologian
 - i. The rise of Marxism and dust storms of the 1930s were divine judgments
 - b. 20th century: Wolfhart Pannenberg, German Lutheran theologian
 - i. The destruction of German was judgment for its treatment of Jews
 - c. 19th century: Abraham Lincoln
 - i. The Civil War was divine judgment on slavery

9. Political crisis and religion
 - a. Is the purpose of government merely the protection of individual freedoms (modern liberalism) or the common good (classical view)?
 - i. Edwards said both, and neither is sufficient without the other
 - ii. Therefore the state should aim at common religious and moral aims
 1. Basic moral aims summed up in natural law
 2. Without these agreements, the nuclear family will crumble
 - a. Then society dissolves
 - b. This is the wrath of God
 3. Only religious revival provides a way out
 - a. For that to come, the church must pray
10. SUM: the only way for a society to restore its vision of property and liberty is by having its virtue revived through spiritual awakening
 - a. Thus a society whose conceptions and practices of property and liberty have been corrupted must reconsider the national covenant tradition