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The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740–1865

Kenneth P. Minkema and Harry S. Stout

In his later years Edwards Amasa Park contemplated writing a biography of the great colonial American theologian Jonathan Edwards, but he never lived to carry out the plan. Park (1808–1900), a professor at Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, was commonly known as “the last of the Edwardseans,” the line of orthodox Calvinist theologians who subscribed to Edwards’s thought. In notes made in 1903 describing the sources collected by his father for the biography, William Edwards Park wrote that Jonathan Edwards had “recognized African Slavery[,] He held much the same view which Professor Stuart afterwards adopted.” “Professor Stuart” was Moses Stuart (1780–1852), the elder Park’s colleague at Andover, an apostle for slavery, a colonizationist—that is, an advocate of exporting freed blacks back to Africa—and a defender of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. William Park’s statement, it turns out, was essentially correct. Many nineteenth-century figures who claimed to be followers of Edwards were actually closer to him in their conservative support of slavery than they were to the first-generation followers of Edwards, whose theology was known as the New Divinity. Among the New Divinity’s adherents was Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), who distinguished himself during the revolutionary era by calling for the immediate abolition of slavery.¹

Most research on religion and antislavery has followed a well-worn path pioneered by Gilbert H. Barnes, John L. Thomas, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Their studies emphasized “evangelical” and Unitarian reformers such as the brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan, the sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimké, and William Lloyd Garrison. More recently, studies of African American figures such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth have revealed the indispensability of black voices for liberation. Over the last quarter of a century, important studies have focused on the religious convictions brought to the antislavery debate.² Yet conspicuously absent have been reformers in the New Divinity and Ed-


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² Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830–1844* (New York, 1953); Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight
wardsean tradition. Although now largely unknown, that tradition represented a major intellectual and social force in antebellum American society, and it constitutes the primary focus of this essay. This study contributes to the histories of the antislavery debate and of religion by showing how a religious movement that started with radical antislavery principles in the revolutionary period gradually and largely, but never wholly, abandoned the principles of immediate emancipation and racial integration.

In American social and intellectual history, it has been common to use a “declension” model to describe the devolution of movements from primitive originality and genius to dissipation, imitation, and irrelevance. Scholars have thus long portrayed the adherents of Edwards as mere shadows of the founder who did not fully understand his ideas. By the early nineteenth century, scholars have often suggested, the New Divinity that Edwards founded was dead. Recently, however, scholars of religion have been reevaluating antebellum religious thought and culture and have found important Edwardsean continuities up to the end of the nineteenth century and beyond, and in figures supposedly thoroughly hostile to Edwards. By focusing on the involvement of Edwards’s followers in the debate over slavery, we show that, here, at least, the declension model holds true, though the tradition reached its apex, not in the progenitor, but in his first-generation disciples.

A key theological concept for understanding the evolution of Edwardsean approaches to slavery was addressed by Edwards in his posthumously published *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765). In that work Edwards defined “true virtue” as “that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general, that is immediately exercised in a general good will.” Edwards used another key term, “Being in general,” to identify God. Sometimes Edwards defined true virtue as “benevolence to Being in general,” with “benevolence” meaning that “general good will” or love extended to God and fellow humans. Those terms are crucial, for Edwards’s disciples would refine his concept of benevolence even more into “disinterested benevolence,” or “disinterestedness,” with distinct implications for antislavery.

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We will trace the shifting views on slavery expressed by Edwardseans, first Edwards himself and then his major intellectual heirs, spanning more than a century from proponents of the colonial New Divinity active in the revolutionary era to nineteenth-century Edwardseans who held forth in prominent pulpits in every generation through the Civil War. When closely examined, this intellectually coherent but ideologically diverse tradition included men and women who ranged widely on a continuum from adamant abolitionism to implicit support for slavery.

Jonathan Edwards

We begin with Jonathan Edwards and his conflicted influence on antislavery in the movement he would inspire. By many accounts, Edwards was America's greatest religious thinker and, according to Perry Miller's classic though flawed biography, was "so much ahead of his time that our own can hardly be said to have caught up with him." Edwards's precocity did not extend to the question of slavery. In fact, Edwards was a slave owner who purchased a number of slaves in the course of his lifetime. As early as 1731, he bought his first slave in the auctions at Newport, Rhode Island, the major northern hub of the Atlantic slave trade. The brutalizing dehumanization of the slave market, now generally conceded, apparently did not faze him, nor did he ever free any of his slaves. Apparently, Edwards was so at home with the institution of slavery and the status that it conferred on aristocratic clergymen such as himself that he never really questioned its central tenets. It was in the logic of Edwards's ethics and epistemology, rather than in his personal views, that seeds of a unique antislavery ideology would be planted. To be true to their mentor's philosophical and theological legacy, Edwards's heirs had to repudiate his racist indifference to antislavery.

That said, Edwards was forced to confront the moral issue of slavery at least once. This little-known moment in Edwards's life was hidden from historians until several years ago, when a letter draft he wrote was discovered amid his papers in the Franklin Trask Library at Andover Newton Theological School. That Edwards wrote at all on the subject of slavery owed less to a sense of moral urgency than to clerical politics. In late 1741, at the peak of the Great Awakening in New England and only weeks after delivering the quintessential fire-and-brimstone sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, Edwards sat down at his desk and penned thoughts on slavery and the slave trade in defense of a fellow clergyman who was criticized for owning a slave. That document, summarized elsewhere by Kenneth P. Minkema, displayed an Edwards who accepted the status of slaves born into slavery but opposed the ongoing Atlantic slave trade. Those who objected to slaveholding but condoned the slave trade, Edwards wrote, partook "of a far more cruel slavery than that which they object against in those that have slaves here." He opposed further incursions into Africa for new slaves, denying that "nations have any power or business to disfranchise all the nations of Africa."

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Edwards’s reasons were grounded in his apocalyptic conviction that before Christ returned to earth, the heathen must be converted to the truths of Christianity. As he surveyed world events, he concluded that slavery could never be a converting ordinance that would bring captured Africans into the Christian faith voluntarily. In fact, an ongoing trade in African slaves would promote just the opposite: wars of African against African, African against European, and European against European. For the conversion of Africa to take place, the slave trade would have to die. But for Edwards, that line of argument had no immediate bearing on American slaves born into the institution; they were there for life. To those who argued that the Israelites traded in slaves, Edwards responded that this precedent gave no warrant for the present: “God’s winking at some things that were early,” he argued, had no more relevance for the present than God’s winking at polygamy during the days of the Old Testament. In the dispensation of the gospel, God “don’t wink at such things now.”

That Edwards saw no contradiction between “winking” at domestic slavery and balking at the continuing importation of slaves is curious but also characteristic of the thinking of many among his clerical peers. Many never witnessed the most extreme brutalities of the institution, and having satisfied their Christian consciences by witnessing and preaching to their slaves, they were at peace with it. By accepting domestic slavery as a necessary evil not unlike a just war, Edwards could remain at ease with his slaves—whom he viewed as legally in bondage—as long as he tutored them in the truths of Christianity. Significantly, Edwards never referred to slavery as a “sin.”

Edwards’s views on the slave question, fraught with tension and potential, prefigured future developments among his followers. After his death in 1758 some concerns he articulated—a biblical view of slavery, the separation of slavery per se from the slave trade, and the impact of slavery on global revivalism, among others—became central to views on slavery and its abolition. The contradictions in Edwards’s own thought encouraged several different approaches in the New Divinity and among the later Edwardseans.

The Revolutionary New Divinity

In the revolutionary era Edwards’s apparent indifference to domestic slavery was not shared by his natal and intellectual progeny. Subsequent New Divinity leaders, white, native, and black, would extend the social and ideological implications of Edwards’s complex views of the slave trade and of Indians, as well as of his treatises *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* (1758) and *The Nature of True Virtue*, forming stricter—and sometimes exceptionally urgent—opinions on the institution. However different the cultures and contexts of the two generations, war—from the Seven Years’ War to the Revolution—formed an important continuity that spurred millenialist fervor. New Divinity abolitionists carried forward Edwards’s millennial, revivalist impulse as an impetus to their views on slavery. Chief of these were Edwards’s son, Jonathan

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Edwards Jr. (1745–1801), and Edwards’s most renowned intellectual heir, Samuel Hopkins.9

Long before he read his father’s treatise on original sin, Jonathan Edwards Jr. witnessed maltreatment of Indians at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, that undoubtedly shaped his later antislavery sentiments. For his part, the elder Jonathan Edwards considered Indian cultures as inferior and Indian religions as satanic. Separated from knowledge of the true religion, Indians were despicable. Yet he exhibited a real sympathy for Indians, and during his tenure at the Indian mission at Stockbridge, he formed a bond with them. When his father accepted the Stockbridge post, the younger Edwards was six years old. His playmates were Indian boys; as a boy he spoke Mahican and Mohawk more proficiently than English, so much so that his father hoped to groom him as a missionary. Though the younger Edwards maintained a strong interest in Indians, his tastes were academic and cosmopolitan. After graduating from the College of New Jersey, he refused a call to Stockbridge and instead briefly studied with Hopkins. He soon became the pastor of the White Haven Church in New Haven, Connecticut, where he became associated with Yale College and drawn into organized resistance to the evils of slavery.10

Jonathan Edwards Jr. fell under the influence of his father’s best-known intellectual disciples, Joseph Bellamy (1719–1790) and Samuel Hopkins. Bellamy, the longtime pastor of Bethlehem, Connecticut, was renowned as a powerful preacher and influential leader among Edwardsians. Hopkins had studied with Edwards in Northampton after hearing him deliver The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of a Spirit of God at Yale College in 1741. He observed revivals and studied divinity at Edwards’s parsonage in late 1741—curiously, the very time Edwards was grappling with the slavery issue—and again during the late spring and summer of 1742. Thereafter, he and Edwards were close friends and constant correspondents. Hopkins began his ministry in the frontier town of Housatonic (Great Barrington), Massachusetts, where he stayed for a quarter of a century. Following Edwards’s death in 1758, Hopkins took advantage of his access to Edwards’s manuscripts and sought to extend his “Mentor’s” legacy by printing a memoir of his life together with selected sermons and treatises. One of them, The Nature of True Virtue, provided a major intellectual source for his antislavery thought. But not at first. Only after moving to Newport, Rhode Island, in 1769 did Hopkins go public with a major revision of his mentor’s theology by redefining the doctrines of “true virtue” and “benevolence to Being in general.”11

Confronted by a society in social transformation and ideological crisis, Hopkins would no longer detach theology from the world around him. Where Edwards, the abstract theologian, could contemplate Christian ethics in terms of “holy affections” to “Being in general,” Hopkins had to locate those affections in relationships with particular beings in the world around him. In other words, he had to resituate the ethics of true virtue from

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Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), oil on canvas, attributed to Joseph Badger, c. 1755. Arguably Jonathan Edwards’s most influential disciple, Hopkins was a minister at Newport, Rhode Island, when he formulated his early and controversial position against slavery and the slave trade. Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.

God to his fellow men and women. That shift would have profound implications for his views of the institution of slavery. Hopkins came somewhat late to the antislavery movement (he owned a slave before moving to Newport), but once committed, he brought an intensity and vivid articulation that, though largely forgotten, stand as a highly influential testimony to the moral necessity of abolition.

How did Hopkins come to his antislavery views? When he moved in 1769 from Great Barrington to Newport—where his mentor had purchased slaves—he saw slavery and the slave trade at their worst. By 1750 half of Newport’s fleet of 170 vessels worked in the violent and brutalizing business of the slave trade. Hopkins’s firsthand witness pushed his theology in distinctive ethical directions that would inspire his mounting antislavery campaign. In the early 1770s, when Hopkins was revising Edwards’s views of true virtue in treatises such as The Nature of True Holiness, he also began preaching against slavery from his pulpit. In 1773 he and Newport’s other minister, Ezra Stiles, sought support for training free black missionaries as a means of discouraging slavery by converting Africans in their homeland. The two hoped to draw support from “those who are convinced

of the iniquity of the slave trade; and are sensible of the great inhumanity and cruelty of enslaving so many thousands of our fellow men every year, with all the dreadful and horrid attendants.” Stiles grounded his antislavery largely in republican ideology. Hopkins complemented that argument with more theological rationales grounded in Edwards’s thought on the millennium and his Indian missiology. In his classic work The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, Bernard Bailyn describes a “contagion of liberty,” by which some thinkers borrowed from the rhetoric of the Revolution to attack slavery. That was certainly true of Jonathan Edwards Jr. and Hopkins. Both were aware of others who made a connection between liberation from British “enslavement” and liberation for American slaves and added their voices to the cause. They were not alone.13

The younger Edwards also began preaching against the slave trade in the early 1770s, indicating close communication with Hopkins, with the theologically liberal Stiles as an additional support. Beginning in 1772, Edwards catechized and preached to Africans and Indians in special meetings. While he maintained the segregationist tradition of seating slaves and servants in the gallery, he did introduce the controversial measure of allowing slaves, free Africans, and Indians who were church members to take communion with white members of the congregation rather than separately. In 1773 Edwards and Ebenezer Baldwin (1745–1776) of Danbury, Connecticut, published an essay against slavery in the Connecticut Journal and the New-Haven Post. In it they pointed out the hypocrisy of their fellow colonists in crying out for liberty and rights yet refusing it to others: “If it be lawful and right for us to reduce the Africans to a state of slavery, why is it not as right for Great Britain, France, or Spain, not merely to exact duties of us; but to reduce us to the same state of slavery, to which we have reduced them?” To practice true virtue, the Christian had to seek to foster general “happiness,” which in the New Divinity encompassed knowledge of God as well as spiritual and physical fulfillment for the self and others. Only those intent on eradicating slavery and all other sins were disinterestedly benevolent and consequently regenerated. Baldwin and Edwards also encouraged other New Divinity followers to publish antislavery pieces.14

Another member of the circle of early New Divinity abolitionists was Levi Hart (1738–1808) of Preston, Connecticut, who married one of Joseph Bellamy’s daughters. In 1774 Hart published a sermon he had delivered in Farmington, Connecticut, that used strikingly Edwardsean rhetoric. Taking almost a verbatim cue from Edward’s History of the Work of Redemption, which was posthumously published that very year, Hart argued:

The whole plan of Redemption, which is by far the greatest and most noble of all the works of God made known to us, to which they all tended in which they centre, is comprised in procuring, preaching, and bestowing liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to the bond. . . . But . . . in proportion as Liberty is excellent and to be desired . . . , so slavery or bondage is terrible and to be avoided. . . . Of all the enjoyments of the present life that of liberty is the most precious and


valuable, and a state of slavery the most gloomy to a generous mind—to enslave men, therefore, who have not forfeited their liberty, is a most atrocious violation of one of the first laws of nature, it is utterly inconsistent with the fundamental principle and chief bond of union by which society originally was, and all free societies ever ought to be formed.

Only a few weeks after Hart’s widely circulated sermon, the Connecticut assembly passed an act prohibiting slave importation. In 1775 Hart even proposed ending slavery in Connecticut by compensating masters for freeing their slaves.15

In the same year that Hart preached in Connecticut, Nathaniel Niles (1741–1828), later a Vermont supreme court judge and member of Congress, preached two staunchly antislavery sermons at the North Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Both bore the unmistakable imprint of his teacher Joseph Bellamy and of the elder Edwards. According to the principle of disinterested benevolence, Niles argued, “you and I shall perfectly unite in our regard for your interest and for mine. Your interest will not be the more dear to you, nor the less so to me, because it is yours.” Since slavery runs contrary to such selflessness, it will certainly incur God’s wrath.

God gave us liberty and we have enslaved our fellow-men. What can we object against it? What excuse can we make for our conduct? What reason can we urge why our oppression shall not be repaid in kind? Should the Africans see why our oppression shall not be repaid in kind? Should the Africans see God Almighty subjecting us to all the evils we have brought on them, and should they cry to us, O daughter of America who are to be destroyed, happy shall he be that rewarded thee as thou hast served us; happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones; how could we object? How could we resent it? Would we enjoy liberty? Then we must grant it to others.16

Hart’s and Jonathan Edwards Jr.’s adaptation of disinterestedness, like Hopkins’s, had a strong social and political dimension. The Revolution compelled the New Divinity theologians to explore anew the meaning of virtue and its importance to society. The younger Edwards, later a Federalist like most other early New Divinity adherents, stressed the need for a strong central government to quell depravity and factionalism and to promote reform. Applying the concept of true virtue to the social covenant, he stated that a benevolent goodwill toward being in general was the essence of a harmonious society. But because of sin, republicanism was exposed to strife. Only a commitment to the good of all on the part of the citizenry and government could save society. “All” included slaves. In keeping with the Edwardsean emphasis on immediate repentance, the younger Edwards believed that the only way a society could correct its fault was wholly and immediately to repent of it. Otherwise, true virtue could not be exercised. The institution of slavery was an ob-


struction because it hindered both master and slave from acting benevolently. Ultimately, national regeneration and reform were blocked by the perpetuation of slavery.

New Divinity preachers were not alone in their antislavery stance, and they made common cause with other liberationists. In December 1772 the recently arrived English immigrant and Baptist lay exhorter James Allen anticipated the most famous English immigrant, Thomas Paine, with incendiary sermons urging the colonists to assert their rights and throw over a king who would make them “slaves.” Moving beyond Paine, he urged abolition of slavery at home.17

Allen’s frequently reprinted sermon pamphlets were undoubtedly read by the New Divinity clergy and, in particular, by Samuel Hopkins. Unlike his mentor, Hopkins had transformed his ethical imperatives, and he had no difficulty invoking the category of sin to describe all forms of chattel slavery, domestic or in trade. In Calvinism, to speak of sin was to require immediate redress; here could be no equivocating or gradualism.18

Nothing short of universal emancipation would do. In one widely circulated address to the Continental Congress in 1776, Hopkins invoked disinterested benevolence to single out the “very great and public sin” of slavery that “must be reformed before we can reasonably expect deliverance, or even sincerely ask for it.” Hopkins borrowed the language of Edward’s 1741 draft on slavery and the slave trade to compare the purchase of “illegal” slaves with receiving stolen goods but then went on to denounce all forms of slave ownership as sinful. More, failure to resist the sin of slavery was as sinful as slaveholding itself: “We, by refusing to break this yoke and let these injured captives go free, do practically justify and support this slavery in general, and makes ourselves, in measure at least, answerable for the whole; and we have no way to exculpate ourselves from the guilt of the whole . . . but by freeing all our slaves.” Ministers in particular were guilty of tyranny if they were silent about slavery because “they are commanded to lift up their voice, and cry aloud, and show the people their sins.” Of these sins, Hopkins concluded, none was more “cruel” or “shocking” than slavery.19

An unpublished sermon by Hopkins from 1776 has only recently been discovered and transcribed. It too plays on the theme of ministerial culpability as it rages against the sin of slavery. To provide context, Hopkins described the desolation of ancient Israel for its people's sin and disobedience. The Israelites tried to “bribe” God with fast days and outward shows of devotion, but their “hands were full of Blood.” The situation in New England in 1776 was no different. Despite libertarian rhetoric, “the Blood of Millions who have perished by means of the accursed Slave trade long practised by these States is crying to heaven for vengeance on them and tho’ everyone has not had an equal share in this wickedness, not having been actually guilty of Enslaving his brother, yet by a general connivance it is become now the Sin of the Land.”20

17 See especially James Allen, The Watchman’s Alarm to Lord N——H (Salem, 1774).
18 David Brion Davis has argued that “immediatism was something more than a shift in [political] strategy. It represented a shift in total outlook from a detached, rationalistic perspective on human history and progress to a personal commitment to make no compromise with sin.” See David Brion Davis, “The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 49 (Sept. 1962), 209–30.
19 Samuel Hopkins, A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans, 1776, in Am I Not a Man and a Brother, ed. Bruns, 399, 413.
20 We are indebted to Jonathan D. Sassi of the College of Staten Island for sharing his transcription of Hopkins’s sermon with us prior to its publication. See Jonathan D. Sassi, “‘This whole country have their hands full of Blood this day’: Transcription and Introduction of an Antislavery Sermon Manuscript Attributed to the Reverend Samuel Hopkins,” Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, 112 (no. 1, 2004), 24–92, esp. 65, 66–67.
In the sermon Hopkins went on to invoke republican ideology but—unlike most Patriots—more as a rationale for abolition than as a political end in itself. This evidence shows the need to revise Bailyn’s thesis that a “contagion of liberty” flowed from revolutionary ideas to institutions such as the state, churches, and antislavery organizations. For Hopkins, it was the reverse: abolitionism, grounded in disinterested benevolence, carried its own contagion of liberty that spread to politics.

Hopkins’s 1776 sermon was delivered shortly after the Declaration of Independence was published, and he pounced on the declaration for the sake of his revolution. In what is perhaps the first documented antislavery argument citing the declaration, he proclaimed: “Tis self Evident, as the Honorable Continental Congress observed: ‘that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, as Life, Liberty, the persute of happiness.’” With the declaration in hand, Hopkins could argue that slavery was opposed both to the primary law of God and the emerging law of the land. Hopkins would not be the last to invoke “America’s scripture,” and his early expropriation of its language signals the rhetorical power contained in that document and, in particular, the enduring anthem of “all men are created equal.”

Having established the grounds of slavery’s sinfulness in natural and divine law, Hopkins moved in his independence sermon to a withering application, calling on Americans to repent and reform or lose all the gains promised in the looming war for independence. Blending republican and New Divinity demands for the equal distribution of social and civil benefits, Hopkins declared, “where liberty is not universal it has no existence.” Evil, slaveholding American legislators were to be shunned as zealously as Parliament or the king’s ministers. It was not enough that they supported independence: “be sure that you never give your Sufferage for the Election of one to any place of public trust that does enslave his fellow creature, certain it is that he that will Enslave an African would enslave an American if he could. He that will enslave one man would enslave all men if he had power.” For Hopkins, the rhetoric of revolution had two inseparable aspects; it simultaneously looked outside to British “tyranny” and internally to African enslavement. Independence could not be contemplated without including abolition. In words reminiscent of James Allen, he exhorted his hearers to act, not only against British tyranny, but against their own sins.

Rouse up then my brethren and assert the Right of universal liberty; you assert your own Right to be free in opposition to the Tyrant of Britain; come be honest men and assert the Right of the Africans to be free in opposition to the Tyrants of America. We cry up Liberty, but know it, the Negros have as good a right to be free as we can pretend to. We say that we have a right to defend our Liberty, but know assuredly that this is not the privilege of one man more than another. The Africans have as good a right to defend their liberty as we have. Be exhorted therefore to exert yourselves for universal Liberty as that without which we can never be a happy people.

Sadly, Hopkins’s striking words, looking beyond abolitionism to a just society, would not be widely heeded, even by his own congregants. And Americans would not be a “happy people.” New Divinity theology did not lead inexorably to abolitionism. Although

21 Ibid., 71. See Pauline Maier, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence (New York, 1997), 154–208.
22 Sassi, “‘This whole country have their hands full of Blood this day,’” 91–92.
Hopkins extolled the disinterestedness of his famous Newport parishioners and disciples Sarah Osborn (1714–1796) and Susanna Anthony (1726–1791), who preached to slaves and built up a small community of free and enslaved black Edwardsians in Newport, they were silent on the sin of slavery. Osborn even owned a slave whose mother was in her prayer group. Most colonial Patriots, citing republicanism first, were more than willing to uncouple independence and slavery, creating the groundwork for the profound contradiction of American freedom and American slavery that stands at the center of an ongoing American tragedy.

But New Divinity clerics would continue to agitate for liberation, contributing to an unbroken American rhetoric of emancipation that would eventually triumph in the Civil War. Those clerics, along with others, recognizing that slavery would never end through piecemeal opposition, pioneered in creating American organizations against slavery and the slave trade. For example, in 1790 Jonathan Edwards Jr. (together with such civic leaders as Ezra Stiles, Tapping Reeve, and Noah Webster) helped form the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom and the Relief of Persons Unlawfully Holden in Bondage. This group used pamphleteering, lobbying, letter writing, and litigation to further the cause of abolition. The society was largely a theological (and biological) family affair. Other founding members included New Divinity ministers—many of them the students or the students of students of Hopkins and Bellamy—Charles Backus, Benjamin Trumbull, Nathan Perkins, Ammi Robbins, Jeremiah Day, Allen Olcott, and Nathan Strong Jr., as well as Levi Hart, state representative David Daggett (a parishioner of the younger Edwards), and the younger Edwards’s nephews Timothy Dwight (later president of Yale) and Theodore Dwight (an adherent of Hopkins who praised the slave revolt in Saint Domingue).

In 1791 Jonathan Edwards Jr. was asked to deliver the society’s first annual address, which was published as *The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade, and of Slavery*. Like his father and Hopkins, he denied that the warrant to Israel in Leviticus was still in effect. It “has no respect to us, but was... peculiar to them,” he asserted. Biblical patriarchs such as Abraham were guilty of adultery and concubinage, but that did not mean that Christians were freed to do the same. Grappling with his family’s history—both his father and his grandfather had owned slaves, and his brothers either owned or sold them—the younger Edwards sought to exonerate his kinsmen by pleading at once their Christian sincerity and their ignorance. Whether consciously or not, he invoked the same image of God’s “winking” that his father employed in his 1741 draft. If slavery was a greater crime than “fornication, theft or robbery,” this seems to bear hardly [reflect badly] on the characters of our pious fathers, who held slaves. But they did it ignorantly and in unbelief of the truth. . . . As to domestic slavery our fathers lived in a time of ignorance which God winked at; but now he commandeth all men everywhere to repent of this wickedness, and to break off this sin by


righteousness, and this iniquity by shewing mercy to the poor, if it may be a lengthening out of their tranquility.

Where the elder Edwards had used this “winking” passage from the Acts of the Apostles to exonerate those in the past who participated in the slave trade, his son extended it to indict slavery in general.25

The revolutionary generation of New Divinity preachers shared Hopkins's and the younger Edwards's more radical sentiments. Nathanael Emmons (1745–1840), the “flame of liberty kindled in our revolutionary struggle...burn[ing] inside him,” held that slavery contradicted revolutionary principles. After he retired in 1835, he acted as the president of the New York Antislavery Society. Integral to Emmons's motives was disinterested benevolence. “Benevolence,” he taught, “is the key to unlock the most profound, and difficult, and important doctrines of the gospel, and prepare the mind to discern the beauty and consistency of them.” The New Jersey Presbyterian minister Jacob Green (1772–1790), who may have been the first to call himself an Edwardsean, was likewise wedded to Edwards's ethical scheme and, starting in 1776, attacked slavery as both anti-Christian and antirevolutionary, arguing that slave owners were “tories of the worst sort” because they were enemies to liberty.26 Though scholars have described Timothy Dwight, Edwards's grandson, as noncommittal on emancipation, new appraisals indicate he advocated a just, interracial, and integrated society based on the principles of disinterested benevolence and charity. Dwight was even more radical than Hopkins and the younger Edwards in his stand against colonization, the sending of former slaves back to Africa under the auspices of Christian organizations. He believed that whites were indebted, and had a serious responsibility, to blacks, for example, to provide them a proper education—a theme later echoed by the New Divinity preacher and college president Edward Dorr Griffin (1770–1837), though with the goal of sending educated blacks to Africa. But integrationist voices such as Dwight's were overwhelmed by rising antiblack sentiment and the hardening of racial identities in the North after the turn of the nineteenth century.27

25 Timothy Edwards, the grandfather of the younger Edwards, owned at least one slave, named Ansars; Pierpont, the brother of the younger Edwards, is listed in the 1790 census as owning two slaves; and their brother Timothy Edwards transacted the sale of two of his father's slaves in 1759, though he is thought to have later freed a family slave named Titus and given him land in New York State. See Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery.” Lev. 25:44–46 (Authorized [King James] Version); Jonathan Edwards Jr., Injustice and Impunity of the Slave Trade, and of Slavery, in The Works of Jonathan Edwards (1842; 2 vols., New York, 1887), II, 84, 91; Acts 17:30 (av).


Indians and African Americans adapted Edwardsean teachings to fit their own perspectives. Among the revolutionary generation, Samson Occom (1723–1792), the Mohegan preacher and advocate of the emancipation of enslaved blacks, was educated at Eleazar Wheelock’s Charity School, later Dartmouth College. Wheelock was an intimate acquaintance of Edwards and his theology was strongly Edwardsean, as evidenced in how he impressed upon Occom the need for self-sacrifice. Occom’s ordination sermon was preached by Samuel Buel, a protégé of Edwards and a fellow revivalist. Occom was also a close associate of the younger Edwards; they both ministered to the condemned Indian Moses Paul before his famous execution in New Haven in 1772. In his sermon on that occasion, Occom appealed to disinterestedness as a basis for rapprochement between Indians and whites.28

28 We are indebted to Ava Chamberlain of Wright State University for providing these references from her research on Samson Occom. See Mr. Occom’s address to his Indian brethren. On the day that Moses Paul, an Indian, was executed at New-Haven, on the 2d of September, 1772, for the murder of Moses Cook ([Boston], 1772); and Ava Chamberlain, “The Execution of Moses Paul: A Story of Crime and Contact in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut,” New England Quarterly 77 (Sept. 2004), 414–50. On Occom and abolition, see Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom, Feb. 11, 1774, in Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley, ed. John C. Shields (New York, 1988), 176–77.
Among Timothy Dwight's contemporaries was the African American New Divinity preacher and Revolutionary War veteran Lemuel Haynes (1753–1833), who was an immediatist and, like Dwight, an ardent Federalist. A student of Bellamy's and strongly influenced by Hopkins, Haynes nonetheless renounced Hopkins's claim that God used the evil of slavery to serve a "positive good." He also opposed the increasingly popular idea, begun by Hopkins and Stiles's project, of colonizing blacks. Haynes, in concert with the Philadelphia African Methodist Episcopal preacher Richard Allen, viewed the Revolution as an opportunity to institute benevolence in America, eradicate selfishness—including its worst form, slavery—and establish a multiracial society. Haynes's biographer John Saillant has written that "under the sway of 'Disinterested Benevolence,' Haynes suggested, slavery, superiority, and disparity would vanish, blacks would no longer be locked into ignorance, and the 'natural Affections' would guide black as well as white life."29

Saillant has identified Haynes as part of what he calls a community of "Africanist Calvinism" in the Atlantic world, a tradition that drew heavily on Edwards and Hopkins. African American Calvinists generally espoused colonization, though there were exceptions such as Haynes. But it was colonization with a difference. To these free black lead-

ers, slavery was first and foremost sinful. Rejecting white paternalistic expectations for colonization, black writers and preachers nurtured a special covenantal identity achieved through suffering and trial. Emigration to Africa, freely chosen, was part of that identity. The black Nova Scotian preacher John Marrant (1755–1791), ordained in 1785 under the auspices of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, an aristocratic patron of revivalism, was acquainted with and drew on New England New Divinity writers such as Haynes and Hopkins to develop his hermeneutic. Like Haynes, Marrant made disinterestedness a touchstone. Preaching in Boston to a black congregation, Marrant declared that “benevolence, which is the most important duty, . . . comprehends all the rest . . . pure, holy, spiritual and benevolent affections can only fit us for the kingdom of heaven.” Echoing Hopkins, he also warned that self-love was the source of the evils dividing humankind.30

African Calvinism, like African American Protestantism generally, had a millenarian inception. A principal proponent of emigration was the black Boston Masonic leader, Prince Hall (1748–1807). Indeed, one of the most fascinating documents in early African American Christianity is Hall’s thirty-five-page manuscript that describes a black exodus to Africa to establish a “holy city”—a rebuilding of Eden in its original location. Significantly, the document is an extended commentary on Edwards’s History of the Work of Redemption.31

The Post-Revolutionary Edwardseans

If New Divinity antislavery preachers, white, native, and black, represented a crucial link in the ongoing campaign against slavery, they would not be able to sustain that link within their own tradition. Other voices would pick up the struggle, while new generations of Edwardseans distanced themselves from the fire of Hopkins, the younger Edwards, and Haynes. Many diffused the potency of Edwards’s formulation of benevolence and retreated from Hopkins’s revolutionary rhetoric. Those strict Edwardseans who gave serious consideration to disinterested benevolence were minor figures who largely restricted themselves to using that concept in definitions of Christian ministry.32 Indeed, European thinkers seem to have been more energetic in employing Edwardsean notions of virtue, including most notably the English abolitionists William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp, who held Edwards and Dwight in high regard and read Hopkins and the younger Edwards on slavery. Other English figures who drew on Edwardsean theology included the political theorist William Godwin and the Baptist leader Robert Hall, along with

31 Prince Hall, “Some Remarks on Mr. John Edwards compleat History or Summary of all the Dispensations and Methods of Religion from the Beginning of the World to the Consummation of All Things,” in Letterbook, item 24. In 1900, this manuscript, “filling some 35 pages,” was described as being owned by the John T. Hilton Lodge, Lynn, Massachusetts, in William Upton, “Prince Hall’s Letter Book,” Ars Quatuor Coronatorum, Being the Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge of A. F. and A. M. Lodge 13 (Jan. 5, 1900), 60. Facsimile reproduction of Upton’s article in Charles H. Wesley, Prince Hall: Life and Legacy (Washington, 1977), 214.
32 On the changing perception of virtue as more universal, rather than confined to the elect, see Noll, America’s God, 237–38. On strict Edwardsean examinations of disinterestedness, see Samuel Austin, Disinterested love, the ornament of the Christian, and the duty of man: A Sermon Delivered at New-York, June 5, 1790 (New York, 1791); Charles Backus, The Benevolent Spirit of Christianity Illustrated; in a Sermon, Delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Thomas Snell, to the Pastoral Care of the Second Church in Brookfield, Massachusetts, June 27th, 1798 (Boston, 1798); and Samuel Haven, Disinterested Benevolence of Gospel Ministers, in Promoting Steadfastness in their People: An Occasional Discourse, Delivered Soon after the Ordination of the Rev. Timothy Alden, Jun. A.M. as Colleague with the Aged Pastor of the South Church in Portsmouth, N.H. (Portsmouth, 1800).
the Scots philosopher Dugald Stewart and the German philosopher Immanuel Hermann Fichte, who hailed Edwards as America’s “solitary thinker” and his notion of “universal benevolence” as the bond of love “uniting all to and in God.”

In America, with a few interesting exceptions, New Divinity adherents devolved from revolutionary immediatism to Edwardsean reactionary and gradualist positions on slavery, as did nearly all the major figures who claimed to be influenced by Edwards. In contrast to the New Divinity abolitionists, they separated Edwards’s millennialist reconsideration from slavery. Conversion, not emancipation, governed their doctrine of true virtue. In his study of the important mid-nineteenth-century Yale theologian Nathaniel William Taylor (1786–1858), Douglas A. Sweeney has observed, “Rather than reform society from the top down, . . . [postrevolutionary] Edwardseans sought increasingly to effect change from the bottom up, by converting individual souls and channeling the energies of the regenerate into local church work and voluntary societies.”

Several factors help account for the Edwardsean shift. First, the strategy of “spiritual politics,” or the attempt to change society by converting individuals, was forged in part out of perceived and actual social, political, and ecclesiastical necessity. With the disestablishment of the churches in Connecticut and Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century and the collapse of the Federalist party, New England clergy were deprived of their privileged place in the public square, forcing them to seek improvement through spiritual renewal achieved person by person through churches and revivals. Benevolence was linked with such theological and metaphysical issues as “natural ability” and freedom of the will and God’s providential government. The desire for church unity—and the desire to ensure their jobs—meant that individual clergymen were often reluctant to take a clear-cut stand on slavery for fear it would divide their congregations. For the same reason, denominations were often unable or unwilling to legislate effectively on the issue of slavery.

Second, most of the white Edwardseans were racists. They were disgust at the prospect of a mixed-race society, feared “amalgamation,” and so favored colonization, for which New England Congregationalism was a seedbed. As scholars such as John W.


36 One manifestation of this shift is the number of works by and about Edwards produced in the decades after religious disestablishment (which occurred in Connecticut in 1818, in Massachusetts in 1833). Each of the first two decades of the nineteenth century saw 8 works on Edwards, and in the 1820s the number rose to 27, tailing off in the following decades. Topically, 15 were related (in order of frequency) to conversion, revivalism, and missions. There was a similar trend in the reprinting of works by Edwards: in the 1800s, 15; in the 1810s, 13; in the 1820s, 31, with the number decreasing through the 1850s. Of the 31 in the 1820s, 8 were on conversion, 6 on revivalism, and 7 on missions. Compiled from M. X. Lesser, *The Printed Writings of Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758: A Bibliography by Thomas H. Johnson* (1940, Princeton, 2003).

Sweet, Joanne Pope Melish, and James Brewer Stewart have shown, racial lines softened in the revolutionary era, but during the first decades of the nineteenth century, strict racial barriers and identities arose. Behind the paternalism of colonization lay what Stewart calls a “destructive form of racism.” Most whites in the antebellum North embraced doctrines of white supremacy. Reflecting a “romantic racism,” nearly all the postrevolutionary Edwardsian theologians argued that God had created slavery to christianize Africa through the expatriation of converted blacks.37 For the later Edwardsians, the Declaration of Independence had a far different application than for Hopkins or Haynes. The preamble’s language of inalienable rights was dismissed as a “rhetorical flourish.” Joseph Tracy (1793–1874), secretary of the Massachusetts Colonization Society and inventor of the term “the Great Awakening” to describe the religious revivals of the 1740s, argued in 1833 that the declaration was a dangerous document that in the hands of radicals such as immediatists led to “Jacobinical” abuses. The colonization movement, in contrast, was by reasonable and necessary “degrees” and “preparatory” measures educating blacks for freedom with the goal of building a “civilized, well-governed nation of free colored people”—not in North America, however, but in Liberia. That, for Tracy, was a “benevolent end.”38

Postrevolutionary Edwardsian views on slavery fell along a spectrum, weighted toward the moderate and conservative end. We cannot pretend to show all the nuances, but identifying important positions along the spectrum, and briefly treating figures who represented those positions, will give some sense of the variety. That variety is reflected in an expanding use of the term “Edwardsian.” As the decades passed and Edwards’s thought became a touchstone for more theological circles, the range of people influenced by Edwards, or reacting against him, necessarily expanded.

**The Conservatives**

Among the most reactionary was a group that, while expressing a wish for the end of slavery, nonetheless saw it, as Edwards did, as an ordinance of God for a depraved world that was sanctioned by the Bible. In New England, they included Parsons Cooke (1800–1864), the pastor of Lynn and Ware, Massachusetts, and Nathan Lord (1792–1870), the Presbyterian president of Dartmouth College, who wrote in 1854 that slavery is “a positive institution of revealed religion.” Slavery, continued Lord, is “a sign of a bad world, yet necessary to keep it from worse conditions—badly enough administered, at best and sometimes past endurance, yet, better, on the whole, than would be the absence of it, in the existing state of society at large.” Lord typified many conservative exegetes in arguing that the institution of slavery had to be considered apart from those who abuse it. There was “slavery as it is” and “slavery as it ought to be.” Condemning the abolitionists’ “false humanitarian philosophy,” he lamented the fact that the great Edwards “is well-

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38 Jonathan Blanchard, A Debate on Slavery: Held in the City of Cincinnati, on the First, Second, Third, and Sixth Days of October, 1845 (Cincinnati, 1846), 14; Joseph Tracy, Natural Equality: A Sermon before the Vermont Colonization Society (Windsor, 1833), 5–8, 17–18.
Leonard Woods (1774–1854), oil on canvas by Edward Dalton Marchant, c. 1848. As a professor at Andover Seminary in Massachusetts, Woods used such Edwardsean concepts as benevolence in criticizing abolitionist efforts. *Courtesy Franklin Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School.*

nigh forgotten, or his meaning is interpreted out of him"—a reference to the misuse of *The Nature of True Virtue.* For Lord and like-minded thinkers, the misuse consisted of bending Edwards's ethical thought into unreasonable and radical directions.39

Another important representative figure in this vein was Leonard Woods (1774–1854), a professor at Andover Seminary. Like Lane Seminary, Andover was vilified in the early 1830s for exiling abolitionism from its campus. Woods spearheaded the effort to put a gag rule on student discussion of the slavery issue. Though professing that slavery—as it was practiced in the United States anyway—was "unjust" and that he looked forward to the day when it would be eliminated, he could not call it sinful. Nor, in a distinction commonly made between the institution of slavery and individual slaveholding, could he condemn all masters as sinful. Whereas many abolitionists (going back to Hopkins) argued that slaveholders should be barred from Christian communion, Wood disagreed. Ironically, he employed the doctrine of benevolence in defense of his conservative position. Some benevolent masters, through circumstances not under their control, were compelled to keep their slaves in bondage. "It is said," Woods wrote, "that benevolence

requires the slaveholder to liberate his slaves. This I acknowledge is evident in many cases. In others it is not. With a man governed by benevolence, the question will be, How he can do the most good to his servants? Sometimes, “true beneficence” consisted in keeping slaves in their present state. Even more, ministering to slaves’ souls, delivering them from spiritual enslavement to sin, was more important than delivering them from civil bondage. Using the rather tortured logic of spiritual politics, Woods submitted that “civil freedom is not the greatest of all blessings.”

The Princeton Edwardseans, like most of their counterparts in New England, did not speak of slavery as sin before the outbreak of the Civil War. Other Edwardseans viewed them as the most open apologists for the South. Like Woods, Charles Hodge (1797–1878), Princeton’s famous theologian and the editor of the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, proposed that “slaveholding is not necessarily sinful” if considered on an individual basis. Though in more optimistic moments Hodge looked to a time when the “improvement” of slaves would lead to the eradication of slavery, his dread of social and ecclesiastical division led him to assert that slavery as a system was not evil—only corrupt and cruel slaveholders were—and, citing the example of Jesus and his apostles, that it was not the church’s business to “interfere with respect to the slave laws of the South.” Furthermore, he argued, defects in Edwardsean theology, particularly its concepts of virtue and benevolence, led to the aberration of abolitionism. Hodge declared that the “spirit of censoriousness, of denunciation, of coarse authoritative dealing . . . were the natural fruit of the New Divinity.” Other Old School Presbyterian educators at Princeton, such as Archibald Alexander (1772–1851) and Samuel Baird (1817–1893), who like Hodge were strongly influenced by Scottish commonsensical philosophy, also denounced as too metaphysical or too utilitarian the New Divinity definition of true virtue that, in its radical social application, undergirded the abolitionist argument.

Southern Presbyterians, including Robert Lewis Dabney (1820–1898) of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (later a Confederate officer under Stonewall Jackson), attacked Edwards directly for deviations from the Westminster Confession (a seventeenth-century Calvinist statement of faith) that resulted in theological and social errors. Like the Princetonians, Old School southern Presbyterians deplored the utilitarian, even “infidel” dimension of Edwards’s doctrine of virtue, not only because they foresaw it would turn liberal Protestantism into a social gospel but also because of its potential as an emancipationist argument. An 1837 editorial in a South Carolina newspaper explicitly linked Edwardsean theology and abolitionist agitation when it questioned the orthodoxy of Columbia (South Carolina) Seminary: “Is it as free from all suspicions of a taint of the new divinity, and of abolitionism as a Southern school ought ever to be? We


hazard nothing in saying it is not.” As sectional tensions grew, southern religious leaders were determined to “cut up Edwardsism by the roots.”

The Moderates

Among the Edwardseans, moderates were the most numerous and their shadings of opinion the most varied. Generally, they were colonizationists (in favor of sending blacks back to Africa) and gradualists (in favor of freeing blacks only after certain goals had been accomplished over an indeterminate time). They were strongly anti-immediatist, sometimes asserting that immediatism was a greater sin than immediatists asserted slavery was. While slavery was an injustice that was to be eradicated, they hesitated to dub the institution, or individual slaveholders, as categorically sinful. The transformation of persons and churches through revival was to take precedence—though there were some, such as Joseph Tracy and the Boston minister Edward Norris Kirk (1802–1874), who felt that revivalism should not come at the expense of antislavery action. Combining their revivalist impulse with colonization sympathies, evangelicals worked to train blacks as missionaries to establish churches in Africa, with long-lasting effects.

In the early nineteenth century, influential non-Hopkinsians, such as the Congregationalist-turned-Presbyterian Lyman Beecher (1775–1863) and the Unitarian William Ellery Channing (1780–1842), were generally pro-emancipation but anti-immediatist and professed to be heavily influenced by the concept of disinterested benevolence. Yet Beecher remained noncommittal on antislavery, alienating parishioners and associates who vigorously opposed slavery such as Garrison and Theodore Dwight Weld. Channing, meanwhile, was hampered by racial stereotypes. As a youngster in Newport, he occasionally attended Hopkins’s services; at the age of twelve he heard Hopkins bear “open and strong testimony against the slave trade.” While he disliked Hopkins’s theology, “the man was something else again”; Hopkins, Channing had to admit, lived the doctrine of disinterested benevolence through his antislavery principles and charity to the poor. Moved by the power of Hopkins’s personal example, Channing adopted the principle of “disinterested devotion to the greatest good,” giving the doctrine a utilitarian flavor. Channing, though an anticolonizationist, nonetheless was “terror-stricken,” as one of his parishioners described him, at the idea of forcing masters “to instantly renounce the right of ownership,” and “above all he deprecated the admission of the colored race to our ranks.” All the same, his collected essays imply that he became more of an integrationist as he neared the end of his life.

Among the moderates in a more direct line from Edwards and Hopkins was Nathaniel William Taylor of Yale Divinity School, who adopted the principle of benevolence but rejected Hopkins’s doctrine that a true mark of grace was a willingness to be damned for


44 Jack Mendelsohn, William Ellery Channing: The Reluctant Radical (Boston, 1971), 46, 226, 237; William Ellery Channing, Slavery (Boston, 1835); William Ellery Channing, Emancipation (Boston, 1840).
Moses Stuart (1780–1852), oil on canvas by Francis Alexander. Stuart, Leonard Woods’s colleague at Andover Seminary, held moderate antislavery views but gave priority to preserving political and ecclesiastical unity. Courtesy Franklin Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School.

the greater glory of God. The pursuit of self-love, he argued, cannot be inconsistent with the highest good in the universe or benevolence. (In arguing the validity of self-love, Taylor was in harmony with Edwards.) Like most of his disciples—and for that matter, like his opponents at the other end of the Edwardsean theological spectrum, such as Bennet Tyler (1783–1858) and Asahel Nettleton (1783–1844) of the East Windsor Theological Institute—Taylor was antislavery, procolonization, and critical of the Garrisonians. Involved in a dizzying array of voluntaristic moral and reform societies and organizations, Taylor was nonetheless frustratingly gradualist and cautious on slavery, exemplifying the revised and reactionary Edwardsean conviction that the end of slavery could best be effected through the conversion of one soul at a time. Although he and his disciples opposed the evils of slavery, “When push came to shove, . . . their concern to uphold law and order, to ensure the South’s peaceful transition away from a slave-based economy, and to promote Christian charity among all concerned, undermined their efforts to put an end to the practice.”

Another moderate, Moses Stuart of Andover Seminary, similarly condemned slavery as a “deep stain upon the fair character of our liberty” but did not go further. He was first and foremost a “Unionist,” he declared bluntly in 1850, and would not jeopardize the nation by advocating immediate emancipation. In fact, he argued that “universal and immediate emancipation would be little short of insanity.” Instead, he endorsed a plan of gradual emancipation and of colonizing blacks, moving them, like Indian tribes under Andrew Jackson’s policy, to their own territory and government. In the meantime white Christians did not have the right to “unmake” slaves, while slaves themselves were to be obedient and content so long as they were the “Lord’s freemen.” Defending the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Stuart even invoked Jonathan Edwards’s mid-eighteenth-century manuscript on the slave trade, incorrectly identifying it as a defense of the trade and exonerating Edwards from intending any harm or acting from “motives of self-interest.” With Taylor and conservatives such as Woods, the individual spiritual dimension was paramount in transforming (or persevering through) present ills. Significantly, the word “sin” disappeared from their apologetic discussions of slavery.46

Leonard Bacon (1802–1881), a Taylor protégé, Andover graduate, and minister of the prestigious Center Church of New Haven, Connecticut, began his career as a gradualist and a main architect of the colonization plan who helped raise support for the Amistad defendants and for their return home. Throughout the 1830s Bacon, along with Woods, Stuart, B. B. Edwards (1802–1852), and the rest of the Andover faculty, vigorously denounced immediatism. In an 1833 essay, Bacon claimed that true benevolence toward slaves consisted in a gradualist approach:

We know it is often said, that any doctrine short of immediate emancipation, puts the conscience of the slaveholder asleep, and justifies him in transmitting slavery unmitigated to another generation. But . . . The duty of immediate emancipation is one thing. The immediate duty of emancipation is another thing. That duty, the present duty of beginning the emancipation of his slaves, the instant duty of commencing a process with them, which shall infallibly result in their complete liberation, at the earliest date consistent with their well-being, may be urged at once on every slaveholder as a direct and indisputable corollary from the great law of love.

Again, the word sin does not appear, at least not yet. The worst that Bacon could argue at this point in his life was that slavery was “an abomination to God,” but not a sin. Like Edwards earlier, Bacon could conceive of slavery as a “necessary evil” in the same sense that one could justify war as a “necessary evil” and not murder. But unlike Edwards, Bacon had heard too much in his own republican tradition glibly to associate slavery with just war. In fact, he recognized his inconsistency, confessing that he found himself in a “state of betweenity in relation to parties on the questions connected with slavery.”47

46 Moses Stuart, Conscience and the Constitution: With Remarks on the Recent Speech of the Hon. Daniel Webster in the Senate of the United States on the Subject of Slavery (Boston, 1850), 111–12, 115, 33. See also Moses Stuart, A Sermon Delivered before His Excellency, Levi Lincoln, Esq., Governor, His Honor Thomas L. Winthrop, Lieutenant Governor, the Hon. Council, the Senate, and the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, May 30. 1827, being the Day of General Election (Boston, 1827), 10.

The Presbyterian Church split in 1837 over a constellation of issues, among them slavery. New School Presbyterians were more vocally and consistently against slavery than their Old School counterparts, though such New School leaders as Lyman Beecher allowed discussion of abolition to make only limited headway. Controversial New Schoolers such as Nathan S. S. Beman (1785–1871) and Albert Barnes (1798–1870) acknowledged that a form of slavery existed in biblical times but countered that Jesus and the apostles lent “no sanction to slavery.” If the principles and spirit of Christianity were applied, slavery would be removed from the world because “it is displeasing to God.” The New School General Assemblies consistently denounced slavery as unrighteous but did little to put their resolutions into effect. As Barnes stated, “we cannot pronounce a judgment of general and promiscuous condemnation on slaveholders.” On the question of whether slave owning was a “sin per se,” Barnes, like Hodge, hedged by answering “not necessarily” because state laws, guardianship, and inheritance had to be taken into account.

With the prospect of growing sectional tensions before them, not to mention schismatic Presbyterians, moderate and conservative Congregational Edwardseans were desperately concerned about sustaining political and ecclesiastical union in the face of antislavery agitation. Trying to avoid any offense to southerners, they did what they could to stifle the Garrisonians and other immediatists. For their part, Garrisonians held Calvinist doctrines in contempt, making the sort of bridges that had connected Hopkins and Stiles virtually impossible. The language of benevolence largely disappeared, or became an apologetic for the status quo, in their considerations of the slavery question, while the anti-Calvinist Garrisonians co-opted the language of immediate repentance. Later Edwardseans by and large advocated colonization for some blacks and supported domestic slavery as a means of spreading Christianity. All were cautiously gradualistic on the issue of emancipation.

They, along with New School Presbyterians, also departed from the elder Edwards, Hopkins, and the younger Edwards when they embraced America’s special role in redemptive history. Though by Stuart’s time slave importation had been outlawed and many recognized slavery as an “abomination,” the Edwardseans as a party were keen to halt criticism of slaveholding as a means of preserving the Union and, not insignificantly, of preserving harmony with their white Calvinist colleagues among the southern slave-supporting clergy.

If Edwardsean and Hopkinesian formulations of disinterested benevolence played less and less of a part in antislavery thought, they had a significant role elsewhere in the extended culture of Edwardseanism. One realm of influence was revivalism. During the Second Great Awakening, Hopkins’s teachings were instrumental in revivals in parts of rural New


69 Albert Barnes, An Inquiry into the Scriptural View of Slavery (Philadelphia, 1857), 62–64, esp. 340–41 and 375; Barnes, Church and Slavery, 100, 112–13, esp. 77. See also Nathan S. S. Beman, Thanksgiving in the Times of Civil War: Being a Discourse Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, Troy, New York, Nov. 28th, 1861 (New York, 1861), 29, 34, 40.

50 On the conservative-to-moderate positions of various Edwardseans and evangelicals, see Victor B. Howard, Conscience and Slavery: The Evangelistic Calvinist Domestic Missions, 1837–1861 (Kent, 1990), 11, 17, 97, 132–34; Wyatt-Brown, Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War against Slavery; and Sweeney, “Nathaniel William Taylor and the Edwardsean Tradition,” 149–51.
England, notably northwestern Connecticut. Samuel Mills Sr., the minister of Torringford, reported that an awakening in his church in 1798 led converts to recognize “the duties of unconditional submission and disinterested affection.” Another Connecticut clergyman reported in 1800 that converts “found their hopes... in a persuasion that they have discovered in themselves the exercise of love to God and man, originating not in selfishness.”

A distinguishing feature of Charles G. Finney’s revivals in the burned-over district of upper New York State was his preaching of disinterested benevolence. We know that Finney read Edwards’s works and “spoke of them with rapture.” In his Lectures on Systematic Theology of 1846, Finney came closer to the elder Edwards than to Hopkins on disinterestedness, but his ethical thought is nonetheless consistent with that of Hopkins in its emphasis on making Christian faith palpable in action. A lifelong opponent of slavery and of colonization who became increasingly critical of the South, Finney, like Channing, adopted a utilitarian interpretation of disinterested benevolence in line with Hopkins’s teaching. But the violence incited by immediatism starting in the 1830s repulsed him. Like other religious leaders such as Beecher and Channing, he refused to allow the slavery debate to divert his attention from revivalism and church unity, believing, with the Taylorites, in the efficacy of spiritual politics.

Institutionally, several colleges were founded on or steered into New Divinity principles during the early nineteenth century. Under Samuel J. Mills Jr. the New Divinity dominated Williams College. Dartmouth and Amherst colleges, too, were run by New Divinity administrators. But in these colleges antislavery agitation was a secondary concern; disinterested benevolence was instead channeled into the missionary movement. Mills is hailed as the founder of the mission movement; beginning with his tenure, Williams College provided more missionaries than any other college.

Edwardsian-Hopkinsian disinterestedness also inspired women, both in and outside the mainstream of New England Congregationalism, particularly in the realm of female education. Mary Lyon’s efforts to establish a female seminary were eventually realized at South Hadley, Massachusetts. Like Hopkins, Hart, the younger Edwards, and Prince Hall, Lyon had a millenarian view of history influenced by her reading of Edwards’s History of the Work of Redemption. She was also committed to inculcating true virtue—“the high principle of enlarged Christian benevolence”—in her students (who included Emily Dickinson). Lyon did not, however, admit blacks to her school. As with so many of the Edwardsians, benevolence with Lyon went only so far.


The Neo-Edwardsean Immediatists

If we break down the people we have been looking at demographically, we see that the early New Divinity immediatists were born in the second quarter of the eighteenth century; transitional figures such as Timothy Dwight and Edward Dorr Griffin date from the third quarter; while the moderates—gradualist advocates of colonization at that movement’s height—were born in the final twenty-five years of the century. But a group of neo-Edwardsean immediatists, if we may call them that, were a distinct generation and of a new century, nearly all born a few years before or after 1800. This new breed of Edwardseans, small in number, focused on the immediate abolition of slavery and on finding a place for blacks in American society.

Some individuals took dramatic personal pilgrimages on the issue of slavery, and members of this cohort provide striking examples. We have seen the importance of individual transformations in the lives of figures as diverse as Hopkins and Channing. Joshua Leavitt (1794–1873) is another case in point. A Yale graduate, Finney devotee, and newspaper editor, Leavitt joined the evangelical abolitionists in 1833 after converting from a moderate, revival-first gradualism to uncompromising immediatism. Leonard Bacon, an enemy of immediatism in the 1830s, is yet another example. Later in his career, Bacon declared slavery sinful, denounced the colonization movement that he had done so much to build, and moved toward integrationism. His collection entitled Slavery Discussed in Occasional Essays, published in 1846, inspired Abraham Lincoln. During the Civil War, Bacon in turn exposed himself to ridicule by defending Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation as constitutional and by advocating the drafting of blacks into the army.\(^{55}\)

Other New Englanders in this group included the former Andover Seminary students Amos Phelps (1805–1847) and Jonathan Blanchard (1811–1892) who, despite the Andover faculty’s best efforts to the contrary, were converted to the abolitionist cause. Phelps went on to become the pastor of Boston’s Pine Street Church, where he denounced slavery, colonization, and race prejudice as sinful and advocated immediate, “complete and universal emancipation” as the only truly benevolent remedy. He was instrumental in the formation of the Massachusetts Abolition Society in 1839. Blanchard, one of the Seventy, Theodore Weld’s original group of itinerating abolitionist lecturers, and eventually a pastor and president of Wheaton College, migrated west. In the course of a herculean career, Blanchard (who named one of his sons after Jonathan Edwards) took the abolitionist side in marathon debates with famous orators such as the Presbyterian leader Nathan Lewis Rice and the politician Stephen A. Douglas, arguing that both slavery as an institution and the master-slave relationship were sinful.\(^{56}\)

Converted to immediatism by Garrison’s writings, Beriah Green (1795–1874), a faculty member at Western Reserve College and an activist in the Liberty party, used disi-


\(^{56}\) Amos Phelps, Lectures on Slavery, and Its Remedy (Boston, 1834), 148, 160, 235–36, esp. 13; Clyde S. Kilby, A Minority of One: The Biography of Jonathan Blanchard (Grand Rapids, 1959), 41–45, 97–98, 119–20. See Blanchard, Debate on Slavery. There were also collective shifts on slavery, such as that of the northern Presbyterians, who in 1863 declared as a denomination that slavery was a sin and identified it as the cause of the Civil War. But that shift came only after the war had begun and as a way to justify the continuing conflict. Marsden, Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience, 88–103.
terested benevolence to criticize colonization, which, in his view, would force free, productive blacks into exile. Preaching in 1833, Green was aware that he was going against the tide. Nonetheless, he exhorted his listeners to risk having “your purest motives, your best intentions, your most disinterested endeavours, your most benevolent exertions . . . held up to a general scorn and execration” in order to give free blacks a place in American society. In support of his integrationist view that sought to exempt free blacks from deportation, he cited individuals active in New Haven—the Yale professor Benjamin Silliman and Simeon Jocelyn, pastor of the African Church, who had recently caused a violent backlash by trying to establish an “African college” in New Haven. Implicit in the position of Green and Silliman was a conviction that Jocelyn made explicit—“the equal right of the colored man to literature, in common with other citizens”—a conviction that harked back to earlier Edwardseans such as Dwight. The people of New Haven, however, were not convinced and were fearful the college would be a hornet of abolitionism. The Yale faculty did not lift a finger in support. In a tumultuous town meeting in 1831, the college proposal was vehemently voted down.57

The evolution of figures such Leavitt, Bacon, Phelps, Blanchard, and Green shows how some in the Edwardsean tradition came full circle in their views on slavery. The neo-Ernested immediatists refused to allow that the Bible condoned slavery, and they were not afraid to denounce slavery as a sin that needed immediate repentance. They reflected the radicalization of antislavery movements generally and the corresponding decline in colonizationism in the two decades before the Civil War.

Afterword

This essay represents the first effort we know of to track the Edwardsean emancipationist legacy systematically for a century and a quarter.58 In Edwards we have seen a compromised opposition to the slave trade and among his intellectual heirs in the revolutionary era an all-out assault on slavery in any form. In Samuel Hopkins and Lemuel Haynes we have encountered prophetic voices who represent the apotheosis of the Edwardsean emancipationist tradition. Whatever scholars may say about Hopkins’s theology being inferior to his mentor’s (and that is virtually a truism in intellectual history), he was well ahead on emancipation and racial equality. Indeed, on the subject of race and equality, it was Hopkins and Haynes—not Edwards—who were so far ahead of their times that our own is barely catching up.

The arc of Edwardsean influence in the slavery debate was not an unbroken progression; instead, its movement was retrograde and convoluted. In the generations after Hop-


kins, Edwardseans largely lost a sense of the moral urgency of eradicating slavery and supported gradualism and racial separation. Edwardseans who returned to immediatism late in the antebellum period did so in alliance with the Garrisonians and evangelical abolitionists rather than as conscious followers of Edwards or Hopkins.

Yet, as critical as the New Divinity voices were at the founding moment in our national history, their legacy has gone largely unrecognized. By the time of the Civil War, they had all but disappeared from antislavery and abolitionist memories. In tracking references to Edwards and the Edwardseans in his research for a moral history of the Civil War, Harry S. Stout has found frequent references to, and advertisements for the writings of, “President Edwards” in the northern popular press of the 1860s, but almost all involve Edwards the revivalist and his terrifying sermon Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Significantly, neither Edwards nor his heirs appear in the Confederate press, popular or academic. Perhaps southerners remembered the New Divinity legacy of antislavery better than their northern fellow Calvinist adversaries did and therefore made no mention of the tradition. The only nonsouthern evangelist to appear in the Confederate press was George Whitefield, the “great revivalist preacher,” who, one southern writer gleefully noted, “was at one time a slaveholder in Georgia, being at his death the owner of fifty slaves, men, women, and children.”

Likewise, there is also virtually no mention of Samuel Hopkins or of the doctrine of “disinterested benevolence” in Union publications. In northern literature, Hopkins later reemerged, but in an ambivalent fashion. In the hands of some authors he became a sentimental figure: etherealized and criticized by Harriet Beecher Stowe in an 1859 novel or trivialized with nicknames such as “Old Sincerity” and “Old Benevolence” in a fictitious 1901 version of a journal by Edward’s daughter Esther Burr. Yet, others hailed him. John Greenleaf Whittier, dismissing the “mountainous debris” of metaphysics produced by Hopkins and his generation, praised him for his “moral heroism” in opposing slavery. The ambivalent rediscovery of Hopkins may have been spurred by the dramatically increased attention to Edwardsean ethics in the decade before the Civil War: from only one article on the topic in each of the decades up to midcentury, to at least ten books and major articles in the 1850s. Along with the publication of Hopkins’s collected works (and a separate printing of his antislavery pieces) and of Edward’s Charity and Its Fruits in 1852, there was a printed Princeton-Yale exchange over The End of Creation and The Nature of True Virtue. The flurry of publications and Whittier’s recommendation may have contributed to Stowe’s revival of Hopkins in The Minister’s Wooing.


61 In the debate Presbyterians (the Princeton side) attacked Edwards’s Concerning the End for Which God Created the World and The Nature of True Virtue, claiming that the former incorrectly identified the “end” as God’s glory, rather than the happiness and holiness of the creature, and that the latter was eccentric and not Calvinistic.
Restoring the Edwardsean tradition to the history of antislavery will, we argue, improve our understanding of antislavery thought in several key regards. The Edwardseans demonstrate the intimate connections between politics and religion, in the antebellum period generally and in the slavery debate particularly. While the connections between radical religion and abolitionism have been amply documented, the successive waves of Edwardseans show how a religious school or tradition became part of mainstream culture and then reflected the larger cultural reaction against immediatism. For those later Edwardseans, preserving ecclesiological and political union, as well as promoting revival and church growth, became paramount. Figures in the Edwardsean tradition in the decades preceding the Civil War, pulling back from the antislavery radicalism represented by Hopkins and Haynes, did much to erect the theological bulwark against emancipation and integration. In the long and tortured history of emancipation, the New Divinity appears more a comet or a shooting star in freedom's galaxy than a fixed planet in the Quaker or Garrisonian orbits. But that should not blind us to the vital role that New Divinity voices and the doctrine of disinterested benevolence played in the world we have inherited.

Congregationalists (the Yale side) defended as orthodox and sustainable Edwards's ethical views and his teachings on related topics such as atonement and the nature of the will and the affections. Jonathan Edwards, Concerning the End for Which God Created the World, in Works of Jonathan Edwards, VIII, ed. Ramsey; Park, ed., Works of Samuel Hopkins; Edwards Amasa Park, ed., Timely Articles on Slavery by the Reverend Samuel Hopkins (Boston, 1854).