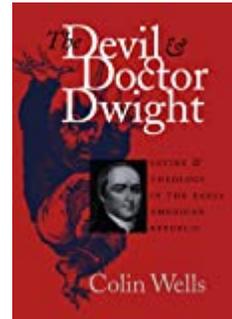




**Colin Wells.** *The Devil and Doctor Dwight: Satire and Theology in the Early American Republic.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. x + 254 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5383-2; \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2715-4.



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**Published on** H-SHEAR (September, 2002)

In 1788, there appeared, in pamphlet form, a 778-line satiric poem entitled *The Triumph of Infidelity*. Neither the author nor the publisher was identified. A second edition of the poem appeared soon after and another edition was printed in London in 1791. Although the attribution of authorship to the Reverend Timothy Dwight of Fairfield, Connecticut, is not universal, both contemporaries and later scholars have generally agreed that the pastor of Greenfield Hill Congregational Church and future President of Yale was the anonymous poet.[1] It is this poem that was the subject of Colin Wells's doctoral dissertation at Rutgers and that he seeks "to recover for students of early America" (p. 16) in the *The Devil and Doctor Dwight*. [2]

In Wells's view, *The Triumph of Infidelity* is "a lost classic of late Augustan satire ... [and] a unique example of the convergence of literature, religion and politics at the moment the new American Republic was first being imagined" (p. 16). The poem is a microcosm through which to view the culture wars of the age and, in embryonic form, the thought and career of its author Timothy Dwight.

The eighteenth century was the great age of English satire and Wells's *explication de texte* identifies many specific parallels between *The Triumph of Infidelity* and the works of Dwight's Augustan predecessors, particularly

Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*. Common to both is a "dense, allusive" (p. 3) style that makes them difficult for the modern reader unfamiliar with the many referents. They also share the view that satire has a moral function and has as its theme a "grand struggle of historic forces" (p. 24). In Dwight's case, according to Wells, the target was a society "drawn unwittingly towards its own corruption by self-interest and moral complacency" (p. 37).

According to Wells, *The Triumph of Infidelity* is also an entry in ongoing theological debates. For many in New England, Calvinism's emphasis on human weakness had become problematic and attempts at theological clarification had divided ministers into Edwardseans, Arminians, Old and New Divinity camps. Added to this mix were various strands of British thought including the modern Pelagianism of Lord Shaftesbury, latitudinarianism, deism, and other forms of religious rationalism. Wells does a commendable job of sorting through this morass of ideas and capturing the essence of the argument. In the America of the 1780s, the focus of these debates was on the universalism of Boston minister Charles Chauncy. Chauncy's writings had circulated privately for some time, and the years following the American Revolution seemed an opportune time for their publication. The most significant of these was *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations* (1784). The result was

an internecine war among New England clergy in which Chauncy had both his critics and defenders.

Wells sees *The Triumph of Infidelity* as part of this debate and, more significantly, sees Dwight as looking beyond the doctrinal squabble to the broader cultural and political implications of universalist ideas. To Dwight, both in the satire and in his posthumously published *Theology*, the idea that all men would be saved leads inevitably to a moral complacency by eliminating the individual Christian's moral struggle which is essential to salvation. In Wells's view, Dwight saw this human struggle as a never-ending effort to overcome self-delusion by viewing the world from the perspective of a transcendent "eternal present."

The decades following the publication of *The Triumph of Infidelity* saw the evolution and expanding influence of both universalist theories and Dwight's thought. Swept up in the currents of a revolutionary age, universalism led some of its adherents to various forms of secular utopianism that "celebrated the virtues and capabilities of man." From this perspective, Christianity and its clergy, including Dwight, were a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. When wedded to "the older language of republican virtue," these ideas led directly to "the great ideological victory of Jeffersonian democracy" (p. 141).

To Dwight, this constellation of ideas represented not simply an attack upon religion, but a competitor religion. In contrast to the cult of reason, Dwight, according to Wells, "posit[ed] the harmonious relation of science and religion" (p. 111). But as the perfectionism expounded by William Godwin, Bavarian Illuminati and French revolutionary radicals gained in acceptance, "the confident Augustan voice of *The Triumph of Infidelity*" gave way "to the fierce and thundering tones of the New England jeremiad" (p. 151). The struggle against infidelity was the consistent thread that ran through Dwight's life and thought from 1788 to his death in 1817.

The conclusion of *The Devil and Doctor Dwight* is a wide-ranging attempt to illustrate the long-ignored influence of Dwight's struggle against infidelity. Wells finds echoes in the Unitarian controversies of the 1820s, abolitionism, Transcendentalism, and in the writings of Whitier and Hawthorne.[3]

Wells is to be congratulated for his efforts to look at Dwight's poetry, theology, and public career not as isolated parts of his larger life, but as integral parts of the man. Previous book-length studies of Dwight have failed to do justice to this poet, preacher, and president of Yale

who played an important (albeit secondary) role in the early republic. Charles Cunningham's 1943 biography is a well-written narrative with only a sprinkling of analytical substance. As part of the Twayne American authors series, Kenneth Silverman contributed a volume on Dwight that understandably focuses on his literary endeavors and minimizes Dwight as minister and college president. Stephen Berk's *Calvinism versus Democracy* does an adequate job of connecting Dwight to evangelical reform movements, but ignores the rest of his long career. Annabelle Wenzke's 1989 volume has the single-minded purpose of connecting Dwight to the development of Evangelical Protestantism around the globe. The most recent book length study, John R. Fitzmier's *New England's Moral Legislator: Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817*, clearly surpasses other treatments of the subject, but by focusing heavily upon Dwight as preacher and theologian it also fails to see Dwight as a whole, rather than a collection of parts.[4] Readers of *The Devil and Doctor Dwight* will never again be satisfied with a unidimensional portrait, nor will they fail to recognize the interplay of politics, culture, and religion in late eighteenth-century America.

This does not mean that *The Devil and Doctor Dwight* is successful in achieving its objectives. Part of the reason for this is that it seems to have three subjects, rather than one. Moreover, none of these three is the one suggested by the title, which is too obviously an attempt to market the work to Faust scholars, Stephen Vincent Benet aficionados, or fans of *The Devil and Miss Jones*. The subtitle, *Satire and Theology in the Early American Republic*, is, however, an accurate descriptor of the work.

First, the work is a close textual analysis of some of Dwight's secondary works, most particularly *The Triumph of Infidelity*. Wells is absolutely correct about the "dense, allusive" character of eighteenth-century satire and he does an excellent job in teasing out many of the allusions. Many of these discoveries, however, are buried in the explanatory notes and are not integrated into the analysis. This is particularly true when it comes to attempts to determine whom Dwight might have had in mind in his portraits of "the Smooth Divine," Euclio, Florio, and others. Were these social types or men who would have been familiar to the closed circle of Connecticut *literati*?

*The Devil and Doctor Dwight* curiously rejects a central role for Dwight's millennialism and Biblical exegesis in the poem and his thought. According to Wells, Dwight "immediately discarded" his belief in America's rising

glory “at the moment the victory [in the Revolution] was secured” (pp. 42-43; see also, pp. 131-132n). This conclusion seems to run counter to the idea expressed in lines 12-14 of *The Triumph of Infidelity* where America is described as “the realms of freedom, peace, and virtue ... /the realms, where Heaven, ere Time’s great empire fall,/ Shall bid new Edens dress this dreary ball.” References to the Book of Revelation suffuse the poem from these opening lines to the conclusion where Satan has “mark’d all the throng” (line 775). In Dwight’s poem, might Chauncy be the false prophet? As Dwight himself wrote in the early 1770s, “Nothing gives greater weight and dignity to Poetry than Prophecy.”[5] Satire can have its roots in religion as much as in early modern republican thought.[6]

What is also missing from Wells’ discussion is a sense of the fun of satire. Whether bawdy, raunchy, or characterized by a sharp wit that with “the fineness of a stroke ... separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place,” satire since the time of Horace and Juvenal has tried to tell the truth with a smile.[7] Visitors to Dwight’s home in Fairfield and later to Yale saw in him an engaging conversationalist who enjoyed clever repartee. This comes across no more clearly than in “The Friend” essays that appeared in the *New-Haven Gazette and Connecticut Magazine* in 1786 and 1787, the very period in which Dwight was composing *The Triumph of Infidelity*. Since satire forces us to reflect on our own self-delusion as well as the foibles of others, Dwight’s ability to laugh at himself was a way of viewing the world from the perspective of the “eternal present.”

These observations aside, Wells should be commended for the task he has undertaken. Any scholar who has spent time in the newspapers and other products of eighteenth-century American printers is struck by the enormous quantity of satiric material—poems, essays, drawings. It is easy to dismiss them as poor imitations of Swift, Hogarth, and other critics of British life. A recent British reviewer of a CD-ROM, for example, dismissed *M’Fingal* (1775), John Trumbull’s satire of a loyalist in revolutionary America, as worthless.[8] In contrast to the enormous quantity of scholarly work by students of Georgian England, few Americanists have shown the patience to probe the cultural world that lies underneath the often horrid versification and stilted style.[9]

Second, the work is a study of ideas in the eighteenth century as they impact and flow from the *The Triumph of Infidelity*. Wells does an excellent job of summarizing and clarifying the ideas of Augustan poets, Charles Chauncy,

and others. The influence of Jonathan Edwards, however, is minimized. At times it seems that Dwight’s theology came more from Alexander Pope than his own grandfather (p. 85). One textual reference (and two explanatory notes) do not seem to do justice to the important influence of Edwards’s *The History of the Work of Redemption* on Dwight’s poem. Also missing is the profound influence of Reverend Jonathan Edwards, Jr., Dwight’s uncle under whom he studied for the ministry. Edwards the Younger was a major participant in the universalist controversy of the 1780s.[10] Finally, while Wells’s effort to establish connections between the ideas expressed in the war over infidelity and “the more momentous ideological struggles and transformations taking place in America during this period” (p. 1) is laudable, this argument needs considerably more elaboration and development.

The discussion of universalism in *The Devil and Doctor Dwight* is largely limited to debates occurring in the rarified atmosphere of high culture. In the poem, however, Dwight showed an awareness of how these ideas filtered down to the common people through such men as Ethan Allen and John Murray. Wells refers to this connection “between Universalism and backwoods itinerant religion” (p. 235) in his explanatory notes but does not explore the development of popular religious movements of the era. Insights garnered from the recent work of historians such as John Brooke, Peter Hughes, and Stephen A. Marini would have added a new dimension to the understanding of the poem and Dwight.[11] While Dwight’s obsession with infidelity may have dominated the last three decades of his life, his efforts on behalf of missionary societies and education on the fringes of New England evidence his concern with popular universalism as much as the speculations of Cambridge divines.

Finally, *The Devil and Doctor Dwight* is an attempt to set forth the ideas of a man for whom Wells has developed a certain fondness. While it does succeed in transcending some of the boundaries dividing students of history, literature, and theology that have limited previous analyses of Dwight, the portrait presented here has its own limitations. A faithful portrait of Dwight and his ideas must take into account his two major poems, *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785) and *Greenfield Hill* (1794), as well as demonstrate a firmer command of his *Travels in New England and New York* (1821-1822). Analysis of these works shows a Dwight who owes as much, if not more, to John Milton and such eighteenth-century poets of the natural order as James Thomson, George Crabbe, and Oliver Goldsmith than to the Augustan satirists. Such a portrait must also attempt to show greater connection

between Dwight's ideas and his actions as pastor, college president, and reformer. Attempting to see Dwight primarily through the lens of *The Triumph of Infidelity* creates a blurred image.

#### Notes

[1]. *The Triumph of Infidelity: A Poem* ([Hartford]: printed in the *World*, 1788); *The Triumph of Infidelity: A poem supposed to be written by Timothy Dwight, D.D., of Greenfield in Connecticut in 1788* (London, 1791). The first Connecticut edition has forty pages; the second, twenty-four pages. There are minor changes in the poem. Surprisingly Wells does not discuss the question of authorship. For a discussion of this issue see Lewis Leary, "The Author of the Triumph of Infidelity," *New England Quarterly* 20 (1947), 377-385.

In his appendices, Colin Wells provides a workman-like edition of *The Triumph of Infidelity* and extremely helpful explanatory notes. For those unfamiliar with the poem, the following is meant as a brief synopsis with which Wells may very well take exception. Some familiarity with the poem, however, seems necessary background for understanding *The Devil and Doctor Dwight*.

After a dedicatory epistle to Mons. de Voltaire, Dwight opens *The Triumph of Infidelity* with a brief description of the prince of darkness being majestically transported from the Old World to the New. Satan then delivers a monologue occupying over half of the satire (lines 17-452) in which he sets forth the successes of infidelity in the Old World from before the birth of Christ as well as his reasons for coming to the American shore.

In this review of two thousand years of providential history, the triumph of infidelity was never complete. According to Satan, the final victory seemed near "ere Bethlehem's wonder rose" (line 23). But the apostolic church fell when "My Goths, my Huns, the cultur'd world o'er ran / and darkness buried all the pride of man" (lines 61-62). Infidelity then took the form of the medieval papacy and held unquestioned sway until the Reformation. Infidelity then reared its head again under Charles II and gave unbelief new life until God brought forth Newton, Locke, and Berkeley to turn the tide of battle. New legions now Satan raised and new champions found in Hume and Voltaire. "While thus by art and perseverance won, / Again the old world seem'd almost my own" (lines 343-344).

The greatest barrier to infidelity's triumph, according to Satan's narrative, existed in the New World in the

person of "that moral Newton, that second Paul" (line 356), Dwight's own grandfather, Jonathan Edwards. Satan's response was to raise up the universalist Charles Chauncy to lead new souls astray with "sweet sophism" (line 419).

Through the remainder of the poem Dwight introduces the reader to a number of real individuals and social types who are Satan's minions in the ongoing battle. There are epicures and hypocrites, some who cultivate wealth and others who curry popular favor. What all of them share, according to Dwight, is the belief that the road to salvation is easy and open to all men. They have no sense of their own sinfulness or belief in eternal damnation. They eagerly listened to the message of Chauncy that "Hell is no more, or no more to be feared" (line 654). "The decent christian threw his mask aside, / and smil'd, to see the path of heaven so wide" (lines 763-764). The poem ends on a rather enigmatic note:

>From a dim cloud, the spirit eyed the scene,/ Now proud with triumph, and now vex'd with spleen,/ Mark'd all the throng, beheld them all his own,/ And to his cause no friend of virtue won:/ Surpriz'd, enrag'd, he wing'd his sooty flight,/ And hid beneath the pall of endless night. (lines 773-778)

Wells recognizes that the weight of scholarly opinion finds this ending an example of what Kenneth Silverman labeled the poem's "technical ineptitudes" (p. 41n). Wells, however, considers the conclusion as consistent with his larger interpretation of the poem.

[2]. Colin Wells, "Timothy Dwight, 'The Triumph of Infidelity,' and the Universalist Controversy" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1995).

[3]. Although Wells does not say so, this more positive image of Dwight is consistent with recent students of New England clergymen that see them in a more positive light than the traditional image of them as reactionary complainers totally out of step with the trends of the early Republic. David W. Kling, *A Field of Divine Wonders: The New Divinity and Village Revivals in Northwestern Connecticut, 1792-1822* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); James R. Rohrer, *Keepers of the Covenant: Frontier Missions and the Decline of Congregationalism, 1774-1818* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jonathan D. Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness: The Public Christianity of the Post-Revolutionary New England Clergy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Mark R. Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of*

*the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Although its chief focus is Fisher Ames, another recent work that is consistent with the more positive image of Dwight and the Federalist world view is Marc M. Arkin, "The Federalist Trope: Power and Passion in Abolitionist Rhetoric," *Journal of American History*, 88 (June 2001), 75-98.

[4]. Charles Cuninghame, *Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1942); Kenneth Silverman, *Timothy Dwight* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969); Stephen Berk, *Calvinism Versus Democracy: Timothy Dwight and the Origins of American Evangelical Orthodoxy* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1974); Annabelle S. Wenzke, *Timothy Dwight* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); John R. Fitzmier, *New England's Moral Legislator: Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Mention of these book-length works is not meant to ignore many fine discussions of Dwight in journals and other books. In his introduction, John Fitzmier provides a magnificent discussion of the "problem" of Timothy Dwight and at the end of his biography he provides a superb bibliographic essay that should be consulted by anyone working on Dwight. Works on Dwight published after Fitzmier's bibliography include Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), chap. 7; Robert J. Imholt, "Timothy Dwight: Federalist Pope of Connecticut," *New England Quarterly*, 73 (September 2000), 386-411; Mark Garrett Longaker, "Timothy Dwight's Rhetorical Ideology of Taste in Federalist Connecticut," *Rhetorica* 19 (Winter 2001), 93-124; Colin Wells, "Timothy Dwight's American *Dunciad*: The Triumph of Infidelity and the Universalist Controversy," *Early American Literature*, 33 (Spring 1998), 173-191.

[5]. Timothy Dwight, *A Dissertation on the History, Eloquence, and Poetry of the Bible, Delivered at the Public Commencement, at New-Haven* (New-Haven: printed by T. and S. Green, 1772), 16.

[6]. Although he does not consider Dwight or the Connecticut Wits, the observation of Pascal Covici, Jr., seems on the mark: "American humor, in its iconoclastic bumptiousness and focus on the foibles of the individual, has its origins in Puritan thought" (*Humor and Revelation in American Literature: The Puritan Connection* [Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1997], 2-3).

[7]. John Dryden, "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Purpose of Satire," *Essays of John Dryden* (Ox-

ford: Clarendon Press, 1900), II, 93.

[8]. *M'Fingal* "goes on (and on) for 52 pages of text. I can't imagine any first degree, or even MA/PhD research, students finding this document of any value" (Alan Farmer in *History Review* [December 2001], 52).

[9]. Bruce I. Granger, *Political Satire in the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960); Alison Olson, "The Zenger Case Revisited: Satire, Seditious, and Political Debate in Eighteenth Century America," *Early American Literature*, 35 (Fall 2000), 223-245; Lewis P. Simpson, "The Satiric Mode: The Early National Wits," in Louis D. Rubin, Jr., ed., *The Comic Imagination in American Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 49-61. One work that recognizes the importance of this satire is Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970). David S. Shields also recognizes the importance of satire in his study of the public sphere in eighteenth-century America, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). And although his primary effort is to see the connection between republican thought and poetry, no student of poetry in this era can ignore William C. Dowling, *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

[10]. Jonathan Edwards, Jr., *The Necessity of Atonement, and the Consistency between that and free grace, in forgiveness; illustrated in three sermons, preached before His Excellency the governor and a large number of both houses of the legislature of the State of Connecticut, during their sessions at New-Haven, in October, A.D. M.DCC.LXXXV* (New-Haven: Printed by Meigs, Bowen and Dana, 1785); idem, *The Salvation of All Men Strictly Examined; and the Endless Punishment of Those Who Die Impenitent, Argued and Defended Against the Objections and Reasonings of the late Rev. Doctor Chauncy, of Boston, in his Book Entitled "The Salvation of All Men," &c* (New-Haven: Printed by A. Morse, 1790).

[11]. John Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Peter Hughes, "The Origins of New England Universalism: A Religion Without a Founder," *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, 24 (1997), 31-63; idem, "Early New England Universalism: A Family Religion," *ibid.*, 26 (1999), 93-113; Stephen A. Marini, "The Origins of New England Universalism: Daughter of the New Light," *ibid.*, 24 (1997), 31-63; idem, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge:

Harvard University Press, 1982). Wells makes good use of the still valuable study of Universalism by Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Universalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). Wells's study was clearly completed before the publication of Ann Lee Bressler's more recent study, *The Universalist Movement in America, 1770-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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**Citation:** Robert J. Imholt. Review of Wells, Colin, *The Devil and Doctor Dwight: Satire and Theology in the Early American Republic*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6730>

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