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*Prima facie*, then, we can speak of God as simultaneously one person and three persons. But this is both confusing and misleading. Person does not mean the same when applied to the one God as it does when applied to each member of the trinity separately. The one, triune God is a numerically distinct individual being. A person in the Trinity is not. If the Father, the Son and the Spirit were numerically distinct we should have three gods, and thus violate the most fundamental doctrine of Jehovahism: "Jehovah our God is one Jehovah" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

DONALD MACLEOD, *BEHOLD YOUR GOD* (33).

## A REVIEW ARTICLE

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*Eric Bargerhuff*

### *NEW ENGLAND'S MORAL LEGISLATOR: TIMOTHY DWIGHT, 1752-1817*

John R. Fitzmier

Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1998)

261 pages, cloth, \$39.95

One of the most prominent personalities in the era commonly known as the Second Great Awakening was a man by the name of Timothy Dwight. Dwight was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, a Congregational minister with outstanding oratory skills, a literary figure and theological teacher, and president of Yale College from 1795-1817.

This biography by John R. Fitzmier, who is now vice president for academic affairs and dean of the Claremont School of Theology in California, is the most recent work on the legendary figure. As such, it is an attempt to analyze Dwight's life, his religious thought and political influence, and his legacy in the early colonial and revolutionary culture of New England. The author's thesis of this volume, is that "Dwight's religious system served a powerful, integrative function among what might otherwise appear to be a disparate set of professional activities. That system is 'Godly Federalism,' and can best be seen when Dwight functions as a 'moralist'" (20).

Fitzmier's presuppositions regarding this period of American religious history play a key role in his whole approach and interpretation of the significance of Timothy Dwight. His perspective views the period known as the Second Great Awakening as primarily a moralistic and political movement, of which Dwight was a watershed figure. One of Dwight's most famous students, Lyman Beecher, has written a detailed account of the revivals and awakenings of this period of Yale's history under Dwight's preaching and teaching. This was a period of revival where Beecher has stated that under Dwight's preaching, "all infidelity skulked and hid its head" (15). Yet for Fitzmier, this account is merely a mythical tale of a student whose "youthful religious zeal" and undying devotion to Dwight color the accounts of the event (58). Beecher is characterized as having a "sophomoric enthusiasm and selective memory" (101). According to Fitzmier then, the way in which Dwight should most prominently be remembered and interpreted is in his ability to integrate Scottish Common Sense Realism, Edwardsean theology, and Godly Federalism into a secularized postmillennial moralism.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that this ability enabled Dwight to become "the most prominent divine in turn-of-the-century New England" (101). He notes that with the mixture of his religious and political visions and ideology, which has as its focus the ushering in of the Kingdom of God, Dwight can be categorically placed among "other American prophets with markedly different visions" who "followed his luminous track" (182). Examples of such American "prophets" include such notables as Joseph Smith, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jim Jones and David Koresh (182).

The format of the text opens with a thorough biographical and chronological construction of Dwight's life. Fitzmier discusses the legacy of the Edwards family into which Dwight was born, as well as the godly influence of young

Timothy's mother, Mary Edwards Dwight, a daughter of the great Jonathan Edwards. An overview is given of Timothy's early education at home and then at Yale, where Timothy helped establish a literary society known as the "Connecticut Wits," a group committed to developing a distinctly American flavor to literature, rhetoric, and poetry of the day. Dwight continued at Yale, receiving a master's degree, and was subsequently hired by the college as a tutor until an illness involving his eyesight caused him to return home. (His eyes would be a source of deep trouble the remainder of his life.) Fitzmier claims that Dwight's decision to join the church at Yale College prior to his return home was his initial conversion to Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Fitzmier traces Dwight's involvement in the ministry as a chaplain in the Revolutionary War, his pastorate and establishment of a school in Greenfield, Connecticut, and his subsequent ascension to the presidency of Yale where Dwight's leadership of the college, his writing, and preaching in chapel helped shape an institution.

In the second chapter, Fitzmier narrows the discussion to Dwight's role as a preacher, and how his homiletical style as an extempore speaker carved out a distinctly American homiletic. He briefly notes individual sermons and writings of Dwight, in his continued attempt to paint the picture of Dwight not as a father and leader of a spiritual great awakening, but as an American political moralist.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 3 investigates Dwight's place in the theological terrain of his day, surveying the theological map and comparing him to Edwardsean and New Divinity theologies. Fitzmier addresses Dwight's views on soteriology, Calvinism, moral agency, as well as his affinity with or disdain for the theological progression of the New Divinity movement. He concludes that Dwight remained an Edwardsean but did not endorse or become a New Divinity theologian even though at times he echoes a few of their assertions. He

claims that Dwight failed to become "America's theologian" because he did not

possess the intellectual brilliance, constructive genius, or scholarly opportunities necessary to comprehend, redirect, or repristinate the Edwardsean tradition in America . . . [o]nly after his death and after a generation of nineteenth-century religious activists had blunted the sharp edges of Edwardseanism would his theology be hailed as a model for American evangelical Protestantism (128-29).

Chapter 4 investigates Dwight's historical consciousness of the American nation and how this is integrated with his biblical postmillennial views. Fitzmier shows how Dwight's view on God's blessings or doom is equivocally linked to what is happening in America as a nation. He states that "[T]his unbreakable connection between Dwight's assessment of American faithfulness and his beliefs about God's outlook on the nation . . . is evident in Dwight's preaching, in his theology, and in his history" (157).

This conclusion by Fitzmier does indeed seem to be warranted by the evidence presented and represents the strongest chapter of the book.

The final chapter of the book summarizes Fitzmier's views on Dwight as a preacher, theologian, and historian, and concludes that the synthesis of these three roles of Dwight constitutes him as one of the greatest moral and political figures in early American history. However, in the same way that Federalism faded into history, Fitzmier concludes that the vision of America possessed by Timothy Dwight has done the same—even though Dwight's theology, his extempore preaching, millennial views, and the theological culture of the Edwardsean tradition he espoused were to be held and expanded by such disciples as

Nathaniel William Taylor. These views of Dwight had considerable influence on future American Protestants, "though in rather modest ways that elude direct cause and effect links" (178).

A helpful bibliographical essay, bibliography, and index conclude the text.

### EVALUATION

Fitzmier has added to the continuing discussion of American religious history with this provocative view of one of the most influential figures surrounding the period of the Second Great Awakening. The book as a whole asserts a decidedly secular perspective on the life of Dwight, although some excellent theological history is traced and expounded in the text. There is no doubt that Fitzmier is uninterested in tracing Dwight's influence on what is known by many as the Second Great Awakening, but is rather more concerned on Dwight's political and moral influence in early America. Therefore, this biography represents a pendulum swing that seems to counter what Fitzmier himself refers to as a "history of partisan interpretation" (7). Regardless of his views on what he sees as the "myth" of the "revivals" of this period, there is perhaps some merit to seeing Dwight from this more political perspective. For there is no doubt that Dwight was not only an excellent orator of the divine message as well as a man who understood the potential social influence of the political arena. This involvement in politics can indeed be consistent with one who holds to a postmillennial eschatology.

Although one may not agree with all of Fitzmier's conclusions about Dwight, his depth of historical research and ability to arrange factual data are admirable.

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### Notes

1. It should be noted that the connotations of the words "moralist" or "moral legislator" are not the same today as it would have commonly been understood during the time of Dwight. Today, a "moralist" in secular society is primarily a negative term, perhaps synonymous with what is known as the political and radical "religious right." Fitzmier states that, "contemporaries are inclined to view the 'moralist' attribution as nothing more than a veneer designed to hide the evils of cultural arrogance, backward-looking provincialism, partisan politics, or naked ambition" (158).

Yet in Dwight's day, a "moralist" would have been viewed more positively. (It was Benjamin Dwight, Timothy's son, who claimed that his dad was "a father to New England—her moral legislator" (158)). Fitzmier acknowledges that this carried a positive connotation, stating that a "moralist" in Dwight's time "sought to discern general paradigms for the Christian way of life, they constructed codes of conduct based on these paradigms, and they continually reexamined and reevaluated these paradigms and codes in light of larger philosophical questions about right and wrong, good and evil, and supernatural and natural" (158).

To his credit, Fitzmier acknowledges these differences in connotation. Yet by writing a biography today where the terms "moral legislator" are in the title without immediately qualifying it, Fitzmier seemingly is content on allowing the modern connotation to be a commentary on his revisionist understanding of the life of Timothy Dwight.

2. He maintains this conclusion based on the fact that Dwight, throughout his life, always held that membership in the church was only for those who made a full profession of faith in Christ, a rejection of the Halfway Covenant of his day. Additionally, Fitzmier states that it was Dwight's "personal difficulties" that led him to take this journey of faith, and attributes nothing to the Spirit of God at work in his life (33). Fitzmier seemingly has little room for discussion of the role of the Spirit in Dwight's life and ministry.
3. It is significant to note that whenever Fitzmier does speak of revival, it is always in quotation marks (i.e., "revival").