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

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1. Who was Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)?
   a. Greatest American religious mind
         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