

Claremont Colleges Scholarship @ Claremont

CGU Faculty Publications and Research

CGU Faculty Scholarship

1-1-1966

Jonathan Edwards and Puritan Consciousness

Richard Bushman

Claremont Graduate University

Recommended Citation

Bushman, Richard L. "Jonathan Edwards and Puritan Consciousness," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, V (Fall, 1966), 383-396.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the CGU Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in CGU Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

JONATHAN EDWARDS AND PURITAN CONSCIOUSNESS

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN
Assistant Professor of History
Brigham Young University

THE writings of Jonathan Edwards contain the most complete description we have of the piety of eighteenth-century American Puritans. Events made Edwards a specialist in Puritan consciousness. As he said, "It is a subject on which my mind has been peculiarly intent, ever since I first entered on the study of divinity."¹ Besides inquiring into his own heart, he was chief defender and interpreter of the Great Awakening and closely studied revival conversions to distinguish God's work from mere emotions.

He recorded the fruits of his research in a variety of documents. His "Diary" and *Personal Narrative* tell of his own quest for holiness; *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* were his answers to critics and frauds. He also edited and commented on *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*, for the edification of concerned souls, and described the Northampton revivals of 1735 in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising*

Work of God. Taken together these works fully describe the religious consciousness of his day.²

Edwards used himself as the chief source of information about conversion. His personal writings reveal how occupied he was with dark intruders from the cellars of his soul and the sweet and glorious visitations of grace. He wrote at length of the contrasting moods they brought and of his earnest efforts to keep his house in order. By reconstructing Edwards' dominant states of mind and by following his will's struggle to regulate the powers of heaven and self circulating in his soul, we can recover much of Puritan consciousness, making it available for translation into modern terms for our better understanding.³

² The guide to the literature on the English branch of the subject is William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1938.

³ For a comparable discussion of English Puritanism, see Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward, *Two Elizabethan Diaries*, M. M. Knappen, Ed., Chicago: American Society of Church History, 1933, pp. 1-16. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1958, is a much more sophisticated and complex discussion of Luther's piety. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, London: Longmans, Green, 1902, is still fundamental for anyone seeking psychological understanding of religion.

¹ *The Works of President Edwards, in Four Volumes. A Reprint of the Worcester Edition.* 4 vols., New York: Leavitt, Trow & Co., 1843, vol. III, p. ix. Hereafter referred to as *Works*. John E. Smith explicates Edwards' definition of true religion in the introduction to Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, John E. Smith, Ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

The reconstruction and translation of Puritan experience is a task well worth the effort. In an age so distant as our own, Calvinist theology may be conceived as a stately but desolate mansion. We think of doctrinal treatises as houses of intellect only and are baffled to know why men shed blood in their defense. We also may glibly connect our modern revival of Calvinism with the pristine variety, when actually the meaning of the two are quite different. Perhaps most important to historians, the significance of the passing of Puritanism is misunderstood if we do not understand the structure of feeling lying behind it. Calvinist doctrines lost their vitality because old passions faded and new ones emerged. The changing shape of personal experience motivated the intellectual developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unless we have a clear conception of the Puritan consciousness, we will not see what died and what lived on, and why, in the mentality of the new era. Edwards' discourses on piety fix a base line for measuring ensuing changes.

Edwards' close attention to the condition of his soul began when he was 16 and in his last year of college. In the two years after graduation while studying divinity in New Haven his "sense of divine things" gradually increased. In August of 1722 he finished his preparations and accepted a temporary pulpit in New York where he preached for a year and a half before returning to his father's house in East Windsor. Soon after he was appointed tutor at Yale. All this time his ecstatic experiences were growing more intense. Many years later he said that he enjoyed more "constant delight and pleasure" in God than ever afterwards.⁴

This time of conversion from age 16 to 20 is described in both the "Diary" and the *Personal Narrative*. The *Narra-*

tive was written after the revival had already swept through the Connecticut Valley once, beginning at Edwards' pulpit in Northampton. It recounted his experiences of 20 years earlier, as a guide to parishioners who had newly discovered the excruciating pleasure of grace, and also presented his religious credentials, as it were, to critical observers in America and Europe. As such, the story stressed the moments of exaltation when Edwards felt close to God and drank deeply of the joys of grace.

The "Diary," or what remains of it, begins in December of 1722, near the midpoint of the conversion period. It was written for Edwards' own use, not for publication, and more frankly discloses how the peaks of rapture were regularly followed by valleys of despair. Essentially it is a record of the uphill struggle for piety. Those high thoughts of Christ's excellence which infused him with heavenly delight were exceedingly elusive, and he was determined to strengthen his hold at all costs. In one sense the "Diary" is a handbook of Edwards' "inventions," as he called them, and their success in producing spiritual enjoyments.⁵ He was continually searching for ways of sustaining himself on the heights or of lifting himself from the depths. The "Resolutions" accompanying the "Diary" are the restraints and spiritual exercises he imposed on himself to achieve a lasting piety.

The highs and lows in Edwards' consciousness were two distinct frames of mind, characterized by clear contrasts in spiritual operations. The graceless consciousness he variously called dull, dead, lifeless, sunken, decayed. He never enlarged upon the meaning of these words as he did with those describing his de-

⁴ *Works*, I, pp. 16, 23.

⁵ The most complete versions of the "Diary" and the "Resolutions" appear in S. E. Dwight, *The Life of President Edwards*, New York: G. & C. & H. Carrill, 1830, hereafter referred to as *Life*. The reference is to p. 77.

lights, but they suggest a depressed state characterized by a flat emotional tone. In his "Diary" he equated deadness with listlessness and spiritual lethargy. At one point he said that during times of dullness he was not easily affected, his emotions were sluggish and bound.⁶ He also said in his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* that hardness of heart was the opposite of piety, and hardness "meant an unaffected heart, or a heart not easy to be moved with virtuous affections, like a stone, insensible, stupid, unmoved, and hard to be impressed," in short "a heart void of affections."⁷

The misery of spiritual decay arose also from the paralysis of the righteous will. Edwards despised the listlessness which "unbends and relaxes" the mind "from being fully and fixedly set on religion." In times of spiritual depression he lamented that his "resolutions have lost their strength." Apparently when he began to sink, all his powers to act decayed. "I do not seem to be half so careful to improve time, to do every thing quick, and in as short a time as I possibly can." He was not "half so vigorous" and moved slowly, meanwhile placating his conscience by thinking of religion. He resolved the next time he was lifeless to force himself "to go rapidly from one thing to another, and to do those things with vigour." When all else failed, he worked arithmetic or practiced shorthand, anything to keep active.⁸ Feeling his powers bogging down, he drove them on to keep his will from stalling.

To Edwards' mind a mired will and bound affections were two aspects of the same spiritual malfunction. The will was the faculty inclining the soul to like or dislike, to choose or reject, and all its movements were accompanied by some degree of pleasure or displeasure.

Will and emotion were organically bound together. The will could not act without arousing emotion to some degree, and the affections were still only when the will stood at dead center, in a state of "perfect indifference."⁹

Thus conceived, the affections were symptomatic of the state of the soul. Joyous sensations of love for God meant the heart was strongly inclined toward heaven, while listless affections revealed an unconcern for religion. Edwards despised dullness because it signified "perfect indifference" to God.

He also knew that the will might pass beyond neutral indifference and incline lustfully toward worldly objects. The heart hard to holy affections was perfectly capable of indulging wicked passions.¹⁰ The diary is a record of the evil inclinations that tugged persistently at Edwards' will. He readily admitted that "without the influences of the Spirit of God, the old serpent would begin to rouse up himself from his frozen state, and would come to life again."¹¹ The lethargy of will, even in merely dull frames, was not simple laziness as Edwards sometimes supposed, but the pull of inadmissible desires straining against his purer inclinations. When he did arithmetic or practiced shorthand he was struggling to deny forbidden demands from the emotional underworld.

His plans for invigorating the will are closely related to the central impulse of the Protestant Ethic. Cotton Mather probably had the same experience in mind when he urged a vocation on his parishioners as a means of avoiding the snares of sin. Devotion to a calling, even practicing shorthand, kept the Puritan a step ahead of the dullness and sin dogging his heels.

These artificial devices for controlling the will were forgotten when Providence

⁶ Dwight, *Life*, p. 87.

⁷ *Works*, III, p. 16.

⁸ Dwight, *Life*, pp. 72, 81, 78, 91, 100.

⁹ *Works*, III, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, III, p. 18.

¹¹ Dwight, *Life*, p. 77.

lifted Edwards from his sunken condition to his other, happier frame of mind. Grace liberated the emotions and will from their prison. Filled with the Spirit, he joyously exercised the powers of his soul with perfect freedom. "Wherever true religion is," he said, "there are vigorous exercises of the inclination and will towards divine objects."¹² High thoughts of Christ made "unusual repentance of sin" easy, and he pressed forward in the struggle with alacrity and zeal. All of his work went better once the will was freed. "I can do seven times as much in the same time now, as I can at other times, not because my faculties are in better tune; but because of the fire of diligence that I feel burning within me."¹³ The startling change confirmed the doctrine of rebirth, the creation of a new man in the old.

When downcast, Edwards complained most about his will, but when exalted he spoke more of affections. While lifeless, all he could manage was to drive on the stubborn will, knowing the affections would revive if the will inclined toward God. In gracious times, the affections rolled forth so powerfully that the will was carried effortlessly on their crest.¹⁴ Obeying God, mortifying the self, and all the acts of will were the natural outcome of gracious love. Will and affections, of course, sprang from the same source, but overwhelmed as he was by love for God, it seemed fitting to stress one side more than the other. In the treatise on affections he underscored the proposition that "true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."¹⁵

Above all Edwards experienced a consuming love of God. When he walked in the fields softly singing God's praises, his heart overflowed with adoration. Sometimes he imagined himself alone

in the mountains with Christ, "and wrapt and swallowed up in God. The sense I had of divine things," he wrote, "would often of a sudden kindle up, as it were, a sweet burning in my heart; an ardor of soul, that I know not how to express." Even then his passions were not so free as he wished:

The inward ardor of my soul, seemed to be hindered and pent up, and could not freely flame out as it would. I used often to think how in heaven this principle should freely and fully vent and express itself. Heaven appeared exceedingly delightful, as a world of love; and that all happiness consisted in living in pure, humble, heavenly, divine love.¹⁶

The love that began in God, overflowed into His creations, and encompassed all men. "God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing," he wrote. He delighted to think of heaven where "reigns heavenly, calm, and delightful love, without alloy . . . where those persons who appear so lovely in this world, will really be inexpressibly more lovely, and full of love to us."¹⁷ Brainerd's love was not only ardent for his friends but for his enemies, Edwards noted, and he could happily report that the Northampton converts put away their differences and treated one another lovingly.¹⁸

The whole world was bathed in affection while Edwards lived in the "sweet sense of the glorious *majesty* and *grace* of God."¹⁹ The contrast with his sunken condition is perhaps best epitomized in the two words, sweet and vile. When despondent, insofar as he felt emotions, they were bitter and dark: anger, fretting, despair, melancholy, and scorn. They made him feel vile and odious, and he sought to extinguish or at least hold

¹² *Works*, III, p. 6.

¹³ Dwight, *Life*, pp. 78, 83.

¹⁴ *Works*, I, pp. 17-18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 16, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 16-17, 19-20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 659; III, p. 235; cf., I, p. 549.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 16.

them back, covering them with an appearance of benignity.²⁰ In grace, his feelings were calm and sweet, the two words he used over and over. His emotions pleased and satisfied him, giving joy as they poured from his heart.

Eventually these sweet enjoyments always departed, and Edwards found himself decaying. His "Diary" entries most often occur at these times when he was sinking and remorsefully examining himself to discover why. His response then is important to understand, for it was characteristic of his psychic structure and basic to his theology. He always blamed himself, lamenting, "O how weak, how infirm," and set about to regain grace. In a letter to a young Christian he advised the practice he always followed himself: "If at any time you fall into doubts about the state of your soul, in dark and dull frames of mind . . . apply yourself with all your might, to an earnest pursuit after renewed experience, new light, and new lively acts of faith and love." At the same time, he knew he could not earn grace by himself. His full lament was, "O how weak, how infirm, how unable to do anything of myself!" The very cause of his downfall was a pretension to independence. "While I stand, I am ready to think that I stand by my own strength . . . when alas! I am but a poor infant, upheld by Jesus Christ."²¹ Even the thought of becoming pious by his own efforts was prideful and offensive to the Spirit.

What then could he apply himself to in the pursuit of renewed experience? The answer was obvious to a Puritan. He must work to be more dependent on God: "O let it teach me," continues the lament, "to depend less on myself, to be more humble, and to give more of the praise of my ability to Jesus Christ."²² The heart of Edwards' piety was humility

before God carried to the point of self-abasement. His exertions all aimed to make less of himself and more of God.

Humility began with the extinction of the vile self, the lazy, lustful, proud, angry, and morose self which had to be wholly denied, utterly annihilated with all its corruptions to make room for the "contrary sweetness and beauties." He continually looked for more stringent forms of self-denial, convinced that "great instances of mortification, are deep wounds, given to the body of sin." With every blow he grows weaker and more cowardly, "until at length, we find it easy work with him, and can kill him at pleasure."²³

To set a demanding standard, he once considered the supposition that there was to be but one person on earth at a time "who was properly a complete Christian, in all respects of a right stamp," and resolved "to act just as I would do, if I strove with all my might, to be that one, who should live in my time."²⁴ That sort of conscientiousness called for the complete elimination of every trace of sin. By the time Edwards began the "Diary" the grosser forms of sensuality were completely vanquished and never merited a comment. Instead he regularly rebuked himself for eating, drinking, and sleeping too much. He decided to skip meals entirely if called to the table when deeply engaged in study.²⁵ He could not permit himself any display of untoward emotions either. He worried especially over an inclination to find fault and resolved that he must "refrain from an air of dislike, fretfulness, and anger in conversation," and constantly exhibit an air of "love, cheerfulness, and benignity."²⁶ Of course, he assiduously attended to all his religious duties such as prayer and scriptural study, requiring of himself the

²⁰ Dwight, *Life*, p. 87.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 151.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 80.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 82, 83, 86, 87, 102, 103, 106.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

most intense concentration and heartfelt devotion. When he wrote that he was lax in not "forcing" himself upon "religious thoughts," he was looking for total immersion in his meditations.²⁷

Occasionally the constant exertion was too much and without willing it, his strength gave way. He even wondered if "this being so exceedingly careful, and so particularly anxious, to force myself to think of religion, at all times, has exceedingly distracted my mind, and made me altogether unfit for that, and every thing else." But then his strength returned and it seemed he could not do enough. Sometimes he discovered himself looking forward to a suspension of effort, thinking he had earned a release as his due. But he knew his lot was different, that he must "live in continual mortification without ceasing, and even to weary myself thereby, as long as I am in this world, and never to expect or desire any worldly ease or pleasure."²⁸

Talking about his wickedness seemed to strengthen him for the struggle and he avidly enlarged upon his corruption. His sin, he said, was "like an infinite deluge, or a mountain over my head." Or, reversing the metaphor, "when I look into my heart, and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell."²⁹ These were sincere expressions of his feelings, but he also knew that pointing to his sinfulness empowered him to hate and destroy those qualities that were, after all, still part of himself. When he said, "What a foolish, silly, miserable, blind, deceived, poor worm am I, when pride works," he confirmed his determination to cut out a cancer in his own flesh, however painful. One of his early resolves was "to act in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile

as I."³⁰ Confessing his sins passionately and in detail permitted him better to "abhor" himself and brought him closer to the total abasement he sought.³¹

For all its difficulty, the destruction of evil impulses was the easiest part of Christian humility. The more demanding task was to give up every desire, every aspiration, every action that was not wholly for the glory of God, even if ostensibly innocent. The Christian's duty was "freely, and from his very heart, as it were [to] renounce, and annihilate himself."³² Edwards wanted to destroy his sins and then give everything else to God.

He once asked himself if he could permit any delight or satisfaction that was not religious. His first answer was yes, for otherwise there would be no rejoicing in friends or any pleasures in food. But on second thought he concluded, "We never ought to allow any joy or sorrow, but what helps religion." That degree of self-denial was characteristic. One of his first resolutions was "never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God." Comprehensive as the statement was, it did not satisfy him. Every time he received an honor or prospered in any way, he worried that he exalted himself at God's expense. He regularly added resolutions blocking any loopholes where pride could sneak through.³³ In one of his high moments of dedication he entered into a covenant with God that was meant to be absolutely binding and complete.

I have been before God, and have given myself, all that I am, and have, to God; so that I am not, in any respect, my own. I can challenge no right in this understanding, this will, these affections, which are in me.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 82, 77, 80.

²⁹ *Works*, I, p. 22.

³⁰ Dwight, *Life*, p. 68.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³² *Works*, III, pp. 139-140.

³³ Dwight, *Life*, pp. 79-80, 68, 83, 69, 71, 72.

Neither have I any right to this body, or any of its members—no right to this tongue, these hands, these feet; no right to these senses, these eyes, these ears, this smell, or this taste. I have given myself clear away, and have not retained any thing as my own.³⁴

Abasement was not merely an unpleasant prerequisite for enjoying God's love, a device for opening oneself to grace, ending when the walls of the self were broken and the Holy Spirit flowed in. Humility was the desirable condition in itself, one of the sweetest fruits of grace, and came to culmination in times of spiritual joy. Edwards prayed for constancy in the pleasures of humility, for they were "the most refined inward and exquisite, delights in the world." He loved to be "a member of Christ, and not anything distinct, but only a part, so as to have no separate interest, or pleasure" of his own.³⁵ Some of his most fervent contemplations were of himself as a child being led by Christ. In a famous passage he pictured the soul of a Christian as "a little flower as we see in the spring of the year low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory." "There was no part of creature holiness," he went on to say, "that I had so great a sense of its loveliness, as humility, brokenness of heart and poverty of spirit; and there was nothing that I so earnestly longed for. My heart panted after this, to lie low before God, as in the dust, that I might be nothing, and that God might be ALL, that I might become as a little child."³⁶

The impulse for self-abasement brought Edwards to the verge of mysticism but it never carried him over. The passages that ring most mystically express a *longing* to lie low in the dust, a *yearning*

to be "emptied and annihilated" and "full of Christ alone," without claiming consummation.³⁷ Edwards could never forget the corruptions of the flesh blocking the influx of the Spirit. The Northampton converts after experiencing God's glory had "a far greater sight of their vileness, and the evil of their hearts."³⁸ The more grace they enjoyed, the more they recognized how their sins separated them from God.

Edwards' conception of the regenerative process also stood in the way of self-annihilation. The Spirit of God did not absorb the person; it altered his nature and more particularly his perceptions. Through his senses he saw the beauty of God and his creations, and this vision was the source of holy love. The whole process was supernatural, originating in God, yet it was natural too, working through the faculties of the creature. Through all, the individual mind was held inviolate. Indeed regeneration depended on the independent functions of perceiving minds beholding and loving God's excellence.³⁹

The preservation of individuality, however, was not Edwards' reason for advocating this conception of regeneration. Its beauty was that it diminished the role of the self in redemption. Humility not individualism was still the prevailing spirit. The schemes of Arminians and radical Separates, the targets of Edwards' arguments in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, began with selfishness. The Arminians thought men chose God to achieve their own happiness, and the Separates said converted men loved God because he first loved and saved them.⁴⁰ Edwards opposed both for justifying man's cardinal sins, pride and self-love. Men came to true faith only by

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 550.

³⁹ Miller, Perry. *Jonathan Edwards*. New York: William Sloane, 1949, pp. 67-68, 193-194.

⁴⁰ *Works*, III, pp. 91-95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 80.

³⁶ *Works*, I, pp. 21, 18.

obliterating the self and occasionally at least loving God purely for his own sake.

By affording a glimpse of God's beauty and excellency, grace gave men this selfless experience. Seeing His beauty, brightness, and glory, they adored Him without thinking of themselves. Saints "do not first see that God loves them, and then see that he is lovely; but they first see that God is lovely, and that Christ is excellent and glorious." "False affections begin with self." "The hypocrite lays himself at the bottom of all," while "the saints' affections begin with God." "In the love of the true saint, God is the lowest foundation."⁴¹

Edwards lived for those moments when the sight of God's glories so overwhelmed him that self fell away and he stood awestruck in love and admiration. "A true saint, when in the enjoyment of true discoveries of the sweet glory of God and Christ, has his mind too much captivated" to think of himself. "It would be a loss which he could not bear to have his eye taken from the ravishing object of his contemplation and turned back on his own person."⁴²

The same power to humble also confirmed Edwards' belief in conventional Calvinistic doctrines. The value of belief in divine sovereignty, original sin, and free grace was that they allowed nothing to human powers and attributed all to God. They tore away the shields of human self-confidence and laid a man bare, exposing his sinfulness, helplessness, and utter dependence. An Arminian could hold on to some small portion of pride and self-righteousness. Calvinism compelled a man to abase and abhor himself totally.

Edwards' conviction that complete humility was man's only hope for enjoying divine love, a regulated will, and salvation was the theme of his life. He

announced it in his maiden sermon before the Boston ministry, entitling his address, *God Glorified in Man's Dependence*. He elaborated a sophisticated and exalted statement of the same theme in *The Nature of True Virtue*, the work occupying him in his closing years. His personal devotions, his polemical works, and his sermons constantly returned to God's overpowering glory and dominion, and man's nothingness.

This picture of Edwards' consciousness raises many questions about his character. Perhaps the most obvious is what relationship existed between his deep yearning for self-abasement and his two most common spiritual conditions: the emotional lethargy of the dull states and the passionate love of the exalted? Why did self-annihilation seem the most natural way from lethargy to love? How can we explain his spiritual dynamics in terms meaningful for our generation?

To suggest a tentative answer, as well as to sketch briefly Edwards' place in the subsequent development of the New England mentality, we must set him in a wider context of Puritan consciousness. Edwards devoted most of his writing to the converted man, but he also described the condition of hardhearted sinners. Actually the misfortunes of this state were implicit in all of his writings, for only in contrast to the miseries of wickedness did the joys of grace achieve poignancy. Though not invidiously, the gracious person constantly contrasted present light to his previous deplorable darkness.

In the years before the Great Awakening, preachers addressed many a sermon to sleepy sinners. A drowsy insensibility seemed to have fallen over their parishioners and blinded them to the unfortunate condition of their souls. These everyday Puritans listened to the sermons about sin and damnation without taking them to heart. In one way or another they warded off the threats descending from the pulpit and main-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, III, pp. 93, 96.

⁴² *Ibid.*, III, p. 100.

tained their equanimity. Some thought their righteousness was sensible proof of grace. Others may have taken enough comfort from the multiplication of flocks and herds not to worry over their estate in the hereafter. Edwards was well aware of "the stupifying influence of worldly objects."⁴³

The apparent complacency, however, was not solid confidence. For years before the Awakening, ministers noted that an earthquake, a sudden death, or a shipwreck would set their congregations to inquiring into the state of their souls. Any sort of dramatic destruction seemed to resonate in the hearts of people and awaken fears of God's intentions for them. Two deaths in Northampton "contributed to the solemnizing of the spirits of the Young People" there. And when one person was seized with a concern for his soul, soon others were too. Observers from neighboring towns came to look and went away with "wounded spirits."⁴⁴ The sudden precipitation of concern up and down the Connecticut Valley in 1735 showed how the previous complacency covered a powerful dread.

The realization that burst upon these people was a horrifying conviction of their own sin. They saw clearly "their dreadful pollution, enmity, and perverseness: their obstinacy and hardness of heart." They could not forget their guilt in the sight of God and saw that with perfect justification "the great God who has them in his hands" was "exceedingly angry." He appeared "so much provoked and his great wrath so increased" that He must "forthwith cut them off" and send them down to "the horrible pit of eternal misery."⁴⁵

The revival ministers pressed hard on these fears, teaching what was called "legal humiliation." They underscored

the hopelessness of the state of the unconverted, tried by the law of God and found worthy of unending torment. The picture of God they drew was a Being of wrath and terror, unflinching in his determination to crush sinners. Small wonder that some listeners were buried in black despair. Weighed down by concern, Edwards' Uncle Hawley killed himself in the midst of his spiritual turmoil. Others clamored to "extinguish their fears of hell," and find some "confidence of the favour of God."⁴⁶ They grasped at every evidence of righteousness in themselves, every image of holy things crossing their minds, eager to see grace in it. The Separates made the assurance of the Saints a cardinal point of doctrine. Edwards thought their hopes were obstacles to true humility, but he himself brooded about his own state, at last resolving simply to trust in God's good intentions for him.⁴⁷

Edwards wondered why he had never passed through the state of terror. Missing this step worried him a little, for it was standard in the conversion process.⁴⁸ But if he never felt terror consciously, there is reason to believe it worked its effects on some level. Like other Puritans he was seized with concern when destruction threatened, in his case a bout with pleurisy that brought him "nigh to the grave." Before his conversion nothing was more terrible to him than thunder and lightning flashing from the heavens, and he admitted that from childhood, no point of doctrine bothered him more than that of "God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell." "It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me," he confessed.⁴⁹ Perhaps as revealing as any-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, III, p. 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, III, p. 236.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 548; III, p. 549; cf. III, pp. 240-246.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 66.

⁴⁷ Dwight, *Life*, pp. 76, 93, 99, 105.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76; *Works*, I, pp. 15, 661-662.

⁴⁹ *Works*, I, p. 15.

thing is the sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. It is difficult to conceive of anyone portraying the terrors so forcefully who had not experienced them somewhere in his being.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. . . . You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder.⁵⁰

Those are the words of a man who had felt the wrath of God.

This component of terror was as characteristic of Puritan consciousness, Edwards not excepted, as love or lethargy, and must be included in an explanation of Puritan personality. Altogether the picture is suggestive to anyone with a psychoanalytic orientation, though understandably very complex. So compelling an experience as conversion necessarily operated on many levels of the personality, and brought to the surface feelings shaped in all the earliest stages of life. Edwards' cycle of depression and exhilaration, for example, is reminiscent of an infant's experience of fright and estrangement when separated from the mother and of the return of well-being when reunited. The wooden restraint of feeling is a mode of handling emotion characteristic of those taught to fear vile outbursts when first learning self-control. The compulsive element in Edwards' preoccupation with will restraining the affections is unmistakable. Conversion permitted a safe and joyous release of emotions somehow purified by submission to God.

But the central issue, judging from Edwards' own account, was reconciliation with the great and terrible God. The doctrine of God's sovereignty in punishing whom he wished was the major intellectual obstacle to conversion—and acceptance of God's right to judge prepared the way. The scripture that precipitated the first outpouring of grace was I Timothy 1:17: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen." Immediately after the glory of this declaration struck him, Edwards saw God as an object to be loved rather than feared. His heart was caught up to Christ and he rejoiced in the loveliness of the Divine Being.

In many ways this reconciliation of Father and son paralleled the resolution of the Oedipal crisis, and perhaps Edwards' conversion may be considered, on one level, primarily as an effort to repeat and master that difficult ordeal. The similarities between Puritan theological images and common childhood images of father and son suggest how easily the tensions of the early conflict could be transferred to the adult conversion experience. The qualities of the revival preachers' terrible God, for example, resemble those a boy often attributes in his imagination to his father-rival. In the boy's fear-inspired fancy, even a kind and meek father is credited with omnipotence and horrible wrath. The boy's own transgressions also, though chiefly imaginary, may be painted in darkest hues, like those of the concerned sinner. Edwards' sense of sinfulness fits the childhood pattern particularly well. Partly he deplored specific faults like sensuality, anger, or faultfinding, departures from some ideal standard. But more wicked than disobedience was pride, the vaunting of the self over God. The young boy likewise worries about disobeying the father, especially about indulging sensuous desires that seem like forbidden approaches to the pleasures of the mother's love. But

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, p. 318.

his most wicked ambition is to displace the father, to rise above him, perhaps to kill him. Pride is the boy's most offensive sin, too.

Some of Edwards' comments on hidden sinful desires reveal how deeply he probed for the roots of wickedness.

You object against your having a mortal hatred against God; that you never felt any desire to kill him. But one reason has been, that it has always been conceived so impossible by you, and you have been so sensible how such desires would be in vain, that it has kept down such a desire. But if the life of God were within your reach, and you knew it, it would not be safe one hour.⁵¹

He could never consciously contemplate this act himself, of course, but pride in the world, or self-confidence, anything but abasement, pulled down God and exalted man in symbolic patricide.

This analogy between the spiritual vicissitudes of childhood and maturity helps explain the emotional lethargy of Edwards' dull frames of mind. The repression of emotion is connected with the assimilation of the wrathful father image. He becomes part of the boy and in a sense constantly rebukes him for his wicked desires. This judging part of the self demands the containment of evil thoughts, repressing them below the level of consciousness. Thus whenever Edwards' pride or sensuality raised their heads, his internal monitor suppressed them, closing subterraneously the valves of all feeling even remotely related to the forbidden actions. His experience of dullness was actually a struggle between unconscious desires and the countervailing powers of conscience.

Edwards made peace with this conscience as boys make peace with their fathers, by relinquishing the ambition to overcome and by striving to imitate instead. The significance of abasement

was that he felt assured of God's love only when sin and pride were utterly denied, when he offered no threat to God's supremacy. Only when utterly humble was he confident of divine approval. Then his conscience released the emotions of the gracious times and he loved heartily and freely. Blessed with God's love, his soul glowed with affection. Humility was the surest way to circumvent the wrath of God and recover full use of will and emotions.

One reward of humility was a return to a harmony with all of Being, reminiscent of the infant's most blissful exchanges of love with its mother. Edwards longed to be a child again, or a little flower, opening itself "to drink in the light of the sun," eagerly consuming nourishment from the center of warmth and affection. One of the signs of true conversion was the awakening of sensory delight in divine things, which often seems like a hungry absorption of love through all the nerve endings, as if the usual consumption organs would not suffice. God's perfections in these joyous moments assumed at times a maternal cast. Edwards sang of 'the' beauty, grace, and holiness of God, and longed to be "wrapt" up in Him. Indeed much of Edwards' model for the ideal harmony with God seemed to be drawn from the selfless union of mother and child.⁵²

The meaning of conversion in psychoanalytic terms was that men accepted Edwards' solution to a basic problem. The preachment of legal humiliation brought the crisis to a head. The images of terror and the condemnation of sinners revived long-buried fears by starkly confronting the listener with a reflection of his inner self. The preachers coined words for feelings that before were mute, and gave archaic despair currency in the adult consciousness.

The wounds thus opened began to heal when the convert under the influence

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, IV, p. 48.

⁵² *Ibid.*, I, p. 18.

of grace ceased to fight God and started to love Him. By giving way entirely, as Edwards had, the sinner escaped divine terror and indeed found it beautiful.⁵³ Edwards sometimes saw a passive calm come over sinners as they gave up the struggle and surrendered to God. In his own case, the doctrine of divine sovereignty that once appeared horrible became "exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet." After that, thunder entertained rather than terrified and led to "sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God."⁵⁴

The big difference in the converted man was that love swallowed fear. Natural men stood in awe of God and fearfully strove to obey Him, but they did not voluntarily "abase themselves and exalt God alone. This disposition," Edwards said, "was given only in evangelical humiliation, by overcoming the heart, and changing its inclination, by a discovery of God's holy beauty." Natural men may be "subdued and forced to the ground;" converted men "are brought sweetly to yield, and freely and with delight to prostrate themselves at the feet of God."⁵⁵ The crux of conversion was the willing renunciation of all ambition to rival God, and submission to Him out of selfless love.

The resolution of the old conflict brought peace and joy and a great tenderness of heart, but not perfect stability. The price of freer emotions and heightened self-awareness was the painful oscillation between dullness and grace. Edwards observed that among all converted men, love decayed and fear arose in persistent alternation. Conversion reconciled the soul to God without purging entirely the former fears of the terrible Divinity. The old terror remained at some level and properly so, Edwards thought, because it stirred men up to

watchfulness, excited them to "care for the good of their souls," and restrained them from sin.⁵⁶ Conscience repeatedly drove them to the abasement and self-denial which preceded the return of gracious love, the dominant mode of Puritan consciousness.

Pointing to the parallel between boy-father and man-God relations does not fully explain the movements of the Puritan consciousness. At best the comparison suggests the sources of energy feeding the quest for piety. The theological and moral symbols—God, terror, pride, sin, abasement, love, beauty—tapped primary reservoirs of emotional power. The flow of childhood feelings into the adult struggle gave it urgency and endurance. But after saying that much the psychoanalyst can only congratulate Edwards for attempting to resolve an ancient and fundamental human dilemma.

The bald statement that the dramas of the Puritan consciousness were no more than a reenactment of the Oedipal trauma grossly distorts the truth. No simple link can be forged between childhood and adult life. Among other objections, there are logical flaws in such a contention. The most important is that all children pass through Oedipal crises, but not all adults are Puritans. The task of the historian is to explain why Oedipal problems were so prominent in the Puritan consciousness and why their resolution took the form it did.⁵⁷

The inquiry obviously leads toward a study of Puritan family life and the conditions that magnified the boy's fear of his father.⁵⁸ It also leads toward a new

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, III, p. 56.

⁵⁷ I also hold with those who maintain a psychoanalytic interpretation of religion does not exclude a supernatural one.

⁵⁸ Morgan, E. S. *The Puritan Family: Essays on Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England*. Boston: The Trustees of the Public Library, 1944.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, III, pp. 246-249; I, pp. 548-549.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 15, 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, III, p. 138.

look at Puritan culture to discover the elements that drew out this particular configuration of feelings from the varied experiences of childhood. It should be clear at this point how influential Calvinist doctrine was in the shaping of character. The conceptions of divine sovereignty, original sin, and free grace all stressed man's lowliness, God's power, and the necessity of submission. Those doctrines were bound to select from the legacy of childhood the patterns surrounding the Oedipal crisis and give them standing in the adult world. In the years when a young person was looking for the components of the private self that were negotiable in public, he could name and talk about these feelings. The doctrine helped him to choose them from his large store and award them a permanent place in his adult identity. Thus the Puritan encountered fewer obstacles to feeling sinful, despair, and holy wrath than, for example, a lad bred on optimism and rugged individualism in the late nineteenth century.

The Puritan consciousness began to decline in Edwards' own lifetime. By the end of the eighteenth century Puritans were in the minority even in New England. Either Edwards or the psychoanalyst could explain why. Calvinism required men to abase themselves totally in the hopes of reaching God, and few could meet the test. Edwards knew that pride and selfishness lay at the very bottom of the soul. Natural men had always constructed ingenious doctrinal defenses against God's demands for absolute humility. The psychoanalyst knows that boys who cease to compete overtly with their fathers continue the rivalry under various guises. No one surrenders entirely, and most will more or less openly protect their pride against the extreme demands of conscience.

Edwards lived to see eighteenth-century thinkers devising ways of stifling the voice of judgment and terror in themselves. The Enlightenment provided var-

ious notions of sufficient cultural strength to counterbalance the humbling doctrines of Calvinism. Reason was one of these. By virtue of its power Benjamin Franklin, a fugitive from Puritan Boston, held God to strict compliance with moral rules and could appease his conscience with good works. Benevolence was another. Charles Chauncy, Edwards' archfoe during the Awakening, said divine love and eternal punishment were contradictory. God desired the well-being of His children and punished to teach goodness. When the lesson was learned, the punishment ended. No one needed to fear permanent internment in the pit of misery. These two, reason and benevolence, helped many a Yankee to calm his fear of judgment and to avoid the humiliation of total surrender.⁵⁹

The sons of the Puritans who resorted to these devices, however, did not enjoy perfect equanimity. Though its commands were muffled, conscience continued to drive men. They worried that their good works fell short, that pride had carried them too far, and that they must serve others more selflessly. They became zealous reformers, determined to exterminate from the world the evil they could not remove from their own hearts. However tightly they sealed the passage leading to the past, the voice of their fathers' God still resounded in their hearts. Even adherence to optimistic doctrines of progress only demonstrated how they feared their world would sometime collapse and God would have them in His awful power.

For many the cost of restraining God was the loss of internal freedom. Unable to face God in all his terror, they could never know Him in His glory. They held Him strictly to a reasonable moral-

⁵⁹ Haroutunian, J. *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology*. New York: H. Holt, 1932, describes this development in theological terms.

ity and consequently were bound themselves. They enjoyed the small pleasures of decorous worship and worldly prosperity, and passed over the raptures of envelopment in heavenly love.

A few grandsons of the Puritans sensed they were cheated of their inheritance. A reasonable faith and moral propriety with quiet hopes for a good estate hereafter palled them. They hungered for sweeter, stronger nourishment. In this generation the transcendental prophets once again lost themselves in visions of divine excellence and felt the surge of holy love in their souls. They did not practice Edwards' humility; Emerson thought Puritanism a religion of "privation, self-denial and sorrow."⁶⁰ But they

taught their own forms of discipline and surrender, and they avidly sought the moments of ecstasy and insight which as heirs of Edwards they knew were accessible to human consciousness.

Few others, however, tasted of the divine glory and so most forgot what Puritanism once meant. They saw only the terrors of a wrathful God and gladly buried the Puritan Divinity in the graves of their ancestors. Edwards was remembered chiefly for inhuman strictness and his debasement of human powers. Puritanism came to stand for dreary self-restraint and joyless piety. The latter-day generation lost touch entirely with the vital heart of Edwards' religion. They failed to see that unending spiritual exertions and absolute surrender were nought beside the sweetness of beholding and selflessly loving the great and glorious God.

⁶⁰ Emerson, R. W. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Concord Edition, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904, Vol. I, p. 220. My argument here follows that of Perry Miller in his essay, "From Edwards to Emerson," in

Errand into the Wilderness, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956, pp. 184-203.