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JONATHAN EDWARDS AND THE INDIANS

TIBOR FABINY

Abstract

Unlike Jesuits who usually showed more respect for the native culture of the Indians, Protestant missionaries held that native American religion was satanic and the Indians were devils. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), America's most outstanding theologian and missionary to the Indians for seven years at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, was not exempt from that Protestant tradition either. However, he gradually came to see the Indians differently. In his extensive correspondence he said that the Indians were "disposed" to the Gospel, frequently much better than those contemporary Christians in whom Edwards was so disappointed. This "disposition" or "inclination" is a key category in Edwards' "phenomenology of religion", the famous *Religious Affections* (1746). This paper wishes to explore four issues: (1) how and why Jonathan Edwards after almost twenty five years of parish ministry and internationally recognized scholarly work ended up in Stockbridge; (2) how his views on the Indians were influenced by his grandfather Solomon Stoddard and the young missionary David Brainerd; (3) how Edwards saw the Indians during his Stockbridge years; (4) how he addressed the Indians in his new sermon rhetorics.

Between his dismissal by his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1750, and his being elected as President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) in 1757, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), America's outstanding philosopher, theologian, revivalist spent almost seven years in Stockbridge, Massachusetts as pastor and missionary to Indians. During this time he wrote some of his most significant philosophical and theological works such as *Freedom of the Will* (1754), *The Nature of True Virtue* (1755, published in 1765); *End for Which God Created the World* (1755, published in 1765); and *Original Sin* (1758).

1. Edwards' Road to Stockbridge

Jonathan Edwards was and still is, American's most productive and influential theologian. At the age of 23, the young and talented Yale-trained pastor of Puritan descent was called to Northampton to be an assistant to the congregation of his grandfather, The Rev. Solomon Stoddard, the "pope of the Connecticut Valley". After the death of his grandfather in 1729 Edwards became full pastor. Due to his ministry and preaching the so-called "little awakening" took place in his congregation of which he gave an account in his *Faithful Narrative* (1737). This book reached England and Scotland to inspire the Wesley brothers and probably George Whitefield (1714–1770). Whitefield's visit to America in 1740 resulted in the Great Awakening in which Edwards had also a crucial role. He summarized the lessons of the Great Awakening in his *Religious Affections* (1746), a book that soon made him a famous Anglo-American theologian.

However, as he wanted to introduce strict measures concerning the access to communion which would break with the more lenient tradition of his grandfather ("half-way covenant"), his congregation decided to dismiss him in 1750. After his dismissal Edwards was offered several jobs including one in Scotland but he chose to serve the Indians.

2. The Influence of Solomon Stoddard and David Brainerd on his Views on the Indians

Unlike Jesuits who usually showed more respect for the native culture of the Indians, Protestant missionaries held that native American religion was satanic and the Indians were devils. Neither was Edwards free from the Protestant tradition that Indians were "beasts" as they performed ritual torture and cannibalism.

He was not only raised on such stories but he must have beeen told several times the murder of one of his aunts and two of his cousins by the Canadian Kahnawake Indians at Deerfield Massachusetts in 1704 (McDermott 2000, 195–196).

However, he gradually came to see the Indians differently. In this "learning process" he was probably first inspired by his grandfather, also his predecessor in Northampton, Solomon Stoddard (1643–1729) who wrote *Question: Whether God Is Not Angry with the Country for Doing so Little towards the Conversion of the Indians* (Boston 1723) .

Though we do not have evidence whether Edwards read Stoddard's pamphlet, he was already 20 years old when it was published and three

years later he began his ministry under the patronage of his grandfather that lasted for another three years. This means they could have talked about the issues raised in this recent publication.

In this 1723 pamphlet, which has no modern edition, Stoddard was keen on urging the English to convert the poor heathen Indians:

> We our selves have been pitied, when we were in the like condition. The English nation was formally under heathenish darkness, as these Indians; they worshipped several idols…We should have been so sensible of this Mercy of God to us, as to pity these Indians, not knowing but that God may have glorious churches among them, and that in length of time, many of their Posterity may be glorious Witnesses unto Christ, and that his Kingdom may flourish among them. (Stoddard 1723, 9).

Stoddard showed that other nations like the Germans or the Danes were far better in converting the Indians and the English should especially be ashamed to see that the Roman Catholics were far more successful in bringing the Indians "to their religion" in Peru, Mexico etc. "And is not a shame to us to be backward to promote the true religion?" (10)

> And it is very hopeful, if the Indians did once imbrace the true Religion, they would by degrees, leave off their wild and base way of living; learn Trades, improve Land; and govern themselves as civilized Nations do; they would relinquish this Savage way of living that they had been addicted unto. (11).

Stoddard warned his people that while the Indians remained heathen it was a great danger that "the Christians in America will Indianize and become that Gog and Magog spoken of Rev 20" (11). Stoddard applied typological logic in arguing that just as St Paul wanted the pagans to become Christians in order to "provoke emulation" among his own folk the Jews, now the lazy English are to be made jealous by the conversion of the Indians. Moreover, their conversion had some pragmatic aims: if they were christianized there would be peace and prosperity instead of war and hunger. Against those who wanted to destroy them Stoddard believed it was "much better to convert them". He finished his 12 page pamphlet with a tone of optimism: "Then they will do good, they will serve and glorify God, they will help to enlarge his Kingdom, and be a benefit to their neighbours" (12).

The other influence on Edwards was definitely the diary and journal of the young missionary to the Indians David Branierd (1718–1747). Brainerd entered Yale College after an intense conversion experience in 1739 at the awakening sermons of George Whitefield (1714–1770),

Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) and James Davenport (1716–1757) during the Great Awakening. However, as a convert Brainerd was not free from the judgementalism so typical of the "new born": he was reported to have made a remark of one of his Yale tutors that "he had no more grace than this chair". As a result he was expelled from college and studied with a local pastor and began to preach without licence (Marsden 2003, 324). However, soon he was given an appointment as a missionary to the Indians by the Society in Scotland Promoting Christian Knowledge which he undertook in spring 1743. First he worked in a Mohican village of Kaunamek and then he travelled to convert the Delaware Indians. While Brainerd was serving at an Indian village in Crossweeksung south of Trenton in 1745, an awakening broke out.

Though Brainerd's physical condition was more and more weakened he travelled on horseback several hundred miles. At the end of May 1747 he arrived at Edwards's home where Edwards' 17-year-old son Jerusha took care of him as his health was rapidly deteriorating. They even travelled together to Boston for two weeks because horseback riding was suggested as therapy by Brainerd's doctors. While back at home Edwards was impressed by the intensity of Brainerd's faith. Brainerd eventually died in Edwards's home on October 9, 1747. Three days later Edwards preached the funeral sermon: "True Saints, When Absent from the Body, Are Present with the Lord". Four month later Jerusha, "who was of the same spirit with Mr. Brainerd" also died of acute fever. Edwards preached on "Youth is like a flower that is cut down". They were buried next to each other (Marsden 2003, 324–325).

Throughout 1748 Edwards was busy editing Brainerd's *Diary* and writing *An Account of the Life of David Brainerd.* This was Edwards' other important source concerning the Indians. What images could Edwards gain from Brainard's Diary?

Brainerd wrote that the "poor pagans" were "desirous of hearing the Gospel of Christ" (Brainerd 1749, 272). When on February 19, 1746 Brainerd preached to the Delaware Indians he wrote:

> Diverse of the Indians here seemed to have their prejudices and aversion to Christianity removed, and appeared well disposed and inclined to hear the word of God. (337).

He described how the Indians were moved, for example, by his preaching on the transfiguration. They were weeping as they were deeply affected by the glory of Christ (318). He gave a detailed account of the conversion of his interpreter who had been a drunkard and had joined him only as he was interested in the "customs and the manners of the English".

However, by listening to his sermons, the man became spiritually troubled and earnestly desired his soul to be saved (275–277).

Let me quote another example at length, Brainerd's description of the conversion of an Indian girl:

> There was one remarkable instance of awakening this day, that I cannot but take particular notice of here. A young Indian woman, who I believe never knew before she had a soul, nor ever thought of any such thing, hearing that there was something strange among the Indians, came it seems to see what was the matter. In her way to the Indians she called at my lodging, and when I told her I designed presently to preach to the Indians, laughed and seemed to mock; but went, however to them. I had proceeded far in my discourse before she felt affectually she had a soul; and before I had concluded my discourse, was so convinced of her sin and misery; so distressed with concern for her salvation, that she seemed like one pierced through with a dart, and cried out incessantly. She could neither go nor stand, nor sit her seat without being held up. After public service was over, she lay flat on the ground praying earnestly, and would take no notice of, nor give any answer to, any that spoke to her. I hearkened to know what she said, and perceived the burden of her prayer to be, *Guttumaukalumeh wechaumec kmeleh Nda*, i.e. 'have mercy on me, and help me to give you my heart'. And thus she continued praying incessantly for many hours together. This was indeed a surprizing day of God's power, and seemed enough to convince an atheist of the truth, importance, and power of God's word. (284)

Another example is when Brainerd met the Delaware king "who appeared kindly disposed, and willing to be instructed" (296) which gave him encouragement that a door would be opened to preach the gospel. Having preached to the Indians Brainerd was both realistic and hopeful:

> Still entertained that God would open their hearts to receive the gospel, though many of them in the place were so drunk from day to day, that I could get no opportunity to speak to them. Toward night discoursed with one that understood the languages of the Six Nations, (as they are usually) called who discovered an inclination to hearken to Christianity; which gave me some hopes that the gospel might hereafter be sent to those nations far remote. (297)

While reading and editing this young man's spiritual diary Edwards was not yet aware that in two years time he would himself undertake to serve as a missionary among the Indians in Stockbridge. However, Brainerd's diary, his devotion to, and concern for, the Indians could be the

explanation why, after his dismissal, Edwards chose to pastor the Indians rather than accepting some other more prestigeous job.

3. Stockbridge – the Hostile English and the Friendly Indians

The Stockbridge mission was founded in 1734 to renew the missionary work on the Massachusetts frontier (Wheeler 2007, 197). Here Edwards was serving a congregation of one to two hundred Mahican and Mohawk Indians (McDermott 2003, 271). He was formally installed as pastor to Indian and English congregation on August 8, 1751 (Lee 2005, xxvii).

We may get an image of Edwards and his family in their new environement from a letter Edwards wrote to his father the Reverend Timoty Edwards on January 27 1752:

> My wife and children are well pleased with our present situation. They like the place better than they expected. Here, at present, we live in peace; which has been an unusuall thing with us. The Indians seem much pleased with my family, especially with my wife. They are generally more sober and serious than they used to be. Beside the Stockbridge Indians, here are above sixty of the Six Nations, who live here for the sake of instruction (Claghorn 1998, 420).

Edwards's typologically poetic sermons have sometimes been called as "sermons in stones" which is, in fact, a direct quotation from Shakespeare's celebrated comedy. The voice of the banished pastor of Northampton bears indeed much resemblance to the voice of the banished Duke in *As You Like It.*

> [...] Are not these woods
> More free from peril than the envious court?
> Here we feel not the penalty of Adam [...]
> And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
> Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.
> (Shakespeare 1984, Act 2, Sci 1, lines 4–5; 15–17)

However, it cannot be said that the situation was as idyllic as it seems (or seemed) at first sight. Throughout 1752–1753 there was much tension between Edwards and the Williams family. Edwards was not only intereted in preaching to the Indians but also in teaching them as well. Though Edwards did not have much regard for Indian culture but believed

in the Indians' potential. He proposed to teach biblical stories and the basics of artithmetics to the Indian children and he also recognized that music was very popular with the Indians. He suggested that English children should be integrated into Indian schools. His family usually took an Indian boy into their home (Marsden 2003, 389–390). His younger son Jonathan Jr. had Indian playmates and soon learned the language of the Indians. Later he recalled: "I knew the names of some things in Indian which I did not know in English; even all my thoughts ran in Indian" (qtd. in Marsden 2003, 391).

Education in Stockbridge was under the control of Colonel Ephraim Williams (1691–1755) the rich land invester and his family especially his daughter Abigail Williams Sergeant Dwight (1721–1791) who married, after the death of her first husband, Edwards' supporter-turned-enemy the brigadier Joseph Dwight (1703–1765). Originally this family was appointed to be in charge of the mission school by the Rev Isaac Hollies (1700–1774), a wealthy English dissenter, and chief patron of the Stockbridge mission. The family wanted Abigail to become the mistress of the girls' school. Edwards was convinced of Abigail's (mainly spiritual) incompetence.

In Edwards' fight with the Williams faction, the schoolmaster Timothy Woodbridge (1709–1774) proved to be a staunch supporter of Edwards. Edwards' protege was the young Harvard graduate Gideon Hawley (1727–1807) who began to teach Mohawk and other Iroqouis children together with some English (including Edwards' son) at the boarding school. The Williams faction included Captain Martin Kellog (1686–1755). He served as the schoolmaster of the Indian school and still drew a good salary from Hollies for what he called the "Hollisian School", and he refused to yield to Hawley (Marsden 2003, 399). The conflict accelerated because of an incident in which a friend of Kellog struck the child of one of the chief Indiansand Hawley wanted but could not defend the Indian child. As a result of this conflict half of the Mohawks left (Marsden 2003, 391). Edwards' former opponent in Northampton, Elisha Williams (1694–1755), joined the battle on the party of Edwards' enemies and not until February 1754 was Jonathan Edwards given sole charge of Indian schools in Stockbridge by chief donor Isaac Hollies (Lee 2005, xxvii; Marsden 2003, 405). However by March 1754, "frustrated by the abuses of Edwards predecessors, nearly all the remaining Indians left Stockbridge" (Lee 2005, xxviii). The renewed French and English conflicts on the frontier and the Indian war marked the end of Edwards' educational project.

While living in Stockbridge among the Indians, Edwards' earlier assumptions were confirmed. In his extensive correspondance Edwards

frequenly mentioned that the Indians were "disposed" or "inclined" to the Gospel, sometimes much better than those contemporary Christians in whom Edwards was so disappointed.

Gerald R. McDermott has suggested that Edwards developed a "dispositional soteriology" (McDermott 2000, 132–139) meaning that heathens were sometimes more disposed to Christ than baptized Christians. For Edwards this disposition was much more important than moral behaviour. Just as Brainerd, Edwards also frequently used the categories "inclination" and "disposition" which he developed as a key categories in his' "phenomenology of religion", the famous *Religious Affections* (1746): "the affections are no other, than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and the will of the soul" (Edwards 1959, 96); Edwards further wrote that, "the essence of all true religion lies in holy love; and that in this divine affection, and an habitual disposition to it" (Edwards 1959, 107).

Edwards wrote to Isaac Hollies that Indians "that used to be notorious drunkards and blood-thirsty warriors, have of late strangely had dispositions and manners changed through some wonderful influence on their minds" (qtd. in McDermott 2000, 199).

Rachel Wheeler compared the German Moravian and the English mission to the Mahican Indians (only 40 miles from one another). The main difference was that the Germans usually provided detailed records of the names of the Indians residents at the mission, but the English missionaries did not seem to care about that.

Indian names crop up in Edwards's vast amount of writing only thrirteen times in Wheeler's counting. (Wheeler 2003, 136). Two letters name his interpreter John Wauwampequumnnaunt. Edwards characterizes him as

> an extraordinary man…good reader and writer…an excellent interpreter …there was never an Indian educated in America that exceeded him in knowledge, in divinity, understanding of Scriptures. He heretofore had been so strictly temperate as he ought to have been, but there seems now to be an alteration in him in his passion and he is much more careful. The things of religion seem to lie with much weight on his mind, and he seems to be very diligent and faithful in his business (Claghorn 1998, 451–2).

4. The Rhetorics of a Stockbridge Sermon

Edwards is most famous, even notorious, for "hell-and-damnation" sermons such as "The Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), later anthologized for generations of students of American literature. However,

the image that Edwards was mainly preaching "terror" sermons, is mistaken. He much more frequently preached about God's beauty or that "Heaven is a World of Love". Whenever he was preaching on hell he wanted to make God's salvation "real". By the time of his ministry in Stockbridge, however, he gave up his full-blown hell-fire sermons. (McClymond and McDermott 2012, 499).

As far as the format of his sermons to the English, Edwards followed the puritan tradition of "text", "doctrine" and "application" (McClymond and McDermott 2012, 505).

Edwards' first sermon (January 1751) to the Stockbridge Indians was about the Roman God-fearing centurion Cornelius who had some understanding of God but the lack of the knowledge of Jesus Christ before Peter the apostle came to him.

In a typological logic Edwards saw himself in the position of Peter and the Indians as the types of Cornelius. "Now I am come to preach the true Relig. To you & all your Childr. as Peter did to Cornelius & his family that you & your children may be saved" (Sermon on Acts 11:12–13 qtd.in McDermott 2003, 263).

While in Stockbridge Edwards held four services every Sunday: two for the Indians and two for the English (McDermott 2003, 266). In Stockbridge Edwards preached one hundred and eighty seven new sermons and on twenty occasions he preached again his earlier sermons (McDermott 2003, 264). According to Wheeler Edwards "composed very few original sermons for the English in Stockbridge – only about twenty" (Wheeler 2003, 133).

To close this paper on Edwards and the Indians we are going to take one of his sermon. He preached "To the Mohawks at the Treaty, August 16, 1751". His text: 2 Peter 1:19 was about the word of prophecy, a "light that shineth in a dark place".

Unlike his sermons to the English this one is very short and simple. He began by saying

> When God first made man, he had a principle of holiness in his heart. That holiness that was in him was like a light that shone in his heart, so that his mind was full of light. But when man sinned against God, he lost his holiness, and that light that was in his mind was put out (Kimnach et al. 1999, 105).

The language and the imagery of Edwards's sermon is as if someody were preaching to young children. Edwards definitely possessed the charisma of addressing his target audience. He pointed to the process how the world "sank more and more into darkness" and began to worship the

stars and the moons. At this point the Indians could easily identify themselves with the "people".

Edwards called Holy Scripture as God's great pity taken on people sinking into darkness. First he sent them Moses, then the prophets and some "1750 years ago", his Son. And Christ opened Scripture and the light began to grow again. And of course, the English, who arrived on this continent some 140 years before brought this light with them to the people living in darkness.

Edwards criticized the French, i.e. the Catholics who only

> pretend to teach the Indians religion, but they won't teach 'em to read. They won't let them read the Word of God. They are afraid that if they should read the Scripture, they would know that their ways are not agreeable to the Scripture (Kimnach et al. 1999, 105).

Edwards also criticized fellow English and Dutch Protestant missionaries who baptized the Indians and gave them the sacraments before giving instructions. He acknowledged that the English were not better than the Indians but they had the light which they were now passing over to them. To decribe the power of the devil, Edwards evoked the image of being captive in war, familiar to the Indians:

> I have read some of the nations, that when they take children captives in war, they keep 'em well for a while and feed 'em with the best till they are fat, and kill 'em and eat 'em. So the devil does by wicked man (Kimnach et al. 1999, 109).

Edwards invited the Indians to let the light of the Word enter their hearts because this would change their hearts. To illustrate this he used the practical image of the glass and the natural image of the flower. This is again something definitely familiar to the Indians

> There is such a thing as this light's shining into the heart, as it does into the hearts of all good men. And when it does so, it changes their hearts and makes 'em like to Jesus Christ. 'Tis when you hold a glass out in the light of the sun, and the glass will shine with a resemblance of the sun's brightness. Like a sweet and beautiful flower in the spring…A wicked man that hears the Word of God and won't receive it is like a piece of dung in the light of the sun. It sends forth a stink, but reflects no light (Kimnach et al.1999, 109–110).

Edwards' art of persuasion is also evident in the way he appeals to the Indians' children asking the parents whether they wanted their children to

remain in darkness and let them burn eternally in hell where is "heat but not light".

However, the momentary dreadful image of hell is soon replaced by heaven by which Edwards finished his simple but deep and heart-piercing sermon:

> But if you recieve this light into your hearts, you will be prepared to die and fitted to dwell in heaven, which is a world of light. And there you yourselves will shine forth forever as the sun in the kingdom of Jesus Christ (Kimnach et al. 1999, 110).

Edwards, unlike his son, never learned the language of the Indians; he was perhaps too old to do that. However, Edwards knew their minds, their way of thinking, their emotions and the motives that could affect them. This sermon, in my view, reads as a midrash for the Indians on the first two chapters of St Paul's Epistle to the Roman, or, on the beginning of the Gospel of St John. The Indians were most probably sensitive to the images of light and darkness which served for Edwards as vehicles for conveying the theological message of creation-sin-redemption. Appealing to the Indians' children Edwards could stir their emotions. Evoking the practical image of the glass and the natural image of the flower Edwards could make the teaching of Christianity alive in the minds of his Indian listeners. We may call this way of preaching emblematic, a tradition not unknown for the 17th and 18th century divines and believers but unfortunately eclipsing with the advent of rationality. Emblematic and even typological arguing was an important way to make the matters of faith and salvation "real" in Edward' art of preaching both for the English and especially for the Indians.

We have seen that Edwards' encounter with the Indians was the result of a long learning process. The impact of his grandfather Solomon Stoddard and the young missionary David Brainerd must have been instrumental in overcoming his "indigenious Protestant prejudice" in this process. In Stockbridge he found himself fighting with the Williams' family for the interest of teaching the Mohawk and other Iroqouis at the boarding school. As a missionary preacher Edwards approached the Indians with love and care and he did his best to accommodate the message of the Gospel to their way of thinking and feeling. Edwards came to believe that these illiterate Indians were better disposed to salvation than several of his white "Christian" fellowmen.

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