

Books

The Foolishness of Edwards

David Laurence

That Jonathan Edwards was both a Christian and a philosopher is a proposition with which any student of the texts will readily agree. All his life Edwards held to a neoplatonic philosophy of being; he likewise remained from first to last a devout proponent of evangelical Reformed Christianity. Neoplatonism and evangelical Christianity recommend themselves to most contemporary thinkers with something less than compelling force, and having committed himself to both these unwisdoms, Edwards may seem to many to be vulnerable to the charge Freud laid at Dostoevsky's feet: lesser minds have reached the same conclusions with less effort. Yet those who have set aside the stereotype of the hell-fire preacher and encountered Edwards's penetrating mind and breathtaking power of literary expression find he exerts a fascination that belies all expectation. His Christian philosophy can rise from the page as a vast and immensely complex fugue in which the seemingly incongruous emphases upon the authority of Christ as a personal savior and the transcendent priority of impersonal Being-in-general move in a sublime counterpoint which, through the play of its contraries, anticipates an ever surprising and luminous whole.

Recent scholars have been largely agreed that the way to make this forceful presence available to our own day is to let the emphasis fall very much upon the more strictly "philosophical" of Edwards's accomplishments. Where the problem of his Christianity is considered at all, it is likely to be considered within the intellectual forms of systematic theology. The strongest modern reading of Edwards, Perry Miller's pervasively influential intellectual biography (1949), interprets his Christianity in the terms of a naturalistic, empirical philosophy with such thoroughness that a reader unaware that Edwards was a Christian could come away from Miller's book with his ignorance on that score safely intact.

Modern interpreters have consistently shaped their depiction of Edwards's enterprise according to its intellectual content and have made relatively little of the spiritual conviction that Christ is Savior that Edwards called the "sense of the heart." Many speak of this

"sense of the heart" as important, and no interpreter, reading Edwards's *Personal Narrative*, doubts that it came to him with extraordinary immediacy and power. But despite this acknowledgment on all sides, no one seems to know how to give due weight to what everyone cannot help noticing. It has been far easier to give an account of what Edwards thought about religion than to give an account of the importance of what he thought of his rigorously Christian religiosity.

Harold P. Simonson's *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (Eerdman's; 174 pp.; \$6.50) is an attempt to chart this too seldom visited region of Edwards's world. Simonson is virtually the first interpreter since Joseph Haroutunian (*Piety versus Moralism*, 1932) to consider the specifically Christian spirituality of Edwards and the claims he made for it as matters worthy of serious consideration. He makes the reader aware throughout the book of Edwards's Christ-centeredness, and undertakes the much-needed project of showing the decisiveness of conversion and a lifelong struggle for holiness for his intellectual and ministerial career. He has a clear understanding of the Reformed doctrinal position Edwards maintained and a large sympathy for it—though also a tendency to identify it too directly with Calvin's. Simonson, a professor of English at the University of Washington in Seattle, is particularly interested in Edwards as a master of the evangelical sermon.

This short book begins with a consideration of Edwards's *Personal Narrative*, *Dairy*, and *Resolutions*. The religious experiences recorded in these documents, Simonson writes, "constituted the foundation of [Edwards's] life." Against Perry Miller's judgment that an ecstatic reading of Locke's *Essay* was the decisive event upon which Edwards's career turned, Simonson asserts "the fact that Edwards read 1 Timothy 1:17 with ecstasy, preaching and writing all his life in Biblical and Calvinist [sic] language." Simonson agrees with Miller that Locke's sensationalist psychology was important for the development of Edwards, both as thinker and writer. But he vigorously denies the conclusion Miller drew, that since Edwards used the terms of sensationalist psychology to describe religious experience he was therefore an empiricist. "Even though his monumental *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* purports to be a psychological study of religion, [Edwards] cannot be considered a scientist (empiricist) in this field. The all-important fact is that his observations were subsumed into the more embracing category of religious conversion." The author quotes William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* to the effect that scientific observation must do violence to the unique to make it fit general categories of analysis. An individual, repelled by the objective handling of beliefs he

DAVID LAURENCE, a graduate student in the American Studies Program at Yale University, is at present completing his doctoral dissertation on Jonathan Edwards.

has invested with a degree of sacredness, is apt to cry, "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone" to defend his right to recognition as "a unique being." "This," writes Simonson, "is exactly the cry that filled Edwards' voice, as it did that of the Hebrew prophets, Paul, Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard."

According to Simonson, Edwards's religious utterance is the cry of individual uniqueness confirming itself, through the mystery of redemption in Christ, as a reality that the eye of science and philosophy can neither recognize nor invalidate. The author insists upon what he calls "the singularly self-authenticating" nature of Edwards's sense of the heart. On the basis of this nonempirical view, he proceeds to revise Miller's depiction of Edwards as a naturalist whose thought sprang from a reading of Locke and Newton. Miller understood Edwards to have preached naturalism in a Christian vocabulary; Simonson understands Edwards to have preached Reformed Christianity in a vocabulary that, while touched by Locke in some of its reaches, remained firmly biblical.

Simonson gives his analysis a biographical and historical context by means of a brief review of the evangelical enterprise Edwards embarked on during the Great Awakening. Having gone over this familiar ground, he moves on to his main concern, an attempt to show that Edwards's imagination and use of language are specifically religious or spiritual in character, as opposed to artistic. For Simonson the sermons and treatises of Edwards are read properly only when they are read as discoveries of an awesome power, which, in terrible majesty, animates existence and which, in the meekness of Christ, redeems believers. Edwards's writings are not to be read as imaginative exercises which strive for certain effects, but as statements which demand that their reader venture his life upon the truth of what they say. As Simonson puts it, "the reader must enter into what has been imaged forth." Simonson attempts to show how for Edwards the sermon was a way of making a seeker ready to make that entrance. "The test of the preacher's power was in whether he could transform doctrine into preparatory experience that grace would complete as saving experience." In two closing chapters Simonson considers the two foundation stones of Edwards's pulpit rhetoric, the concepts "sin" and "salvation."

Simonson's plan is admirable, but his execution of it suffers from confusion and inconsistency. Simonson recognizes that in *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* and elsewhere Edwards argued against an understanding of the work of redemption as a self-authenticating experience not capable of validation according to any external rule or qualification. In an account otherwise pronouncedly sympathetic the author argues that Edwards was himself confused on this point. He writes, apparently with the *Affections* in mind, that "the intellectual vindication that [Edwards] structured belied the singularly self-authenticating sense of the heart. To make visible

whether in treatises or institutions what is invisible must fail, all the more notably when the visible takes the form of hard and rigid outline." Simonson believes that Edwards strayed from his calling when he set himself to expound the signs of conversion and "insisted that such privacy be made public through professed testimony." "Had he said that the true fruits of the Spirit—love, peace, joy, humility, insight, practice—defy distinguishing marks, he would have bespoken their true mystery. He would have been content...to have allowed the Great Awakening to do its own mysterious work in the private hearts of his congregation."

Simonson believes that in his heart of hearts Edwards truly was someone for whom the Scripture rule, or any external rule, could never be anything but antagonistic to the supposedly self-authenticating experience of divine excellency. He believes that having known such experiences as those recorded in the *Personal Narrative*, Edwards had to be (however secretly) someone for whom the sermons, tracts, and treatises of men—and the very Scriptures themselves—could only be so many misleading approximations of an inexpressibly personal "insight." But his sense of the heart was for him nothing else but a felt conviction of the truth of the realities depicted in Scripture; it did not and could not imply antagonism between the believer's experience of grace and the Scriptural account of the work of redemption.

Far from holding that spiritual experience was self-authenticating, Edwards held that only a rule derived from the Scriptural depiction of true holiness, especially in the life and teaching of Christ, could authenticate it as specifically Christian experience. For Edwards the "mystery" of spiritual knowledge and experience made Scripture *more real* to believers; spiritual conviction made Scripture so intelligible that a believer became willing to rest upon the promises made there, taking the Bible as his guide and rule. But Simonson, zealous to defend Edwards's religious convictions from the prying eye of science and philosophy, and anxious lest the great Edwards turn out to be a fundamentalist, insists upon spiritual knowledge as self-authenticating. And this insistence allows no other conclusion but that when the self-authenticating mystery makes one a believer it does not matter whether Scripture becomes more or less real, or indeed whether the believer cares never to open his Bible again.

What the believer puts his faith in is not the work of redemption depicted in Scripture as performed by Christ, but his own experience. As Hans Frei describes this kind of evangelical piety: "What is real, and what therefore the Christian [of this opinion] really lives, is his own pilgrimage; and to its pattern he looks for the assurance that he is really living it." Edwards's piety was not this kind of piety, though it is the kind of piety Simonson attributes to him. For Edwards what made the work of redemption real was not his experience of

grace, but Christ's really having performed that work; and the fountain of his assurance was not the pilgrimage he lived, but the Gospel promises by light of which he lived it. Good orthodox divine that he was, Edwards condemned the kind of evangelical pietism Simonson attributes to him as "dependence upon experiences." And he quite correctly saw that the "mystery" of such experiences was likely to be a eulogistic name for their unintelligibility.

His claims to the contrary notwithstanding, Simonson, like Miller, gives us an Edwards removed from his Scriptural foundation and set upon the foundation of "experience." In place of Miller's "naturalistic experience" Simonson gives us "religious experience." And for Simonson religious experience is always a mystery so recondite that neither Scripture nor the nature of things can take its measure or be its rule. Simonson correctly presents it as "Edwards' dictum" that "man believes [the Christian revelation] that he might truly imagine." But for the Edwards Simonson describes the Scripture revelation, far from being the fountain and foundation of the believer's life, would have to be finally irrelevant to it. In Simonson's account what redeems is not the work of Christ depicted in Scripture, but the self-authenticating experience. The only connection between this experience and

Scripture that Simonson offers is the assertion that this experience is the same experience that made believers of Abraham and the prophets and of Christ himself.

In Simonson's account the self-authenticating experience is understood to be the fountain and foundation of Scripture—a complete reversal of the position Edwards held. And once this reversal is asserted to be that position, Edwards's conviction that a spiritually destitute (that is, Christian) man "in effect knows nothing" cannot with reason be accounted anything more than a hyperbolic figure at best and an unintelligible foolishness at worst. But it is just this Christ-centeredness which Simonson understands to be so important to Edwards's position. Given Simonson's way of describing the "mystery" of belief such that neither Scripture nor the nature of things (metaphysics) can be its foundation, it would be far more reasonable to conclude that it is the believers (including Christ and the prophets) who "in effect know nothing." Edwards took *both* Scripture and the nature of things as the ground of belief. Taking both these out from under Edwards's feet, Simonson renders himself incapable of giving an accurate account of Edwards's truly majestic religious position. Miller's account, at least, settled Edwards recognizably upon the earth; Simonson's resembles nothing so much as a castle in the air.

French Communism, 1920-1972 by Ronald Tiersky

(Columbia University Press; 425 pp.; \$15.00)

Edith Kurzweil

Political possibilities and limits, everywhere, are influenced by the Russian specter. The Russian Revolution, which established the first Communist society—a caricature of Marx's utopian vision — provided enormous agitation but also ended, at least for the time being, every chance for a real egalitarian society. We still try to create a better social order and envision all kinds of humanistic utopias, but the Russian failure and its subversion of Communist ideals pushed real communism to the realm of fantasy—or at least to China.

Most commentaries deal with the subversion of Marx's socialist ideals, with theoretical and social issues, and with their political implications. In America, of course, the discus-

sions are peripheral: communism peaked in the 1930's and was fairly wiped out even before McCarthyism briefly revived it as an issue in the 1950's. If we think of it at all now it is to protect ourselves against Russia or against a minute "lunatic fringe." But in some countries, France for instance, communism is a vital part of both the political and the intellectual scenes.

French communism, unlike American communism, is real. The French have a large contingent of Marxist thinkers. Thus the debates among the *Temps Modernes* group around Sartre, the famous exchange between Camus and Koestler as expressed in *The Rebel* and in *Darkness at Noon*, and even the Marxist breast-beating by some of the structuralists like

Lévi-Strauss, Goldmann, and Althusser, and the writing by various "defectors," such as Lefebvre and Aron, indicate the relevance of Marxist thought to most of the country's intellectuals. Yet all of their debates, as Lichtheim remarked, were (and are) hardly those of the Communist Party. The Party—understandably allergic to thinking—exists alongside the thinkers, whose awareness of communism is probably heightened precisely because the *Partie Communiste Française* (PCF) has political power and is also, after Italy, the largest Communist party in a non-Communist society.

Tiersky, a political scientist, set out to study this party . . . without its trimmings. He purposely stays away from the philosophical issues