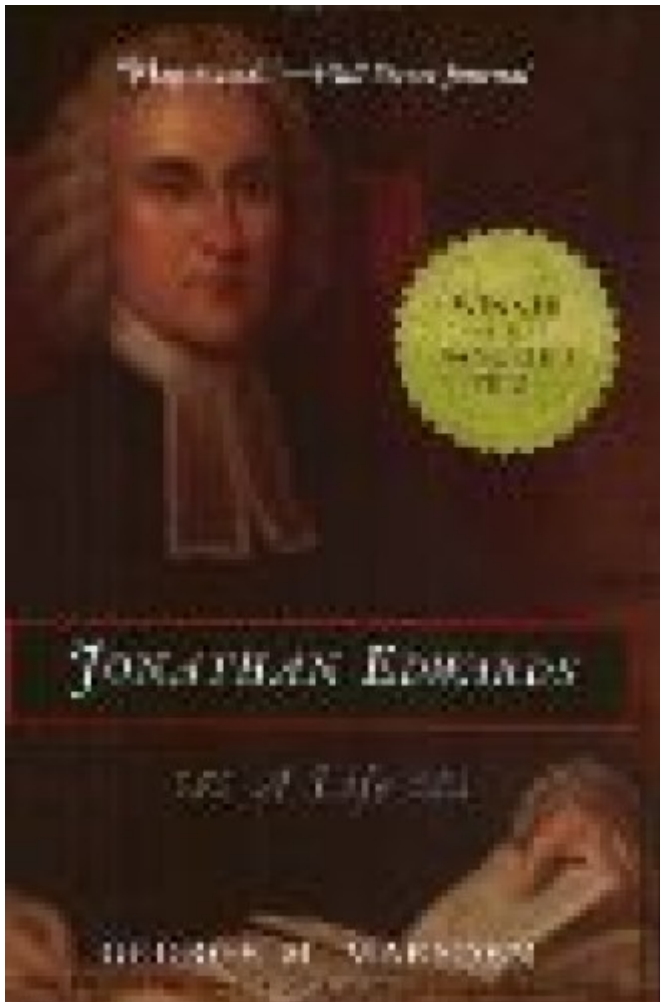


# America's theologian

By [Allen Guelzo](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

## In Review



## Jonathan Edwards: A Life

George M. Marsden  
Yale University Press

Only one portrait of Jonathan Edwards was painted during his lifetime, a rather conventional “likeness” done by the Boston-based painter Joseph Badger. The face is

severe, aloof, unsmiling and suspiciously similar to many of the other faces in Badger's 150 or so portraits from the 1740s and '50s. It turned out to be too severe for many of Edwards's admirers over the years. As a result, later variations on the Badger portrait have appeared, variations that struggle to soften the remoteness of Badger's image and even to curl the unrelenting edges of Edwards's mouth into a smile. One of these, an 1877 lithograph by John Ferguson Weir, adorns the jacket of George Marsden's new Edwards biography.

Thereby hangs not one, but two, tales. Marsden has won a distinguished place in American religious history, especially with his landmark history of American fundamentalism published in 1980. He has also been an effective advocate for evangelicals in higher education. In his 1994 opus, *The Soul of the American University*, Marsden detailed the erosion of religious viewpoints from America's prestigious and elite universities, and argued passionately that secularized universities that pride themselves on diversity have no reason to practice the deliberate exclusion and demonization of religious thinking that openly prevail on their campuses.

At the same time Marsden has energetically urged evangelicals not to wait for an evangelical affirmative-action plan but to seriously pursue vocations in higher education, despite the risks and the discouragements. A product himself of the evangelical Protestant subculture, Marsden was one of a group of talented evangelical historians (including Mark Noll, Harry S. Stout, Nathan Hatch and Joel Carpenter) who has exhorted evangelical students to do good work, to compete for places in the secular academy and to bury the long associations evangelical Protestantism has had with anti-intellectualism. Knit together by personal as well as professional ties, this group helped organize the Conference on Faith and History and the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals. Their creative studies of American religion forced astonished praise from secular critics, and won them teaching posts at Yale (Stout) and Notre Dame (Marsden) and highly influential administrative positions at Notre Dame (Hatch) and the Pew Charitable Trusts (Carpenter). They preached, they practiced and then they preached some more—Noll in his best-selling jeremiad, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, and Marsden in his handbook for aspiring evangelical scholars, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*.

The work of Marsden and his colleagues has always had these two aspects: shaming the secular university for its bigotry, and exhorting other evangelicals to give the

bigotry no reason for flourishing. If there is one figure these historians refer to, almost as a charm to deflect the bigotry and energize the faithful, it is Jonathan Edwards. In Noll's catalog of evangelical underperformance, the shining exception is Edwards; Harry Stout's impressive work *The New England Soul* (on the history of colonial New England preaching genres) lauds Edwards as the "one towering intellectual figure" among American evangelicals.

They have been helped to these claims by the fact that Edwards is the one serious evangelical figure that even secular historians have felt obliged to include in their syllabi—even if it is only to use him as a point of departure before hurrying on to Franklin, Emerson and William James. So when Stout moved to Yale in the 1980s, it surprised no one that his greatest project became the revival of Yale's intention to publish a scholarly edition of Edwards's works, a project which had lain virtually moribund since the death of Edwards's greatest secular remembrancer, Perry Miller, in 1963. With Stout as its new general editor, the project gained new funding and a new momentum. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* now consists of 20 volumes and is the premier scholarly editorial project in American intellectual history.

As Stout took over, Noll became a member of the editorial committee, Marsden and Hatch were incorporated into the conferences the committee organized, and the whole endeavor thrived on funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Edwards scholarship became the primary showcase for the larger evangelical project: to produce intellectual work which would give the lie to the stereotype of evangelicals as mental hillbillies, and to set up a sweeping evangelical paradigm for up-and-coming evangelical scholars to emulate. It is only appropriate, then, that Marsden should have tackled Yale's biography of Edwards, and that the dust jacket should sport not the Badger portrait, but the lithograph which the Yale *Works* has long used as its semiofficial image of Edwards.

Edwards's life brackets the first half of the 18th century, from 1703 to 1758. It was an age of divided minds, home to both Benjamin Franklin and the pietist August Hermann Francke, and Edwards's life is a study in these divisions. Edwards was educated at Yale, which was supposed to be the firewall that Congregational conservatives were building against the apostasies of Harvard. But he presided over the creation of an evangelical New Divinity which turned out to be as lethal to his ancestral Calvinism as were the Boston liberals he opposed. He was (just as the Badger portrait implies) remote, priggish and staggeringly unsympathetic to the inconsistencies and unevenness of normal human behavior; yet his family adored

him, and the ministerial students who came to study in his parsonage were almost sacrilegiously worshipful. He was a Calvinist intellectual, but his most extended philosophical treatise, on *The Freedom of the Will*, offers a model of human volition that sits suspiciously close to the blank materialist determinism of Thomas Hobbes.

Almost none of these complexities and contradictions ruffle the surface of Marsden's chunky new biography. In the first place, the 18th century is clearly not Marsden's scholarly element. He has picked up a smattering of 18th-century interpretive vocabulary—the significance of hierarchy from Gordon Wood, the economic pressures plaguing Northampton from Patricia Tracy, the entangling web of kinship networks from Kenneth Minkema's marvelous dissertation on the Edwards family—but a careful survey of the footnotes does not reveal much reading beyond a fairly small shelf of secondary sources and, of course, the published texts of the Yale Edwards volumes.

That means that a variety of key manuscript sources for Edwards's life (such as the journal Samuel Hopkins kept during his sojourn with the Edwards family in 1741-42, or the Joseph Bellamy letter books at the Presbyterian Historical Society) never make an appearance. Judging just from the notes, the Minkema dissertation is the backbone of this book, with George Claghorn's edition of *Edwards's Letters and Personal Writings* (volume 16 in the Yale series) coming in a close second.

In the introduction Marsden promises "to tell the story of Edwards and his family with relatively few interpretive intrusions." This is a refreshing promise after a decade of postmodern biographies into which authors feel free to insert loopy personal fantasies and political self-congratulation. But those "few intrusions" are enormous, in terms of both substance and style. Substantively, the "largest theme" of this book is how "a religion that claims universal and exclusive truth" can fit "into a pluralistic environment." This is, of course, the theme that dominates *The Soul of the American University* and *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, and it suggests that the biography's focus is not the Edwards of the 18th century but the evangelicals of the 21st, with Edwards as a stand-in and marker for them.

Stylistically, there is a breathlessness in Marsden's estimates of Edwards that hints at trumpets and angel-choirs in the background. Edwards is fascinated "by the eternally momentous question of conversion"; his youthful self-examinations for the signs of grace were "honing a character of steel"; he is "working in similar worlds of discourse" as J. S. Bach; his preaching is "awe-inspiring"; his savage dismissal by his

Northampton congregation in 1750 was caused by “his commitment to principle”; his “universe was similar to that of many of our own moral tales, from *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* to countless lesser entertainments.” (I am trying to imagine Solomon Stoddard as Gandalf or George Whitefield as a kind of Obi-wan Kenobi, but I just can’t.)

A more subtle kind of interpretive intrusion comes when Marsden lapses into traces of modern evangelicalese—the vocabulary of “the last days” or portentous declarations that “the fires of the Holy Spirit were sweeping through the hearts of many of the people, spreading from one to another.” And there is more than a little special evangelical pleading in those intrusions. The uneasiness with which modern readers react to Edwards’s most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of Angry God,” only shows for Marsden “how immense the gulf of assumptions is that separates most modern readers from the world” of the 18th century.

Fair enough, but then what is it about 18th-century people that makes “Sinners” so much more palatable to them than to modern readers? Marsden insists that that’s not the right question. The problem is with us: “Few today, including many who affirm traditional Christian doctrines, have the sympathies to take seriously some of the deepest sensibilities” of those “ordinary 18th-century colonials.” Once again, the focus is on modern incomprehension of evangelical uprightness, not on Edwards.

The paucity of primary research in Marsden’s book guarantees that there will be little in the way of new discoveries here. Most of what Marsden tells us about Edwards’s life follows the same path as Ola Elizabeth Winslow’s *Jonathan Edwards* (1940) and Iain Murray’s *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (1986), or else repackages the research of Minkema and other Edwards scholars. Like Perry Miller (*Jonathan Edwards* [1949]), Marsden would like to imply that Edwards was a victim of the “transition from yeoman society to agrarian capitalism.” But Miller wrote long before early American historians embraced “bottom-up” social history and turned to tax lists and probate inventories as sources for piecing together the world of colonial American. That social history from western Massachusetts in the 1750s shows very little evidence of anything that looks like serious enmeshment in transatlantic capitalist networks. That enmeshment would not begin in western Massachusetts until the 1820s, and Edwards himself thought that one reason for the comparative immunity of the Connecticut River valley from incursions of “Arminianism” was its remoteness from the coastal commercial towns.

It was not capitalism but Pietism which came the closest to enmeshing Edwards in transatlantic networks of discourse. Edwards scholars have long puzzled over why Edwards, in the *Faithful Narrative of 1735* (the first publication which brought him international attention), used as his case studies in spiritual awakening a young woman, Abigail Hutchinson, and a four-year-old girl, Phoebe Bartlett. These were not the models most likely to persuade elite skeptics in a society as committed to hierarchy as Marsden portrays it. It is only when Hutchinson and Bartlett are placed against the template of conversion models in contemporaneous Pietist literature (such as the Silesian children's revival described in W. G. Ward's *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening*) that Edwards's use of Hutchinson and Bartlett suddenly becomes part of a recognizable pattern. Yet Hutchinson and Bartlett get only one passing mention from Marsden, and Pietism disappears after a one-paragraph cameo appearance.

Still, I may be asking for attention to the trees when Marsden is after the forest. And the forest in this case is the idea that true evangelical faith and the highest flights of intellectual power, far from competing, are mutually energizing. Edwards's "theological assessments"—"regardless of whether one shares them"—confer upon him a rare "prescience" of the "direction that Western thought, culture, and religion were heading." His "rigorous Calvinism" equips him with a timeless and totalizing capacity "to critically scrutinize his own era" and use "many of [its] categories and assumptions . . . to criticize its trends." Marsden's Edwards, in other words, contains the same twofold endeavor which has dominated Marsden's imagination from the start—to show how good history can be done by evangelicals, and how the study of evangelicals can yield good history.

It would, I think, be safe to say that Marsden has written a life of Edwards the way Edwards would have liked such a life to be written. Edwards himself wrote such a biography about the tubercular missionary David Brainerd, whose journals Edwards rewrote and published in 1749 as *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*. Edwards presented Brainerd's sacrificial mission to the Indians as the model of true evangelical piety. He made no great effort to provide context or to compile a bibliography of missionary treatises for comparison, and with a show of evenhandedness he acknowledged that Brainerd was not perfect, either in thought or deed. Nevertheless, Brainerd was, according to Edwards, "indeed a remarkable instance of true and eminent Christian piety in heart and practice." When we hear Marsden conclude that "Edwards, despite some evident shortcomings, was a saint

according to the highest Reformed spiritual standards,” we are not far from hearing what Edwards said of Brainerd. But this kind of assessment belongs to the lives-of-the-saints genre, not to history.

Can there be a biography of Edwards which avoids both the urge to make him into a preaching puppet and the tin-eared incredulity of the secular moderns Marsden criticizes? I think so, but this is not it. Like Miller’s *Jonathan Edwards*, which was less a biography and more of a tract for neo-orthodox times, Marsden’s *Edwards* will be remembered less as a biography and more as a period piece from the “evangelical surge” in American academic culture chronicled by Alan Wolfe and John Schmalzbauer. But it may also motivate the up-and-coming evangelicals Marsden has struggled to cultivate and encourage finally to write the *Life* that Edwards so richly deserves.