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# Harvard and Yale in the Great Awakening

Ross W. Beales, Jr.

In 1961 Edmund S. Morgan called upon historians to take a different approach to the study of New England Puritanism. Unlike Perry Miller, who had emphasized the intellectual and theological formulations of the New England clergy, Morgan suggested that historians turn to local records and examine what actually took place in the religious life of individuals and communities. For example, while historians had analyzed the formulation of and debates over the half-way covenant, little had been done to study the actual process by which churches adopted, modified, or rejected the work of the 1662 synod.<sup>1</sup> While Morgan called for a close examination of the religious histories of individual communities and churches, other historians began to study early New England communities from the perspective of demography, family life, and the transformation of community structure and values over several generations. For the most part, book-length community studies such as Philip J. Greven's *Andover* and John Demos' *Plymouth* pay relatively little attention to religious practices and experiences, while Kenneth A. Lockridge's *Dedham* and Robert A. Gross' *Concord* tend to limit their analyses to the role of religious leaders and the founding of churches.<sup>2</sup> In response to Morgan's admonition and to the methodological examples of the demographically and family-oriented community studies, there has developed a special genre of community studies which, for short-hand purposes, we can call Great Awakening studies. The revivals of the 1740s have long been a subject of great interest, but only in the last dozen years or so have historians begun to dig below the vehement theological debates of the 1740s and to trace what actually happened in the context of specific towns, churches, and families. The result has been the publication of studies of such towns as Norton, Massachusetts and Norwich, Windham, and Woodbury, Connecticut.<sup>3</sup>

Two characteristics of these studies should be noted. First, they lack a comparative perspective and common data bases. There are obvious practical reasons for choosing only a single community for study, as data for family reconstitutions and for analysis of economic status, class structure, and church membership can be massive for a single community. As a result, many Great Awakening studies are limited in value because they were not designed to be comparative, and conclusions from one study are often difficult to compare with other studies. Second, these studies have identified a demographic group which seems to have been especially vulnerable to revival preaching. Persons who joined the churches during the Awakening had three distinct characteristics: they were younger, more apt to be single, and relatively poorer than the converts of

earlier years had been when admitted to the churches. These three characteristics are related, of course, as marital status and economic position are directly correlated to age. But why were the young so drawn to the revival? The new converts seem not to have been a permanently disfranchised group. Frequently the sons and daughters of middle-class church members, the new converts were the kind of people who were most likely, in the long run, to join the churches and, if male, to own property and hold public office. In other words, the Awakening altered, albeit temporarily, the traditional pattern of religious maturation.

Historians have not been content to let the matter rest there and have sought more subtle reasons for the vulnerability of young people to the revivals. One hypothesis is that in the 1730s young people, especially males, experienced a kind of status anxiety resulting from the pressure of population growth, diminishing economic resources, and narrowing opportunities. Whatever its value, the accuracy of this hypothesis cannot be tested until more precise comparative data are available.<sup>4</sup> A study of the Great Awakening at Yale and Harvard can address the two problems of comparability and the role of youth in the revivals.<sup>5</sup> The colleges were not, of course, communities like the towns and churches which have been studied, for the colleges were composed almost exclusively of temporary residents who were unmarried adolescents and young men. Despite their unique characteristics as communities, a comparison of the revival at the two institutions can suggest ways of looking at the revivals in other locations. And the fact that the colleges were composed almost entirely of unmarried males in their teens or early twenties permits us to examine the reaction of youth to the revivals in the comparative context.

There were several similarities between the revivals at Yale and Harvard. Students at both institutions heard the powerful preaching of itinerant ministers like George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, and college authorities appear, at least initially, to have had an open mind about the revivals.<sup>6</sup> Students were converted, held special religious meetings, exhorted one another privately, and became censorious toward those with whom they disagreed. Some students left school either permanently or for short periods in order to witness more of the revivalists' preaching and, in some cases, to exhort publicly. Disciplinary measures at both Harvard and Yale included the expulsion of refractory students. Finally, the faculty and trustees of both schools eventually condemned Whitefield publicly for what they saw as his pernicious influence on the religious life of New England.

Despite these similarities, the course and outcome of the Awakening at Yale and Harvard were far different. More students at Yale than at Harvard participated in the revivals, and their zeal led them to disobey the college's rules, attend separatist meetings, and drop out of school. The result was a higher level of conflict between students and faculty at Yale and more efforts by Yale authorities to bring order, if not peace, to the college by expelling New Light students. Indeed, students at Yale were so disruptive of life in New Haven and at the college that Yale was closed down and the students were sent home for a brief period. Because of these troubles, the Connecticut legislature became

directly involved in enacting and enforcing regulations governing student conduct.

The course of the Awakening at Yale and Harvard can be briefly summarized. In its most immediate impact, the Awakening may be said to have begun in the fall of 1740, with the preaching of George Whitefield, and to have ended in 1744, with the colleges' public condemnation of Whitefield and the expulsion of New Light Samuel Bird from Harvard and John and Ebenezer Cleaveland from Yale. Whitefield preached in the Cambridge and New Haven churches and at both colleges. He was greeted courteously, if not with open arms, by Harvard's president, Edward Holyoke, and Yale's rector, Thomas Clap, both of whom must have resented his later lamentation that the colleges' light had become darkness. Whitefield made an immediate impression on members of both institutions, an impression so strong that Harvard tutor Daniel Rogers abandoned his post, followed Whitefield out of town, and never returned.<sup>7</sup>

While Whitefield was certainly the most famous of the revivalists, Gilbert Tennent's preaching tour of New England in early 1741 had an even more dramatic impact. During that year events at Yale and in New Haven became increasingly charged with religious passion. Students exhorted one another and were critical of Old Light preaching, particularly that of Joseph Noyes, minister of the New Haven church, which the students were required to attend. The week of commencement in September of 1741, saw New Haven turned on its theological ear when the increasingly notorious and reputedly mad itinerant minister from Southold, Long Island, James Davenport, denounced Noyes. On the day after commencement, Jonathan Edwards delivered his famous sermon, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, which Old Light William Hart of Saybrook countered with a sermon on the nature of regeneration.<sup>8</sup> There followed a separation in the New Haven church, and some students began to attend the separatists' meetings contrary to Rector Clap's orders. In early 1742 David Brainerd was expelled for refusing to apologize publicly for his New Light activities. When it appeared that the situation had become unmanageable, Clap sent the students home for an early vacation. After the short closing and a legislative investigation, the college re-opened with Clap firmly in control and fully prepared to tolerate no further challenges to his authority. The expulsion of John and Ebenezer Cleaveland in 1744 for attending separatist meetings marked the denouement of this stage of the Awakening at Yale.<sup>9</sup>

Harvard passed through these years with much less difficulty. Although confronted with similar challenges, the example of itinerants and the temptations to take to the road and exhort publicly and to censure those with whom they differed, Harvard students were less radical than their Yale counterparts. The differences between the two institutions require explanation. In its larger social context, the Awakening in Massachusetts was less divisive than in Connecticut. Data on church separations, for example, show that in proportion to overall population, far fewer churches in Massachusetts were split by the Awakening than in Connecticut, and only in Connecticut were repressive anti-New Light laws passed. Thus, to a degree, the Awakening's divisiveness at Yale reflected its larger impact throughout Connecticut as a whole.<sup>10</sup>



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In the immediate vicinity of the two colleges, there were substantial differences. Neither Harvard nor Yale had its own church, and students were required to attend services in the Cambridge and New Haven churches. The Reverend Nathaniel Appleton of the Cambridge church was a prominent but moderate New Light who welcomed the revivals, added new members to his church, and kept his people united behind him. By contrast, Joseph Noyes of New Haven was an uninspiring Old Light whose church was badly split by the Awakening. Noyes' relative obscurity is suggested by the fact that in a forty-six year career, he published not a single sermon: by contrast, Nathaniel Appleton published at least thirty-one sermons during his sixty-seven year ministry. The Cambridge church had long been one of the most important pulpits outside Boston, and Appleton had been selected for that church because of his superior qualifications. One might suggest that the New Haven church had become more important during Noyes' ministry because of the growth of the town and the college, but that Noyes himself had not grown in stature. Had Noyes been more sympathetic to the Awakening, or if he had had a more forceful character and greater stature, he might have been able to guide his flock—including the Yale students—through the revival with fewer difficulties for the town, the college, and his own ministry. Noyes' troubles were compounded by the fact that James Pierpont, who was his predecessor's son, was both a prominent member of the New Haven community and the leader of the faction which separated from the New Haven church.<sup>11</sup>

Nathaniel Appleton's position as the Cambridge minister was undoubtedly strengthened by the fact that a majority of the Harvard Overseers, all from the Boston area, were prominent New Light moderates. They welcomed the revival, but they were also in a position to urge a moderate course of action. Thus, Benjamin Colman of the Brattle Street Church both rejoiced in the revival at Harvard and cautioned against giving encouragement to "*illiterate and half-learned* Persons to go about *exhorting* and drawing *Hearers* by their *Shew of Affection*."<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the Harvard Overseers, most Yale trustees opposed the Awakening, and, more widely scattered than the Harvard Overseers, they were less able to provide a continuous or effective presence in support of Noyes or Clap. Their ineffectiveness is revealed, first, in their mishandling of radical James Davenport, who made fools of them at the 1741 commencement, and, second, in their unsuccessful attempt to woo Aaron Burr from New Jersey as a suitable colleague for Noyes.<sup>13</sup>

The timing of James Davenport's major preaching effort in New Haven also helps to differentiate Yale from Harvard. At the Yale commencement in 1741, Davenport publicly ridiculed and attacked Noyes, divided the New Haven church, and embarrassed the Yale trustees when their efforts to restrain him backfired. Davenport was later arrested in Hartford, was pronounced "disturbed in the rational Faculties of his Mind," and was transported out of Connecticut back to his church on Long Island. He then made his way to Boston, where he found that the clergy, Old and New Light alike, had had ample warning and were united against him. As in Connecticut, he was arrested, was declared *non compos mentis*, and was returned to Long Island. He had neither invitation nor opportunity to preach in Cambridge.

The Harvard and Yale faculties were also sufficiently different to affect the course of the revival at the two institutions. While Harvard tutor Daniel Rogers did abandon his post, it is clear that the Harvard faculty was more experienced in working with students. President Holyoke was fourteen years older than Rector Clap and had been president for four years before Whitefield's arrival. Clap had been rector for only six months when Whitefield arrived in New Haven. Harvard's sixty-five year-old Henry Flynt, a tutor since 1699, was critically sympathetic to the Awakening, at least in its initial stages, and worked with the students who were affected by the revival. By contrast, twenty-four year-old Chauncey Whittelsey, tutor at Yale, was no older than some of the students and earned lasting, if minor fame from David Brainerd's comment that he had no more grace than a chair.

For all of these reasons, therefore, when radical New Lights like Andrew Crosswell, himself a Harvard graduate, preached against Harvard, urged parents to remove their sons from college, and warned students that the president and tutors were Arminians and should not be heeded, it was Crosswell himself who was ignored.<sup>14</sup> That Crosswell found no followers at Harvard is not surprising, for students tended to respond to the Awakening in ways which were compatible with their backgrounds. Yale was a much more fertile field in which New Light doctrines and practices could be sown, for almost 57 percent of Yale students came from towns whose ministers were New Lights; in contrast, only slightly more than 31 percent of Harvard students came from such towns. In addition, approximately 10 percent of Harvard students but fewer than 3 percent of Yale students were Anglicans and were therefore unlikely to participate in the revival. Harvard students of New Light persuasion thus found ample support for moderate activities but few inducements to radical behavior. At Yale, by contrast, New Light students made up a larger proportion of the student body, and there were many inducements not merely to moderate but to radical revivalistic behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

The influence of the students' backgrounds can be seen in several examples. First, several Yale students had experienced revivals before the Awakening. Joseph Hawley's father had committed suicide at the height of the 1735 revival at Northampton. Samuel Buell had been converted during that same Connecticut Valley revival of the mid-1730s. And David Youngs had witnessed a revival under Davenport's ministry early in 1740. Buell and Youngs, along with David Brainerd, formed the nucleus of a group of older students who were especially active in proselytizing among their classmates in the winter of 1740-41.<sup>16</sup> While Harvard students prayed and sang together, exhorted one another, and even in some cases, had visions, Harvard had no comparable group of older, experienced students who could assume leadership in the revival.

The importance of the students' backgrounds can also be seen in the effect of parental opinion on two students who were initially caught up in the revival but whose minister-fathers successfully encouraged them toward a moderate course of action. At Yale, Eliphalet Williams complained to his father, Solomon, about Noyes' preaching and asked his father to intercede with Rector Clap so that Eliphalet might attend preaching at separatist meetings. His father was willing to ask Clap's permission for his son to attend the preaching of ortho-



dox and regular ministers, but he admonished Eliphalet to be patient if Clap refused.<sup>17</sup> The elder Williams made his case for patience on several grounds: God's providence had cast Eliphalet under Noyes' ministry, and Eliphalet could only use lawful means to seek a more edifying ministry; the trial of sitting under Noyes' ministry would teach patience and humility; Eliphalet should not risk losing all his parents' cost and trouble in providing him with an education; and, finally, rulers should be treated with "great Tenderness" because of their responsibilities; those who were ruled could not always judge issues properly, so it was best for the ruled to pray for their rulers and to make their burdens as easy as possible.

Solomon Williams' advice evidently had its intended effect, as did the advice which Experience Mayhew gave to his son, Jonathan, at Harvard. In a thirty-two page manuscript pamphlet, Mayhew set forth the design of his education, which included, most particularly, the goal that Jonathan's mind be "furnished with useful Knowledge" and especially such knowledge as would be necessary for the ministry. The elder Mayhew also wrote a pamphlet criticizing Whitefield's autobiography, emphasizing "how dangerous a thing it is to Depend on Impulses." Jonathan Mayhew echoed his father's admonitions when he later advised his brother, "Let us be ware of Hypocrisy: our Hearts are Traitors to themselves."<sup>18</sup>

The expulsion of Samuel Bird from Harvard and the Cleaveland brothers from Yale in 1744 provides yet another example of the strength of family influence. The three students were expelled not for conduct at school—indeed, Ebenezer Cleaveland had not even begun his freshman year—but because of activities in their home towns. Bird came from Dorchester, where his father, a New Light, was an outspoken critic of the town's Old Light minister, Jonathan Bowman. Bird was charged with four misdeeds: he had behaved disrespectfully toward his minister, publicly attacked Old Light ministers, encouraged the New Lights who separated from Bowman's church, and brought the college into disrepute by slandering an Overseer and by asserting that he "wouldn't give a Groat to avoid Expulsion."<sup>19</sup> At Yale the Cleaveland brothers were similarly charged with misconduct while away from college. With their parents they had attended what Rector Clap considered to be illegal separatist meetings in Canterbury. Clap accused them of violating the laws of God, the colony, and the college. The Cleavelands admitted the facts but denied Clap's interpretation and his right to punish them. Right or no right, Clap had the power, and when the Cleavelands refused to make a public confession, they were expelled.<sup>20</sup> These examples—Eliphalet Williams, Jonathan Mayhew, Samuel Bird, and the Cleaveland brothers—reveal the importance of family background in determining the ways students responded to the Awakening. Harvard and Yale did not exist in a vacuum, and it is hardly surprising that students brought to college not only the academic training which had prepared them for admission but a religious perspective which prepared them to respond to religious events.

The importance of parental influence in affecting the students' responses to the Awakening leads back to a consideration of the importance of family religious traditions in the other communities which have been studied during the Awakening. Hypotheses about the influence of narrowing resources on the

minds and hearts of young people may not be as fruitful as the realization that the bonds which tied older and younger generations together were strong and that family and community religious traditions prepared the young for eventual entry into the churches. For many young persons, the Awakening altered the timing of religious experience and church-joining, but when the young joined the churches, they were fulfilling family expectations.

## NOTES

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2. Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, New York, 1970); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town, The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York, 1970); Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976); Christopher M. Jedrey, *The World of John Cleaveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth-Century New England* (New York, 1979).
3. The classic treatment of the Awakening in New England is Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York, 1957), which emphasizes the "great and general" character of the revivals. Recent studies on Massachusetts include J. M. Bumsted, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy in Massachusetts: The Town of Norton as a Case Study," *Journal of American History* 57 (1971): 817-831; and Philip J. Greven, Jr., "Youth, Maturity, and Religious Conversion: A Note on the Ages of Converts in Andover, Massachusetts, 1711-1749," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 108 (1972): 119-134.
4. See especially Bumsted, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy"; Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York, 1980).

5. See Ross W. Beales, Jr., "Cares for the Rising Generation: Youth and Religion in Colonial New England" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Davis, 1971).
6. See especially George Whitefield, *A Continuation of the Reverend Mr. Whitefield's Journal from Savannah . . .* (Boston, 1741); Jacob Green, "Sketch of the Life of Rev. Jacob Green," *Christian Advocate* 9 (1831); Henry Flynt, Diary (microfilm of MS in Harvard University Archives), October 12, 1740; Samuel Hopkins, *Sketches of the Life of the Late, Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D.D., Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Newport . . .*, ed. Stephen West (Hartford, 1805); *The Testimony of the President, Professors, Tutors, and Hebrew Instructor of Harvard College in Cambridge, Against the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, and His Conduct* (Boston, 1744); *The Declaration of the Rector and Tutors of Yale-College in New-Haven, Against the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, His Principles and Designs. In a Letter to Him* (Boston, 1745).
7. Daniel Rogers to Edward Holyoke, Worcester, October 15, 1740, in Robert W. Lovett, ed., *Documents from the Harvard University Archives, 1628-1750* (Publications of The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 50, Collections; Boston, 1975), 762.
8. On Davenport's preaching, see Daniel Wadsworth, *Diary of Rev. Daniel Wadsworth, 1737-1747, Seventh Pastor of the First Church of Christ in Hartford . . .*, ed. George Leon Walker (Hartford, 1864), 72; Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England . . .* (Boston, 1743), 98-99; Samuel Johnson to Roger Price, July 5, 1742, in *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings*, ed. Herbert and Carol Schneider (4 vols.; New York, 1929) 1: 105-106; *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, September 28, 1741; Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God . . .* (Boston, 1741); William Hart, *A Discourse Concerning the Nature of Regeneration . . .* (New London, 1742).
9. "The Diary of John Cleaveland, January 15 - May 11, 1742," ed. Ross W. Beales, Jr., *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 107 (1971): 143-172; Connecticut Historical Society, *Collections* 16 (1916): 458; Connecticut Archives (State Library, Hartford), Colleges and Schools, 1st ser., 1, pt. 2: 269a, 269b, 270; *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, ed. Charles J. Hoadly and J. Hammond Trumbull (15 vols.; Hartford, 1850-1890) 8: 454-457, 500-502.
10. Samuel W. S. Dutton, *The History of the New North Church in New Haven from its Formation in May, 1742, during the Great Awakening to the Completion of the Century, in May, 1842. In Three Sermons* (New Haven, 1842), 6-7. For a list of separate churches in Connecticut and Massachusetts, see C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* (New Haven, 1962), 302-318.
11. On Harvard and Yale graduates, see John Langdon Sibley and Clifford K. Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts* (17 vols.; Cambridge and Boston, 1783-1975), and Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of*

*Yale College with Annals of the College History* (6 vols.; New York, 1885-1912).

12. Benjamin Colman, *The Great God Has Magnified His Word . . .* (Boston, 1742), 32. A contemporary list of New Lights appears in *The Testimony and Advice of an Assembly of Pastors of Churches in New-England, at a Meeting in Boston July 7, 1743, Occasion'd by the Late Happy Revival of Religion in Many Parts of the Land . . .* (Boston, 1743). Harry S. Stout, "Remigration and Revival: Two Case Studies in the Social and Intellectual History of New England, 1630-1745" (Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1974), 387-389, lists 341 Old Light and New Light clergymen.
13. Jared Ingersoll, *An Historical Account of Some Affairs Relating to the Church, Especially in Connecticut, together with a notation of Some other things of a different nature* (MS, Library of Congress).
14. Flynt, Diary, April 8, 1742; Andrew Crosswell, *What Is Christ to Me, If He Is Not Mine? . . .* (Boston, 1745), 8; Flynt, Diary, October 10, 1742.
15. For the backgrounds of the Harvard and Yale students, see Beales, "Cares for the Rising Generation," 168-175, 224-230.
16. Samuel Buell, *The Import of the Saint's Confession . . .* (New London, 1792), 40-41; Samuel Buell to Eleazer Wheelock, New Haven, March 2, 1740 (Yale University Archives).
17. Solomon Williams to Eliphalet Williams, Lebanon, February 22, 1742, in "God and Man at Yale, 1742," ed. Ross W. Beales, Jr., Connecticut Historical Society, *Bulletin* 41 (1976): 29-32.
18. Experience Mayhew, *A Letter to a Minister of the Gospel containing some Queries on several Passages in the Reverend Mr. George Whitfield's account of his own Life, Published in the Year 1740* (MS, Mayhew Papers, No. 8, Boston University); Jonathan Mayhew to Zachariah Mayhew, Boston, March 26, 1742, in "'Our Hearts Are Traitors to Themselves': Jonathan Mayhew and the Great Awakening," ed. Ross W. Beales, Jr., *Bulletin of the Congregational Library* 27 (1976): 4-8.
19. On Bird's expulsion, see Faculty Records (Harvard University Archives), 195-196, 202-211, and "Hearing on Samuel Bird" [April 25, 1744], in Lovett, ed., *Documents from the Harvard University Archives*, 774-778.
20. Clap's position in the Cleaveland affair was presented to the public in *The Judgment of the Rector and Tutors of Yale-College, Concerning Two of the Students Who Were Expelled; Together with the Reasons of It* (New London, 1745); on Clap's role in the Awakening, see Louis Leonard Tucker, *Puritan Protagonist: President Thomas Clap of Yale College* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1962). For the Cleavelands' point of view, see John Cleaveland's Narrative of the Proceedings of the Government of Yale College in the Expulsion of John and Ebenezer Cleaveland (Cleaveland Papers, Essex Institute) and John Cleaveland's petition to the General Assembly, April 28, 1745 (Connecticut Archives, State Library, Hartford, College and Schools, 1st ser., pt. 2, 280a-280d). Jedrey, *World of John Cleaveland*, 22-40, summarizes events at Yale and John Cleaveland's response to the Awakening.