

A DEBATE ON THE ISSUE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
IN TIMES OF REVIVALS

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Christian revivals that have arisen from time to time in the history of the church are indeed times of greater religious sensitivity. God's presence is felt in an unusual way. Signs and wonders occur. People have been known to cry, laugh, shake, fall in a trance, and sing with all their hearts. Which religious experiences are genuine and which are not? How can one assess whether or not there has been a genuine religious experience or conversion? Is this how the Spirit of God works? Can a preacher manipulate the feelings of his listeners during an evangelistic campaign? If so, should we call this "brainwashing"?

The purpose of this article is to provide some light on religious experiences that are observed during events that church historians call revivals, or visitations of God. We will hear a debate between two doctors and a theologian/pastor. From the outset it should be noted that two of the 'panelists' lived in other centuries. We refer to the Rev. Jonathan Edwards (XVIII century) and the psychiatrist Dr. William Sargant (XX century); while the third, Dr. Patrick Dixon, is still alive.

The essayist, with the help of the two doctors, intends to assess religious experiences that occurred in the revival that took place in Northampton, Massachusetts, between 1735 and 1742 under the ministries of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, in order to establish some principles that could guide us in modern times. Dr. Dixon will expand the discussion with more contemporary events.

First we will listen to the famous British psychiatrist, Dr. William Sargant (1907-1988), whose mother was the daughter of a Methodist minister and five of his uncles were preachers. This doctor, then, had grown up in a home with a strong Methodist foundation. Sargant worked in the postwar period and observed and treated cases of deep shell shock or post-traumatic syndrome; he was interested in Pavlov's studies. In his experiments with dogs, Pavlov observed that even these had different types of personality and reacted in different ways to stress or trauma. If a dog is exposed to a barrage of stimuli, it would change its behavior patterns. Through the observations of Pavlov's experiments, Sargant sought to develop a physiological understanding of the mechanism of 'brainwashing.' Thus, in this first section we must analyze Sargant's theory and his warning about what could have happened in Massachusetts.

In 1957, he wrote his book *"Battle for the Mind: Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing"* which emphasizes that its objective is to elucidate the processes, the 'how' and not so much the 'why' people turn to religion or a political position in particular. He writes in his introduction: "Many people have pointed out, quite rightly, that the ultimate test of both religious and political values is not definable in terms of *how it happens*, but of *what is achieved*" (p. 12).

The mechanism Sargant observed in these cases is the following: a person is subjected to intense trauma which deeply affects them; the person breaks down and then follows a new or different way. This he called 'abreaction' which according to the Encyclopedia of Psychology is a "Psychoanalytical term for the vivid, often cathartic return of painful emotion(s) from past circumstances" (Grinnell, 2016, ¶ 1). It is then the process of disorientation, orientation and finally reorientation.

One day, while staying in his father's house, Sargent began to read one of the volumes of Wesley's diary. He makes the following comment:

It was John Wesley's Journal of 1739-40. My eye was caught by Wesley's detailed reports of the occurrence, two hundred years before, of almost identical states of emotional excitement, often leading to temporary emotional collapse, which he induced by a particular sort of preaching. These phenomena usually appeared when he had persuaded his hearers that they must make an immediate choice between certain damnation and the acceptance of his own soul-saving religious views. The fear of burning in hell, induced by his graphic preaching, could be compared to the suggestion we might force on a returned soldier, during treatment, that he was in danger of being burned alive in his tank and must fight his way out. The two techniques seemed startlingly similar (p. 25).

Sargent maintained that it was possible to compare how this fear of hell could affect the nervous system of people under the preaching of Wesley, with the fear of death of his war-torn patients. He argued that anger and fear may induce alterations in brain function that would make a highly suggestible person reverse their preconditioned behavior patterns, leading to a 'conversion.'

Sargent comments that in his diary of June 15 1739, Wesley describes how several people, on hearing the preaching, reacted in different physical forms: "Some sunk down, and there remained no strength in them; others exceedingly trembled and quaked; some were torn with a kind of convulsive motion in every part of their bodies, and that so violently that often four or five persons could not hold one of them" (p. 100).

About Jonathan Edwards, pastor of a Congregational Church in Northampton Massachusetts, Sargent comments his use of the technique of fear of hell with even more drama. "Edwards made a practice of inducing guilt and acute apprehension as the first step toward the conversion of normal persons, and insisted that the tension must be increased until the sinner broke down and made complete submission to the will of God" (p. 150). It seems that after the terror the people would find peace. Sargent observed the same psychological process of 'disorientation', 'orientation' and finally 'reorientation', or in theological terms, 'conversion'. A co-worker of Edwards and afterwards of John Wesley was the gifted and powerful preacher George Whitefield, who used the same technique of giving terrifying sermons.

Sargent also suggests the connection between 'conversion' and the sensitivity of the human brain to the rhythmic percussion, drums and dancing, bright lights, and other sensory stimulation which are often repetitive; and points out the potential of this type of stimulation to induce seizures in susceptible people. "No man, however highly civilized, can listen for very long to African drumming, or Indian chanting, or Welsh hymn singing, and retain intact his critical and self-conscious personality" (p. 158). He describes the process in the hands of a voodoo priest and evangelical pastors in America.

A voodoo priest increases excitement and suggestibility by altering the loudness and rhythms of the drums, just as in a religious snake-handling cult, which I observed myself in the United States, the preacher used the tempo and volume of singing and hand clapping to intensify the religious enthusiasm, and emotional disruption was finally induced by thrusting live poisonous snakes into their hands. After a terminal collapse into stupor, both groups of participants may awake with a sense of spiritual rebirth (p. 107).

So we can say that Sargant, as a psychiatrist treating patients traumatized by World War II and also someone very influenced by a sincerely religious family, begins to make comparisons between the process of abreaction in his patients and conversion (or dramatic turnabout) whether religious or political, caused by the bombarding of mental stimuli that could lead a person to a state of stupor or trance leaving them with a feeling of peace or relief (reorientation or conversion). He concludes his book by saying:

Though men are not dogs, they should humbly try to remember how much they resemble dogs in their brain functions, and not boast themselves as demigods. They are gifted with religious and social apprehensions, and they are gifted with the power of reason; but all these faculties are physiologically entailed to the brain. Therefore the brain should not be abused by having forced upon it any religious or political mystique that stunts the reason, or any form of crude rationalism that stunts the religious sense (p. 239).

Sargant was very clear from the beginning that he had nothing against religion. His study has to do with the effect on the brain physiologically, of the bombardment of stimuli. We have to ask ourselves to what extent has the process Sargant called 'brainwashing' occurred in revivals. Let's turn our attention to our second panelist, the pastor and theologian, Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was born into a pastoral family in Connecticut, United States. He studied at Yale University, and, heir to the parents' puritanism was ordained minister for the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts as an assistant pastor in 1727, under the ministry of his grandfather Solomon Stoddard, who had been pastor of the church for sixty years. His grandfather died in 1729, leaving his grandson with the difficult task of the ministerial charge of one of the largest and wealthiest congregations in the colony. Throughout his time in Northampton, his preaching brought about remarkable religious revivals. Jonathan Edwards was a key figure in what has been called the First Great Awakening that took place between the years 1735-1745.

It is important to stress that Edwards is one of the most recognized and respected theologians of the eighteenth century. He was the author of several books that are highly appreciated even today. He was a pious, humble man and a profound student of the Scriptures. As was common in those days and especially among the Puritans, he shared the Calvinistic viewpoint in theology. He believed in total depravity as a result of the original sin of Adam, the impotence of the individual before God, God's sovereign right, and the reality of hell for anyone who did not accept God.

The revival of 1735-1745 was a reaction to a decline in piety and moral laxity within the Congregational churches of New England. So, Edwards noted that the people of Northampton and the congregation he had inherited from his grandfather were not paying attention to spiritual matters. God helped him faithfully to preach the Word with power. The revival occurred in stages; 1735-1737 in his church in Northampton and from 1740 to 1745 in several congregations in New England. Many people received Jesus as their savior, giving a boost to the growth of the church in the thirteen British colonies.

Between 1735 and 1737 the revival was evident in Northampton. People could be seen singing hymns in the streets, several taverns closed, and it was impossible to enter the church building unless one arrived hours before (Farley, 2001, ¶ 17). In six months, about three hundred people were admitted to the church (Edwards, 1965 [1736]), p.19). Edwards describes that at first people reflected on their behavior and had a terrifying sense of the wrath of God (1965 [1736]), p. 27). Similarly, there were times when people, for joy, began to laugh, and to cry (1965 [1736]), p. 37). Edwards shares the testimony of Abigail Hutchinson, a slightly sickly lady, who under conviction of sin "only saw darkness and her flesh trembled in fear of the wrath of God" (1965 [1736]), p. 56). She received her peace and died in the Lord.

Then in 1740, God's movement spread to several parts of New England, as well as the town of Northampton. George Whitefield, Wesley's young friend was active in this second stage of revival. Whitefield was an outstanding speaker. It is estimated that ten percent of New England was converted during this time. This visitation of God was the prelude to the revival that began in 1738 in Great Britain.

In recent years, there was much criticism for what some considered excesses in religious experiences in worship. Edwards was the victim of this criticism and in 1755, at a meeting in the city, it was decided that Edwards should not continue as pastor in the church in Northampton. He was appointed as president of the Princeton University, but in 1758 he died of smallpox.

The interest of this essay is to analyze possible cases of manipulation of the religious experiences of his listeners when he preached. It is not the intention of the essay to judge the great theologian of Massachusetts, but allow him to defend himself against the accusations of Sargent, and maybe draw some lessons for today.

It was said that many excesses accompanied the revival. People experienced highly unusual spiritual phenomena. Sometimes during sermons, they shouted and fell to the ground, unconscious. Even Edwards's own wife sat in a trance for long periods in a corner of his living room, unable to move, completely overwhelmed by the love of God (Farley, 2001, ¶ 21). Edwards did not discourage, or hinder this type of demonstration. He recognized that they were the result of the powerful and supernatural work that the Holy Spirit was doing in sinners. He was also aware that Satan could try to sow confusion by counterfeits and demonstrations aimed to distract the people from the true counsel of God.

It is important to note the context of events in Massachusetts. Most people who attended the meetings were simple people; they were illiterate or could possibly read a little. Puritan teachings that people heard in churches not affiliated with the Anglican Church put much emphasis on the greatness and glory of God. It was not unusual to preach about hell, so we should not be surprised at the preaching of Edwards and Wesley in this regard. Both preached many sermons about the love of God and other biblical themes.

Edwards was convinced about the message he preached. The so called "terror sermons," were designed to awaken sinners to their plight and to move them to flee the wrath of God. In 1741, he preached twice the most famous of them, "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*", first in his own congregation and then on July 8 in Enfield. Edwards, represented sinners like spiders hanging over the open mouth of hell. He emphasized the absolute dependence of the sinner on the will of a sovereign God. God

would be fully justified in condemning them to hell because of their sin. It is only by the grace of God's sovereign will that there was any hope (Edwards 1741). Before closing the service, hundreds of people lay on their knees on the floor, crying out to God for mercy and forgiveness.

His techniques were not impressive. Moreover, he always read his sermons in a somewhat monotonous voice, but with great conviction. Nothing in his style or presentation could be responsible for what happened that day in Enfield. A witness, Stephen Williams wrote in his diary: "We went over to Enfield where we met dear Mr. Edwards of Northampton who preached a most awakening sermon from these words, Deuteronomy 32:35, and before the sermon was done there was a great moaning and crying went out through ye whole House.... 'What shall I do to be saved,' 'Oh, I am going to Hell,' 'Oh, what shall I do for Christ,' and so forth. So yet ye minister was obliged to desist, ye shrieks and cry were piercing and amazing" (sic) (Farley, 2001, ¶ 3).

It was after this that folk began to criticize Edwards and he responded by preaching a series of sermons in Northampton on "religious affectations" that were gathered and published in 1746. This book is a classic in the field of phenomenology of religion. His book has a strong biblical basis. In the first part, Edwards presents the general relationship between feelings and religious beliefs. He acknowledges that "affectations are the most vigorous and practical exercises, inclinations and the will of the soul" (1971 [1746], p.16). In other words, human beings will respond emotionally to something as important as a relationship with the divine. In the second part, Edwards explains the negative signs of affection. He shares the example, among others, that there was great joy when Jesus entered Jerusalem; but the same crowd who shouted "Hosanna in the highest!" later he shouted, "Crucify him!" In the third part of his book, Edwards talks about those things that are positive signs of true grace, such as love, humility, spiritual growth, among others, which serve as positive evidence of the work of God in the believer's life.

When reading the famous sermon preached in Enfield, I tend to have much sympathy with Dr. Sargant. But nevertheless, if I were to read that sermon one Sunday morning in my church with accompanying emphasis and drama, people would be surprised, would comment, but there would not be the same results described by Edwards. The context is different and chiefly I am not a godly person like Edwards. In this century, we hardly ever speak of hell and sometimes we see it only as something that exists now in some of our complicated neighborhoods. We clash with this concept of justice of God.

There is a big difference between men who have suffered terrible circumstances during a cruel world war in the twentieth century, and the simple listeners convinced by a great preacher who felt that he had to warn them about hell as part of his responsibility as a pastor in the eighteenth century. However, we might notice that this kind of theology frightened people, creating a crisis that could well produce alterations in brain function, as Sargant suggests. Physical reactions produced could be part of a process of abreaction which resulted in conversion. The question is was Jonathan Edwards using fear to "brainwash" his people? Many times in the history of the church, physical phenomena such as crying, laughing, or falling into a trance can be observed. Does God use the process of abreaction for dealing with people? Does the fact that many people

were converted justify Edward's style of preaching? Our next panelist will try to address these questions.

Dr. Patrick Dixon (1957-) graduated in Charing Cross Hospital, London. He worked for a time at St Joseph's Hospice, a center that offered decent treatment for people with terminal illnesses. He founded the international agency ACET¹, an organization that has carried out a global campaign on education for prevention of HIV-AIDS. Dixon no longer practices as a doctor, but he is still actively involved as Chairman of the International Alliance of ACET.

Currently, he devotes his time working with companies as a 'futurologist'. On the back cover of his latest book (2015), *The Future of Almost Everything*, Sir Brian Souter² describes it as "a great guide for our future, which should be read by all decision makers, filled with a deep insight into a great number of trends. Patrick Dixon has a great career for many years in anticipation of opportunities, risks and challenges that affect us."

Before inviting him to the debate on experiences in times of revival, we must add that Dr. Dixon is a convinced evangelical and is associated with the church of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), a charismatic Anglican church serving a congregation in the west end of London with a good proportion of young professionals who work in the city of London (the financial center of the city).

He devotes the first chapter of his book, *Signs of Revival*, to describe events that took place in 1994 in HTB, influenced by what was happening in Toronto. He describes scenes where people were laughing, crying and falling in apparent trance during church services. He cites in his book the weekly newspaper the Sunday Telegraph (6/19/94): "The faithful fall for power of the Spirit ... there are astounding scenes of people shaking with laughter, slipping into a trance, falling to the floor and crying" (in Dixon, 1994, pp. 9-10). At this historic moment nobody was preaching terrifying sermons rather the visitation of God went from church to church and even from country to country by a kind of contagion that came from the Vineyard Toronto Church. Similar demonstrations were also observable in Costa Rica and other countries during this period.

In order to observe these phenomena Patrick Dixon made a historical study, investigating all the sources he could find where these religious phenomena were observed in times of revival. In his chapter, entitled "The History of Emotional Faith", he discovered cases of the Fathers of the Church, some cases in the medieval period, and the great visitation of God, on several occasions in Wales and Northern Ireland, the case of Jonathan Edwards, England under the ministry of the brothers Wesley, the great revival of 1859 in the United States and Britain, the revival in Wales, 1904 (among others).

In the chapter entitled "Medical Perspectives on Manifestations", he provides interesting insights about what happens in the brain and nervous systems of people in these situations. He notes that what happened in his congregation in London and globally, was a kind of contagion. This opens the possibility of influence of auto-suggestion and hysteria in people, in a highly emotionally charged meeting. Laughter is

¹ <http://www.acet-international.org/>

² Sir Brian Souter is a member of the Church of the Nazarene in Perth, Scotland.

exceptionally contagious and liberates emotions. But this could be driven to euphoria and even mania. Crying also releases tension and emotions.

He dedicates an interesting section to answer William Sargant. He believes that Sargant is following an intuition and has treated it in a superficial way. What Sargant does not understand is that the conversion takes place in different ways, many of which do not come after terrifying sermons. Many people become Christians simply because a friend or family shares the gospel with them. Dixon believes that two-thirds of conversions to Christianity occur in a gradual manner and not as a result of a crisis (p. 247). He agrees with Sargant that an extremely emotional worship service with music which is very rhythmic and has a high volume may lead people to have emotional crisis, but this is not the case, says Dixon in the majority of charismatic churches (p. 248). He admits that all human behavior can be infectious because we feel we need to identify with a group.

Patrick Dixon suggests another alternative theory of what is going on in the minds of the people who go into a trance. He explains it as a recognized phenomenon, called 'Altered States of Consciousness' (ASC). He describes what happens when a person enters an ASC: they will have a different perception of their reality; they are unconscious of the passing of time; they may lose control over their bodies; they will exhibit changes in emotional expression such as disinhibition, ecstasy or terror; the body feels heavy and disassociated; there may be changes in perception; they may hallucinate; they may experience changes in meaning or have a sense of the ineffable or feelings of new hope and hyper-suggestibility (pp. 261-265).

Dixon gives an interesting list of factors that drive people to enter into ASCs such as: prolonged fasting; reduction in sensory stimulation, being silent for a long time; or the opposite receiving a barrage of sensory stimulation; concentrating on one thing; relaxation of critical faculties; changes in blood chemistry through disease, drugs, dehydration, hyperventilation or hypnosis (pp. 266-276).

Examining this list should make us concerned. What have drug-induced hallucinations to do with religious experiences in church? May be that was why Saint Anthony, the hermit monk who, ate almost nothing every day, saw demons all the time. This list that Dixon offers raises questions about services where choruses are repeated several times as in Hindu mantras, or when people sing worship songs to the beat of the drum for an hour, or where people dance for prolonged periods in worship, or when some pastors invite their members to "make their minds go blank". We could include here also religious groups who meditate in silence looking at religious pictures.

Meditation is the technique used by specialists in eastern religions to enter an ASC. One of the effects that can be felt in all these cases, whether they be Hare Krishna or evangelical Christians, is that they end up by saying that have had a sublime experience of joy and peace; as Sargant warns, "After a terminal collapse into stupor, both groups of participants may awake with a sense of spiritual rebirth" (p. 107).

The explanation given by Dr. Dixon is that when God made us, He created us with this fourth state of consciousness. How did the prophets receive visions? Isaiah explains his calling: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). John of Patmos explains: "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet..." (Revelation 1:10). In the history of the conversion of

Cornelius recounted in Acts 10, the author tells us of Peter: “About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance (vv.9-10).

Conclusion of debate

Sargant is right to say that these events are cathartic for many people; they feel at peace, they lose the burdens that were weighing them down. Dixon also admits that after these events in London, people were relieved, full of joy and peace. Dixon's contribution to the explanation of the ASCs is very interesting; it throws light both on the effect of heightened religious experience and also contains a warning. So we must understand more what scholars in psychology and psychiatry are saying about it.

We will look again at the questions we initially posed. Can a preacher manipulate the feelings of his listeners in an evangelistic campaign? I think both, Sargant and Dixon, admit that this is possible. Preaching graphically about hell as in the case of Edwards and Wesley may fall into this category. Should we call this ‘brainwashing?’ While there are undoubtedly Christian and non-Christian sects employing the technique of brainwashing, most of what happens in a moment of true revival is a very special response to the move of the Spirit of God. A genuine revival will be accompanied by repentance from sin, and may have physical manifestations. The historical review provided by Dixon shows that these are common during genuine revivals. It is totally justifiable, at a time of revival to see an increase in the religious sensibilities of the participants. In the end, a revival will be judged not by the amount of emotions or physical manifestations displayed, but by the obvious change in people’s lives and the positive effect on society around them.

Are revival leaders manipulating people’s experiences or are their experience genuine? God gave us our emotions and, when a person hears His voice and has a meeting with Him, they will experience it. I conclude with two warnings from Scripture: Jesus said, “For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Mathew 24:24); and John wrote: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

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