APPENDIX

Jonathan Edwards as the American Augustine

Considering the differences of time, milieux, and the absence of references to Augustine in Edwards' writings it is remarkable that he has been likened to an "American Augustine." Nevertheless, references to Edwards' affinity with Augustine abound in the secondary literature. A brief review of some of those authors who have detected an Augustinian strain in Edwards' works discloses that they see a striking correspondence in their combined allegiance to the major Christian doctrines. Of greater interest to some commentators and as my thesis has shown, is Edwards' re-focussing on the inward subjectivity of Augustine's Trinitarian spirituality.

Edwards has provoked great passion amongst both his supporters and detractors since he began his public ministry in New England in the Eighteenth century. The uncompromising Augustinian Calvinism which underpinned all of his writing and the brilliant way in which he expounded the great themes of Christian theology in the context of his engagement with the major thinkers of the Enlightenment either endearing him to his like-minded supporters or enraged his detractors. What was never denied, by either supporter or detractor, was the power of his intellect, some would say genius, evil or otherwise, which illuminates his theology, philosophy and ethical thought.

Here is no mere demagogue, but a theologian of great learning and insight whose prodigious literary output seems not to have ended with his death, as previously little known or lost works are brought into the scholarly arena for scrutiny and debate. In fact, the number of books, articles, monographs, and anthologies based on his collected works in the Yale edition continues to mushroom as yet another generation encounter his life and thought and are duly captivated or repelled.

As Peter J. Theusen argues, such is the sheer size of Edwards's literary legacy it reflects more images of the man and his theology than that of all other American theologians. There is ample scope for would be biographers, historians, and theologians to trace the development of any number of Edwards's major theological themes and thus arrive at a number of possible interpretations of his life and thought. Theusen likens the search for the historical Edwards to

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the nineteenth century quest for the historical Jesus. Given the proliferation of recent works on Edwards his assessment is no exaggeration. During the past sixty years the quest for the real, historical Jonathan Edwards has assumed gargantuan proportions with competing evaluations of Edwards’s life and legacy abounding.3

As Theusen notes, reactions to Edwards’ thought depend largely on the theological stance adopted by his reviewers. For the most part, the Edwards thus revealed “is clearly a mirror of his observers.”4 Theusen goes on to suggest that Jonathan Edwards is “the single greatest mirror in American religious history,” an observation confirmed by Mark Noll who notes that Jonathan Edwards is mentioned more often than any other figure in the three-volume Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience. 5 Of all the comparisons between Edwards and other theologians, one figure stands out from all the rest and that is Augustine of Hippo.6

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The perils of attempting to define the real Jonathan Edwards are reminiscent of George Tyrell’s observation that Adolph Harnack’s liberal, ethical, civilizing Jesus of the nineteenth century quest was little more than “the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.” George Tyrell Christianity at the Crossroads (Longmans, GB 1909), p44.

4 Peter Theusen, “Jonathan Edwards as Great Mirror,” p. 42. Difficulties in interpreting Edwards’ legacy emerged soon after his death. In 1756 for example, one of Edwards’ disciples Joseph Bellamy wrote to another Edwards’ sympathizer Samuel Hopkins, suggesting that they collaborate on a catechetical text that would simplify Edwards’ ideas for theological students since it was clear that “Mr Edwards books will be the better understood for at present [even] the learned do not understand him” (Weber 53). Thirty years later Yale President Ezra Stile’s diary entry in 1787 opined that in another generation Edwards’s works “will pass into as transient notice perhaps scarce above oblivion” (Dexter 3:275), but nothing could have been further from the truth.

In the following 150 years, with the gradual publication and dissemination of Edwards’s collected works, scholars from all points of the religious compass (and some of no religion at all) felt moved to analyse Edwards’s contribution to American religious and cultural life. Not all such assessments were complimentary, and there was a partial lacunae during the mid to late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century when the impact of biblical criticism, the emergence of theological liberalism, and the adoption of a Darwinian Weltanschauung undermined religious belief in general, and Puritanism in particular, so that Edwards was eclipsed.


The secondary literature abounds with comparisons of Edwards and Augustine so that for example, one contemporary observer believes that many scholars accept him as “an eighteenth-century Augustinian theologian with remarkable talents.” Edwards was always embroiled in controversy and if he adopted an Augustinian piety which endeared him to some, many eighteenth and nineteenth century commentators were repelled by his Calvinistic determinism and reacted fiercely against the traditional Reformed doctrines he so ably elucidated. Doctrines such as original sin, predestination, total depravity, limited atonement and the perseverance of the saints could be traced back to Augustine and before him to Paul, but the spread of Enlightenment and Arminian thinking contributed to some hostility to Edwards right from the beginning of his public life.

In 1867, Mark Twain wrote to his friend Harriet Beecher Stowe about his reading of Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*, referring to it as “Jonathan's insane debauch” the product “of a resplendent intellect gone mad.” In fact two of Edwards's most trenchant critics during the nineteenth century were the Beecher sisters, Harriet and Catharine, who disagreed strongly with Edwards' Augustinian Calvinism. Harriet Beecher Stowe is well known for her criticisms of New England Calvinism and in particular that espoused by Jonathan Edwards at a time when the theology of Augustine began to be freely discussed in New England society. Both sisters suffered personal tragedies that called into question their belief in original sin and predestination. Harriet was devastated by the death of her son by drowning, as was Catharine by the death of her fiancé. Fearing for their loved ones' eternal salvation since they died without experiencing the prerequisite Calvinistic conversion, both sisters agonized about their loved ones' fate. In airing the difficulties they shared with the Puritan tradition, and most especially with the doctrine of election, the Beecher sisters looked behind Edwards and saw Augustine as the inspiration behind New England Puritanism.

In directing her criticisms of the doctrine of election back to Augustine, Harriet echoed her elder sister Catharine who wrote two volumes of theology in which she devotes more attention to Augustine that to any other figure. Catharine referred to Augustine’s deleterious influence on

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9 Mark Twain quoted in Gura, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 153

269
Puritanism as "the Africa Enslavement of Anglo-Saxon minds". Why this should have happened is attributed by Theusen to the Beechers having lived "in a particularly Augustinian moment in New England history," a time when perennial themes from the Pelagian and other controversies of late antiquity resurfaced and were debated. Unitarianism became an important issue in New England, and the question of original sin and infant baptism was one that perplexed devout Christians. However, although Harriet Beecher Stowe and her sister Catherine Beecher shared Twain's abhorrence of Edwards' Calvinism, they could still acknowledge Edwards' positive contribution to American intellectual and literary life.

While a number of scholars have drawn attention to similarities between Edwards and Augustine since Edwards became known in international circles in the mid 1730's, Perry Miller has been the most persuasive in linking Edwards and Augustine. He sees Edwards' theological and intellectual background as firmly rooted in the Augustinian, Calvinist tradition, and attributes an Augustinian piety to Edwards, a piety which a more recent appraisal of Edwards suggests revived the "time-honoured tradition of Augustine in finding religion in the whole man, in the fundamental inclination of the heart and in his love of the divine Gloria."

These three categories could well constitute a definition of Puritan spirituality as espoused by the seventeenth century reformers and Jonathan Edwards, but they are also prominent themes in Augustine and are the basis for my study. The "love of the divine Gloria" was elaborated from the matrix of a spiritual maturity expressed in a passionate devotion to the person and work of Jesus Christ; this devotion drove their entire theological enterprise. Miller began his study on Puritan piety, *The New England Mind*, by designating the piety of the early Puritans as Augustinian.

"I venture to call this piety Augustinian," he wrote, "not because it depended directly upon Augustine....[but] simply because Augustine is the arch exemplar of a religious frame of mind of which Puritanism is only one instance out of many in fifteen hundred years of religious history....There survive hundreds of Puritan diaries..."
and thousands of Puritan sermons, but we can read the inward meaning of them all in the \textit{Confessions}."\footnote{Miller, \textit{The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century}, p. 4.}

The common thread between them was not one of outward expression but of inward mood: "The same subjective insight, the same turning of consciousness back upon itself, the same obsession with individuality, the same test of conclusions not so much by evidence or utility as by the soul’s immediate approbation and revulsion-these qualities which appear in Augustine almost for the first time in Western thought and give him his amazing ‘modernity’ reappear in force among the early Puritans" and certainly none more so than in the writings of Jonathan Edwards.

Miller sees Edwards’ "Augustinian strain of piety" flowing from humanity’s desire to transcend the finite, imperfect self, and in this respect, Augustinian themes are also modern existential themes. It would appear that Miller is suggesting that the relationship between Augustine and the Puritans was one of spiritual descent, rather than one of theological dependence. In other words, as my study has demonstrated, the link between Edwards and Augustine is a shared aesthetic sensibility of heart knowledge of God, rather than shared conclusions arrived at after rigorous intellectual application.

Union with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is not just a formal statement of Christian orthodoxy in their theology but a life changing experience arising from a new orientation of the heart, mind and will. Edwards didn’t simply inherit Augustine’s theology, he responded to the Augustinian tradition which the Reformers continued to espouse, and like Augustine, felt the truth of the tradition in the heart as well as assenting to its main tenets with the intellect.

In another work in which Miller attempts to discern continuities and discontinuities in the history of ideas, an essay exploring the links between Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson who were much closer chronologically and contextually than Edwards and Augustine, he suggests that one cannot argue for "an organic evolution of ideas" from Edwards to Emerson. Nor does Miller accept that "a direct line of intellectual descent" will suffice to explain the sense of continuity he believes underlies their ideas. In Miller’s comparison of Edwards and Emerson, their almost mystical love of nature which they view from very different perspectives, one a Calvinist and the other a transcendentalist, represents the common medium from which they articulate their worldviews.\footnote{Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson," in \textit{Errand into the Wilderness}, pp. 184-185.} Miller places great emphasis on the importance of "the inward meaning" they
attach to events in order to discern patterns of divine intervention, and it is the same attention to the “inward meaning” of doctrines that characterizes the theology of Edwards and Augustine.

Whilst Edwards and Emerson were literally poles apart theologically, this was not the case for Edwards and Augustine who shared important theological emphases. The sovereignty of God, original sin, the necessity of grace for redemption and the doctrine of the atonement were interpreted from the perspective of the pro-Nicean doctrine of the Trinity. However, a common subscription to orthodox doctrines is not the link endorsed by Miller. He sees Edwards’ spiritual affinity with Augustine in a deep awareness of the “three-person’d God” in the heart that informs the whole of life. That is not to suggest that Miller was an unequivocal admirer of all that Edwards wrote. In company with many others, he deplored the Calvinism that Edwards so ardently embraced.

The twentieth century witnessed several significant comparisons between Edwards and Augustine particularly with respect to their philosophy of history. In 1937 H. Richard Niebuhr made a plea for an “American Augustine” who would write a modern De Civitate Dei that would explore the history of the American church and its relationship with contemporary civilization rather than with ancient Rome. He suggested that Jonathan Edwards was America’s most influential theologian and philosopher and mused that perhaps Edwards might be revived to “bring down to our time the History of the Work of Redemption,” much as Augustine had done in the early fifth century.  

In 1958, on the occasion of the bicentenary of Edwards’s death, Niebuhr delivered a lecture entitled “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” which on a superficial reading seemed to suggest that not only was Edwards out of touch in his own lifetime he was even more of an anachronism in the twentieth century. Niebuhr sums up the popular judgment on Edwards as a failed mystic as follows: “Jonathan Edwards was a great man but he was wrong on almost every issue for which he contended—the gloriousness of an inscrutable almighty, universal, majestic, wrathful, God; the depravity and corruptness of the human heart; the need for the reconstitution of the church, not as catholic and all-inclusive but as the selected group of the convinced; the determinism, the unfreedom of human existence; the glory of God as the chief and only end of being.”

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As he progresses however, it becomes apparent that Niebuhr is not convinced by popular opinion and in fact holds Edwards in high regard as the one who gave the people of his day a glorious vision of a glorious God which is sadly missing in twentieth century America. The true anachronism of Jonathan Edwards according to Niebuhr is that Twentieth century Protestant Americans do not know the Holy God of love that Jonathan Edwards knew and worshipped with such passion. To their great loss Niebuhr argues that most Americans of his day worshipped an anaemic, kindly, heavenly Father who is very little use to anyone as far as explaining history goes. Given the atrocious realities of the twentieth century with its shocking picture of human corruption and bestiality during the two world wars and all the lesser ones, Niebuhr felt that Edwards’ spirituality was as relevant in a modern context as it had been in his own day. In Niebuhr’s estimation, the “Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards” lies in the present day Christian’s refusal to honour Edwards’ prophetic call to a holy life before the demands of a just and righteous creator God. Edwards’ prophetic call had been delivered by Augustine in late antiquity.\textsuperscript{21}

R.C. De Prospo locates the connection between the two theologians in their theistic discourse, which he regards as essentially dualistic. By that he means the ultimate pattern of disjunction between Creator and creation which he maintains leads to the creation of “hierarchical duplicities.” De Prospo contends that this type of dualistic discourse unites the early Church Fathers and Puritans with its attention to the inextricability of truth and experience.\textsuperscript{22} He sees no difficulty in the fact that there are continuities between Augustine and Edwards despite the long time interval between their lifetimes. In his analysis of their correspondences of thought, he makes the point that any regularities between theologians widely separated in time “are as plausible as any gestalt and as powerful as they can be made to appear structurally consistent.”\textsuperscript{23} De Prospo disagrees with Miller’s assessment of Edwards as a “modern” theologian. Edwards hovers between his received tradition and the new learning with which he took issue. He is “not quite a Puritan nor quite enlightened” but a somewhat “Janus-like” figure who is the link between ancient and modern philosophy and theology because of his adherence to what many scholars regard as an outmoded Calvinism which goes back to Augustine.\textsuperscript{24}

The use of aesthetic imagery is another point of coincidence between Edwards and Augustine in De Prospo’s analysis of Edwards’ use of language. In Chapter four of this

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pp. 126-133.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 15.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 35.
dissertation, I have argued that both Edwards and Augustine equate the divine beauty with true virtue, but God’s beauty is revealed in the contraries of good and evil and shines forth even more brightly when contrasted with the evils of the created order. The longing for the beauty of God is symptomatic of the aching heart of the pilgrim saint and is not new in Edwards but can be traced back to ancient Neoplatonic roots which also underpin Augustine’s aesthetics. Their common reliance on heart imagery forms part of a seamless strand in experiential religion which goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures, is taken up by Augustine and is to be found in the seventeenth century Puritans.25

Another scholar to note an affinity between Edwards’ and Augustine is Peter Gay. One of Edwards’ most virulent detractors, Gay places Edwards in the Augustinian tradition but this is not intended as a compliment. In a very disparaging review of Edwards’ legacy, Gay claims that Edwards was no modernist innovator but a very flawed conservative. He asserts that “to grasp the temper of Edwards’ history, one must read the Church Fathers and the Scriptures. However magnificent in conception, however bold in execution Edwards’ History of the Work of Redemption is a thoroughly traditional book, and the tradition is the tradition of Augustine ...” Gay’s dismissal of Edwards as a “tragic anachronism” for his insistence on Calvinist doctrine echoes the opinions of those who found Edwards’ theology harsh, even damaging.26

More recently attention has been drawn to the convergences of thought and theology in their Trinitarian theology. Among the first to analyse the significantly Augustinian strains in Edwards’ Trinitarianism was William Sparkes Morris. Morris points out a number of parallels in their thinking and is of the opinion that much of Edwards’ Trinitarian imagery comes from Books X-XV of The Trinity, despite his acknowledgment that it is difficult to guarantee that Edwards ever read Augustine.27

The Trinitarian congruencies between Edwards and Augustine have also been noted by William J. Daniher Jr. He devotes considerable space in his discussion of the Trinitarian foundations to Edwards’ ethical writings to the evident similarities in their use of the

25 Ibid., p. 158.
psychological analogy and the importance of the relationship between the Trinity and true virtue.28

Yet another scholar to detect an Augustinian strain to Edwards’ whole theological enterprise is Avihu Zakai who finds significant resonances in their philosophies of history. The Introduction to his study of Edwards’ philosophy of history is titled the “The American Augustine.” Zakai writes, “The wide range of his works and the variety of themes he dealt with, as well as the solutions he offered for the Christian life and thought in his time, justify I would argue, the conferring upon him the title of the “American Augustine.”29 The similarities are to be found, according to Zakai, in the depth of their religious experience and in the similar nature of the controversies with which they were engaged as part of an attempt to defend Christian thought in a hostile environment.

That Edwards is an heir to Augustine is nowhere more clearly articulated than by his latest biographer who evaluates Edwards’ life and thought more positively from the perspective of what he determined is an “essentially Augustinian framework.”30 Marsden sees both theologies shaped by the traditional Scriptural paradigm of the sovereignty of God, sin, grace, and redemption through Trinitarian love. Edwards’ solution to the problem of the ontological gap between the glorious majesty of God and the inferior status of the creation is overcome by humanity’s incorporation into the Trinitarian life of God, an idea which is certainly espoused by Augustine. According to Marsden, Edwards achieves this resolution by offering a “post-Newtonian statement of classic Augustinian themes” in which God’s Trinitarian essence is love.31 In another context, Marsden calls Edwards “The American Augustine” for the sheer genius of his “vision of God that is overwhelming in its beauty.”32

Even this brief survey of some of the scholarly literature in which Edwards’ Augustinian heritage is mentioned suggests that the link between the two theologians is more than superficial. Both wrote about homo religiosus, the inner man, the life of the mind and loves of the heart; what it meant to be a Christian, how the Christian could know conversion, and how that conversion would be evident in the daily life of the believer. Their great intelligence, prodigious output and spiritual insights about the beauty of holiness, the glory of God, and the joy to be found in him

31 Ibid., p. 505.
guarantees their place in the tradition of heart religion. My comparison of their Trinitarian view of God, conversion, epistemology and aesthetics re-inforces the notion hinted at by many others, that it is not inconceivable that Edwards is indeed the "American Augustine."
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Volume Title</th>
<th>Volume Editor(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (1957)</td>
<td><em>Freedom of the Will</em></td>
<td>Paul Ramsey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1959)</td>
<td><em>Religious Affections</em></td>
<td>John E. Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (1970)</td>
<td><em>Original Sin</em></td>
<td>Clyde A. Holbrook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (1972)</td>
<td><em>The Great Awakening</em></td>
<td>C. C. Goen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (1977)</td>
<td><em>Apocalyptic Writings</em></td>
<td>Stephen J. Stein</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 (1980)</td>
<td><em>Scientific and Philosophical Writings</em></td>
<td>Wallace E. Anderson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (1985)</td>
<td><em>The Life of David Brainerd</em></td>
<td>Norman Pettit</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Paul Ramsey</td>
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