

〈書評〉

Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. xxii + 607 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

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1. Overview of the Book

Douglas L. Winiarski's *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light* is a breathtaking work on the religious life of ordinary men and women in eighteenth-century New England. The thickness of the book – it is well over 500 pages – can make non-specialist readers shrink from diving into it, but the book is in fact surprisingly accessible. The author's socio-cultural approach that focuses on the “lived” experience of ordinary people makes the whole book a page-turner even for those who are not particularly familiar with, say, the Puritan theology or the Calvinist-Arminian debate. Furthermore, the author's effort to stick to the “words, phrases, and metaphors familiar to eighteenth-century clergymen and laypeople” overall helps to make the subject easier to understand. Even if readers do not have much knowledge of the previous scholarly conversations over “evangelicalism,” the argument of the book will mostly make sense, because Winiarski rather uses the word “Whitfeldarians,” which was, according to him, a more familiar term than “evangelicals” for eighteenth-century New

Englanders themselves.¹

The book consists of five meticulously well-researched parts, *each* of which is 80 to 140-page long. The author's overarching goal in this book is to show how the Congregationalist establishment, which had enjoyed a dominant status in New England since the seventeenth century, was "buried under an avalanche of innovative and incendiary religious beliefs and practices during the middle decades of the eighteenth century."² In Part One, Winiarski identifies key features of established Congregationalist culture in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, among which is a very strong sense of devotional obligations. A wide range of difficulties in life, such as earthquakes, diseases, wars, infant mortality, and other daily afflictions, led New Englanders to seek God's merciful protections and material blessings through the performance of religious duties (e.g., church attendance, baptism, prayer, and meditation). The observance of such devotional practices – which Winiarski calls a "godly walk" – was their way of turning an "uncertain world of pain, strife, and upheaval" into a "more livable" space.³

However, the "godly walk" consensus did not last long. In Part Two, the author discusses how the popular Anglican revivalist George Whitefield changed the New England religious landscape upon his arrival there in 1740. At the core of his ministry was a shift of emphasis from the godly walk (i.e., the patient observance of various religious duties) to a drastic, one-time experience of "conversion." Referring to the new movement formed by Whitefield and his allies as the "Whitefieldian awakening," the author explores various types of sources (e.g., sermons, prayer bills, letters, and diaries) to illustrate the rise of the instantaneous "new birth" discourse in New England in this era. Part Three takes a look at another dimension of the Whitefieldian movement: the physicality of conversion experience. According to the author, there was a widely shared belief among the

1 *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 15.

2 *Ibid.*, 9.

3 *Ibid.*, 76.

participants in the revival that the Holy Spirit would literally enter the bodies of humans at the point of their conversion.⁴ By analyzing numerous cases of trembles, agony, trances, and visions, which converts experienced allegedly as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit, Winiarski highlights the ecstatic, bodily aspect of the new revival.

Not surprisingly, confrontation between the emerging revivalists and the old Congregationalist established clergy was inevitable. In Part Four, the author discusses the tensions between the two parties by looking into the career of James Davenport, a Yale-trained elite who turned into an eccentric revivalist. Davenport's style was far more openly provocative than Whitefield's. He annoyed the established clergy by holding revival meetings without their permission, by branding them as hypocrites, and even by burning up books and treatises, which he deemed as works of "Heresy."⁵

What the Whitefieldian awakening brought to New England were, in conclusion, the breakdown of the Congregationalist standing order and the diversification of religious views. In Part Five, Winiarski delves into the emergence of numerous dissenting individuals and sects during the decades following the 1740s. Newly revived lay people who could no longer stand the established ministers left the church and formed new congregations, in which a strong emphasis was now put on the direct communication with God through spirit possession, heavenly visions, and instantaneous conversion. By examining several concrete cases of growing tensions between the established clergy and the dissenting laity in the period between 1745 and 1780, Winiarski argues that the "Whitefieldian revivals were the rock on which the ship of New England Congregationalism foundered."⁶

2. The Centrality of the "Body" in Lay Piety

Among those five engaging parts, Part Three, "Exercised Bodies, Impulsive Bodies," makes a particularly important contribution to the

4 Ibid., 215.

5 Ibid., 294, 306-308.

6 Ibid., 373.

scholarship on eighteenth-century New England piety. In what follows, I will first give an extended summary of Winiarski's argument in this part, and then discuss its contributions and problems.

Placed at the middle of the five parts of the book, Part Three explores the gradual collapse of the Congregational standing order and the rise of radically diverse religious expressions and groups in eighteenth-century New England. The author's originality here lies in his focus on the *body* in this narrative. According to Winiarski, at the core of the Whitefieldian revivals in the 1740s was the immediate, ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit, which resulted in a diverse array of *bodily* expressions among lay men and women. Though the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was of course not new, Whitefield and his supporters had a novel emphasis on the idea of the Holy Spirit *entering* and *indwelling* in the body of converts. This idea immediately became widespread among lay people in New England towns. Winiarski finds in letters and diaries written in this era such remarkable passages as: “[God's Spirit is] dwelling in me”; “Continual refreshing Preasence of the holy Spirit”; and “[God would] Send his holy Spirit [to open converts'] blind Eyes.”⁷ In a similar vein, it was believed that the Word or the scriptures could intrude or penetrate the bodies of converts. While hearing Whitefieldian revival sermons, the audience could experience the scriptures “warm[ing]” their heart, “fall[ing] with Weight” on them, and “tak[ing] root” in them.⁸ Importantly, these metaphors were, according to Winiarski, taken “literally” by ardent participants in the revivals. “Many were convinced,” he claims, “that inspired preaching transformed biblical texts into a ‘sensible,’ physical force that was [in the words of the revivalist Daniel Rogers] capable of creating ‘Marvellous Motion.’”⁹

The experience of inspiration or possession by the spirit led to a multitude of bodily expressions. Assuming that an internal conversion would entail a change in external behaviors, Jonathan Edwards identified such outward behaviors as “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness,

7 Ibid., 215.

8 Ibid., 221.

9 Ibid., 222.

goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” as “virtuous fruits” of the indwelling Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Yet the experience of the spirit could cause much more vivid, enthusiastic bodily responses among converts. Daniel Rogers, a revivalist who obsessively studied the linkage between “the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit” and “exercised bodies and impassioned speech,” noticed that inspired converts often lost control over their own bodies and began to speak or pray spontaneously. For instance, his record includes a story of a woman who suddenly “received Power from God” after confessing her sins and hearing Rogers’s direct exhortation to her. Most remarkably, this woman could no longer control her own body in this ecstatic state: according to Rogers, her “Mouth” was, after the experience of receiving God’s power, “fill’d with the Praises of the Lord.”¹¹

Not infrequently, converts had more explicitly mystical experiences, such as visions, trances and revelations, too. Exploring numerous sources written in the mid-eighteenth century, Winiarski points out that the following phenomena regularly occurred to lay New Englanders: “the cataleptic trance, the heavenly journey, the temptations of Satan, the father and son enthroned, and, most important, the image of the Book of Life opened to the names of God’s elect.”¹² In the summer of 1742, for example, two parishioners in Lebanon, Connecticut, simultaneously got in “a kind of Trance” and both remained in that state for “near 2 Days and 2 Nights.” After they recovered their consciousness, both of them separately told their minister that they had been “to heaven.” According to the account of one of them, his heavenly journey included an encounter with Satan and Jesus, an entry into a great celestial city, and a reading of the Book of Life given by Jesus, in which the names of many saints were listed.¹³

In addition to contributing to the scholarship on eighteenth-century New England history, Winiarski’s discussion in this part teaches religion scholars in general how to study *bodies* or *embodied practices* in religion.

10 Ibid., 217.

11 Ibid., 229.

12 Ibid., 256.

13 Ibid., 252-253.

Readers will never miss his methodological virtues, such as a usage of numerous hitherto unexplored sources, in-depth reading of them, and a skill to weave them into a thick yet accessible narrative. Yet most importantly, by focusing on the body, the author is showing not just what the religious life of ordinary people was like but also the *centrality* of their roles in the shaping of religious movement. In other words, though scholars of religion have often viewed clerical elites as primary setters of *doctrines*, Winiarski shows that this is not necessarily the case so far as discourses of *body* are concerned. In fact, what emerges from Winiarski's account is a portrait of lay men and women who actively reinterpreted and challenged the discourses provided by the clergy, rather than receiving them passively. Accordingly, many of the ministers who appear in Winiarski's narrative are astonished, confused, and surprisingly powerless in the face of the dynamic religious expressions of lay folks. Jonathan Edwards is perhaps a superb example of such ministers. At first glance, Edwards seems to have had a strong initiative in the shaping and spread of particular bodily practices, including outcries, faintings, and convulsions, among his audience. As Winiarski puts, "Edwards not only validated bodily exercises as authentic, he *created* space for convicted parishioners to enact their conversion struggles in somatic form."¹⁴ Soon, however, things got beyond control of Edwards. The escalation of bodily experiences, including trances, dreams, and visions, among people worried Edwards so much that he eventually changed his mind and even warned at his 1741 address at Yale College that these enthusiastic responses should not be taken as legitimate signs of the Holy Spirit's work.¹⁵ The change of Edwards's mind on this matter indicates a fascinating fact about the religious life in the eighteenth century: *the relative weakness of the clerical power in the formation of bodily practices*. Surely, ministers must have exerted a huge power in such fields as doctrines and rituals, but when it came to the "body," their instructions could be easily ignored, challenged, and revised by the laity. Winiarski's study thus shows that to study bodies is to challenge a

14 Ibid., 223. Emphasis added.

15 Ibid., 169-172.

scholarly preconception that the laity follow what the clergy tell them to do and believe.

Despite the author's rigorous investigation into the subject, his argument is not without its flaws. Here, I would like to point out two lacunas in Winiarski's work, which subsequent scholars can hopefully fill. First, by focusing almost exclusively on the "lived" experience of ordinary people, Winiarski blurs *wider political contexts*, in which it was supposedly embedded. To be clear, I am *not* saying that political or economic matters (such as the town governance, tax systems, and the relations between the colonies and the British monarchy) must be placed at the *center* of the narrative. In fact, turning eyes from such *macro*-contexts to hitherto overlooked *micro*-experience of ordinary people is the whole point of lived religion scholarship. So it is totally fine that political and economic topics receive less attention in this type of work. Nevertheless, it would be unfortunate if this paradigm shift resulted in a treatment of micro-aspects of people's life as something *separate from* macro-political contexts – and this seems to be what is happening in Winiarski's book. After reading Winiarski's book, I remain wondering what effects the Whitefieldian revivals had upon the political orbits of the eighteenth-century New England colonies. How did the 1740s revivals change colonists' perception of England? Did the experience of conversion cultivate among them an independent spirit, which eventually helped the rise of a movement for a political independence from Great Britain? Or, did the revivals rather turn people into *apolitical*, soul-salvation-seeking individualists who would serve existing political authorities more obediently? Winiarski provides no answers to these questions.

Second, in spite of his otherwise comprehensive scope, racial minorities receive little attention throughout the work. The overall absence of African and Native Americans in this book is particularly lamentable given that one of Winiarski's major subjects is none other than the "body." In fact, that African and Native Americans have historically developed different types of somatic ontology from those of white Protestants is increasingly well-recognized in recent scholarship. In her 2018 article, for example, Polly

Schaafsma analyzes a variety of graphic arts of the Pueblos in the American Southwest and identifies a unique understanding of human bodies in them.¹⁶ Whereas the Western cosmology presupposes clear boundaries between humans and non-living beings, what happens frequently in the indigenous art world is “the *blurring of boundaries* between humanity and other entities.”¹⁷ In a similar vein, a recent edited volume by Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette S. Jouili on African religions and African diasporic religions also emphasizes the necessity of overcoming the Western conception of bodies as something isolated and individually bounded.¹⁸ According to the editors, scholars of African religions and African diasporic religions shall delve more into “the role of the body in producing *relationality* and *intersubjectivity*.”¹⁹ Given the recent development of these scholarly works on rich, bodily discourses and practices among non-white groups, I cannot help but wish Winiarski had incorporated racial minorities more fully into his narrative of the Whitefieldian revivals. In fact, reflecting his almost exclusive focus on white colonists, Winiarski’s examples of bodily experience of the Holy Spirit are mostly *individualistic* ones (such as a heavenly journey and a cataleptic trance), which are based on the Western conception of an isolated, bounded self. But what did a bodily experience of the Holy Spirit among enslaved Africans and Native Americans look like? Did they follow the mode of white people’s religious experience, or did they develop their own modes? These important questions remain largely unanswered in this book.

16 Polly Schaafsma, “Human Images and Blurring Boundaries. The Pueblo Body in Cosmological Context: Rock Art, Murals and Ceremonial Figures,” *Cambridge Archeological Journal* 28 (3), 2018, 411-431.

17 *Ibid.*, 412. Emphasis added.

18 Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette S. Jouili, “Introduction: Embodiment and Relationality in Religions of Africa and Its Diasporas,” in Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette S. Jouili (eds), *Embodying Black Religions in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 1-22.

19 *Ibid.*, 9.