

PLUNDERING THE EGYPTIANS

Edwards' Subversive Exploitation of Modernism

"The 'implicit apology' is something distinctive to Edwards...[it] was an exceptionally ambitious endeavor, since he sought to use every conceivable form of reasoning—metaphysical, moral, experiential, and historical—in a many-sided effort to establish the centrality and supremacy of God...With the phrase 'implicit apology' I refer to Edwards's subtle strategy, throughout his corpus, to appropriate and reinterpret various styles of thought or genres of writing so as to make them conform to his fundamental Christian convictions. He 'baptized' every eighteenth-century idea and intellectual tradition he could lay hands on. Norman Fiering writes that 'his purpose, contrary to that of the philosophers, was to turn the best thought of his time to the advantage of God.' He turned the tables on the Enlightenment, or 'plundered the Egyptians'—to use the language of early Christian writers. The profane reasonings of the salons and coffee houses were converted *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. The implicit apology appears in such varied writings as *Divine Light*, *The Mind*, *Two Dissertations*, and *History of Redemption*. In the implicit rather than explicit apology, Edwards engaged not the specific apologetic issues of his time but rather whole traditions of thought that he wished to interpret. To see the implicit apology one must read between the lines." (**Michael McClymond**, *Encounters With God*, p. 85, 101)

INTRODUCTION: The early church fathers' philosophical appropriation of Greco-Roman philosophy & rhetoric, yet filling it with a new, distinctly Christian content—all under the metaphorical rubric of the "plundering the Egyptians" language found in the book of *Exodus* in the Old Testament (3:21-22 / 11:2-3 / 12:35-36)

*A Dissenting Voice in the Early Church:

"What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?...Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!" (**Tertullian**, "Prescriptions Against Heretics")

*Yet it was not the majority view among most early Christian thinkers:

"One observes again and again that Christian thinking [in the early church], while working within patterns of thought and conceptions rooted in Greco-Roman culture, transformed them so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being." (**Robert Louis Wilken**, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, xvii)

"Although Christian thinkers worked within a Greek and Roman tradition of moral philosophy that preceded them, they transformed what they had received." (**Robert Louis Wilken**, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, xxii)

*Contextualization & the *Translatibility* of Christianity (Incarnation / I Corinthians 9:19ff)

“It is in the moments of transition, the process of diffusion [of the gospel] across cultural boundaries, the points at which cultural specificities change, that the distinctive nature of the Christian faith becomes manifest in its developing dialogue with culture. The process is clearly visible within the New Testament itself...In order to explain in the Greek world who Christ is and what he did and does, a new conceptual vocabulary had to be constructed. Elements of vocabulary already existing in that world had to be commandeered and turned towards Christ.” (Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xvi-xvii)

*The dangerous mistake of the “fundamentalist fallacy”:

“...the ‘fundamentalist fallacy’ [is] the conviction that God reveals himself outside of a cultural setting to communicate timeless truths to people who themselves are not influenced by their own cultural setting.” (Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, p. 8)

*The gospel is *always* clothed in the culture it inhabits, for better or for worse. Contextualization is not a choice one may accept or deny; rather, it will be inevitably done. The only question is whether it will be done well and faithfully and creatively, or poorly and unbiblically and naively.

“In speaking of ‘the gospel,’ I am, of course, referring to the announcement that in the series of events that have their center in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ something has happened that alters the total human situation and must therefore call into question every human culture. **Now clearly this announcement is itself culturally conditioned. It does not come down from heaven or by the mouth of an angel...Neither at the beginning, nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a culturally conditioned form of words. The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh. Every statement of the gospel in words is conditioned by the culture of which those words are a part, and every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally conditioned style of life. There can never be a culture-free gospel.** Yet the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied.” (Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, pp. 3-4)

*Liberals do this, too! (cf. C. S. Lewis’ complaint about “orthodox” heretics within the church of England)

1.) EXAMPLES

***Old Testament:** *Genesis 1-2* and Ancient Near Eastern creation myths

***New Testament:** Paul in *Acts 17* (cf. his sermons to Jews in synagogues—same gospel narrative is proclaimed to both, but in radically different ways and radically different idiom)

**Romans 1:18-32* (Wisdom of Solomon, a 1st century Jewish document almost certainly written before *Romans*, makes most of the same points that Paul's argument revolves around, in strikingly similar language—the difference is that Jews, not just Gentiles, are idolaters under God's righteous judgment. Most commentators believe that Paul is intentionally alluding to this document to spring his surprising misdirection in 2:1 ff)

**Gospel of John* (Logos terminology)

*NT writers' allusions to the *Imperial Cult* of Rome (emperor as *theos* [God], worship language, gospel, Lord, all the nations, etc.)

**Colossians* ("fullness" language drawn from the philosophy rampant in the area)

**Pastoral Epistles* (stoicism, virtues, etc., this in part accounts for the notably different language in comparison to earlier Pauline letters)

"Paul uses the *language* of the opposition but recharges it with his own content, thus turning it against them...much of the language is very likely that of the opposition, or at least of the environment to which Paul is speaking. There is nothing unusual about Paul's adapting such language to his own purposes. Nothing, for example, is more Stoic-sounding in Paul than *Philippians 4:8* or *12*. But anyone reading those sentences in the context of Paul recognizes that he means very non-Stoic ideas by them." (**Gordon Fee**, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 16, 18)

***Early Church**

"For Christians the moral life and the religious life were complementary. Although thinking about the moral life moved within a conceptual framework inherited from Greek and Latin moralists, Christian thinkers redefined the goal by making fellowship with the living God the end, revised the beginning by introducing the biblical teaching that we are made in the image of God, and complicated the middle with talk of the intractability and inevitability of sin. Without an understanding of the ancient moralists Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero, and Epictetus, one cannot enter the world of early Christian ethics; yet as soon as one takes in hand the essays of Clement or Tertullian or Ambrose or reads the sermons of Gregory of Nyssa or Augustine, it is clear that something new is afoot." (**Robert Louis Wilken**, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, p. 275)

2.) VARIOUS MODELS

- 1.) **Isolation** (Fundamentalism)
- 2.) **External Transformation** (starting point is biblical language & categories)
- 3.) **Internal Transformation** (starting point is secular language & categories)
- 4.) **Surrender** (Liberalism)

“God’s congregation possessed and at all times possesses its own language. Nothing can change this. For it has in history its own special history, its own special road. It speaks, when it confesses, in relation to this special history. It stands in the quite special concrete historical context, which has at all times formed its language and will continue to form it. Therefore the language of faith, the language of public responsibility in which as Christians we are bound to speak, will inevitably be the language of the Bible...There is a specifically Church language. That is in order. Let us call it by the familiar name by saying that there is a ‘language of Canaan’. And when the Christian confesses his faith, when we have to let the light that is kindled in us shine, no one can avoid speaking in this language. For this is how it is: if the things of Christian faith, if our trust in God and His Word is to be expressed precisely, so to speak in its essence—and time and again it is bitterly necessary for this to be done, so that things may be made clear—then it is inevitable that all undaunted the language of Canaan should sound forth...One thing is certain, that where the Christian Church does not venture to confess in its own language, it usually does not confess at all...But this cannot be the end of the matter...The Church’s language cannot aim at being an end in itself. It must be made clear that the Church exists for the sake of the world, that the light is shining in the darkness...Where confession is serious and clear, it must be fundamentally translatable into the speech of Mr. Everyman, the man and the woman in the street, into the language of those who are not accustomed to reading Scripture and singing hymns, but who possess a quite different vocabulary and quite different spheres of interest...By the very nature of the Christian Church there is only one task, to make the Confession heard in the sphere of the world as well. Not now repeated in the language of Canaan, but in the quite sober, quite unedifying language which is spoken ‘out there.’ There must be *translation*, for example, into the language of the newspaper. What we have to do is to say in the common language of the world the same thing as we say in the forms of Church language...If a man cannot, let him consider whether he really knows how to speak edifyingly even in the Church. We know this language of the pulpit and the altar, which outside the area of the Church is as effectual as Chinese.” (**Karl Barth**, *Dogmatics in Outline*, pp. 30-33)

3.) EDWARDS' IMPLICIT APOLOGY

“In the late seventeenth century moral philosophy had begun the process of converting into secular and naturalistic terms crucial parts of the Christian heritage. Edwards in a sense reversed the ongoing process by assimilating the moral philosophy of his time and converting it back into the language of religious thought and experience.” (**Norman Fiering**, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought in its British Context*, p. 60)

“It might not be too far from the mark to say that Edwards used the language of psychological empiricism in *Religious Affections* and incorporated the metaphysical language of Neoplatonism in *The End For Which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, but that he filled the idioms, in both cases, with theological content consistent with Calvin.” (**David Brand**, *Profile of the Last Puritan*, p. 87)

“...his philosophical musings on the functions of the will, the nature of virtue, and the purpose of creation—phrased though they were in an idiom foreign to the modern reader—were attempts to cast fundamental problems into forms familiar to eighteenth-century thinkers.” (**Conrad Cherry**, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal*, xxiv)

“...Edwards projected the major unifying theme of his life and works—the glory of God—against the backdrop raised by the man-centered moral philosophers of his day, and against a rising Arminian tide. Indeed he employed the language and idiom of the moral philosophers for his own spiritual-theological purpose.” (**David Brand**, *Profile of the Last Puritan*, pp. 1-2)

“Edwards's writings must also be studied within the context of his philosophical milieu in order to understand and appreciate his unique employment of terms to convey Christian truth.” (**David Brand**, *Profile of the Last Puritan*, p. 89)

“[Edwards] exploited modern ideas and modern rhetoric to confirm convictions that he had held all his life, and accepted on other grounds.” (**Peter Gay**, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 114)

“Edwards' recognition of the vast importance of the assumptions that lay behind such efforts and his insight into their faults arose not because he was so far ahead of his time, but rather because his rigorous Calvinism—and his position in a distant province—put him in a position to critically scrutinize his own era. His theological commitments alerted him to the momentous implications of trends that were already formidable in Britain when he first came onto the intellectual scene and which during his lifetime advanced rapidly even in New England. Edwards was a thoroughly eighteenth-century figure who used many of the categories and assumptions of his era to criticize its trends. Although he may have underestimated the short-term benefits of the emerging culture, he had genuine insight into the emptiness of its highest hopes.” (**George Marsden**, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, p. 471)

“Edwards’s prophetic challenge to the church involves redeeming the secular idiom. The church must cast the Gospel message in thought forms distinctive to each new generation, and she must actively re-direct the lines of secular thought Godward. Christian thought and spirit must not be bifurcated resulting in an emphasis on one to the neglect of the other. The church’s sons, illumined by the beatific and gifted in thinking skills, must extend the lines of biblical truth into the dark world of philosophy, and indeed into all branches of human learning.” (**David Brand**, *Profile of the Last Puritan*, p. 146)

Religious Affections = empiricism, John Locke

End of Creation = Aristotle (ends, Nicomachean ethics), Euthyphro Dilemma, Ramist Logic (Petrus Ramus) as method of deducing true conclusions from reason and mutually accepted assumptions which serve as the logical starting point for inquiry

Nature of True Virtue = Virtue ethics, Francis Hutcheson, moral worth determined by coordination of dignity/being and beauty/worthiness (cf. JE’s defense of an orthodox conception of hell through Enlightenment moral sentiments and principles)

4.) PRINCIPLES

*Christians must be *bilingual*—that is, they must be able to fluently speak the language and understand the internal logic of *both* the gospel *and* the cultural context they inhabit. Furthermore, both “texts” must be understood on their own terms. Christians must be saturated in both worlds, yet able to distinguish them, and giving their ultimate loyalty and allegiance to the biblical worldview,

*The question of *authoritative direction*: which “story” takes precedence over the other here (Lindbeck and Frei on “The Great Reversal” of the modern West: we no longer view our society through the lenses of the biblical narrative, but rather vice versa)

**Linguistic* priority (culture) vs. *epistemological* priority (gospel)

*The gospel says both *Yes and No* to every culture/worldview

Andrew Walls: Indigenizing Principle vs. Pilgrim Principle: Christians are both at home and in exile in every culture they find themselves within

Lesslie Newbigin: Foreign and Familiar: looking at Western culture as if we were foreign missionaries interpreting it from the vantage point of the gospel

Miroslav Volf: The gospel requires both Exclusion and Embrace, Distance and Belonging, Departure and Remaining

“[A]n essential part of the ordination exam ought to be a passage from some recognized theological work set for translation into vulgar English--just like doing Latin prose. Failure on this exam should mean failure on the whole exam. It is absolutely disgraceful that we expect missionaries to the Bantus to learn Bantu but never ask whether our missionaries to the Americans or English can speak American or English. Any fool can write *learned* language. The vernacular is the real test.” (**C. S. Lewis**, 1958 letter to the editor of *The Christian Century*, in *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 3:1006-7)

SUGGESTED READING

Michael McClymond, *Encounters With God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, especially ch. 6 (“Persuasion: Edwards as a Christian Apologist”)

Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*

Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*

Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, especially chs. 1-4

Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*