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## **JONATHAN EDWARDS AND THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY**

Christianity today is the world's largest religion. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2.3 billion people in 2011 say they are followers of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> That means approximately one in every three people on the planet.

It is well-known that in the last century Christianity's center of gravity has been moving from Europe and America to the Global South. While one century ago the average Christian was male and white and better-off materially than most of the rest of the world, today the average Christian is brown, female and poor. At the famous 1910 world missionary conference in Edinburgh, observers might have predicted a future church that would be dominated by mainline Protestants, especially those who took what was then considered a more liberal approach to the gospel, today things look very different. Mainline Protestantism has suffered a drastic decline in numbers and influence in the last half-century, and the two most vital blocs in world Christianity today are Catholics and evangelicals. In the latter group the fastest-growing are the Pentecostals and charismatics, who number today 600 million—more than just about any other community in the world that can be defined by a shared theology.

What is the future of global Christianity? No one knows for sure, of course, but it will probably be dominated by Catholics and evangelicals in Africa, Latin Amer-

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Johnson, David Barrett, and Peter Crossing, "Christianity 2011: Martyrs and the Resurgence of Religion," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35:1 (Jan. 2011), 28-29.

ica, and Asia. Asian Christianity will be dominated by the burgeoning churches in China and India, both of which are growing by leaps and bounds. Scholarly observers estimate that Christians in China number between 50 and 100 million, and in India between 24 and 30 million.

Nearly all of these Global South churches wrestle with the challenge of non-Christian religions that have dominated their lands, and today face them often with hostility and sometimes with violence. Therefore any theology that will be able to help global Christianity in this new century needs to be able to negotiate the boundaries between Protestantism and Catholicism, and experience and doctrine. It also needs to be able to speak to the questions of other religions—Why be a disciple of Jesus and not Muhammad or the Buddha? Is there a way to be distinctively Christian while also talking about levels of truth Christians share with other religionists?

I want to propose that Jonathan Edwards provides a theology that is ideally situated for this new world of global Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Edwards' theology is profoundly biblical and orthodox. By the latter term I mean that it is part of the Great Tradition shared by Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants over the last two thousand years. This is what C.S. Lewis called "mere Christianity," which he defined as "the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times."<sup>2</sup>

Edwards was of course a Reformed theologian with his own Reformed particularities. But with a difference. He was remarkably open to truth wherever he found it, and so often burst the bounds of the Reformed tradition that he inherited. Because of his fresh approach to the Trinitarian God, his theology is a unique bridge-builder, in four ways: 1) between Catholics and Protestants, 2) between East and West, 3) between Pentecostals/charismatics and non-charismatics, and 4) between liberals and conservatives.

But first, a bit more about Edwards. He was a world-class theologian, one of the five or six most distinctive and penetrating theologians in the history of Christian thought. In other words, he was up there with Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Karl Barth.

He certainly wrote as much. Yale University Press has just finished the critical edition of his works, which in print version numbers 27 volumes, 400-800 pages each. Another 46 volumes are in electronic form, for a total of 73 volumes.

But he was also distinctive. More than anyone else in the history of Christian theology, Edwards made beauty central to his vision of God. Augustine and

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, n.d.), viii.

Balthasar depicted God in terms of beauty, but for Edwards the beauty of God was far more integral to his thinking.

Now let me share what I consider to be Edwards' unique contribution to global Christianity. His theology can build bridges between:

1. *Catholics and Protestants*. At a number of critical points, Edwards' theology shows both Protestant and Catholic characteristics. In his embrace of metaphysics as foundational for theology, Edwards' theological approach was closer to that of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Bonaventure than that of Luther, Calvin, or Barth. In his reading of scripture and his view of the natural world, Edwards showed a thoroughgoing commitment to typological interpretation—highly important in the Catholic tradition. This was based on a concept of *analogia entis* affirming that all created things show an analogy to the Creator. With regard to salvation, Edwards' thought exhibited what Anri Morimoto called a "Protestant principle"—the notion that grace always comes from God, and that it is never properly a human possession or under human control. Yet it also revealed a "Catholic substance"—the sense that divine grace is truly present, becomes incarnate in the world, and indwells the saints and the church in an abiding way. In Edwards' teaching, salvation comes by grace alone and yet there is nonetheless a "fitness" that makes it suitable for God to save human beings who come to him in faith. Edwards' teaching on "fitness" in respect to salvation showed analogies to traditional Catholic notions of "merit".

Unlike Reformational thinkers such as Luther and Calvin, Edwards had as much to say about love as faith. Like Augustine, his thought highlighted love sometimes even more than faith. Also striking is Edwards' statement that faith is not the only "condition" of justification. As Thomas Schafer often noted, Edwards came down again and again on the side of Augustine—the fountainhead of both medieval Catholicism and modern Protestantism. In his ecclesiology, Edwards did not hold the subjectivist or individualistic views of the church that have sometimes been attributed to him. Rejecting a strict Congregationalism throughout his life, he gravitated toward a Presbyterian system that affirmed the importance of trans-local authority. His stress on the church's visible unity was in some respects an anticipation of later ecumenism. With regard to the sacraments, Edwards affirmed the Eucharist as a means of grace and a held to a robust view of Christ's presence. Edwards was perhaps *least catholic* in the rather minimal role he assigned to church tradition in his theological method.

2. *East and West*. One of the surprising ways that Edwards bridges between traditions lies in the "Eastern" flavor and ethos of his theologizing. For Ortho-

doxy, the term “theologian” is traditionally used for someone who may have little or no technical academic training, but who instead is rich in direct, experiential knowledge of God. Beginning in the High Middle Ages, the teachers and students associated with the emerging universities in Europe began to embrace scholastic methods for expounding Christian theology. The locus for theological reflection shifted from the monastic community to the lecture hall. Within Orthodoxy, however, there has always been a strong countervailing thrust toward an understanding of “theology” and “theologian” in their earlier sense. Edwards’ *Diary and Personal Narrative* often referred to his own practice of “meditation” or “contemplation.” The practices of prolonged, solitary reflection that he first developed during his youth seem to have continued throughout his lifetime. Prayer, reflection, and attentive reading of scripture and other books created the atmosphere in which Edwards composed his *Miscellanies*. Biographers have commented on the solitary, meditative, and almost monastic appearance of Edwards’ lifestyle and spirituality.

Another link between Edwards and the Eastern Christian tradition lies in his core notion of salvation as “participation” in God’s being, love, knowledge, and happiness. To be sure, the divinization doctrine was not unknown in the West but was far more common in the Christian East. There was no salvation without participation. Edwards’ trinitarianism asserted the ontological priority of the Father vis-à-vis the Son and the Spirit, and affirmed both a single procession of the Spirit (from the Father) and a double procession as well (from Father and Son). In this way, Edwards mediated between traditional Western and traditional Eastern Christian views of the Trinity. Moreover, Edwards’ ontology of divine Fatherhood was not a mere metaphysical nicety. Instead it carried soteriological ramifications. It implied that all being derived ultimately from God the Father, and that God the Son shared his sonship with others. Salvation meant that human beings—as members of Christ—shared in the Son’s joy and delight in the Father. Salvation also meant that human beings—as members of Christ—were recipients and sharers of the Father’s love for Christ. Edwards’ trinitarianism and his teaching on divinization were thus intertwined—in ways that are familiar to Eastern Orthodox Christians.

3. *Charismatics and non-Charismatics*. Edwards may be the only major theologian of the modern era who is widely known and influential in the burgeoning Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, which today numbers more than 600 million adherents around the world. No other author has great influence in the discussion of religious revivals. During the spiritual awakening in Toronto during the mid-1990s, there were vigorous online debates as to whether the events taking place

there were signs of true revival or some kind of spiritual counterfeit. During this debate—much of it online—both sides appealed to Edwards in support of their views. Pentecostals have appreciated Edwards' notion that the Holy Spirit may be not only a conserver of traditions but also an innovator and a disturber of the status quo. Philip Jenkins has documented the massive growth of Christianity in the southern hemisphere during the last several decades and has noted the predominantly "experiential" rather than intellectualistic character of Christianity's growing edge.<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop, Edwards' theology of spiritual experience takes on new importance. His stature as the single most important Christian author on the topic of religious revival suggests that he is going to be read, cited, and debated in the coming generation.<sup>4</sup>

Not only is Edwards still cited as an authority on revival but his writings can be cited in favor of more than one position. On the one hand, he displayed openness. He insisted that no one could define in advance what the Holy Spirit might do. This was known only after the fact, as one observed and then tested the "fruit" that came out of a revival. On the other hand, Edwards insisted on the need for caution. Phenomena that were impressive to observers and that seemed spiritual might be spurious. Edwards even spoke of a "bastard religion" that Satan might counterfeit in order to turn people away from true religion. So even as today's Charismatics might learn from Edwards' spiritual caution, the non-Charismatic church could benefit from Edwards' call for openness to new and even unprecedented works of the Holy Spirit. In his eschatological teaching on the church's coming "glorious times," Edwards opened a door to spiritual novelty. What God might do in the future will transcend anything witnessed in history thus far.

Edwards did not affirm—as do today's Pentecostal-Charismatics—the present-day exercise of the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, Edwards was on the side of the cessationists. Nonetheless, Edwards took an empiricist's approach to revivals, judging them by their observable fruits rather than by *a priori* reasoning. It is possible that he might have taken a different stance on charismatic gifts in the modern era if he had witnessed at first-hand the growth, impact, and dynamism of the twentieth-century Pentecostal-Charismatic movement. He would likely have found something to affirm in this global movement, as well as much to criticize.

4. *Liberals and conservatives.* Given Edwards' overt Calvinism, and his asser-

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See the innumerable references to Edwards in Michael J. McClymond, ed, *Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals in America*, 2 vols. (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007).

tions on such topics as original sin, human depravity, the unfree will, divine judgment, and hell, it is surprising that Edwards would have any appeal at all among liberal, modernist, or revisionist theologians. Yet Edwards has long had admirers at such seemingly unlikely places as Harvard Divinity School and university-based departments of religious studies. Though his theology might be classified as conservative in content, its style and ethos is closer in some respects to what one might consider a liberal or revisionist approach. Edwards assigned a significant role to experience in theology. Like Schleiermacher, Edwards affirmed the apologetic significance of experiencing God. He was also in no sense a creedalist. Never did he appeal to a creedal statement as a basis for affirming any doctrine. In this sense a formal appeal to tradition in Edwards' thought is virtually nonexistent. Believing that the Reformation and earlier Calvinist tradition was capable of being improved, we have classified Edwards as a "developmentalist" rather than as an "originalist" or a "creedalist." He was akin to later revisionists—if not in terms of his specific teachings, then in the sense of being unconstrained by what has been believed and confessed in the past. Edwards identified with the Calvinist tradition, but denied that he believed certain things because Calvin believed or taught them.

What is more, Edwards used innovative arguments to support his positions. The very method he used to develop his theological positions—i.e., the method of discovery by writing—pressed Edwards to come up with new ways of approaching old issues. His theology thus showed a freshness and originality that has often been pleasing to moderately liberal Christians and troubling to the strictly conservative. Conservative Calvinists have long had a love-hate relationship with Edwards. In response to Edwards' *Original Sin*, Charles Hodge went so far as to call the work "pantheistic" in its consequences. In the experiential dimension of his revival theology, Edwards has often been troubling to theological conservatives.

Edwards showed a surprising degree of reliance on human reasoning in theology. This is probably not what one might have expected, given his views on human depravity. He displayed what Soren Kierkegaard once termed "dialectical fearlessness"—that is, a willingness to follow each argument through to its conclusion. Calvinist critics often blamed the vagaries and errors of the New Divinity on Edwards himself. They argued that he was the fountainhead of a theological school that was excessively "metaphysical," unduly attached to human reasoning about God, and not sufficiently respectful of the role of mystery in theological inquiry. Moderately liberal theologians have generally

appreciated the style and ethos of Edwards' theology, and regretted only that Edwards did not follow his logic to different conclusions. Liberals and conservatives have both read Edwards selectively—picking the parts that they liked, and ignoring everything else. Yet Edwards remains one of the very few theologians of the modern era who appeals both to liberal and conservative thinkers.

In conclusion, it may be appropriate to cease speaking of Jonathan Edwards as “America's theologian” and to begin thinking of him as a global theologian for twenty-first-century Christianity.<sup>5</sup> His thought may have more linkages and more points of reference to various constituencies within world Christianity than any other modern Christian theologian. The outstanding modern Catholic thinkers—John Henry Newman, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI—are crucial for understanding post-Vatican II Catholicism. Yet most of them lack the vocabulary and conceptuality that might link them to the Protestant and Pentecostal worlds. The same is true of such eminent Orthodox thinkers such as George Florovsky and Sergei Bulgakov. Yet Edwards' thought—while conceived within the context of the Reformed tradition—offers many surprising avenues of approach to other schools of thought.

Imagine a Christian dialogue today that included adherents of ancient churches—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, etc.—with various modern church bodies—Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, etc.—as well as a fair representation from the newer evangelical and Pentecostal-Charismatic congregations from around the world. If one had to choose one modern thinker—and only one—to function as a point of reference for theological interchange and dialogue, then who might one choose?

My answer should be clear enough from this conclusion.

#### A b s t r a c t

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<sup>5</sup> Miklos Vetö—the outstanding European scholar of Edwards—suggested in his generally positive review of Robert Jenson that “America's theologian” might be a limiting phrase that shortchanges Edwards' global significance (Review of Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian* in *Church History* 58 [1989], 520-2).