

The Conversion of Jonathan Edwards

by Avihu Zakai

There is a history in all men's lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceased;
The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intreasured.

Henry IV, Part Two

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY, the conversion experience has been seen as the most critical, existential moment in the lives of prominent figures, such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther.¹ Likewise, Jonathan Edwards's conversion signified a crucial existential moment in his life, radically separating his intellectual and spiritual life from what had been before, and ushering in a new sense of existence after that. During the summer of 1721, when Edwards was seventeen years old studying toward his M.A. degree at Yale College, a religious conversion shook the entire life of the young man and radically reshaped his experience and existence. Then, as Edwards described his existential and spiritual condition after the moment of conversion, the "appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing."²

Edwards obviously regarded his conversion experience as of monumental and life-changing importance. Strangely enough, however, few historians have found it an

event worth describing or analyzing, and even fewer have found this critical religious experience to bear any crucial consequences upon his life and thought.³ Nevertheless, many features of Edwards's thought, both in form and content, can be traced directly to this signal existential moment when the whole of his religious identity and experience was shaped. Among these are his unique *theologia gloriae*⁴—the theology which celebrates God's majestic glory and sovereignty as evident in the coherence and beauty, order and harmony, of God's creation—and the radical notion of "God's absolute sovereignty"; his construction of a singular redemptive mode of historical thought in which conversion experience occupies a prominent role in and is considered inextricable from the whole course and progress of God's work of salvation and redemption; as well as the central place he assigned to religious conversion, revival, and awakening in the overall progress of the history of the Christian church.

The conversion moment was also a crucial event in terms of the reconstruction of Edwards's religious identity and consciousness. For conversion, which signifies, among other things, the "total transformation of the person by the power of God,"⁵ or the "surrender" of the self and a radical "transformation of conscience," leads eventually to "the

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radical reorientation of one's entire life that occurs when God is allowed to move from the periphery to the center of one's being.⁶ Hence, to say that "a man is 'converted'" means "that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy."⁷ Before his conversion, Edwards had many objections to the religious culture of his time. More specifically, his mind "had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased." The Reformed dogma of election and predestination "appeared like a horrible doctrine" to him. After his conversion, however, "God's absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation," wrote Edwards, "is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes."⁸

For many decades the understanding of the conversion experience was greatly influenced by William James's classic *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Based upon his overall pragmatic views, James attempted to show that conversion is essentially a psychological process involving the unification of a sick and divided self:

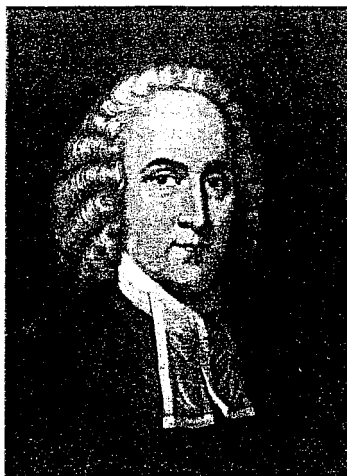
To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.⁹

Recently, however, several studies have considerably broadened James's narrow psychological and pragmatist definition of religious conversion, especially Christian conversion. According to Walter Conn, "conversion radically redirects and transforms the concrete shape and orientation of personal subjectivity, the structure and content of one's conscience as character." In contrast to James's theory of a divided and sick self, he argued that conversion is based on the radical attempt to mediate between

this world and the transcendent. This fundamental quest leads to "the person's radical drive for self-transcendence," that is, a yearning for transcendence in terms of "a self that is realized only in its active movement beyond itself."¹⁰ More specifically, conversion involves "the radical reorientation of one's entire life that occurs when God is allowed to move from the periphery to the center of one's being," signifying the "total self-surrender" regarding the "illusion" of a human being having "absolute autonomy." Thus, "basic conversion," or "fundamental conversion," signifies "a transformation of the person's whole orientation" and constitutes "a radically new beginning" in one's life. In sum, Conn replaced James's inner sick and divided self by the powerful concept of "vertical conversion," that is, the total reconstruction of the self according to the radical quest after transcendence.¹¹

More recently Lewis R. Rambo has attempted to show that because conversion involves ultimately "religious factors," and not merely psychological issues, it should be defined "as a total transformation of the person by the power of God."¹² He called it a "process" because "conversion is very rarely an overnight, all-in-an-instant, wholesale transformation that is now and forever." Furthermore, the conversion phenomenon signifies "a universe of meaning," such as, for example, "a change of one's personal orientation toward life, from the haphazard of superstition to the providence of a deity," or toward "seeing all creation as a manifestation of God and beneficence," or to the belief that "the rule of God is what fulfills human beings." In sum, conversion means "a radical shifting of gears that can take the spiritually lackadaisical to a new level of intensive concern, commitment, and involvement."¹³

It was during his tenure at Yale, as Edwards wrote later in his "Personal Narrative," that he was "at times very uneasy, especially towards the latter part of my time at college; when it pleased God, to seize me with a pleurisy; in which he brought me nigh to the grave, and shook me over the pit of



Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

hell."¹⁴ The attack of pleurisy took place in 1719–20, when Edwards was sixteen years old,¹⁵ and it marked the beginning of a remarkable spiritual process which eventually led to his conversion in 1721.¹⁶ His sinful life, he thought, had brought him to the verge of death. He therefore tried to renounce his former ways and obey the Lord's Word. Shortly after his illness, however, he "fell again" into his "old ways of sin," which led him to suffer many "great and violent inward struggles" in his soul. Time and again he tried to renounce his errant ways, but he constantly fell short of his promises and expectations. Thus, as he wrote, "after many conflicts with wicked inclinations, repeated resolutions, and bonds that I laid myself under by a kind of vows to God, I was brought wholly to break off all former wicked ways, and all ways of known outward sin; and to apply myself to seek salvation, and practise many religious duties." But even this highly demanding determination eventually failed him and brought instead to more "inward struggles and conflicts, and self reflections." Although, as he confessed, "seeking my salvation" was "the main business of my life," he soon doubted

its sincerity: "it seems to me, I sought after a miserable manner; which has made me sometimes since to question whether ever it issued in that which was saving; being ready to doubt, whether such miserable seeking after salvation would be successful."¹⁷

At this moment of agonized self-searching, Edwards recognized that something was wrong with his quest for salvation. Deep in his conscience he felt the need to change his attitude radically from a mere "seeking salvation" for his own personal benefit to a contemplation of Christ's place and role in the world. This was a critical point, the first in Edwards's two-stage process of conversion: the transformation of a selfish interest in his own personal salvation to a new awareness of Christ's glory. Consequently, as he wrote, "I was indeed brought to seek salvation in a manner that I never was before; I felt a spirit to part with all things in the world, for an interest in Christ."¹⁸ Young man Edwards's initial turning to Christ in quest of genuine conversion, however, fell short of his high expectations. Not only did he fail to experience a genuine conversion but his new and vivid interest in Christ could not relieve his inner struggles and spiritual miseries: "My concern continued and prevailed," he wrote regarding his profound search for Christ, "with many exercising thoughts and inward struggle." Most important, however, is the fact that in this early stage of Edwards's conversion process it "never seemed to be proper to express that concern" for Christ "by the name of terror."¹⁹

Evidently, at this point in his painful spiritual journey, the first stage of turning to Christ, Edwards felt that his search would not be achieved through a broken, terrified soul or an agonized spiritual crisis of great magnitude and proportions—common themes in traditional Puritan conversion narratives. Most significant, when his initial quest for Christ did not abolish his inner struggles, he felt that only by turning directly to God, the second stage of his conversion process, would he be able to experience a true spiritual transformation. This second stage proved to be the most fruitful and

successful one for the young Edwards, eventually leading to a successful conversion. At this second stage, Edwards's ultimate goal was not his own salvation, but the Deity's singular place in the world, or God's absolute sovereignty and justice within a divine universe; and, as it were, the assurance of conversion and salvation would come only after the construction of a singular place for God in his sovereign majesty and glory within the created world.

The discussion in Edwards's "Personal Narrative" changes radically at this moment, and now the personal voice, so often describing painful inner struggles and conflicts in traditional Puritan conversion narratives, gives way to an all-glorious vision of God. It is equally important to note the radical and sharp shift in the conversion narrative from Christ to God, and the establishment of God's absolute sovereignty as the basis and trigger for the conversion experience. In a sense, Edwards's conversion process was to be successful only when he accepted without reservation the notion of God's absolute sovereignty. For years he had rejected this very "doctrine 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." But now at last, during the process of conversion and through rational reasoning, Edwards finally "saw further" and his "reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness" regarding the "doctrine of God's sovereignty." He was "convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure."²⁰

The second stage, then, the turning to God, was the more critical and fruitful one in Edwards's conversion experience. But as he admitted, it was without "any extraordinary influence of God's Spirit in it."²¹ In sum, the new awareness regarding God in his sovereign majesty was "without any regard to his own personal condition. Objective, abstract general truth and not subjective, concrete,

and particular revelation was his answer."²² Soon, however, Edwards's awareness was dramatically transformed into a deeper understanding, and the young man finally grasped the idea of "God's absolute sovereignty and justice" with its religious ramifications:

And there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, from that day to this; so that I scarce ever have found so much as the rising of an objection against it, in the most absolute sense, in God's shewing mercy to whom he will shew mercy, and hardening whom he will. God's absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation, is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes.²³

Over time, this awesome understanding of the doctrine of "God's absolute sovereignty" intensified; it brought him not only a mere "conviction, but a delightful conviction." The doctrine, he wrote, "has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God."²⁴

Edwards's "delightful conviction" soon received its fullest affirmation in a passage in scripture. "The first instance that I remembered of that sort of inward sweet delight in God and divine things that I have lived much in since," wrote Edwards, "was on reading those words, 1 Tim. 1: 17. *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*"²⁵ These words greatly enhanced Edwards's conversion experience; they transformed his "delightful conviction" into "that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things," and brought into his "soul...a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing" he had "ever experienced before."²⁶ Indeed, the influence of this passage on Edwards's conversion was a very decisive one:

Never any words of scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever!²⁷

The conversion experience, therefore, led Edwards to construe within his philosophy and theology a most powerful picture of God in his sovereign majesty and glory. After his conversion, this vision constituted one of the most important motifs in Edwards's thought, as can be seen, for example, in his best known works: *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption* (1731), *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741), *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1739), and *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* (1755).

Yet, Edwards frankly admitted that even at this level of his conversion, what he really experienced was a rational apprehension of God in his sovereign majesty, and he never thought there was "any thing spiritual, or of saving nature in this."²⁸ Until this point, the conversion process was based upon "delightful conviction" in the "doctrine of God's sovereignty" and glory, and this belief was greatly enhanced in his soul through reading 1 Timothy. Only now, however, after his full acknowledgment of the "glory of the Divine Being," did Edwards begin to develop new convictions concerning Christ and the work of redemption. Thus, while the sense of God's glory deepened within his soul, there arose in his heart new notions concerning Christ and the way of salvation:

From about that time, I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the works of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by him. An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them.²⁹

Here Edwards describes in the clearest words the nature of his conversion experience, from the first intellectual constitutive act of admitting and acknowledging God's glory and absolute sovereignty to the "ideas of Christ," and finally to Christ's "work of redemption, and the glorious salvation" by him.³⁰ Again, a passage from scripture was the ultimate inspiration for Edwards's new apprehensions of "the beauty and excellency" of Christ "and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him." For, as he wrote,

I found no books so delightful to me, as those that treated of these subjects. Those words Cant. ii, 1, used to be abundantly with me, *I am the Rose of Sharon, and the Lilly of the valleys*. These words seemed to me, sweetly to represent the loveliness and beauty of Jesus Christ.³¹

At that stage, long meditation on Christ brought into the soul of the young man a strong spiritual sense of detachment from the material world. Sometimes he felt "a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns of this world," and "sometimes a kind of vision, or fixed ideas and imaginations, of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God."³² The newly acquired spiritual experience of Christ had a crucial influence on Edwards's heart and soul. Awakened by new visions of Christ, a remarkable process of internalization took place that supplanted mere reasoning and conviction. Now, for the first time in his conversion narrative, Edwards speaks of a spiritual experience that brought fire to his heart and fervor to his soul. "The sense I had of divine things, 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."³³

Edwards was finally on the verge of a complete conversion, on the edge of total self-transformation according to his new, vivid experience of the sovereign majesty of God and Christ's glorious work of salvation and redemption. Yet a critical act still remained: a stamp of authority was required to certify that these spiritual experiences were indeed evidence of a genuine religious conversion. Thus Edwards went home to tell his father, Timothy Edwards, the minister of the church at East Windsor, Connecticut the whole of his spiritual odyssey. This was a critical moment for the young man. Without the approval of his father, all his long and agonizing spiritual journey might be proved invalid. As it was, however, the discussion with his father was most fruitful. Edwards wrote: "Not long after I first began to experience these things, I gave an account to my father of some things that had passed in my

mind. I was pretty much affected by the discourse we had together."³⁴

With Timothy Edwards's final affirmation and approval of his son's spiritual journey, Jonathan Edwards's long process of conversion was completed. After the talk with his father, he took a short walk "in a solitary place" in his "father's pasture." Then, as he wrote, there

came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious *majesty* and *grace* of God...I seemed to see them both in sweet conjunction; majesty and meekness joined together; it was a sweet, and gentle, and holy majesty; and also majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high and great, and holy gentleness.³⁵

With this new sense of God and Christ, Edwards at last fully experienced the conversion moment: "The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing."³⁶

The new sense of the spiritual beauty of divine things, of God's excellence, wisdom, and love, signified that Edwards's process of conversion was finally completed; he had acquired a "full and constant sense of the absolute sovereignty of God, and delight in that sovereignty," and consequently "a sense of the glory of Christ, as a Mediator revealed in the gospel."³⁷ No wonder, then, that after that time and throughout his life, "Edwards stressed the absolute importance of man's belief in God's sovereignty. It was the doctrine he made into a keystone of his own theology, and it was one that, when he became a minister, he drilled into his hearers as the primary necessity for their salvation."³⁸ Furthermore, the conversion experience crucially influenced his conception of 'practical' or 'experimental' religion: "At the core" of Edwards's "religion of the heart is a sense of God's excellence and loveliness, or of the beauty and splendor of divine things."³⁹

In order to understand the magnitude and uniqueness of Edwards's conversion event, it may be helpful to place it in the context of the conversion experiences of

some prominent figures in the history of Christianity. For what Edwards experienced was clearly not the great divine light and mighty voice that St. Paul saw and heard on the road to Damascus, nor was it the painful, soul-shattering experience of St. Augustine so vividly described in his *Confessions*, or the terrible lightning that struck Martin Luther on the road to Erfurt. And Edwards did not experience the broken heart so common in cases of conversion analyzed in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

The conversion of St. Paul took the form of a profound spiritual transformation accompanied by tremendous physical changes. The decisive conversion event occurred on a mission to Damascus to arrest some Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. Suddenly "there shone round about him a light from heaven," and he heard the voice of Christ asking him why he persecuted his followers. As he was lying on the ground "trembling and astonished," he was converted. Such a profound spiritual experience left its mark on his body, for he "was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink" (Acts 9: 1-19; 22: 5-16, and 26: 12-18).

St. Augustine's conversion was marked by many years of soul-searching, inner struggle, and spiritual unhappiness. He underwent his conversion in August 386, when he was almost thirty-three years old. He writes that shortly before this moment, deep spiritual misery had shaken all his body: "When my searching reflection had dredged up from the secret depth of my soul all my misery and piled it up in the sight of my heart, a mighty storm arose, bringing a great shower of tears." Then, immediately after reading a passage from Paul's epistles—"not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Romans 13:13-14)—his conversion took place: "For instantly, at the end of this sentence, by a light, as it were, of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away."⁴⁰

Martin Luther's conversion also took place after much pain and spiritual conflict, and it was accompanied by a decisive physical event. As Luther admitted, before his conversion in June 1505 he was "used to go around in sadness" and felt "oppressed."⁴¹ Especially during the early summer of that year he "seems to have brooded over the question of death and the final judgment." At the end of June 1505, he returned to his life as a student in Erfurt. Then, only a few hours from his destination, "he was surprised by a severe thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning struck the ground, and caused him to be seized by a severe, some say convulsive, state of terror."⁴² He felt, as he described later, as if he were "completely walled in by the painful fear of a sudden death." Instinctively, and before he knew it, he had called out: "Help me, St. Anne [his father's patron saint] ... I want to become a monk." In July 1505, after much deliberation with his friends, he was ready to knock "on the door of the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt" and ask for admission. This was granted immediately. And only then, only "from behind the walls of the monastery did he write to his father."⁴³

Luther's conversion "committed him to being *monos*, a professional monk," and the "promises of celibacy and obedience made at that time in his life can be said to have relieved him of burdens which he was not ready to assume."⁴⁴ This was in contrast to the conversion of St. Paul—a non-Christian, mature man, and deputy prosecutor for the high priest's office, who afterwards assumed a high role in the spread of Christianity. Furthermore, both Luther and Paul experienced their conversion in the wilderness while undertaking a journey. While Paul saw and heard the divine light and voice coming from without, Luther experienced "the spiritual part of the experience" as "intra-psychic."⁴⁵

In sum, St. Paul's conversion was marked by a light and voice from heaven, St. Augustine's by a stroke of light, and Luther's by a terrible flesh of lightning. Furthermore, both Augustine and Luther "were shaken by

an attack involving both body and psyche"; they were in fact "thrown to the ground," and by this physical shock, they claimed, God had "changed their minds."⁴⁶ Edwards's moment of conversion exhibits no such dramatic occurrences of supernatural power or nature's violence. And if the conversions of Paul, Augustine, and Luther were in fact "instantaneous,"⁴⁷ that of Edwards was the "volitional type," according to which "the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits."⁴⁸ Moreover, while Augustine's and Luther's conversions were based upon a broken self converted through Christ's words, that of Edwards was grounded ultimately upon an acknowledgment of God in all his sovereign majesty and glory and resulted in a new vision of Christ.

Edwards's conversion experience was also clearly different from many seventeenth-century New England Puritan conversion narratives.⁴⁹ According to Patricia Caldwell, the model for Protestant conversion morphologies was Martin Luther's "two stage theory of repentance" in his morphology of conversion. "First, under the work of the law, the sinner saw his sin and was sorry for it; only then, under grace, was he enabled to resolve to amend his life. That resolution was literally the turning point or conversion."⁵⁰ In Puritan New England during the seventeenth century, as described by Edmund S. Morgan, the morphology of conversion took the following form:

first comes a feeble and false awakening to God's commands and a pride in keeping them pretty well, but also much backsliding. Disappointments and disasters lead to other fitful hearkenings to the word. Sooner or later true legal fear or conviction enables the individual to see his hopeless and helpless condition and to know that his own righteousness cannot save him, that Christ is his only hope. Thereafter comes the infusion of saving grace, sometimes but not always so precisely felt that the believer can state exactly when and where it came to him.⁵¹

But in Edwards's conversion "there had been no 'terror,' no willingness to be damned for the glory of God, no terrible humiliation

of spirit, no all-absorbing convictions of sin, and no undue concentration on the state of his own soul." His conversion was rather—and this is of the utmost importance for Edwards's universe of thought—a profound spiritual transformation regarding God the Divine Being. "Objective content" in Edwards's conversion, "had predominated over subjective concern. The center had been God, and not his own soul."⁵² Edwards himself admitted that his concern for salvation brought him "many exercising thoughts and inward struggles; but yet it never seemed to be proper to express that concern by the name of terror."⁵³ For what is absent from Edwards's conversion is "the experience of 'legal fear,' or terror, which constituted "a key element in most [Puritan] morphologies." Thus, rather than a radical "turning away from an old self toward God in fear of God's justice, Edwards experienced a turning toward God in appreciation of that justice."⁵⁴ Indeed, according to Ola E. Winslow, Edwards in his conversion moment

experienced no conviction of sin, no sudden ecstasy of forgiveness. He could not tell the moment at which the new life had begun. He was merely brought...to 'new Dispositions' and a 'new Sense of Things'. For him the whole of his life was altered; the divine glory was everywhere; and with a finality of assurance he knew that religion was henceforth to be the main business of his life.⁵⁵

Edwards himself felt keenly that his conversion was rather different from the established pattern spoken about by most orthodox Puritan divines:

The reason why I, in the least, question my interest in God's love and favor, is—1. Because I cannot speak so fully to my experience of the preparatory work, of which divines speak: 2. I do not remember that I experienced regeneration, exactly in those steps, in which divines say it is generally wrought.⁵⁶

No wonder, then, that Edwards was sometimes much troubled about his spiritual state, because, as he wrote in his *Diary*, his conversion experience was different from the rich culture of the Puritan morphology of conversion in England and New England: "The chief thing, that now makes me in any

measure to question my good estate, is my not having experienced conversion in those particular steps, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to experience it."⁵⁷ Obviously, therefore, he was much concerned about the nature of his conversion: "It seems to me, that whether I am now converted or not, I am so settled in the state I am in, that I shall go on in it all my life. But, however settled I may be, yet I will continue to pray to God, not to suffer me to be deceived about it, nor to sleep in an unsafe condition."⁵⁸

At this point a deeper comparison between Edwards's conversion and those of St. Augustine and Luther may throw light on the unique character of Edwards's conversion event. The differences between Augustine and Edwards can be clearly seen in the different biblical passages each of them found as the trigger for their long-sought conversions. Augustine's conversion was materialized through a Christocentric passage from Romans 13:13–14: "not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof." Edwards's conversion, on the other hand, took place after reading a theocentric passage from 1 Timothy 1:17: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen." Prominent in Augustine is his Christology, the central role of Jesus Christ in his conversion, redemption, and salvation; and what is most evident in Edwards is his vision of God's magnificent sovereignty and glory.

A comparison between Luther and Edwards, taking into account their cosmological views concerning time, history, and eternity, further illuminates the radical character of Edwards's conversion experience.⁵⁹ The main difference between Luther and Edwards can be described in a variety of opposing conceptions which contributed to the development of their different theologies, the *theologia crucis* and the *theologia gloriae*: self and mind, Christ and God, finite and infinite, Christocentric and theocentric.

In Luther's conversion, as he wrote, the predominant mode was the quest of personal salvation: "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."⁶⁰ In contrast, in Edwards's experience of conversion the ultimate goal was "reconciliation with divine power,"⁶¹ or the belief in God's absolute sovereignty. Luther's conversion experience reveals his overwhelming concern with his own personal salvation, while Edwards's experience led to his ultimate concern with God's absolute sovereignty. Luther is Christocentric, assigning Jesus the ultimate role in the Christian drama of salvation and redemption, while Edwards is more theocentric, trying to reconstruct the deity's majestic role in the universe and attempting to unveil the coherence and beauty of God's creation. Hence Luther's conversion is more concerned with the deepest layers of his soul and the crucial, merciful role of Christ the savior, while Edwards's moment of conversion is based upon a theocentric vision of the glory of God and His absolute sovereignty which later resulted in a new vision of Christ. Ultimately, Luther deals with the finite human being, emphasizing sin and hence the role of Christ as the savior of souls. His was the ultimate quest for personal salvation; he was not so much concerned with history or the cosmic vision of the universe of *theologia gloriae*. Edwards, on the other hand, absorbed in the infinite, God's absolute sovereignty, was much more occupied with the history of the work of redemption and salvation and the cause for which God created the world. Consequently, in contrast to Luther, who showed little interest in the cosmos, divine universe, and salvation history, the issue of the history of the work of redemption was an inextricable part of Edwards's theocentric thinking.

Finally, Edwards's conversion experience may also explain the difference between his and Calvin's theology of nature, especially in regard of nature's place and role within God's providential design. According to Calvin, "ever since the creation of the universe" God "brought forth those insignia

whereby he shows his glory to us, whenever and wherever we cast our gaze."⁶² In this sense, he argued, "the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible."⁶³ And since God sustains "this infinite mass of heaven and earth by his Word," hence are "the praises of God's power from the testimonies of nature."⁶⁴ Believers, therefore, "should contemplate him in his works" in "such a dazzling theater" of the heavens and the earth.⁶⁵ Indeed, as Louis Dupré shows, Calvin "leaves no doubt that the *ordo naturae* continues to manifest God's presence and guidance."⁶⁶ However, it was also Calvin who warned that it is "harmful" to "involve God confusedly in the inferior course of his works," since "nature is rather the order prescribed by God."⁶⁷ In this context, the "entire order of nature, including the so-called natural law, has been imposed by divine decree. Henceforth only the positive divine law revealed in the Ten Commandments remains."⁶⁸ In sum, for Calvin "nature is no longer capable of serving as a reliable and sufficient guide on the journey through life," and, therefore, to "know what God has decreed nature must be studied in light of revelation." Nature therefore lost its independent and autonomous role in providential history. "All natural signs of God's greatness had been planted by divine decision for the salvation of the fallen world—they no longer are the intrinsic language of nature itself."⁶⁹

In contrast, in Edwards's *theologia gloriae* "nature and human history are...legitimate sources of revelation, communicating God's purpose to his saints," because he believed in "the importance of nature as a vehicle for God's progressive communications," and that deity's "desire to communicate does not compromise God's majesty but instead fulfills it."⁷⁰ Thus, according to Edwards, "the Son of God created the world for this very end, to communicate himself in an image of his own excellency."⁷¹ Indeed, "he communicates himself properly only to spirits," because "they only are capable of being proper images of his excellency"; yet, at the

same time, "he communicates a sort of shadow or glimpse of his excellencies to bodies," which are "but the shadows of beings, and not real beings."⁷² Moreover, because the "natural things were ordered for types of spiritual things," God is working "throughout all nature," and this "to be on purpose to represent the dependence of our spiritual welfare [sic] upon God's gracious influences and the effusions of His holy spirit."⁷³ The world of nature in Edwards's "theistic metaphysics,"⁷⁴ therefore, in contrast to Calvin, became an important source of revelation. As Perry Miller showed, Edwards made "an exaltation of nature to a level of authority co-equal with revelation."⁷⁵ Indeed, according to Edwards, God "makes himself known...by his *word* and *works*; i. e. in what he says, and in what he does."⁷⁶ Thus, both through the order of grace and the order of nature, God ceaselessly reveals himself, and by learning the "language of God,"⁷⁷ then, the saints may acquire knowledge of God's providential design "in the creating of the astonishing fabric of the universe which we behold."⁷⁸

The conversion moment, therefore, is crucial to any understanding of the development of Edwards's theological and philosophical thought. Most important, the experience of conversion infused young man Edwards with an awesome vision of God in his absolute sovereignty and glory, which constituted the form and content of his *theologia gloriae*. For, as Richard Niebuhr wrote,

What Edwards knew, what he believed in his heart and his mind, was that man was made to stand in the presence of eternal, unending absolute glory, to participate in the celebration of cosmic deliverance from everything putrid, destructive, defiling, to rejoice in the service of the stupendous artist who flung universes of stars on his canvas, sculptured the forms of angelic powers, etched with loving care miniature worlds within worlds.⁷⁹

NOTES

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¹The conversion of St. Paul is described in Acts 9:1-19, 22:5-16, and 26:12-18; the relation of Augustine's conversion appeared in *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Hal M. Helms (Orleans, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 1986), Bk. VIII, section xxii; an excellent analysis of Luther's conversion experience can be found in Erik H. Erikson's classic study *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958). Erikson's study, however, has been much criticized for its heavy-handed (presumptuous) and psychologizing (reductive) treatment of religious experience. For a general psychological and pragmatist approach to religious conversion, see William James's classic study, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1982). For a good collection of conversion accounts spanning two thousand years of Christian history, see Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, eds., *Famous Conversions: The Christian Experience* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983).

²Edwards's description of his religious conversion can be read in his "Personal Narrative," *Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections*, ed. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: American Book Company, 1935), 57-72. The quotation is on p. 60. Edwards wrote his "Personal Narrative" a long time after the experience, probably by "1739 or 1740," according to Wilson Kinnach. See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 10, *Jonathan Edwards: Sermons and Discourses, 1720-1723*, ed. Wilson Kinnach (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 267.

³Edwards's conversion has been described in many studies, yet so far there has been made no serious and comprehensive attempt to analyze his morphology of conversion. For studies touching on Edwards's conversion, see Ola E. Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940), and Ola E. Winslow, ed., *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings* (New York: New American Library, 1966); William S. Morris, *The Young Jonathan Edwards: A Reconstruction* (New York: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1991); R. C. De Prospro, *Theism in the Discourse of Jonathan Edwards* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985); Stephen R. Yarbrough and John C. Adams, *Delightful Conviction: Jonathan Edwards and the Rhetoric of Conversion* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993); Harold P. Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1982); Daniel B. Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987); Edward H. Davidson, "Sovereign God and Reasonable Man," in William J. Scheick, ed., *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980), 33-40; Richard L. Bushman, "Jonathan Edwards as Great Man: Identity, Conversion, and Leadership in the Great Awakening," in Scheick, *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards*, 41-64; Conrad Cherry, "Conversion: Nature and Grace," in Scheick, *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards*, 76-88.

An important discussion of Edwards's spiritual life during the time of his conversion can be found in Wilson Kinnach, "Introduction," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 10, *Jonathan Edwards: Sermons and Discourses, 1720-1723*, ed. Wilson Kinnach, 261-80.

⁴In the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, Martin Luther describes the essence of true theology as theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). The opposite of this is the theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). According to Luther's *theologia crucis*, our knowledge of the being of God must be derived from the study of Christ in his humiliation and the sufferings he underwent on the cross. Luther opposed his *theologia crucis* to a *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory) which would maintain with the Scholastic theologians that a true knowledge of God can be obtained from the study of nature. See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), ch. 5, "The Theology of the Cross," 25-34.

⁵Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), xii.

⁶Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 30, 267.

⁷James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 196.

⁸Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 58-59.

⁹James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 189. On William James and the philosophy of Pragmatism see James T. Kloppenberg, "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking," *Journal of American History* 83 (June 1996): 100-38.

¹⁰Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 31-33.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 30-31.

¹²Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, xi-xii.

¹³*Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁴Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 57-58.

¹⁵Morris, *The Young Jonathan Edwards*, 32.

¹⁶According to Iain H. Murray, Edwards's conversion took place "in May or June of 1721." See Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 35.

¹⁷Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 58.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Morris, *The Young Jonathan Edwards*, 34.

²³Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 59.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 60.

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*, 70.

³⁸Davidson, "Sovereign God and Reasonable Man," 33.

³⁹William Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards and the Sense of the Heart," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (January 1990): 43. See also William J. Wainwright, *Reason of*

the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Christian Critique of Passional Reason (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and "Jonathan Edwards and the Language of God," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980): 519-30.

⁴⁰*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, VIII, xxii, 160-61. On Augustine's conversion, see J. C. Kristo, *Looking for God in Time and Memory: Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Augustine's Confessions* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991); Colin Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990); Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); and Don Browning, "The Psychoanalytic Interpretation of St. Augustine's Confessions: An Assessment and New Probe," *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 134-59.

⁴¹Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 96.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 91.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 91-92.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 93-94.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁷James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 230.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Patricia Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narratives: The Beginnings of American Expression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 163-66; Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction*, 7.

⁵⁰Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narratives*, 58.

⁵¹Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 91.

⁵²Morris, *The Young Jonathan Edwards*, 40.

⁵³Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 58.

⁵⁴Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction*, 7.

⁵⁵Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards*, 74.

⁵⁶Edwards, "Diary," in Sereno E. Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 1:24.

⁵⁷Edwards, *Diary*, as quoted in Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narratives*, 163.

⁵⁸Edwards, *Diary*, in Winslow, ed. *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings*, 78.

⁵⁹For my discussion of the differences between Luther's and Edwards's conversions I owe much to Bishop Bill Lazareth of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, an important Lutheran scholar who generously shared with me on several occasions his impressive knowledge of Luther's theology and thought.

⁶⁰The quotation from Luther is in the Introduction to Kerr and Mulder, *Famous Conversions*, xvi.

⁶¹Bushman, "Jonathan Edwards as Great Man," 54.

⁶²Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, 5, 1.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, I, 5, 8.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, I, 5, 8-9.

⁶⁶Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 209-10.

⁶⁷Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, 5, 5.

⁶⁸Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 214.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 215.

⁷⁰Janice Knight, "Learning the Language of God: Jonathan Edwards and the Typology of Nature," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 48 (1991): 531, 536-37, and *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁷¹Edwards, *Miscellany* #108 (c. 1724), *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13: *The "Miscellanies" (Entries Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500)*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 279.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, ed. Perry Miller (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1948), 56, 44-45.

⁷⁴For the term "theistic metaphysics" as applied to Jonathan Edwards's philosophy and theology, see

Wainwright, *Reason of the Heart*, 35-40. A discussion of Edwards's theism in regard of nature, can be found in De Propso, *Theism in the Discourse of Jonathan Edwards*.

⁷⁵Perry Miller, Introduction to Edwards, *Images or shadows of Divine Things*, 28.

⁷⁶Edwards, *Dissertation I. Concerning the End for which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 422.

⁷⁷Knight, "Learning the Language of God," 531.

⁷⁸Edwards, *Concerning the End for which God Created the World*, 419.

⁷⁹H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards" (1958), *The Christian Century*, 1 May 1996, 480-85. The quotation is from p. 483.

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