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Avihu Zakai: Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History

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Introduction

The American Augustine

The history of the development of man's consciousness of history involves a large aspect of the whole evolution of his experience. It is a major part of his attempt to adjust himself to the world in which his life is set.

(Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of History*, 1981)

[The Enlightenment mind] refuses to recognize an absolutely supernatural or an absolutely super-historical sphere. . . . History bears the torch for the Enlightenment; [because it was liberated] from the bonds of scripture dogmatically interpreted and the orthodoxy of the preceding centuries.

(Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 1955)

[Edwards's philosophy of history] makes him stand out against his eighteenth-century Enlightenment background more sharply than his other writings. Herein may lie his most impressive originality.

(Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Theology in America," 1961)

THE PREMISE of this study is that a careful examination of the content and form of Jonathan Edwards's philosophy of history is warranted and in some respects long overdue. Edwards's reputation rests above all on the insights he advanced in his many theological and philosophical writings. In contrast to this extensive corpus of works, on only one occasion did he seriously undertake the writing of a full-scale historical narrative, entitled *A History of the Work of Redemption*—a series of thirty sermons preached before his Northampton congregation during the spring and summer of 1739.¹ This work constituted the fullest and most systematic exposition of his philosophy of salvation history, although he continued to grapple with the issue of divine agency in history in the many *Miscellanies* he wrote from 1739 until his death. Yet, as I shall argue, behind the composition of this narrative stood many years of struggle to define properly the relationship between the order of grace and the order of time,

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, in *HWR*. The best exposition of Edwards's redemption discourse can be found in John F. Wilson's introduction to the above volume. Throughout this study, as the reader will recognize, I owe a great debt to

redemption and history, or between divine agency and the course of history. Viewed in the context of the growth of Edwards's historical consciousness, the narrative of history presented in the 1739 sermons reflects the maturing of his historical thought, which constituted an essential dimension of his life of the mind. Without it much of Edwards's universe of thought is unintelligible and the significance he attached to the historical moment in which he lived would be difficult to grasp.

A knowledge of Edwards's historical thought is necessary to an interpretation of the meaning he gave to his actions, the prominence he accorded revivals within salvation history, and the decisive role he assigned to awakenings in the course of sacred providential history. Here lies Edwards's importance in inaugurating the revival tradition in American history.² Indeed, "no one person was more responsible than Edwards" in shaping the character of the New England revival of 1740–43.³ This applies not only to his actions during this revival, but also, and most important, to the historical interpretation he offered for the eighteenth-century Protestant evangelical awakening in Europe in general and the Great Awakening in particular, envisioning them as a singular moment in sacred, salvation history. It is the argument of this study that an examination of Edwards's philosophy of history, or his distinct redemptive mode of historical thought—the doctrine that the process of history depends exclusively on God's redemptive activity in time and not on human power and autonomy—is necessary not only to the discussion of his sense of time and his vision of history as they appear in the *History of the Work of Redemption*, but also to an understanding of the significance he conferred upon the Great Awakening of 1740–43 within salvation history, and of his zeal in defending it against every adversary.

A distinct mode of historical thought pervaded Edwards's life of the mind, and was chiefly responsible for the content and form of his historical consciousness, or his "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation."⁴ Nowhere is this argument more supported than in the historical

Professor Wilson, who brilliantly positions Edwards's historical thought within the overall context of his philosophical theology.

² For the place of Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption* in the history of religion and culture in America, see Wilson, introduction, in *HWR*, pp. 79–100; and, more recently, Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, & American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). See also the various essays in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allan C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," in *The Shaping of American Religion*, ed. James W. Smith et al., 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), I, p. 246.

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectations': Two Historical Categories," in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 267–88.

justification he offered for the Great Awakening. Behind his defense of that event, which so radically transformed religious life and experience in eighteenth-century New England, stood a well-defined and coherent philosophy of history, an evangelical historiography, which informed his actions and was responsible for the historical meaning he conferred on them. The works he wrote during that awakening, such as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741), *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742), can only be appreciated as deeply animated by a special sense of time and vision of history. Further, Edwards's understanding of his own role in the revival, and the high expectations he developed of it, were strongly informed by a singular historical vision, enabling him to define the Great Awakening, being an integral part of the great eighteenth-century Protestant evangelical awakening, as a decisive moment in sacred providential history, thus rescuing it from dismissal as a provincial event pertaining only to the religious history of colonial New England. On the basis of this historical understanding he was able in his thinking to transform the New England revival and other contemporary revivals in Europe into crucial acts in the drama of the history of salvation and redemption. Since the Great Awakening inaugurated the revival tradition in America, it is all the more important to understand the historical meaning assigned to it by one of its most ardent champions.

The purpose of the present study is to enhance the understanding of Edwards's ideology of history by establishing some contexts within which it may be best studied and analyzed. It will provide a series of contextualizations, an exploration of his intellectual life in a succession of settings through which the *History of the Work of Redemption* may be best studied and understood. The historical narrative will be analyzed first within the slow and gradual growth of Edwards's historical consciousness before he came to compose this work. Such an investigation is necessary in order to follow the development of his ideology of history and of his unique redemptive mode of historical thought. Further, I place Edwards's philosophy of history in the wider context of sacred ecclesiastical history, as a Christian mode of historical thought. Edwards was an heir of Christian theological teleology of history, salvation history, although he transformed it radically in order to proclaim God as the author and Lord of history.

An account of Edwards's philosophy of history demands reference to the rise of new modes of historical thought in the early modern period. It was, in part, in response to the emergence of new historical explanations that Edwards constructed his own narrative and in reaction to them that he formulated his redemptive interpretation of history. The allusion, more specifically, is to the Enlightenment historical narratives that led increas-

ingly to the exclusion of theistic considerations from the realm of history.⁵ Response to this constituted, among other things, an important dimension of Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption*.

Much of Edwards's intellectual development can be characterized, in his own words, as a long struggle "against most of the prevailing errors of the present day," which tended to "the utter subverting of the gospel of Christ."⁶ During his time, he believed, "every evangelical doctrine is run down," and many "bold attempts are made" against "Christ, and the religion he taught."⁷ Many themes in his philosophical and theological enterprise were developed in response to the decline of Christian thought and belief in face of the rise of new modes of thought in early modern history, among them, new scientific explanations of the essential nature of reality, the novel theories of ethics and morals, and the Enlightenment historical narratives. Edwards's universe of thought thus clearly transcended his local setting and the narrow intellectual and religious life of provincial New England. Such was the case, for example, with his response to the new scientific thought and imagination coming out of Europe, traditionally referred to as the scientific revolution,⁸ as is evident in his various scientific and philosophical writings.⁹ In these works on natural philosophy he reacted against certain metaphysical and theological principles that often accompanied the scientific revolution, leading to the growing detachment of God from his creation and contributing to the disenchantment of the world. This was also the case with the response in Edwards's ethical writings¹⁰ to new theories in ethics and morals, such as the British school of moral sense, whose proponents, the philosophers Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), David Hume (1711–76), and others, rejected the traditional view that morality is based on the will of God,

⁵ The development of the various Enlightenment narratives of history is discussed, among others, in Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture: From Clarendon to Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1996); and J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); idem, *Barbarism and Religion: Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶ Edwards, "Letter to the Trustees of the College of New Jersey," 1757, in *LPW*, p. 727.

⁷ Edwards, "To the Reverend Thomas Foxcroft," February 11, 1757, in *LPW*, p. 695.

⁸ In recent years historians have begun to question the very concept of *the* scientific revolution, and even altogether "to undermine one of our most hallowed explanatory frameworks, that of the Scientific Revolution." See B.J.T. Dobbs, "Newton as Final Cause and First Mover," in *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution*, ed. Margaret J. Osler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 25.

⁹ Edwards's various works on natural philosophy appeared in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, in *SPW*.

¹⁰ Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, in *EW*.

and maintained that morality depends on human nature, or that virtue should be considered natural to human beings, and hence that morals come naturally to man.¹¹ The same can be said about Edwards's lifelong battle against deism and Arminianism.¹²

Edwards's philosophy of history should be understood as well in light of his reaction to intellectual developments in the early modern European period. His *History of the Work of Redemption* was composed within a specific context, which witnessed the gradual exclusion of religious thought and belief from history, the physical world, and the realm of morals. More specifically, the formulation of Edwards's redemptive mode of historical thought may be seen, in part, as a response to the Enlightenment narratives of history, which rejected the Christian sense of time and vision of history and thus posed a threat to traditional theological teleology of history. Against the growing de-Christianization of the world of history and the de-divination of the historical process, as evidenced in the various Enlightenment narratives of history, Edwards's quest was for the reenthronement of God as the sole author and Lord of history.

Edwards's reaction to the rise of new modes of historical thought in early modern history may be understood in light of the grave ramifications the Enlightenment project posed for traditional Christian thought and belief, especially in regard to the realm of history. Generally speaking, the Enlightenment "was the revolution of man's autonomous potentialities over against heteronomous powers which were no longer convincing."¹³ This is evident in the new attitude toward history and the growing importance attached to human autonomy and freedom in determining its course. The Enlightenment mind "refuse[d] to recognize an absolutely supernatural or an absolutely super-historical sphere," and attempted to

¹¹ Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 66. See also Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

¹² Edwards's lifelong struggle against deism is described most recently in Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Ava Chamberlain, introduction, in *MISA*, especially pp. 24–34. For Edwards's battle against Arminianism, see Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981 [1949]); and C. C. Goen, introduction, in *GA*, pp. 4–19. A study that views Edwards's theology as an apology for the Christian faith and a response to the Enlightenment is Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). For Edwards and the philosophy of the Enlightenment, see Leon Chai, *Jonathan Edwards and the Limits of Enlightenment Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹³ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 323.

free historical thought “from the bonds of scripture dogmatically interpreted and the orthodoxy of the preceding centuries.”¹⁴ Instead of ordering the structure of history on the dimension of “sacred time,”¹⁵ or the operation of divine providence, Enlightenment historical narratives were based on secular, “historical time.”¹⁶ Hume, Voltaire, Bolingbroke, and Gibbon, to name only a few, attempted to “liberate history writing from its subservience to theology” and to free it from the theological view that conceived “the course of human history as the realization of a divine plan.”¹⁷ Instead of seeing the historical process as contingent on a metaphysical reality beyond and above it, Enlightenment historians attached the highest importance to human beings’ actions and deeds in determining the progress of history. This process of “de-divination of the world” meant that traditional Christian symbols were “no longer revelatory of the immersion of the finite world in the transcendent.”¹⁸ No longer considered as the narrative of a God-given providential plan or as revealing the teleological scheme of time, the historical realm was defined more and more as a space of time intended for the realization of the possibilities and abilities inherent in the nature of human beings. “For the men of the Enlightenment the idea of world-history was particularly congenial. It fitted in with their notion of progress, their view of mankind, advancing steadily from primitive barbarism to reason and virtue and civilization.”¹⁹ In place of the religious vision of history as the drama, or tragedy, of salvation and redemption, which would materialize only *beyond* history, historical thought during the Enlightenment developed the concept of “progress,” or the notion of an immanent human advance based on the belief that utopian visions regarding human freedom and happiness could be fulfilled *within* history. *Historia humana*,²⁰ or the annals of human history, gradually replaced salvation history in the European mind.

For religious thought and practice, such a transformation regarding the historical realm carried profound consequences. “In much the same way that the world became the object of scientific inquiry in the sixteenth and

¹⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon, 1962), p. 199.

¹⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, “Modes of Action and their Past in Tudor and Stuart England,” in *National Consciousness, History and Political Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Orest Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 98–117.

¹⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantic of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 5.

¹⁷ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 372–73.

¹⁸ Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. John H. Hallowell (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975), p. 21.

¹⁹ G. Barraclough, “Universal History” (1962), as quoted in Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 33.

²⁰ Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” p. 10.

seventeenth centuries through a process of desacralisation, so too, religious practices” were “demystified by the imposition of *natural laws*. As the physical world ceased to be a theatre in which the drama of creation was constantly re-directed by divine intervention, human expressions of religious faith came increasingly to be seen as outcomes of natural processes rather than the work of God or of Satan and his legions.”²¹ Once considered the sole source and locus for human life, experience, and expectations, religious thought and belief were increasingly pushed out of the realm of nature and history. The “history of religion since the seventeenth century can be seen as the driving-back of faith from history, from the physical world, and from the realm of morals.” Thus, “religion, withdrawing from its claim to give objective truth about the nature of reality in all its aspects, ends by seeking to stimulate certain sorts of inner feeling in those who care for that sort of thing.”²² Having based their historical narratives on the secular, historical time dimension, in contrast to Christian sacred time, or the time dimension of grace, Enlightenment historians refused to assign divine agency an exclusive role in determining the passing of time. They thus arrived at the de-Christianization of history.

Since Edwards knew of and was familiar with the main arguments of Enlightenment historians, an analysis of the content and form of his ideology of history cannot be based only on the immediate context of his life in Northampton. The best presentation of such a limited approach is that of Perry Miller, who said that the *History of the Work of Redemption* “definitely embodies Edwards’s time and place; it is the history of Northampton writ large. It is a cosmic realization of the communal revival” of 1734–35 in that town.²³ Apart, however, from the problem of finding too clear and easy a causal relationship between text and social context,²⁴ this is indeed a strange assertion from one of the staunchest advocates of intellectual history and the autonomy of the history of ideas,²⁵ who once

²¹ Peter Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 5.

²² Keith Ward, *Religion & Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World’s Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 284.

²³ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 315. The same approach can be found in Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 98–99.

²⁴ Quentin Skinner has warned historians not to jump to the conclusion that it suffices to study a given text by simply examining the social context in which it was composed. See Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 7 (1969): 3–53.

²⁵ On Perry Miller’s overall approach to American history, see Avihu Zakai, “Epiphany at Matadi: Perry Miller’s *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* and the Meaning of American History,” *Reviews in American History* 4 (December 1985): 627–41; and “Perry Miller,” in *The Dictionary of Historians* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 279–81.

claimed “I have difficulty imagining that anyone can be a historian without realizing that history itself is part of the life of the mind.”²⁶ I argue to the contrary that Edwards’s theological and teleological interpretation of universal history transcended his local setting in provincial New England. It ought to be viewed, among other things, in the wider context of his response to the challenge of Enlightenment historical narratives, and his ambition to refute the growing disenchantment of the world.

Edwards owned and read many works by Enlightenment historians,²⁷ among them Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1702), Samuel Pufendorf’s *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe* (1702), Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke’s *Remarks on the History of England* (1731) and *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752), Gilbert Burnet’s *History of his Own Time* (1724–34), John Oldmixions’s *Critical History of England* (1724), Paul de Rapin-Thoyras’s *Histoire d’Angleterre* (1721–31), and David Hume’s *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (1742), which included “Of the Study of History.” In these works Edwards discovered, to his great dismay, that divine agency was no longer considered intrinsic to history. In fact, these writers found religion a great obstacle to the development of human institutions, the advance of civil society, and the fostering of reason and freedom, which became the hallmark of the Enlightenment project. “The ‘Enlightenment narrative’ ” was “both a historiography of state and a historiography of society”;²⁸ its proponents were skeptical of the “chronology of Christian universal history.” Instead, they endeavored “to modify or transform their readers’ sense of national self-awareness through the writing of narrative history.”²⁹

Acquaintance with the varieties of Enlightenment historical narrative enabled Edwards to assess its threat to the Christian theory of history. For example, in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Pierre Bayle, the French philosopher who was also a pioneer of disinterested, critical history, “carries out the ‘Copernican Revolution’ in the realm of historical science.” Instead of assuming that all historical facts are based on the authority of the Bible, and that the validity of the scriptures in turn rests on that of the church, whose authority rests on tradition, Bayle “no longer bases history on some dogmatically given objective content which he finds in the Bible or in the doctrine of the Church.” His influential *Dictionary*

²⁶ Perry Miller, preface, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. ix.

²⁷ See Edwards, “Catalogue of Reading,” typescript on disk, Works of Jonathan Edwards Office, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.

²⁸ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Narratives of Civil Government*, pp. 2–8.

²⁹ O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp. 10, 1.

was not a mere treasure of knowledge but directly challenged traditional religious historical interpretation. “His sharp and unsparing analytical mind freed history once and for all from the bonds of creed and placed it on an independent footing.”³⁰ This is evident, for example, in the entry on “David,” where Bayle declared: “It is perfectly permissible for a private person like myself to judge facts contained in Scripture when they are not expressly qualified by the Holy Ghost.”³¹

Likewise, Edwards owned Samuel Pufendorf’s *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe*, where the German historian and the founder of modern natural law praised the value of universal history, that is, of Europe, for the political education of the ruling elite. He emphasized the need “to understand modern history,” or the history of the modern “nations” of Europe as well as their various forms of government.³² The uses of studying history are thus primarily political and social, and much less theological and religious. The same can be said about David Hume, who in his essay “Of the Study of History” claimed that history’s main use is to reveal the progress of “human society” from “its infancy . . . towards arts and sciences” and to present “all human race, from the beginning of time” in order to improve human “knowledge” and “wisdom.”³³ *Historia humana*, the annals of human institutions, laws, manners, nations, and so on, in contrast to the sacred, became the enterprise of the Enlightenment. Constructed primarily as the narrative of human action, it refused to accept the religious and theological interpretation of history. The course of history was not conceived as dealing primarily with the narrative of God’s action in time, to which the deeds of human beings were at best ancillary and might be irrelevant; rather, historical explication was based more and more on human action and conduct. Thus, Hume wrote that the chief use of “history” is “to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations,” enabling us to “become acquainted with the regular spring of human action and behavior.”³⁴ Likewise, William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester (1698–1779), argued that “the knowledge of human nature” is “the noblest qualifica-

³⁰ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, pp. 207–8.

³¹ Pierre Bayle, “David,” in *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 62–63.

³² Samuel Pufendorf, *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe* (1702), in *Versions of History: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, ed. Donald R. Kelley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 435–38.

³³ David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1882), II, pp. 388–91.

³⁴ David Hume, “History as Guide,” in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 359.

tions for the historian.”³⁵ In contrast, therefore, to sacred history, whose primary task was to exhibit the actions of divine agency in the world, or to reveal the divine plan determining human life and existence and of which world history is simply a product, the Enlightenment narrative emphasized human freedom and autonomy in the shaping of history. It dealt mainly with civil society, irrespective of the theological and religious consequences.

The writing of civil history, of civil government and society, instead of the sacred history of God’s providence and the annals of the church, was the focus of the Enlightenment historical narrative. This can be seen, for example, in *Remarks on the History of England* by Henry St. John, first Viscount Bolingbroke. In this work, published in weekly installments in 1730–31, Bolingbroke deals almost exclusively with human institutions, or “the spirit which created and has constantly preserved or retrieved, the original freedom of the British and Saxon constitutions.”³⁶ Further, in Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia; or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1728), another book Edwards owned,³⁷ the English forerunner of the French *Encyclopédie* made the distinction between “*History*” in general and “*Sacred history*.” The first deals with the “*history of nature*” as well as “the *history of actions* . . . either of a single person, a nation, or several persons and nations,” and the second “lays before us the mysteries and ceremonies of religion, visions or appearances of the Deity, etc. miracles, and other supernatural things, whereof God alone is the author.” Chambers added a third category, “*Civil history*,” which deals with “peoples, states, republics, communities, cities, etc.”³⁸ This division clearly displays the growing erosion in the Christian narrative of history.

The development of civil history is further evident in many works dealing with English history. Edwards owned and read many of them and could find there that the divine agency was no longer considered intrinsic to history. Bishop Gilbert Burnet’s *History of his Own Time* “recorded the triumph, in 1688–9, and precarious survival, during the reign of Anne, of Whig and Protestant ideals.” Edwards possessed also John Oldmixions’s radical Whig *Critical History of England*, which was “centrally preoccupied with the country’s constitution, right and liberties.” The

³⁵ William Warburton, as cited in Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture*, p. 142.

³⁶ Lord Bolingbroke, “Remarks on the History of England,” in *Lord Bolingbroke: Historical Writings*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 177.

³⁷ Edwards, “To Unknown Correspondent,” 1746, in *LPW*, p. 202. See also Edwards, “Unpublished Letter on Assurance and Participation in the Divine Nature,” in *EW*, p. 639.

³⁸ Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia; or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1728), in *Versions of History*, ed. Donald R. Kelley, p. 441.

same can be said about the most popular historical work to appear in England at the time, Paul de Rapin-Thoyras's *Histoire d'Angleterre*; it "provided the Whig with a secular and scholarly account of the origins of the nation's mixed and liberal constitution." Because of the enormous popularity of the work during the first half of the eighteenth century, Rapin's history played an important role "in the political education of the nation," thus helping forge England's "national self-awareness in this period."³⁹

More serious, though, for traditional religious thought and belief were the Enlightenment historians' denunciations of the Christian interpretation of history. Hume argued, for example, that religion "has contributed to render CHRISTENDOM the scene of religious wars and divisions. Religions," and this includes Christianity, "arise in ages totally ignorant and barbarous" and "consist mostly of traditional tales and fictions." Such negative views do not refer only to the past. On the contrary, in "modern times, parties of religion are more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition."⁴⁰ Hume denounced ecclesiastical historians' interpretation of history: "The Monks, who were the only annalists" during the medieval period, "lived remote from public affairs, considered the civil transactions as entirely subordinate to the ecclesiastical, and besides partaking of the ignorance and barbarity . . . were strongly infected with credulity, with the love of wonder, and with propensity to imposture; vices almost inseparable from their profession, and manner of life."⁴¹ These unfavorable characterizations of Christianity and of ecclesiastical historians obviously left no room for accepting the traditional Christian interpretation of history. Instead they emphasized its destructive role in terms of the growth of civil society in Europe and the development of European civilization in general.

Also serious as regards the traditional Christian narrative of history was the threat to the authority of the Bible itself as a historical source, and the attack on its inability to portray adequately the "history" of the "first ages." This was the major assault levied by Bolingbroke on ecclesiastical history in the *Letters on the Study and Use of History*. The "historical part" of the "Old Testament," wrote Bolingbroke, "must be reputed insufficient" to the study of history "by every candid and impartial man" since the Jews had been "slaves to the Egyptians, Assyrians, Medes, and Persians." Not only is the Bible an insufficient and unreliable source, but

³⁹ O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp. 14–18; Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture*, pp. 126–30, 146–50.

⁴⁰ David Hume, "Of Parties in General" (1741), in *David Hume: Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, pp. 62–63.

⁴¹ Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), I, p. 25.

“history has been purposely and systematically falsified in all ages” by church historians. Moreover, “ecclesiastical authority has led the way in this corruption” of history “in all ages.” In the pagan world, for example, how “monstrous were the absurdities that the priesthood imposed on the ignorance and superstition of mankind.” Since “the foundations of Judaism and Christianity” were not built on truth, but on “voluntary and involuntary errors,” it is no wonder that “numberless fables have been invented [by ecclesiastical historians] to raise, to embellish, and to support” faith. Instead of providing historical truths, the Christian interpretation of history has led to the “abuse of history”: “Deliberate, systematic lying has been practised and encouraged from age to age” by church historians, “and among all the pious frauds that have been employed to maintain a reverence and zeal for their religion in the minds of men, this abuse of history has been the principal and most successful.” Sadly, noted Bolingbroke, this “lying spirit has gone from ecclesiastical to other historians.”⁴²

Edwards was fully aware of these trends in European historical thought. Continually acquiring new books from England, and always closely following intellectual developments within the European republic of letters, he was by no means a novice in the thinking of Enlightenment historians. In their works he discovered a growing trend to play down the role of religion in history, and he saw that the de-Christianization of history was leading to its de-divination. In formulating his historical narrative, Edwards sought to show how inextricable religious faith and experience are from history. William James expressed a somewhat similar view, with which Edwards would certainly have concurred, when he said: “Religion, occupying herself with personal destinies and thus in contact with the only absolute realities which we know, must necessarily play an eternal part in human history.”⁴³ To Edwards this meant, among others, that the realm of history cannot be understood without taking account of divine agency and redemptive activity.

One should understand the development of Edwards’s historical thought, and his goal in composing the *History of the Work of Redemption*, as well as its particular content and form, within this broad ideological context. Reacting against Enlightenment historical narratives, he asked: “Shall we prize a history that gives us a clear account of some great earthly prince or mighty warrior, as of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar; or the duke of Marlborough, and shall we not prize the history

⁴² Bolingbroke, “Letters on the Study and Use of History,” in *Lord Bolingbroke: Historical Writings*, ed. Isaac Kramnick, pp. 35–36, 51, 53–55.

⁴³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 503.

that God has given us of the glorious kingdom of his son, Jesus Christ, the prince and savior of the world.”⁴⁴ This belief stood behind Edwards’s historical project, and constituted, among other things, such as biblical and apocalyptic interpretation, the heart of his narrative of history as it appeared in the *History of the Work of Redemption*.

Early in his life Edwards conceived the doctrine of “God’s absolute sovereignty,”⁴⁵ and coined the term God’s “work of redemption,”⁴⁶ and ever afterward he wrestled with the meaning of divine agency in time, redemption, and history. Striving to understand the mystery of divine activity in creation, and attempting to unveil God’s “grand scheme” in history, he sought to reveal the “historical order” by which the Deity executes its plan in history through “the great work and successive dispensations of the infinitely wise God in time.”⁴⁷ During his long search to understand the nature and meaning of divine agency in the order of history, he came to the conclusion that revivals, being “special seasons of mercy”⁴⁸ or grace, constitute a unique dimension of sacred time, or epochs of time, *kairos*, in history. Through the effusion of the Spirit, God orders major and decisive turning points in salvation history in terms of fulfilled or realized time. These constitute the main stages in sacred providential history, and only through these can history, its goal and destiny, be properly understood.

Paul Tillich made a distinction between *chronos*—“quantitative time,” or “clock time, time which is measured”—and *kairos*—“the qualitative time of the occasion, the right time,” such as “the right time for the coming of Christ”—and made special use of it in his philosophy of history.⁴⁹ *Kairos* is a special time or epoch in salvation history in which the eternal judges and transforms the temporal.⁵⁰ Before Tillich, however, Edwards had already proposed this concept and made it the cornerstone of his philosophy of history. Edwards’s historical narrative deals primarily with the “rise and continued progress of the dispensation of grace towards fallen mankind,”⁵¹ or the outpouring of the Spirit of God as “dispensa-

⁴⁴ Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, p. 291.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, in *LPW*, p. 792.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Miscellany* no. 38 (c. 1723), p. 221.

⁴⁷ Edwards, “Letter to the Trustees of the College of New Jersey,” in *LPW*, pp. 727–28.

⁴⁸ Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, pp. 511, 143.

⁴⁹ Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Compare Tillich’s distinction with the more secular approach of Walter Benjamin: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.” See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 261. In Edwards’s case, historical events acquired their meaning and significance from a meta-historical structure.

⁵¹ Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, p. 285.

tions of providence” and, correspondingly, with its immediate historical manifestations in the form of decisive periods, or epochs, of awakenings as they appear in “special seasons of mercy”⁵² throughout history. This was Edwards’s response to the Enlightenment fashioning of new modes of secular, historical thought.

Within this broad context of early modern history I seek to locate, in part, the origins of Edwards’s theology of history. Accordingly, I portray him not so much as an “American theologian,” or as “America’s Theologian,”⁵³ a trend dominant in modern historiography, but as an important early modern theologian and philosopher who took upon himself the task of responding to the growing disenchantment of the historical world. The present study, then, takes into account not only the narrow setting of Edwards’s life in provincial New England, but also examines his historical thought in the wider intellectual context of his defense of the Christian ideology of history in a world approaching the gradual separation of God and his creation and in an age becoming increasingly hostile to Christ and his church.

Seen in this context, in the line of Christian theologians I can find no better comparison with Edwards’s historical endeavor than St. Augustine.⁵⁴ A case can be made that Edwards’s ideology resembles that of Eusebius Pamphili (c. 260–c. 340), the father of ecclesiastical history, especially as regards the use of divine dispensation to describe divine activity in the realm of history. Yet the profound difference in the historical context within which each work was composed obviously influenced the nature of their historical narrative and their interpretation of salvation history, and thus makes such a comparison untenable.⁵⁵ Eusebius’s history

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 511, 143.

⁵³ Robert W. Jenson, *America’s Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁵⁴ This comparison, although less explicitly made, was suggested by H. Richard Niebuhr in the preface to his classic *The Kingdom of God in America*, where he declared his hope that his own study of the kingdom of God in America would serve as “a stepping stone” to the work of some “American Augustine who will write a *City of God* that will trace the story of the eternal city in its relation to modern civilization instead of to ancient Rome, or of Jonathan Edwards *redivivus* who will bring down to our own time the *History of the Work of Redemption*.” See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959 [1937]), p. xvi. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” *Christian Century* (May 1, 1996), pp. 480–85. This address was originally delivered in Northampton, Mass., on March 9, 1958, to commemorate the bicentennial of the death of Jonathan Edwards.

⁵⁵ Eusebius’s aim in his *History of the Church (Ecclesiastical History)* was, in part, to show “the dispensation” of Christ throughout history. See Eusebius, *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (New York: Dorset, 1965), pp. 32–33. Eusebius wrote his *History* at the time of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and the rise of the church to prominence in the world, and thus he displays an optimistic belief that the triumph of Chris-

reflects the triumph of Christianity after the conversion of Constantine, while Augustine and Edwards wrote their apologetics in a world exhibiting antagonism toward Christian faith and belief. Both rejected Eusebius's imperial theology of history—the belief that the emperor, or a godly prince, is providentially ordained to protect the church and ensure its triumph in the world—and tried to explain the fate of God's people within a world marked by hostility to Christ and his church.

Yet, the comparison between the Doctor of the Church and the New England theologian does not stop here, because for both the composition of their historical work constituted only part of their overall theological and philosophical enterprise. Thus, like Augustine, who assumed the mission of defending traditional Christian belief during the early Christian period, Edwards, as I argue throughout this study, took upon himself the mission of protecting religious faith in a world becoming more and more alienated from God and his word. Augustine's *City of God* and Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption*, then, may be regarded as an integral part of their apology for the Christian church. Augustine's and Edwards's life of the mind is characterized by a lifelong struggle against all sorts of opposition within the church itself, and a striving to expose the poverty of its enemies without. After his conversion, Augustine began to write against, among others, the Manichaens, Donatists, and Pelagians. Later, after the fall of Rome, he composed the *City of God* to defend Christianity from the serious charge that this faith was responsible for the terrible disaster that had befallen the empire.⁵⁶ Likewise, Edwards fought not only against "Socinianism and Arianism and Quakerism and Arminianism,"⁵⁷ but devotedly attempted to counter the challenges that Christian life was experiencing with the flourishing of new theories in ethics, science, and history.

Further, although both lived on the periphery of their respective empires and far from the foci of contemporary learning and culture, Augustine in Hippo Regius in North Africa and Edwards in Northampton, New England, each found it necessary to react specifically to the threats against Christianity that arose in the centers of their worlds. Augustine wrote the

tianity will be realized in the process of history, and that the progress of history bears witness to the gradual yet inevitable triumph of the church throughout the world. Augustine's and Edwards's historical contexts were very different. On the difference between Eusebius's and Augustine's historical contexts, see Avihu Zakai and Anya Mali, "Time, History and Eschatology: Ecclesiastical History from Eusebius to Augustine," *Journal of Religious History* 17 (December 1993): 393–417.

⁵⁶ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁵⁷ Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, p. 467.

City of God in response to the fall of Rome—a city that had been free from fear of attack for over 800 years—brought about by Alaric and the Goths in 410. Similarly, but less dramatically, Edwards wrote his major historical work, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, after the collapse of the “little revival” of 1734–35 in Northampton, aiming to prove, in part, against the Enlightenment notion of *historia humana*, that history is a space of sacred time designated from eternity by God for the execution of his work of redemption. In response to attempts to liberate history from its traditional subservience to theology, Edwards claimed that the entire historical process was inextricable from God’s redemptive activity and vice versa. Thus, as Augustine’s thought transcends his life in North Africa, so with Edwards; his universe of thought as well as the main thrust of his philosophical and ideological endeavor transcended his life in British colonial America. Far from the centers of learning in England, he attempted to rescue the foundations of the Christian theological teleology of history from the menace of the Enlightenment concept of secular time. His aim was to exalt “the history” of God’s “glorious kingdom” in the world.⁵⁸ Both Augustine’s and Edwards’s goals were to preserve Christian faith and belief in a hostile world.

I begin the discussion of the formation of Edwards’s historical philosophy with a brief overview of his intellectual development. This may help to place his narrative of history within the general context of his universe of thought and within the main philosophical and theological issues he treated during his lifetime. Chapter 1 therefore offers a short intellectual biography in order to establish the background for the formation of Edwards’s redemptive mode of historical thought. Simply put, Edwards’s life of the mind can be described as evolving along three main stages: during the 1720s, following his conversion, he formulated his natural philosophy in order to provide an alternative to the dominant mechanical philosophy view of the essential nature of reality; during the 1730s, he developed the premises of his philosophy of salvation history, whose full and systematic exposition appeared in the *History of the Work of Redemption*; finally, during the 1750s, after his expulsion from his parish and living in exile at Stockbridge, Edwards immersed himself in the task of responding to the Enlightenment debate on moral philosophy. In these three spheres, he tried to explain the meaning of divine agency in time and the Deity’s redemptive work for fallen humanity. Thus, in discussing Edwards’s philosophy of history, I found it necessary to deal as well with his explorations in the realms of science and ethics, since these issues were closely intertwined in his mind with the dimension of history.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

The account of Edwards's life of the mind, as I write in chapter 2, must start at the moment of his conversion, a profound spiritual experience that determined the agenda for much of his future theological and philosophical work. Many features of his thought, in both form and content, can be traced directly to this signal moment when the whole of his religious identity was transformed. Ultimately, this spiritual experience led Edwards to reconstruct, among other things, the external world of nature and the realm of history, the "order of nature" and the "order of time,"⁵⁹ as well as the realm of ethics and morals, in accordance with the theological convictions he acquired during his conversion. In all these spheres he sought to reenchant the world in order to manifest God's unshaken absolute sovereignty in creation.

The genesis of Edwards's theology of nature, his interpretation of the essential nature of reality, as I argue in chapter 3, was founded upon his conversion experience. His long subsequent engagement with fundamental issues of natural philosophy, as in the long series of scientific and philosophical writings⁶⁰ composed during the early 1720s, was embarked upon in order to redefine the phenomena of nature in light of this experience. Edwards's theology of nature therefore constituted a radical departure from mechanical philosophy—the doctrine that all natural phenomena can be explained in terms of the mechanics of matter and motion alone—which became the predominant mode of thought during the scientific revolution. One of his main goals in interpreting the world of nature was to ascertain God's relation to his creation, to define the relationship between the order of grace and the order of nature, and to get a clear "knowledge of the manner of God's exerting himself" with respect "of his operations concerning Matter and Bodies."⁶¹ For he firmly believed, following his conversion, that "the corporal world is to no advantage but to the spiritual," hence "to find out the reasons of things in natural philosophy is only to find out the proportion of God's acting."⁶²

Constructing the created order upon such theological and teleological premises illustrates the dialectic in Edwards's thought between God's utter transcendence and divine immanence, and the tension between his simultaneous distance from and immediate presence in the world. The created order's ontological status is seen as inferior and subordinate to the divine reality beyond and above it. This notion lay behind Edwards's assertion that God is intimately present in creation, a contention neces-

⁵⁹ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 1754, in *FW*, p. 177; *Miscellany* no. 704 (c. 1736), in *MISA*, p. 314.

⁶⁰ Edwards's work on natural philosophy appears in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, in *SPW*.

⁶¹ Edwards, *Diary*, February 12, 1725, in *LPW*, p. 787.

⁶² Edwards, *The Mind*, 34 (1724), in *SPW*, pp. 353–55.

sary to his claim that the divine agency is not alienated from history and hence that redemptive activity is inextricable from the historical process. The formation of Edwards's philosophy of history, especially with regard to his unique mode of historical thought—the doctrine that the process of history depends exclusively on God's redemptive activity in time, as appears in the close connection between the effusion of the Spirit and its manifestation in the form of revival—is thus inextricable from his construction of the world of nature.

One of Edwards's main goals in constructing his historical narrative, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, was to combat the growing separation between the order of grace and the order of time, redemption and history. In chapter 4, I discuss the ideological context of Edwards's historical thought in light of the threat faced by the Christian theological teleology of history in the early modern period, with the emergence of a secular conception of history and the modern "legitimacy" of historical time.⁶³ This is followed by an analysis of Edwards's philosophy of salvation history, which locates the formation of his redemptive mode of historical thought within the larger context of Christian ecclesiastical history.

What is most remarkable about Edwards's ideology of history, however, is his radical departure from the traditional ecclesiastical history, which constituted the dominant mode of historical thought from the rise of Christianity during the fourth century until "the secularization of theological teleology of history" announced by the Enlightenment of the eighteenth.⁶⁴ This mode of thought regards the Christian church as the locus of history, and thus deals chiefly with the events affecting this body in the world. This is how, for example, Eusebius, the father of church history, defined sacred, providential history. Edwards, however, attempted to write a history as it lies in the mind of omniscient God, a history based on God's redemptive activity in the form of revivals and awakenings. Eusebius's primary concern was to describe "the many important events recorded in the story of the Church," as well as the many vicissitudes this body endured.⁶⁵ Edwards's narrative deals primarily with the content and form of divine activity, the power of the Spirit, and its historical manifestations in the form of conversion and revival. Eusebius wrote his history from the point of view of the church's affairs in the world. Edwards wrote his from the perspective of God and his redemptive activity. Hence, the first dwelt at length upon the persecutions and sufferings of God's people

⁶³ The legitimacy of historical time is discussed in Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

⁶⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957), p. 65.

⁶⁵ Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, p. 31.

in the world, while the later emphasized almost exclusively the rise and decline of revivals and awakenings throughout history. In contrast to Eusebius, therefore, Edwards's history is not ecclesiastical history per se. It is a history of God's work of redemption.

Similarly, Edwards's narrative of salvation history differs from Augustine's *City of God*. While Augustine saw the course of history as predominantly characterized by a perpetual and uncompromising struggle between the earthly city and the City of God, the world and the church, Edwards does not base his view upon such a dichotomy. Given his central premise of the universal character of God's redemptive activity, his narrative of history deals with the universal power of the Spirit as evidenced in revivals and awakenings. Augustine distinguished between redemption and history—divine providence is concerned with salvation, not with history⁶⁶—while to Edwards they are inextricable—there is no history without redemption and no redemption without history.

Edwards's historical narrative also differs from the Protestant and Puritan apocalyptic tradition in England, which developed during the sixteenth century around the doctrine that the struggle against the Church of Rome constituted the hallmark of salvation history. Since Edwards's historical thought was written from the point of view of God's mind and is based on the universal character of redemptive activity, he could not accept that divine agency might be limited to any particular national or geographical center. Hence his strong belief that the aim of divine dispensation during the Great Awakening was to reveal the "day of God's mighty power and glorious grace to *the world of mankind*" (emphasis added).⁶⁷ Edwards's narrative therefore differed, for example, from John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, which represented the whole span of English history as based upon the Church of Rome's persecution of the true church, the Church of England. Edwards, in other words, does not deal primarily with the persecution and suffering of God's martyrs, early Christian or others.

Finally, Edwards's historical vision is very different from earlier New England Puritan narratives, which may explain the transformation he caused in the concept of the Puritan "errand into the wilderness" in America.⁶⁸ In contrast to his forerunners, who sought to explain the mean-

⁶⁶ Markus, *Saeculum*, pp. 20–21; P. Brown, "Saint Augustine," in *Trends in Medieval Political Thought*, ed. B. Smalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 11; Zakai and Mali, "Time, History and Eschatology," pp. 393–417.

⁶⁷ Edwards, "To the Rev. George Whitefield," February 12, 1739–40, in *LPW*, p. 80.

⁶⁸ For an exposition of the Puritan "errand," see Miller, "Errand Into the Wilderness," in *Errand Into the Wilderness*, pp. 1–15; and Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

ing of their migration to America by propounding an unbridgeable gulf between the Old World and the New, thus cutting the history of New England off from England, Edwards's history is not based on such eschatological expectations and apocalyptic visions. He did not believe the millennium would take place in New England, but rather "prophesied that the millennium would be global; hence" the attempt to ascribe to his thought "every form of tribalist nationalism is inherently misconceived."⁶⁹ Instead of refurbishing his predecessors' perception of New England's particularistic role in salvation history, Edwards described its fate as inseparable from that of the Old World. The power of the Spirit knows no boundaries, and God's redemptive activity cannot be limited to a specific geographical space. Hence he consistently examined the New England revival of 1740–43 in light of the general context of the "outpouring of the Spirit of God" in "Germany"⁷⁰ and "the hopeful state of reviving religion in England."⁷¹ He understood the Great Awakening as inseparable from the revivals characterizing the Protestant evangelical movement in early-eighteenth-century Europe, such as the "remarkable reviving of religion" in "Saxony,"⁷² or God's "glorious work" in the revival in Kilsyth, Scotland (1740).⁷³ Defined as the work of the Spirit, the history of revival becomes a universal history.

For many years Edwards endeavored to develop a coherent philosophy of history that would enable him to establish the proper relationship between divine agency and the process of history. In chapter 5, I offer an analysis of the formation of Edwards's historical thought, and how he developed his views in accordance with the changing historical and ideological context in which he found himself, starting with his early adoption in 1723 of the term God's "work of redemption,"⁷⁴ and following the relationship he found between redemption and history until the composition of the *History of the Work of Redemption* in 1739. In these earlier formulations of his theology of history, he strove to define "God's end in making and governing the world,"⁷⁵ to decipher God's "great design" in the order of time, and to understand the Deity's ultimate aim in the "affairs of redemption."⁷⁶ He spent many years searching for a feasible

⁶⁹ Gerald R. McDermott, *One Holy & Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 6, 50–63.

⁷⁰ Edwards, *Much in Deeds of Charity*, 1741, in *SJE*, p. 210.

⁷¹ Edwards, "To Sec. Josiah Willard," June 1, 1740, in *LPW*, p. 83.

⁷² Edwards, *Much in Deeds of Charity*, p. 210; *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, 1742, in *GA*, p. 528.

⁷³ Edwards, "To the Rev. James Rose," May 12, 1743, in *LPW*, p. 108.

⁷⁴ Edwards, *Miscellany* no. 38 (c. 1723), p. 221.

⁷⁵ Edwards, *Miscellany* no. 547 (c. 1731), in *MISA*, pp. 93–94.

⁷⁶ Edwards, "To the Trustees of the College of New Jersey," p. 728; Edwards, *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption*, July 8, 1731, in *SJE*, p. 78.

historical phenomenon on the basis of which he could assert God's redemptive activity, and show the power of the "wheels of providence,"⁷⁷ or "the chariots of his salvation,"⁷⁸ in history, looking for the most appropriate agent by which to demonstrate the "design that God is pursuing, and [the] scheme that he is Carrying on, in the various changes and revolutions that from age to age happen in the world."⁷⁹

Edwards toiled throughout the 1730s to define the meaning of God's work of redemption, an effort that resulted in his laying down the main premises of his philosophy of salvation history. In 1736, he came to the conclusion that the work of redemption constituted the "great end and drift of all God's works."⁸⁰ This led to his attempt to explain the work of redemption as part of the fabric of the entire creation, and to claim that it constituted the essential dynamism behind the teleology of sacred order inherent in the structure of the universe: "The work of redemption may be looked upon as the great end and drift of all Gods works & dispensations from the beginning & even the end of the work of creation it self."⁸¹ The affairs of redemption, he came to think, dealt with the cause and destiny, nature and meaning, of creation.

The fullest and most systematic exposition of this philosophy of salvation history is contained in the thirty sermons on the *History of the Work of Redemption*. As I argue in chapter 6, the construction of the historical narrative in these sermons may be seen, in part, in the larger context of the early Enlightenment. Instead of conceiving history as the direct result of human action, and as a manifestation of immanent human progress, as Enlightenment historians believed, Edwards constructed it from the perspective of God and the manifestations of his redemptive activity in creation. In such a theological and teleological context, history is designed by divine providence as a special dimension of time meant solely for the accomplishment of the plan of redemption, and therefore it should be understood exclusively from the perspective of its maker and author. History, then, is a sacred space of time destined from eternity for God's self-glorification—the display of the Deity's excellence in creation—as evidenced in his work of redemption; hence human beings' existence as well as their history is totally dependent on God.

To show that the course of history is inextricable from God's work of redemption, and hence that the fate of human beings cannot be separated from divine action in time, Edwards proposed that the effusion of the

⁷⁷ Edwards, *Notes on Scriptures*, 389 (1739), in *NOS*, p. 373.

⁷⁸ Edwards, "To the Rev. Joseph Bellamy," January 21, 1741–12, in *LPW*, p. 99.

⁷⁹ Edwards, *Miscellany* no. 547 (c. 1731), p. 93.

⁸⁰ Edwards, *Miscellany* no. 702 (c. 1736), p. 284.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Spirit of God as manifested in the form of revivals and awakenings was the ultimate mark of the divine agency in history. Throughout history God's work of redemption determines the condition of human life, as is manifested in a long series of outpourings of the Spirit, and their immediate effects in revivals and awakenings. "God advances his work of redemption" most of all "through successive effusions of his Spirit."⁸² Hence, the *History of the Work of Redemption* deals primarily with the "rise and continued progress of the dispensation of grace towards fallen mankind";⁸³ it is based on the effusion of the Spirit in the form of "dispensations of providence" as manifested in periods of revivals, or "special seasons of mercy."⁸⁴ In sum, "from the fall of man to this day wherein we live the Work of Redemption in its effects has mainly been carried on by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit of God . . . [and] the way in which the greatest things have been done toward carrying on this work has always been by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit at special seasons of mercy."⁸⁵ History is the "theater" of God, because his transcendent ends determine the drama of human history upon earth. Yet history is not merely the "theater of God's judgments," for God continuously and progressively exhibits in history, through his word and work, the divine plan of redemption for fallen humanity.

The premises of such a philosophy of history, as I argue in chapter 7, constituted the main source of Edwards's apocalyptic and eschatological interpretation of the Great Awakening in 1740–43 and of his defense of this New England revival. Basing himself on his redemptive mode of historical thought, he plainly saw the magnitude and significance of this event in the overall progress of salvation history, becoming its most ardent champion in New England and the British world as a whole. If Edwards made himself the leader of that moment of *kairos* which inaugurated the revival tradition in America, not the least reason for this was his attributing to it a vital role within providential history. The revival demanded its own historian, a person who could expound its meaning in the broadest sense and provide it with the fullest historical and theological justification. This figure was Edwards. His historical interpretation of the revival placed it in the wider context of salvation history, thus infusing this specific New England historical moment with a glorious meaning in sacred history. By showing the continuity between this provincial event and similar awakenings in the Old World, Edwards made the Great Awakening an inseparable part of the general, universal history of God's work of redemption.

⁸² Stephen Stein, introduction, in *AW*, p. 22.

⁸³ Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, p. 285.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 511, 143.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Without a knowledge of Edwards's historical thought, some of his most important works pertaining to the Great Awakening, among them *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*, might remain obscure. In these writings he developed his singular apocalypse and eschatology of the Great Awakening, deeming revival the culmination of salvation history. Moreover, the Great Awakening was not to be judged as a mere provincial event leading only to the conversion of some fallen American colonists. On the contrary, together with other revivals taking place in the Protestant world, such as in Scotland and Germany, it illuminated the general scheme of God's historical work of redemption. On the basis of this theological teleology of history, Edwards interpreted the New England revival as an integral part of the general Protestant evangelical awakening in the early eighteenth century, claiming it heralded "the commencement of that last and greatest outpouring of the Spirit of God, that is to be in the latter ages of the world."⁸⁶ Believing the power of the Spirit is universal and not related to any particularistic center in history, he saw in the Great Awakening a proof of that "glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the *world of mankind*" (emphasis added).⁸⁷ From the Deity's point of view, which it was Edwards's aim to expound, history is a grand theater in which God reveals his redemptive plan, and revivals, such as the Great Awakening, illustrate the historical necessity, or indeed inevitability, of the progress of God's historical scheme of redemption.

Edwards's main achievement in the field of historical thought was the development of a singular evangelical historiography according to which revivals and awakenings constitute the heart and core of the historical process. This philosophy of salvation exercised an enormous influence in New England and America in general. The publication of Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption* in the 1770s "helped to fuel the transference of religious convictions into the political realm," a transference that was noticeable during the American Revolution and later crucial to the "revival of interest in eschatology" and the millennium "that occurred in the 1790s."⁸⁸ Later this book went through a "process of canonization during the Second Great Awakening, 1800–30, and added to [Edwards's] stature as the preeminent authority on revivalism."⁸⁹ Further, as H. Rich-

⁸⁶ Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, in *GA*, p. 230.

⁸⁷ Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, p. 353.

⁸⁸ Wilson, introduction, in *HWR*, pp. 92–93. See also Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Donald Weber, *Rhetoric and History in Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁸⁹ Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition & American Culture*, pp. 47–49.

ard Niebuhr held, Edwards's philosophy of salvation history influenced nineteenth-century evangelists' understanding of "the coming of the kingdom," leading them to believe that "the divine sovereignty was the fruition not only of divine goodness but of human badness in conflict with that unconquerable goodness."⁹⁰ Edwards's theology of history was thus installed at the center of the story of the predominant Protestant culture of America.

Since the issue of divine agency in time concerns not only history but ethics and morals as well, a realm where the Deity constantly advances the work of redemption in terms of the establishment of true virtue, in chapter 8 I analyze Edwards's moral thought in the wider context of his reaction to the Enlightenment project in ethics, and the debate on moral philosophy, as can be seen in his *Freedom of the Will* (1754), *The Nature of True Virtue* (1755), and *Original Sin* (1758). He conducted this enterprise throughout the 1750s, in the final decade of his life, while living in isolation at Stockbridge. Taken as a whole, these works represent Edwards's aim to demonstrate "God's Moral Government of the world,"⁹¹ and to show that the Deity is the sole source of ethics and morals; "nothing is of the nature of true virtue . . . in which God is not the first & the last."⁹² Accordingly, he denounced "that grand objection, in which the modern writers have so much gloried, and so long triumphed, with so great a degree of insult towards the most excellent divines and, in effect, against the gospel of Jesus Christ, viz. that the Calvinistic notions of God's moral government are contrary to the common sense of mankind."⁹³ In his ethical writings, more specifically, Edwards rejected "that notion of virtue maintained by My Lord Shaftesbury, [Francis] Hutcheson, and [George] Turnbull; which seems to be most in vogue at this day," and according to which "all mankind are naturally disposed to virtue, and are without any native depravity."⁹⁴

Finally, in the epilogue I try briefly to assess Edwards's contribution to Protestant culture in America, arguing that his reaction to scientific, historical, and moral thought in early modern history contributed much to the creation of a distinct Protestant culture in America with a lasting influence on American history. In terms of the formation of American identity, Edwards's thought shows that the development of an American culture during the eighteenth century did not depend on a simple and linear transference of ideas from the core culture in Britain, nor on an

⁹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. 138.

⁹¹ Edwards, *Miscellany* no. 864 (c. 1740).

⁹² Edwards, *Miscellany* no. 1208.

⁹³ Edwards, "To The Reverend John Erskine," July 7, 1752, in *LPW*, p. 491.

⁹⁴ Edwards, "To the Reverend Thomas Foxcroft," February 11, 1757, in *LPW*, p. 696.

easy accommodation of them in America. Rather, in some matters it was the rejection of certain well-established European intellectual traditions in the early modern period that helped the formation of a well-defined Protestant cultural space in America.

Examination of Edwards's life of the mind in this context of the philosophical and theological controversies taking place in early modern history, as well as of his contribution to the creation of a distinct Protestant culture in America, may suggest that the comparison between him and Augustine is not too far-fetched. The wide range of his works and the varieties of themes he dealt with, as well as the solutions he offered for Christian life and thought in his time, justify, I would argue, the conferring upon him of the title of the "American Augustine." The similarities between the Doctor of the Church and the New England theologian are revealing in terms of the depth of their religious experience and the wide range of controversies they engaged in. Both Augustine and Edwards underwent a profound conversion experience, which radically transformed their lives and inscribed in their souls a profound experience of God; this event established their sense of God and launched them on a journey to defend the Christian church from its adversaries within and without. One of the many justifications for studying Augustine, according to Gerald Bonner, lies "in the depth of his experience of God, and in his extraordinary flair of communicating that experience to others. This is what sets Augustine apart from the other Fathers of the Church."⁹⁵ The same can be said about Edwards. It was the vision of God's absolute sovereignty in the order of creation—"God's absolute sovereignty and justice," he wrote, "is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes"⁹⁶—that he tried to make known to the world around him throughout his life and writings. The experience of conversion thus transformed Augustine's and Edwards's lives into a struggle against the many errors of their respective times.

Moreover, because they both lived in an age where Christian thought and belief were under attack from many directions, both developed a deep sense of Christian exile and pilgrimage in the world. After the sack of Rome in 410, Augustine preached to his fellow Christians in Carthage: "Citizens of Jerusalem, O God's own people, O Body of Christ, O high-born race of foreigners on earth—you do not belong here, you belong

⁹⁵ Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (London: SCM, 1963), pp. 9–10. See also T. Kermit Scott, *Augustine: His Thought in Context* (New York: Paulist, 1995); and Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹⁶ Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, p. 792.

somewhere else.”⁹⁷ And Edwards, preaching to his congregation in Northampton during the 1730s, echoed Augustine almost word for word when he said:

This world is not our abiding place. Our continuance here is but very short. Man’s days on earth, are as a shadow. . . . It was never designed by God that this world should be our home. . . . The future world was designed to be our settled and everlasting abode. There it was intended that we should be fixed; and there alone is a lasting habitation, and a lasting inheritance.⁹⁸

“We are pilgrims and strangers here” on earth, said Edwards in another sermon, “and are principally designed for a future world. We continue in this present state but a short time; but we are to be in that future state to all eternity.”⁹⁹

Yet this sense of exilic displacement and pilgrimage did not lead to alienation from the world, since for both Augustine and Edwards the *saeculum* is a place of trial for God’s people in their long journey to their last abode; hence the sense of exile in the world did not hinder either of them from composing a profound apology for the Christian church. As the Doctor of the Church formulated out of his many controversies an interpretation of Christian belief that exercised a lasting influence on the history of Christianity, so the New England theologian constructed out of his many struggles against various strains of early modern thought an interpretation that had an important influence on Protestant life and culture in America. Both engaged in a grand intellectual effort of constructing a defense of Christian thought and belief. Such an enterprise in the end amounted to a reconstruction of the human condition, which later generations found meaningful for the problems they faced in their own historical moment.

⁹⁷ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 313–14.

⁹⁸ Edwards, *The Christian Pilgrim*, in *Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections*, ed. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: American Book Company, 1935), p. 130.

⁹⁹ Edwards, *Sermon 1*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995 [1834]), II, p. 820.