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Abstract

Historian George M. Marsden's piece on the life of American preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards offers a biographical account as rich in insight as it is convenient in succinctness. The biography explores religion in colonial America up to the eve of revolution, as well as social and political developments surrounding the First Great Awakening, all through the lens of the Edwards' experience and prolific influence.

Keywords

Jonathan Edwards, American Colonial History, Great Awakening, Religion in America

Cover Page Footnote

Marsden, G. M. (2008). *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*. William B. Eerdmans Pub.

A Review of George Marsden's *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*

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Mid-eighteenth century America was a society of continuity and change, with the march of time bringing these two facets increasingly into conflict. Clergymen were no exception to this phenomenon, being at the forefront of contemporary discussions both religious, as in the Great Awakening; and secular, as in scientific and philosophical inquiries. One such clergymen, certainly abreast of his times, and renowned in his day, was Jonathan Edwards. In *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, George Marsden argues that Edwards walked the line between contending tradition and innovation, and that he pursued this course in obedience to his faith, even until the end.

Tradition, and especially New England religious tradition, held strong sway over Jonathan Edwards throughout his life. His father, Timothy Edwards, was a learned and pious pastor, and this extended into a young Jonathan's upbringing and education. Jonathan was greatly pushed to seek after God and visible conversion, in the old puritan sense, from a young age. He engaged in excessive piety, was greatly immersed in biblical study and prayer, and was even prone to fits of melancholy and uncertainty over the state of his eternal soul. According to Marsden, his father oversaw his spiritual journey with true and dear love, but with the "love of a micromanager" (15-17). So too did these strictures inevitably demonstrate their place in Edward's conscience during the later years of his life.

As a young pastor in Northampton, one of his earliest and most notable goals took the form of a crusade against the debauchery of the youth. Marsden recounts how Edwards turned a number of town calamities, namely an earthquake and the death of a prominent young man, into sermons of God's warning against the "frolicking" and "company keeping" between the sexes

endemic to the town's youth. He argued that, much as the deceased, they too could be stricken down at any given moment, remaining mired in their sins (44-46). This caused an early awakening in Northampton, but would not satisfy Edward's traditional bent. Shying away from the widespread church membership of unconverted allowed by the "halfway covenant" baptismal arrangement, Jonathan sought to counteract his revered predecessor in returning to a more purified church body of only demonstrably changed Christians. Marsden cites this move, though a failure resulting in his dismissal, as one bred by conviction for puritan tradition (108-109).

Jonathan Edwards, however, was hardly an unflinching reactionary. Rather, Marsden argues that he was often supportive of new, even high-revolutionary developments, religious and secular. Religiously, though puritan to the core, Edwards had seen the power of revivals and awakenings in his own community. When the legendary George Whitfield visited him in America, he briefly travelled with the awakening minister. It was in travelling, in fact, that he gave his famous *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* sermon that brought the present crowd to such manic repentance he could not finish the message (63-68). He staunchly defended the awakening's New Lights, addressing the issue at the conservative Yale and later accepting a role at Princeton for its awakening support (69, 131).

Even in secular affairs, Marsden shows Edwards to be a visionary for his time. In his notes, he kept observations and inferences surrounding Newton's theories of physics and light. He even sent findings of his empirical observations on spiders in the hopes of publication in England (25). Even in early inoculations, Edwards was cutting edge, following off of Cotton Mather's advocacy and eventually inoculating his whole family against smallpox (6,131). Even in philosophy, he studied Locke greedily, and wrote his own treatise, *The Nature of True Virtue*, as a "secular" advocacy published alongside an accompanying theological volume (19, 128).

Clearly, Marsden points out, Edwards was just as much a man of science and philosophy as he was of theology.

To George Marsden, Jonathan Edwards was a man of great faith who used that faith to tread righteously the changing dynamic of his day and age, and this point is masterfully contended in *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*. Had Edwards survived as long as his contemporary, Benjamin Franklin, into the American Revolution, it is inconceivable how great an impact he could have had on the young republic. Whatever side of that conflict he would have been on, however, and whatever change he would have made, it is likely, as Marsden states, that Edward's mind would have ever been on the spiritual. To him, spiritual awakening would have been a greater revolution in the country than any that came after (133).