REVIEWS OF BOOKS


As many readers of this journal will be aware, North American conservative Reformed writers (and readers) have grown accustomed in recent decades to taking a dim view of the Christian "revival" tradition. A somewhat different perspective prevails, however, outside North America. Here, claims in popular Christian media that such happenings are afoot around the globe and in regions of America are often met with quizzical expressions and raised eyebrows.

The authors of the two books under review have in common that, while being in broad agreement with the conservative Reformed subculture, they differ from it by taking up a favorable view of the Christian revival tradition, the origins of which they trace to the Great Awakening era of the 1750s. Together, the authors demonstrate that the pattern of the awakening of gospel-resistant societies and the reviving of flagging believers is something that has extended itself across the nearly three centuries which have passed since the 1750s. Both works have an "apologetic" interest: they want to incline us to the belief that such movements may well be the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to advance the gospel in our times.

Yet, having noted these similarities, it is also appropriate to draw attention to their distinctive emphases. Shaw, a Westminster Th.D. graduate and Kenya-based historian of world Christianity, approaches his subject from an interesting non-western vantage point. He urges us to see that the colonial Great Awakening phenomenon represents an archetypal pattern which has been providentially reproduced since, in climates as distant as Korea (1907), West Africa (1930), Uganda (1935 and the following several years), contemporary Brazil and China. The 1950s surge of American urban crusade evangelism spearheaded by Billy Graham is also reckoned to belong among the notable post-Great Awakening recurrences of religious awakening. From his vantage point in post-colonial Africa, Shaw claims to discern that Christian revival has very often been both the birth-process of and catalyst for the indigenization of the Christian message to a particular society which, having received the gospel from cross-cultural messengers, now must learn to state it in localized terms. Shaw believes that such revival is now current, and that it is a powerful instrument of the Holy Spirit, enabling churches to articulate the gospel with new conviction in societies characterized by social upheaval. His is an interesting thesis, and we will return to the evaluation of it.

Hanson (author of the widely appreciated *Young, Restless and Reformed*) and Woodbridge (the eminent church historian of Deerfield, Illinois), by contrast, stand squarely within the American scene. They show a proper consciousness that our Great Awakening was a trans-Atlantic phenomenon which bequeathed both great benefits to young America’s churches and some questionable influences, emerging early in the next century. Their helpful treatment of the 1857–1859 American Prayer Meeting Revival is especially to be welcomed. Like Shaw, they are interested in the twentieth-century recurrence of revival on a global scale and, in addition to highlighting developments in Korea, East Africa, and China, devote a chapter to the important developments in Wales (1904), some features of which were transmitted, globally, to venues as far afield as India and California. As does Shaw, Hanson and Woodbridge include the Billy Graham crusade era as evidence that the revival tradition has not utterly bypassed North America. Yet, in contrast to the other work, the Hanson-Woodbridge volume could fairly be characterized as lamenting the current decline of seeking after revival in contemporary Reformed evangelicalism, despite this movement’s widely reported current doctrinal resurgence.

These two books each have merits. Shaw’s has clearly given us the best-available bird’s-eye view of large Christian people-movements in the twentieth century, viewed from outside the categories of the West. He has indeed shown that at times, revival and the indigenization of Christianity have advanced together. Hanson and Woodbridge, better-rooted in the American story, have assuredly shown us that American developments through 1869 are linked to global developments in the twentieth century, the impacts of which are still being felt. And yet, with these plaudits awarded, there must come a tallying up of some of the issues to which neither book has done justice. As one largely sympathetic to their joint efforts, this writer still asks:

1. Has either volume satisfactorily probed the question of the antecedences of such movements prior to the Great Awakening? Something as vital to the interests of the church and gospel as religious awakening (as they urge it to be) cannot truly be conceived of as emerging only in 1750s Wales, England, and Massachusetts. If revival is as indispensable as they urge, then its earlier emergence must be documentable. If it cannot be documented, their line of argument falters badly.

2. Has Shaw, in his determination to link the emergence of revival with the emergence of national consciousness in colonial and post-colonial situations not over-extended himself? Colonial America’s awakening was occurring simultaneously with events in Wales, England, Scotland, and Saxony, can anyone credibly suggest that these awakenings were wrapped up with the working out of national consciousness after colonial oppression? And what of the applicability of this theory to the Billy Graham era, considering that this beloved preacher early “morphed” from a firebrand revivalist into the confidante of presidents and a domesticated national icon? That there might be some such link in some cases is highly possible. But Shaw has engaged here in pear-stringing beyond what the actual evidence will support.

3. Why has Shaw, and to a lesser extent Hansen-Woodbridge (note their pp. 32-33), been reluctant to discuss what might be called the “dark side” of early nineteenth-century revival practice? Historians writing within a Reformed framework have regularly allowed that an eighteenth-century theology of revival, largely mapped out by Jonathan Edwards, was developed in an unsavory direction by practitioners such as Charles G. Finney (1792–1875). In consequence of this “rose-colored” approach, it is entirely natural that both volumes devote chapters to the mid-twentieth-century Billy Graham era as an example of spiritual revival. A good case can be made for arguing that Eisenhower-era America experienced spiritual awakening. Yet the crusade evangelism of the admired Billy Graham, whatever stage of his career one might focus upon, owed far more to the legacy of Charles
G. Finney than to that of Jonathan Edwards. Thus the question can be fairly asked: "What has been the criterion for inclusion in the range of movements or leaders treated in either volume?" One can conclude that the criterion has not been a common understanding of revival. And then there is the question of what has been excluded.

4. The most significant omission from both volumes is surely the rise of global Pentecostalism, commencing in 1906. This reviewer is no apologist for this expression of Christianity, yet a question must be asked about the adequacy of any modern treatment of revival that does not reckon with the rise and spread of this global movement which, after one century, dwarfs many expressions of older, historical Christianity. Shaw is interested in global Pentecostalism as it manifests itself in twentieth-century movements in Africa, Brazil, and Latin America—but not in the country of its origin. Hansen-Woodbridge’s omission of the movement is even more glaring, given their more extensively North American focus. There are other significant exclusions: the Billy Sunday era (1891–1935), the 1960s “Jesus movement,” and the 1990s “Toronto Blessing” among them.

5. Finally, both volumes leave us about where we began in differentiating what are certainly three distinct phenomena, all of which now tend to be lumped together. One is a “popular” religious movement or “people” movement. We would cast no aspersion on some of the movements these authors have documented in Latin America, West Africa, and India if we employed this terminology. The second is “religious awakening” under which masses of a society come under profound conviction while previously irreligious. The third is “religious revival”—a term implying the restoration of vitality to a church or individual. These two volumes, while not responsible for the confusion that is resulting by the current undifferentiated use of these terms, have not done anything significant to help us to use such terms more deliberately so as to distinguish things that differ.

The Hanson-Woodbridge volume, because it shows greater theological discernment, will generally prove more useful to conservative Reformed readers. The Shaw volume, though weaker in that respect, still offers us a most helpful window into global movements of the Spirit which are still in progress.

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This single-volume work by two former professors at the University of Apeldoorn in Holland is welcomed by English readers in the field of systematic theology. The purpose of this work is to present Reformed dogmatics with scriptural simplicity. As the title suggests, the authors are loyal to the Reformed confessional tradition, particularly as embodied in the so-called Three Forms of Unity. To this reviewer’s knowledge, they have not written anything that is contrary to the doctrinal standards to which they adhere. However, this does not mean that they have twisted the Scriptures in order to justify doctrines that are a foregone conclusion. The authors have listened carefully to the voice of God in Scripture and a conviction of