

INTRODUCTION



Jonathan Edwards

(1703-1758)

Jonathan Edwards is considered the greatest American theologian. Both a Calvinist mystic and a scientist, he had a rare psychological wholeness, balancing intellect and soul. As a boy of 12 he wrote a scientific treatise “On Insects” and also had a religious awakening during a period of revivalism in his father’s church that he later came to consider an immature experience. Edwards stands out with Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as the closest any Americans have come to the genius of Leonardo DaVinci. The critic Van Wyck Brooks credited Edwards with establishing a “highbrow” cultural tradition in America and Franklin with establishing a “lowbrow” tradition. Despite his intellectual greatness and significance, Edwards has been stereotyped as a fanatical reactionary by liberals intolerant of beliefs different from their own. His “Personal Narrative” (1739) is one of the major works in American literary history and his treatise on *Freedom of the Will* (1754) explains the paradox that remains an issue in Naturalism and Postmodernism—the coexistence of predestination and free will.

BIOGRAPHY

Edwards was born in 1703 only 11 years after the infamous witchcraft trials in New England—a dying convulsion of the old Calvinist orthodoxy. His father was Timothy Edwards, a greatly admired orthodox pastor of East Windsor, Connecticut. Young Jonathan grew up in a household of appreciative females like Hawthorne later did, the one boy among 10 sisters who adored him. He was a precocious child with a scholarly interest in Nature, science, philosophy, and theology. “I used to pray five times a day in secret.” With some other boys he constructed a prayer retreat in the wilderness—in a swamp. “And besides, I had particular secret places of my own in the woods, where I used to retire by myself.”

He entered Yale at age 13, soon after the college was founded. At 17 he experienced an authentic mystical conversion described years later in his “Personal Narrative” (1739). He graduated from Yale in 1720, studied theology at New Haven, served briefly as a minister in New York, and then returned as a tutor at Yale. In 1726 he became a colleague of his prominent grandfather Reverend Solomon Stoddard in Northampton, Massachusetts, the most prosperous inland community in Massachusetts. Stoddard was a theologian so dominant he was called Pope Stoddard. Of all his grandsons and many pupils, Stoddard selected Jonathan Edwards to succeed him as pastor in Northampton. Edwards habitually returned from long walks in the countryside with notes to himself pinned all over his frock coat. In 1727 he was ordained and he married Sarah Pierrepont, age 17. Two years later his grandfather died.

DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY

Calvinist ministers preached from a rigidly vertical consciousness. They were dissociated from the heart and soul by their doctrine of total depravity and by their rationalism. Hawthorne depicts the alienation caused by the doctrine of total depravity in "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil." By the end of the 1600s, according to Hawthorne, young people in Puritan communities were increasingly too indoctrinated in their heads to have a conversion experience in their souls (much as secular liberal PC professors do to young people today). Their "spiritual part" died out, as Hawthorne says. As church membership declined, the Puritans gave up one of their dogmas and resorted to a "Half-way Covenant," allowing people to become church members, take communion, and have their conversion experiences later.

REVIVALISM

By the early 1700s the old Calvinist culture in New England was being overcome by the influx of immigrants and by the Enlightenment as personified in Benjamin Franklin. Solomon Stoddard decided that the formalities of the old time religion had become impractical. He opened church membership to anybody who walked in off the street. No conversion experience required. Pope Stoddard turned into a revivalist, appealing to emotion, preaching total depravity and scaring the hell out of people. He led 5 socially disruptive evangelical revival movements--in 1679, 1683, 1696, 1712 and 1718. His chosen successor and favored grandson Jonathan Edwards was expected to carry on his revivalist campaigns and achieve even greater outpourings of the Holy Spirit.

THE GREAT AWAKENING (1734-50)

Edwards initiated the epic Great Awakening in 1734 with a revival in Northampton and the movement spread over the whole eastern seacoast from Maine to Georgia. Emotional outcries, faintings and fits were common. Led calmly by Edwards, wave after wave of religious enthusiasm washed over New England for 15 years. In 1737 he reported on cases in his own church in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton and the Neighboring Towns and Villages*, which became a guidebook for revivalism. Yet Edwards himself was troubled by the emotional displays and what he considered superficial religious experiences like his own as a boy. In his "Personal Narrative" (1739) he differentiates between his immature religious awakening and his authentic later one. This is the first narrative in American literature to depict the individuation process of psychological development through the archetypal spaces City/Garden/Wilderness/Sky, culminating in transcendent consciousness. This archetypal pattern is shared with later works of American literature including *Moby-Dick* and *Black Elk Speaks*, as explained in "Model of Metaphors."

The famous English evangelist George Whitefield began holding revivals in Georgia and in 1739 started a tour of the colonies, reaching New England in 1740. Whitefield was an emotional preacher who incited his audiences to shout and tear their clothes and faint and fall into trances. By 1740, in his contrasting style of calm elucidation, Edwards had induced terror and religious panic throughout the land, becoming the most influential public figure in America. He conducted a long revival in Northampton, preached calmly in other towns and published sermons including "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Contrary to his reputation as a ranting fanatic, Edwards was not emotional in the pulpit. He calmly terrified people with his Calvinist doctrine of their total depravity and image of them all as sinners worthless as spiders dangling over the pit of Hell. His calm gave authority to his conviction. One of his congregation in Northampton recalled, "Mr. Edwards in preaching used no gestures, but looked straight forward."

These emotional revivals were opposed by the Calvinist old guard, Increase and Cotton Mather and the faculties of Harvard and Yale. Stoddard had seen them as arrogant old fogies. Edwards replied to them calmly in his *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746). This conflict prefigures the one in the early 19th century between the Neoclassical Brahmins in Boston (Holmes, Longfellow, Lowell) and the Romantic Transcendentalists in Concord (Emerson, Fuller, Alcott, Thoreau). As the Great Awakening waned, some people were disillusioned. Edwards got blamed for the personal failures of individuals to sustain their faith. Among the disappointed, those who had opposed revivals from the beginning, faculties at Harvard and Yale and relatives who resented his being chosen to succeed Solomon Stoddard, a rage mounted against

Edwards leading to his exile. He was denounced for being too liberal in appealing to emotions. Yet in the end he was rejected for being too conservative on doctrine.

REFORM OF CALVINISM

Edwards introduced two new concepts into Puritan thought, deriving from his own mystical conversion: (1) conversion is an *unmistakable* experience; (2) it is *emotional* rather than rational. He wrote religious philosophy in an effort to harmonize emotion and reason, mercy and justice, fate and free will. His unique contribution to Calvinist theology was to view Nature with holy love, transcending the vertical rationalism of Locke through mystical emotion that he experienced as the grace of God.

The recent works of Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke persuaded Edwards that all ideas come from sense impressions. His idealism is based on the Christian and Platonic belief that the physical is an imperfect manifestation of perfect ideas in the spiritual dimension of the afterlife. Since ideas come from sense impressions, Edwards believed that, accordingly, divine grace is acquired through the senses, rather than through will or reason. *This turned orthodox Calvinism upsidedown*. Puritans traditionally had given sovereignty to reason, will and scripture, while distrusting the senses as of the body and this fallen world, tending to carnality and corruption. Edwards' belief in the importance of sense impressions gave him an almost pantheistic relationship to Nature. This points ahead to the Romantic rebellion against rationalism in the late 18th century and to Ralph Waldo Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists in the early 19th century. Edwards was a precursor of the Romantics in rotating the archetypal paradigm of consciousness from vertical around to wholeness. See "Model of Metaphors." However, in his *balance* of head and heart, Edwards resembles Hawthorne more than Emerson. William Faulkner suggests that sense impressions are the origin of world religions in his portrayal of Vardaman in *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

EXILE

Edwards held his ground as an orthodox Calvinist by insisting that communion was a sacrament only for those who had experienced conversion and received the grace of God. His parish at Northampton wanted lower standards, not higher. In 1750, his congregation dismissed the greatest theologian in American history. This momentous event signaled the general decline of Calvinism in New England during the 18th century, as most people wanted a comfortable religion and turned Unitarian. Hawthorne satirizes them in "The Celestial Railroad" (1843). Edwards was driven out of town in disgrace. He took his large family with him and became a pastor and a missionary to Indians out in the frontier settlement of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Impoverished and isolated, there in the wilderness he wrote his most significant theological masterpieces *The Nature of True Virtue and Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* (1765), published after his death.

DEATH

After 8 years in the wilderness, Edwards was asked to become President of Princeton University, then called the College of New Jersey. In 1758, soon after taking office, he volunteered to take an experimental smallpox immunization shot. It killed him. Once again he suffered for his bravery and sacrifice.

LEGACY

The Lockean epistemology of Edwards was rejected by Charles Brockden Brown in *Wieland* (1798) and by later Romantics, who followed Kant's epistemology. In "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), Hawthorne dramatizes how sense impressions can be deceiving, much as Edwards had explained how emotions can be deceiving. Hawthorne is most like Edwards in his balance of head and heart, his emphasis on the reality of sin, the need for redemption, the transforming power of love, and the concept of God as an Artist of the Beautiful. Both Edwards and Emerson are mystics with holistic consciousness, and because of his emphasis on emotional experience as opposed to reason, Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists may seem close to Edwards, but they replaced the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity with the liberal doctrine of perfectibility. They turned Calvinism upsidedown by in effect declaring themselves God, like the counterculturalists of the 1960s. See "Edwards to Emerson."

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