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An Edwards for Our Time: A Review Essay



By James C. Schaap

George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. 505 pp.
\$35.00

Dr. James Calvin Schaap, Professor of English at Dordt College, has authored the following works: *Romey's Place*, *In the Silence There are Ghosts*, *The Secrets of Barneveld Calvary*, *On the Trail of the Spirit*, *Every Bit of Who I Am*, *Touches the Sky* (released last fall and given an Award of Merit by *Christianity Today*), and most recently, *Fifty-five and Counting* (just released by Dordt Press). In addition, Dr. Schaap has written numerous plays, histories, and articles on faith and writing.

It happened in class, Early American Literature, not more than a month ago. I was rolling along nicely, commenting on the difficult positioning the New England church was required to make because of mere demographics and a phenomenon Perry Miller long ago asserted to be the loss of a sense of sin in third and fourth generation Puritans. This was the problem: when those churchgoers who'd never taken communion (becoming a "visible saint" was no cake walk, after all) wanted their children baptized, a sacrament the church forbade its non-members, something had to give.

On the one hand, the mid-seventeenth-century church risked the irrelevancy created by their own rapidly shrinking membership; on the other hand, offering baptism to the technically unregenerate required cataclysmic change in church polity. The beautiful babies of non-members, I was saying, presented a difficult dilemma to the Puritan church.

What grew out of the turmoil was the "Halfway Covenant," which allowed even those who were not "visible saints" to have their children baptized. The Halfway Covenant was, as its name suggests, a compromise, but what it failed to deliver was new confessing members.

The lecture continued. Along came Samuel Stoddard, a grand old church patriarch in Northampton, who devised a new way of understanding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. What Stoddard did, essentially, was redefine the body and blood as a "means of grace" and underplay its privilege. With that redefinition in place, churchgoers of seemingly moral character could partake. Admission to the table was much more free and easy. One very practical effect of Stoddard's radical change—not unlike the

practical effect of the Halfway Covenant —was to keep the church alive.

In other words, I was telling them—in good Miller fashion—the times they were a’changing in New England; the church was beginning to function like a political institution, ironic in a culture where the political system was designed to operate like a church. But then, I said, it likely had to change or die.

And then it happened. One of my students, a young woman who would probably assess herself as being among the more “spiritual” students on campus, asked the most wonderfully timed question I’ve heard in years. “Seems odd that the changes had to go in that direction,” she said, or something to that effect. “Why didn’t the church ever think of renewing itself from the inside?”

It’s a wonderful question because those acquainted with the history and literature of Puritan New England know that what she was asking was precisely what was about to happen. Stoddard’s own grandson, Jonathan Edwards, the fiery Calvinist revivalist, was about to add some combustible theology to the religious enthusiasm already brewing around him and, with the aid of many others, of course, create what historians call the Great Awakening.

In a way that I knew this particular student might well really love, Jonathan Edwards was exactly what the church needed at the time, someone poised to create a movement back to righteousness and piety. By way of the nature of her question I could anticipate her reception to what was coming on the syllabus; she was going to love the next reading assignments. Jonathan Edwards would be her champion for the very reason why, at Billy Graham Center on the campus at Wheaton College, the white-maned Puritan preacher stands front and center at the exhibition Wheaton has created to document the history of American revivalism. Jonathan Edwards, four-square Calvinist that he was, can be seen as the progenitor of any number of famous American itinerant evangelists—Billy Sunday and, of course, Billy Graham among them.

When the Puritan churches were in immediate danger of dying off by way of dead orthodoxy, along came a man many would come to consider the most brilliant American theologian of his time or perhaps any for that matter, a philosopher extraordinaire, a missionary to the Native Americans, a college president, a devoted husband and a loving father, a prodigious

writer whose corpus is larger than that of any of his peers with the exception of Cotton Mather.

Along came Edwards and the Great Awakening. I couldn’t have written a better question for some student to ask.

Yet, in a way, that student’s segue question has a tragic subtext. Why didn’t she already know about the Great Awakening? Why wouldn’t she already know about Edwards, especially *this* young woman, someone who, I guessed, would resonate to, among other things, the spiritual amplitude of Edwards’ “Personal Narrative,” the next reading assignment. Here’s what I was and am wondering: in the 16 years of her Christian education, how could she have missed hearing a story central to American history, central to the history of Calvinism, central to the narrative of Reformed folks in America? Shouldn’t she have known something about what had happened in early eighteenth-century New England? Shouldn’t all Christian college students know at least something about the man Wheaton College places at the doorstep of its own redemptive story?

I didn’t poll the class, but I’ve been teaching Early American Literature and Jonathan Edwards for a quarter century, and I know that in that college class most of the students are reading Edwards seriously for the first time in their lives. Few have ever heard of the Great Awakening.

However, if we consider the way students are educated today, there really are all sorts of reasons why Christian students would know so little about a Calvinist who, were he Catholic, might well be sainted. For a century already, modernist scholars would just as soon marginalize him, especially when all those significant free-thinkers around Edwards—Jefferson, Franklin, et al—were creating nothing less than democracy itself. Quite simply, from the vantage point of the American Revolution, just thirty years hence, Edwards does seem an anachronism. Besides, how on earth can anyone today take seriously such arcane ideas as “the sovereignty of God,” the theological tenet closest to Edwards’ heart? Honestly, how can teachers even begin to explain such esoteric theology to an age enamored with Brittany Spears?

George Marsden’s eminently readable new biography of Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, ends with Marsden’s hopes and dreams for the story he has so wonderfully retold. He admits that Edwards’ passions are not particularly fashionable today, that his way of

thinking seems more than a bit medieval. He really doesn't expect readers to find a kindred spirit in a deeply religious man who struggled throughout most of his life with his own sense of worthiness before God. "Not everyone will agree with all his premises and so will not be compelled by all his conclusions," Marsden writes near the end of the biography. "Nevertheless, anyone might do well to contemplate Edwards' view of reality and its awesome implications." There's the dream. Maybe, just maybe, Marsden suggests, this man's story will loosen some already ancient preconceptions and push at least some readers back to Edwards, not only for history's sake, but for the sake of a vision that is altogether too easily relegated to American history's own scrapheap.

What seems clear since the April 2003 release of *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* is that at least some of Marsden's hopes have materialized. In a quarter-page listing within the book section of the December 2003 *Atlantic*, the magazine names Marsden's biography with only nine others as "Books of the Year," and suggests Edwards for "giving and getting" at Christmas season. *Publisher's Weekly* says of Marsden's new biography, "This is a beautifully written book about one of America's most important thinkers." *Commonweal* says that *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* is "not only a definitive biography, but it reads like a novel." In a lengthy review in the *New Republic*, a review that is itself almost a biography, Elisa New writes,

George Marsden's fine biography helps us to better understand not only Edwards but, through Edwards, how one of the most rigorous and austere doctrines ever invented got people where they live. It is a high-stakes, vital, experientially rich, and deeply anxious view of existence that orthodox Protestantism offers, one that fertilizes, as it is confirmed by, William James's later assertion that "life is in the transitions."

What Marsden has done in *A Life* is offer readers a truly multi-dimensional Edwards in the intellectual milieu of his time, and Marsden has done the job so well that the man known primarily for the misunderstood "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" seems as fascinatingly human as he once probably was. That success is a gift, not only to Edwards' own legacy (last year was the 300th anniversary of his birth) but also to all of us, maybe even especially those of us who should be seeing him as a major player in our own theological heritage. What Marsden has done for us, specifically, is give us back one of our own ancients,

which is not to say without the wars.

When he thinks he needs to be, Marsden is clear in his complaints about the man and his actions. In one of the most stinging defeats of his career, Edwards, late in his ministry at Northampton, determined to raise the bar of church membership. It was, remember, his own beloved grandfather, the Rev. Samuel Stoddard, who had, decades earlier, lowered the standards from the days of the "visible saints." Much later, Edwards became convinced that some kind of stringent examination of the confession of a member-elect was required before admission could be granted to the table of the Lord; he determined to change an

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ecclesiastical tradition that was firmly established in Northampton. When he did, he suffered, as did his family—as he knew he and they would.

Marsden says this decision tells us a great deal about Edwards' character, a good deal more, in fact, than mere dedication to principle. His problems, Marsden claims, stemmed at least in part from "his brittle, unsociable personality." What is more and perhaps most striking is a second reason for Edwards' problems in this situation: "Edwards was not," Marsden says, "a keen judge of the full range of human behavior." He goes on to say that even though Edwards was a master at "judging the deceitfulness of the human heart and at analyzing religious affections," his steep convictions and "the very intensity with which he viewed such things. . . kept him from ordinary shrewdness about what was possible." And

then a wonderful irony: “Although he was a Calvinist in theology, he was a perfectionist by nature,” and “he asked more than he could hope for from people.”

With this kind of analysis, Marsden offers us a complex and multi-dimensional Edwards, someone who becomes, through the long pages of this wonderful biography, thoroughly human. What he’s given us is a theological great-grandparent we can understand.

When Marsden is at his best, he litters the story with clean and clear motivation. Anyone who knows the life of Edwards knows the story of his early disfavor with his congregation, something that happened when he’d discovered, much to his horror, a number of the young men circulating reading material considered explicit at the time. What they were reading wasn’t pornography by any stretch of the imagination, but it was material that described sexual matters that seemed, mid seventeenth century, to be prurient. Edwards attempted to prosecute the offense by drawing attention to what was going on; he didn’t handle the situation behind closed doors, as he could have. Instead, he made the whole unseemly mess a matter of public concern, in church no less.

Because a few of the young men involved belonged to powerful families, Edwards’ insistence on making the situation public was to those families something of a smear, given the fact that what happened seemed to them little more than monkeyshine. His public insistence on an end to the shenanigans smudged his reputation deeply, even though he had built quite strong relationships and gained national and even international fame in Northampton, by way of published sermons, pamphlets, and essays.

From the vantage point of twenty-first-century American culture, the whole series of events seems perfectly understandable. If Puritanism is, as Mencken once claimed, the sneaking suspicion that someone somewhere is having a good time, then the story of the preacher’s excited, public reaction creates its own moral: Jonathan Edwards, “puritanical” about sexual matters because of his own deeply repressed libido, throws the book at boys without understanding that boys, after all, will be boys. As so often happens among Protestants, it’s sex they can’t handle—so goes the traditional interpretation of the events. Edwards falls, a victim of his own darkly suppressed sexuality. That has been the standard spin for years.

What Marsden does in this difficult episode of Edwards’ life, and throughout the book, is stretch the

caricature Edwards into someone far more broadly human, not simply by creating new dimensions, but by drawing on historical sources to help us see that the issues, at the time, were far more complex than any one interpretation.

By offering us the testimony of those who spoke up against the boys—all of them young women—Marsden reveals that what was happening at the time wasn’t simply a matter of naughty boys smirking over naughty books. What he asserts is that the incident was, in fact, the occasion for some fairly damaging sexual abuse. What several young women made clear in their testimony concerning the affair was that the boys would deride them publicly, make cat calls, so to speak; and, Marsden argues, it was those accusations, made publicly, that prompted Edwards to act publicly.

Thus, by today’s moral standards, Marsden has created a far more sympathetic Edwards. Traditionally, his puritanical sexual repression prompted him to overreact in his handling of the incident, ballyhooing the boys’ reading into a public scandal. If Marsden is right, an Edwards who is concerned about the sexual harassment suffered by the young women in his congregation seems today to be a far more sympathetic man.

Marsden doesn’t stop there, however, nor does he even try to intimate that Edwards was some paragon of twentieth-century political correctness. What he points out is two important biographical facts that might well have played a role in Edwards’ motivation: first, that Edwards’ own home was full of young women, his own daughters, some of them, perhaps, friends of the very girls who were being harassed; second, Marsden reminds us of the fact that Edwards had “spent most of his life in households surrounded by women,” making him very sympathetic to the suffering those young women were undergoing at the hands of their brutish male peers. Wisely, Marsden does not back away from the common assertion that Edwards, in this case, overreacted entirely. But what he does, convincingly, is examine the whole situation in ways that make the entire incident far more complex than any one interpretation is capable of covering entirely.

Even more important, what Marsden explains is Edwards’ spiritual sadness at what was going on. The boys—young men actually—were professing members of his church; they had gone through the

earlier 1732 revival and had been admitted, like many other young people whose faith was enthusiastically supercharged at the time, to the Table of the Lord. By Edwards' standards, those young men had to be barred from that table, lest the bride of Christ itself, the church, be corrupted.

The traditional spin on the entire incident—Edwards' repressed sexuality creating overkill—fades in light of the myriad explanations and motivations that Marsden recreates to help us understand why Northampton's spiritual leader might have reacted the way he did. Marsden is not particularly interested in making Edwards' decisions somehow holy or just; what he wants to do is round out the whole humanity of a man who can be too easily banished to the back of the library's dustiest shelves simply for being "puritan."

In helping contemporary readers see Jonathan Edwards as a fully realized human being, what George Marsden has created is an Edwards for our time, as impossible as that sounds. The final chapter of the book makes it clear that that's what Marsden wanted to do, and the glowing reviews of the book testify that that's what he's done. Like a good novelist, Marsden has delivered up a multi-faceted protagonist here in this long and incredible life, someone we come to know just as fully as a neighbor, a fully realized human being, not just an abstraction, or worse, a buffoon—not just, God forbid, a puritan. And that's why no less an astute reviewer than Edward S. Morgan can write, "Marsden has brought together in a magisterial synthesis the details of the man's daily life and the range of ideas that challenged the assumptions of his time," and then add, most incredibly, "and ours." That's the level of success George Marsden has reached here, the tally of his achievement.

And yet, there's more. In what seems almost an aside (critics are correct in more ways than one about this biography reading like a novel), Marsden takes on his readers' perceptions with respect to one of Edwards' strongest affirmations about the human condition, that of original sin. In the process he challenges Peter Gay's summation of Edwards as "a tragic anachronism fighting for outdated opinions." Not only does Marsden show that Edwards wasn't alone in his views at the time, but he also goes on to question whether the whole modernist notion of Edwards and his Calvinist theology isn't itself

deficient: "no Christian teaching has had more empirical verification during the past century than the doctrine of innate human depravity," Marsden says. "Champions of modernity or postmodernity may not agree with Edwards' way of accounting for the defects of the human race, but they may have more difficulty in arguing that Edwards was wrong to be challenging the emerging optimism of 'the age of light.'"

It's this kind of analysis, I believe, that makes Elisa New, in her *New Republic* review, refer to this biography as "high stakes."

I'm writing these words while contracted to teach at an almost fifty-year-old college that has claimed, since the day of its inception, some deeply rooted ties

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to the Reformed tradition. Chances are, you are reading these words in the faculty publication of that college. When I say that Marsden has delivered up an Edwards for our time, we might just read that line in a more referenced way because it seems to me that there is much *we* can learn from the Edwards that Marsden has given us, descendants, in a way, of Edwards' own theological tradition.

I remember first spotting Edwards, front and center, at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College and being surprised, even shocked. My own understanding of Edwards was that he was just as vehement a Calvinist as those who railed on Jacob Arminius at the Synod of Dordt, which lent its name to this college. And he was. Most historians heartily agree that what led to his prominence in New England (and even in England) at the time was not his fiery pulpit oratory. Whitefield was the Billy Sunday; Edwards was a skilled debater. Marsden, like many others, insists that Edwards' capacity for igniting emotions grew from his ability to create unassailable logic; he created sermons to which there could be no rejoinders, presented a labyrinth of reasoned arguments that

became an impenetrable fortress. He was no stemwinder, in other words; but he was a peerless logician.

And that logic was anchored in traditional Calvinism. Throughout his life, Edwards' major antagonist was what he himself would call "Arminianism," a term which eventually spanned a wide assortment of theologies and philosophies, including both the independent, spiritual self created by religious enthusiasm, as well as the deism growing all around him in his later years. "Arminianism," to Edwards, was in many ways cognate to the idea of "free will," as opposed to the principle of the sovereignty of God; thus, it was enemy. Marsden quotes Edwards: "The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is *of* God, and *in* God, and *to* God; and God is the beginning, the middle and end in this affair." Marsden then adds that, in his opinion, this sentence is "the central premise of [Edwards'] entire thought."

Seeing Jonathan Edwards at the doorstep of Wheaton's history of revivalism seemed to me something like highway robbery. How could such a doctrinaire Calvinist be lauded so prominently in a display meant finally to honor Billy Graham, the man whose ministry magazine is titled "*Decision*"? Isn't the history of revivalism itself really a manifestation of what Edwards himself would have considered Arminianism? To whom does Edwards belong, in other words, to Wheatonites or the Calvinists?

The answer, of course, is both. While the means Edwards may have taken to prompt his own religious enthusiasms in Northampton and beyond in the 1730s and 1740s were, quite frankly, vehemently Calvinistic, the effects were something else altogether. By maintaining the importance of a personal religious experience, no matter how deeply rooted he was in historic Calvinism, Edwards was, finally, freeing the individual believer from religious tradition, which, in effect, meant fracturing the existing ecclesiastical structures in the New England countryside. Oddly enough, as Marsden himself points out, what linked both the enthusiasts and the deists, an odd couple if there ever was one, in the second half of the eighteenth century was the belief in the importance of the individual, an idea that is fundamental to freedom, liberty, and democracy. No less a light than Ralph Waldo Emerson, a half-century later, makes

that coupling quite clear.

Honestly, as Marsden himself would argue, I think, Jonathan Edwards belongs to all of us.

The real joy at the heart of the experience of reading Marsden's biography does not derive from his closing theological doors or giving us clear answers to debates that raged then or now. Instead, it comes from a reader's realization that the conflicts we still address all around us even today—spirituality vs. religion, religious enthusiasm vs. the importance of theological doctrine, feeling vs. thinking—are not any simpler to solve today than they were in the eighteenth century. It would likely be difficult to find anyone, then or now, with as formidable a one-two punch as Edwards, who was, without a doubt, a giant both intellectually *and* spiritually.

Which is not to say that what Marsden offers is no help at all. Nothing could be further from the truth. By presenting us, both Wheatonites and Calvinists, with as full a biography of Jonathan Edwards as he has, George Marsden has finally helped us better visualize the nature of the questions that have plagued our dialogue, and still do.

But let's bring Edwards even closer to home. This year, on campus here at Dordt College, a new student-led worship has begun. For years already, students have come together on Wednesday and Sunday nights for what may once have been called "hymn sings," but today, in a technologically new age, students have added the supercharged excitement of rock concerts, Christian rock concerts. For years already, these services have been the foundation of renewed spiritual commitment on campus. Anyone who wags his or her fingers at "kids today" really hasn't experienced the intense spirituality that actually exists among many of our students. Visit the Dordt campus some weekend, and it's likely that administrative guides will note the blossoming spirituality evident at GIFT, Dordt's Sunday night, student-run worship.

However, now there's another worship experience on those Sunday nights when rousing GIFT services aren't offered. In a way, it's a wholly different experience. Today one can join "Wellspring," described by the student newspaper as "a new opportunity to seek God." Sam Gutierrez, who coordinates the service, describes it this way: "The purpose of Wellspring is to come together primarily to listen" because, he says, "listening is not much cultivated

in our culture.” In some ways, Wellspring is an alternative to “GIFT” because what GIFT offers in volume, Wellspring whispers.

The *Diamond* article introducing the new worship describes spiritual opportunities on campus this way: “Dordt students have four college-sponsored worship services—chapel, praise and worship, GIFT, and now Wellspring”—each of which has a different emphasis. “Wellspring” the newspaper says, “is geared towards being a potential source of what is missing from the others.” What is clear is that Dordt College offers its students a cafeteria of worship styles.

That’s just fine. After all, who can deny the reality of the contemplative tradition in world religion? What can the Buddhists teach us, after all? Even in the long Christian tradition, the contemplative has its place; among at least some of our students’ parents, Henry Nouwen may well be the most read theologian of Dutch descent. The knowledge of God’s verifiable presence may well be something left completely out of the practice of Reformed piety in the last 200 years, maybe even since the Reformation. Welcome Wellspring. There’s every reason to believe that it is uplifting for our students to sit in silent contemplation of the reality of God and God-ness.

What Wellspring also makes clear, however, is how broad and pervasive the marketplace of contemporary spirituality is. If, at a campus as geographically isolated as Dordt College, students manifest a desire to worship God in a form belonging to other world religions or other Christian traditions than, say, evangelical Protestantism, then it seems clear that today we live, really, in a smorgasboard.

How will we choose? How will our students choose? Is Christianity today really at the mercy of the techniques of marketing? Does understanding contemporary Christian spirituality require, first and foremost, a perception of the pervasive nature of consumerism? Can the church really be a church if it is, in fact, all things to all people? Is this development only the latest manifestation of what Nathan O. Hatch called already a decade ago “the democratization of religion”?

When I say that one of Marsden’s great gifts to us in this new biography of Jonathan Edwards is having created an Edwards for *our* time, what I mean is that by the way of this biography he has given us something to say, from history, about situations not dissimilar to that in which we find ourselves, as a

Reformed community, today. Marsden himself, I think, would be the first to say that there are no easy answers here, that assessing the life of Jonathan Edwards can never answer our own questions definitively. For that, most often, we await the eternal day. But what he has done is given us a life that opens up to some of the prevalent questions of this time and all time, while asserting, to all the world and to ourselves, the legitimacy of a worldview that begins in the knowledge of both God’s sovereignty, and, conversely, human depravity.

Surely there must be a place for this story in our curricula and not just at the level of a history senior

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seminar. Shouldn’t the young woman who asked the astute question in my class have known at least something about what happened in the history of her own sub-culture in the mid eighteenth century? Shouldn’t she have known something about a man who spent a lifetime considering at least some of the same questions she is considering now and will continue to ponder when she graduates and finds her place in our culture?

In *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, what Marsden has done for Christendom is wonderful; he has presented American culture with a picture of a man whose spiritual premises are not at all anachronistic, and Marsden has done so convincingly.

But it might be instructive for us, at Dordt College, to think seriously about what it is Marsden may well have also given us, descendants of Edwards’ own Reformed heritage. For what is here, in his pages, is, in fact, an Edwards for our time too.