

NARCISSION: THE ROOT OF ALL HYPOCRISY IN THE THEOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

BRUCE W. DAVIDSON*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays there is a naïve tendency to accept uncritically all accounts of spiritual experience as authentic. Many books capitalize on this and relate their authors' supposed experiences with God. For example, in the best-selling book *Eat, Pray, Love* and the movie based on it, the protagonist encounters God as an entity who simply ratifies her own personal inclinations and pursuit of self-actualization. This god apparently also has no objection to her divorcing her loyal husband as an obstacle to those goals.¹ Such accounts are widely believed and even admired. Probably as a result of the influence of some forms of psychology and the general neo-Romantic *Zeitgeist*, contemporary people are apt to put a lot of faith in religious experiences as forces that can change their characters and behavior.

Likewise, recent developments in the Christian world promote a style of belief that downplays the rational component of faith and urges instead a more experiential approach. Elements of the charismatic/Pentecostal movement, the Spiritual Formation movement, and the Emergent Church reframe Christianity as primarily experience-centered, including the pursuit of altered states of consciousness, voices, and visions from God. However, along with many others in the Puritan tradition before him, Jonathan Edwards was not so easily impressed by spiritual experiences. A traditional believer in radical human depravity, he knew the human heart to be a wellspring of subtle deception and hypocrisy, even among professing Christian believers. Therefore, “the root and cause of things is to be looked into” rather than just the phenomena of experience.² The root of much of it he traced to narcissism.

Essentially, Edwards saw religious hypocrisy as the outgrowth of narcissism. He identified various signs by which one might be able to recognize it in individuals and groups professing religious belief. All of them are telltale signs of self-centeredness. In Edwards's view, true converts manifest marks of love for God that do not spring solely from self-interest. Here I will examine Edwards's fundamental ideas about the nature of human evil as well as the historical reasons for his concern about religious hypocrisy. After this, I will look at some prominent attrib-

* Bruce Davidson is a professor at Hokusei Gakuen University, Nishi 2-chome, 2-3-1 Oh-yachi-Nishi, Atsubetsu-ku, Sapporo, Japan 004-8631 and a board member of the Jonathan Edwards Center Japan.

¹ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4: *The Great Awakening* (ed. C. C. Goen; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 234.

utes of false piety in Edwards's analysis and draw out some implications of Edwards's thought for contemporary people, especially Christian believers.

II. ORIGINS OF EDWARDS'S INTEREST IN HYPOCRISY

Edwards took up the issue of authentic piety versus religious hypocrisy for a number of personal, pastoral, and historical reasons. To begin with, his own process of conversion had been complicated. According to his own report, Edwards had two religious awakenings in childhood in which he had "much self-righteous pleasure" and a "delight to abound in religious duties." However, he confessed that at the same time he retained an antipathy to various ideas in Christianity, such as hell and predestination. After a time, his enthusiasms waned and he abandoned his early religious fervency. However, as an adult he experienced an entirely different kind of religious conversion. This eventually caused him to regard his previous experiences as counterfeit. The later experience made him feel profoundly drawn toward God himself even aside from the question of his personal salvation. Meditating on the verse "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God..." (1 Tim 1:17), Edwards says "there came into my soul...a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before." Edwards related that after this, "I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by him."³ In many ways, all these experiences—the superficial earlier ones and the later more dramatic change—became models for Edwards's later descriptions of hypocrisy and authentic conversion.

As pastor of the church in Northampton, Edwards was involved in a number of religious revivals and their aftermaths. At the beginning, he was very optimistic about the conversions during these revivals, but he gradually moved from a positive to a negative orientation about many of those who claimed conversion. His earlier works about the revivals answer critics and argue strongly for the authenticity of the conversions during them. In his later reflections Edwards came to appreciate the danger of hypocrisy more deeply. As uncontrolled fanaticism began to increase and the lives of a number of converts seemed to remain unchanged, eventually Edwards became skeptical of the reality of the experiences of many of the supposed converts.⁴

³ Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987) 19–35.

⁴ *Ibid.* We can see a clear increase in skepticism in Edwards's published writings about the revivals over time. His first account, *A Surprising Work of God*, first published in 1736, takes an almost entirely optimistic view and contains two detailed, moving conversion stories. The next two works, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*—published in 1741 and 1742, respectively—contain his first attempts to come up with guidelines to judge the authenticity of religious experiences but basically continue in a laudatory vein. However, when we come to *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, published in 1746, we find a much more rigorous and severe treatment of religious experiences detailing the characteristics of hypocrisy. It does not have much of the character of an apology for the revivals, though Edwards continued to view them as the authentic work of the Spirit. More than the earlier works, *Religious Affections* should be considered Edwards's mature, fully-formed analysis of religious experiences.

Chamberlain views Edwards's pastoral concern about hypocrisy as a more significant motivation for his works such as *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* than his desire to defend the revivals from critics.⁵ Furthermore, she notes that in modern discourse, the term "hypocrisy" often means people who blatantly live in a way that contradicts their profession of religious belief, whereas in Edwards's time the term often was applied to subtle instances of religious self-delusion, not openly scandalous inconsistency. Edwards appears to have been influenced by the views of the earlier Puritan Thomas Shepard, who also dealt with religious fanaticism and preached pastoral sermons about distinguishing true and false piety.⁶ The Puritans in general had often taken up the topic of discerning spurious piety.

Another influence on Edwards came from the ideological currents of his time, such as the ethical humanism of philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson seemed to advocate a kind of ethical narcissism, by which we contemplate our own moral virtue with enjoyment: "These moral pleasures ... make us delight in ourselves and relish our very nature. ..." ⁷ However, from Edwards's point of view, Hutcheson's comments just show how "the unregenerate characteristically make themselves their last end, and make their own happiness their chief good, to which they subordinate God," in Stoever's paraphrase.⁸ Over against such humanistic moralists, Edwards maintained that real virtue only existed where non-egotistical love for God reigned supreme.⁹ He made much the same point about genuine spirituality.

III. THE ROOTS OF REAL GODLINESS AND HYPOCRISY

According to Edwards, the human race breaks down into those "that love God or those that are his enemies."¹⁰ "His enemies" include not only those who are openly irreligious or who profess a false religion but also many of those professing to be Christian believers. What distinguishes the truly godly is that they have real love for God, while hypocrites have only love for themselves, which hides under a cover of bogus piety. The devil accused Job of having just that sort of piety.¹¹ Chamberlain describes Edwards's approach to discerning the difference between the two as the "devil-comparison method." That is, the devil can counterfeit almost every characteristic of piety except the sort of love for God that the authentically

⁵ Ava Chamberlain, "Brides of Christ and Signs of Grace" in *Jonathan Edwards's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 3–18.

⁶ William Stoever, "The Godly Will's Discerning: Shepard, Edwards, and the Identification of True Godliness," in *Jonathan Edwards's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 85–99.

⁷ From the "Essay on the Passions," quoted in William Robert Scott, *Francis Hutcheson* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966) 159.

⁸ Stoever, "Godly Will's Discerning" 87.

⁹ Bruce W. Davidson, "The Four Faces of Self-love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *JETS* 51 (2008) 89–91.

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25: *Sermons and Discourses 1743–1758* (ed. Wilson H. Kinnach; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 523–24.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 531.

pious experience.¹² The love that the real believer has is unique in respect to its object: God's holiness. In an unpublished sermon named "True Saints Differ From All the World," Edwards asks his listeners if they are familiar in an experiential way with "that supreme excellency and sweetness there is in holiness."¹³ In that holiness—God's absolute, distinct, unique moral purity—the real believer finds something to delight in and imitate, according to Edwards. This should be a continuing experience and not a transitory one, resulting in a frame of mind akin to that of the Beatitudes—not complacent but thirsting for greater personal sanctity and closeness to God, humble with a sense of one's sinfulness, etc.¹⁴ This attitude is primarily directed toward God himself and not toward oneself or the eyes of others. Only an act of God's sovereign, free grace produces this dramatic change in the heart, not "natural principles, such as self-love, natural fear, natural gratitude, [or] natural admiration of something extraordinary, as the affections of false Christians do."¹⁵

Interestingly, Edwards's account of original sin traces it solely to unfettered self-love turned malignant. No evil principle of action was introduced; self-love by itself was able to do all the work of bringing mankind down. As Gerstner explains, "The most fundamental Edwardsian conception of sin is as self-love without God... this was the root of all evil... . No infusion or transfusion of corruption was necessary... ." ¹⁶ A more modern way of putting it is that all human evil is essentially narcissism. In his words, "the whole of the corruption ... may be resolved into an inordinate self-love."¹⁷ Before the tragedy of original sin, self-love was an entirely wholesome, natural principle, and the love of God enlarged human love to go beyond self and embrace all of creation and ultimately God himself. The fall of humanity removed this all-embracing love for God and his creation. This led in turn to self-love without the controlling effects of universal love centering on God. So in Edwards's diagnosis human depravity is in essence self-love gone berserk, breaking the bounds of restraint as a result of estrangement from God.¹⁸ In its most extreme form, such corrupted self-love "will dispose one to delight in another's misery, because self-love seeks its own comparative happiness ... if there be

¹² Ava Chamberlain, "Jonathan Edwards on the Relation between Hypocrisy and the Religious Life," in *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture* (ed. Peter W. Williams; Edinburgh: Blackwell, 1999) 342.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, "True Saints Differ From All the World" 831. Sermon on John 14:7 (July 1746), accessed August 18, 2011 at the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "The Parable of the Net" 821. Sermon on Matt. 13:47–50 (March 1746), accessed August 18, 2011 at the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards on the Matthean Parables*, vol. 1: *True and False Christians (On the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins)* (ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, Adriaan C. Neele, and Brian McCarthy; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) 147.

¹⁶ John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Powhatan, VA: Berea Publications, 1993) 336.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Blessing of God: Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Michael McMullen; Nashville: B & H, 2003) 333.

¹⁸ Davidson, "Four Faces of Self-love" 94–95.

only self-love that bears rule, it will be contented with nothing short of the throne of God... ”¹⁹

One manifestation of this condition is a kind of love for God arising from self-centeredness. The religious hypocrite loves God only because he perceives that God can enhance his own status or satisfy his own desires, in Edwards’s view:

... everything is as it were paid for beforehand, in God’s highly gratifying their self-love, and their lusts, by making so much of them, and exalting them so highly, as things are in their imagination. ’Tis easy for nature, as corrupt as it is, under a notion of being already some of the highest favorites of heaven, and having a God who does so protect ‘em and favor ‘em in their sins, to love this imaginary God that suits ‘em so well, and to extol him, and submit to him, and to be fierce and zealous for him.²⁰

They assume a stance of utilitarianism about religious belief. God serves chiefly as a platform for displaying and enjoying their own virtue and piety. Their hearts continue substantially unchanged, while their outward behavior may even be worse than it was before, as divine influences produce a contrary effect: “Though the sun, in common illuminations, shines upon the ungodly in a sense, yet ‘tis the sunshines upon a dunghill. It communicates nothing of its brightness and sweet influences to it, but is an occasion of its sending forth the greater stench.”²¹

IV. SIGNS OF RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY

It follows that various concrete and observable signs can reveal this narcissistic orientation to religious belief. To begin with, Edwards considered that a preening, self-centered tendency to refer constantly to oneself was a bad sign, since false faith’s “tendency is to exalt self, and depend on self and deify self.”²² In contrast, “the godly have no room left for boasting: the glory belongs all to the Mediator.”²³ Hypocrites often imagine that God is as impressed by their religious experiences and performances as they are. So their religion tends in the direction of self-righteousness: “All false religion, all the religion of hypocrites, is of that nature and tendency. ’Tis one of the greatest distinctions ... between true religion and all its counterfeits—that way of trusting in our own righteousness.”²⁴ Ironically, at the same time hypocrites have no interest in experiencing the real holiness of Christ, either as something to contemplate with enjoyment or as something to imitate themselves.²⁵

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18: *The Miscellanies* (ed. Ava Chamberlain; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 78.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2: *Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 253.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards* 150.

²² *Ibid.* 169.

²³ *Ibid.* 164.

²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “Self-righteousness” 831. Sermon on Matt. 21:31 (January 1747), accessed August 18, 2011 at the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

²⁵ Edwards, *Blessing of God* 366.

Out of their narcissism a mysticism often arises that eschews any objective, rational referent for faith. While true converts value the truth in a rational way, the Spirit “sanctifying and assisting their reason to search out the meaning of Scripture,” false faith “sets up other things, and finally to bring the Scripture into contempt.”²⁶ Irrational mysticism affords religious narcissists more scope to take center stage in defining the nature of God and faith. They often have experiences they cannot explain in words—“an unaccountable persuasion that their minds are suddenly possessed with that they can give no reason for.”²⁷ Their religious ideology has a certain arbitrariness to it. On the basis of their inclinations, hypocrites tend to fashion for themselves a customized deity that suits them. Ideas unattractive to them, such as divine wrath and absolute sovereignty, might fall victim to a theological reworking.²⁸ An imaginary god more attractive to their prejudices then becomes the object of their worship and affection, “so having formed in their minds such a God as suits them, and thinking God to be such a one as themselves, who favors and agrees with them, they may like him very well.”²⁹ In contrast, authentic believers embrace every attribute of God’s revealed nature, including facets that others find unpalatable. In fact, Edwards did not consider the significantly heterodox even to be candidates for acceptance as genuine believers.

Throughout his pastoral career, Edwards insisted on the necessity of heartfelt experience as a mark of genuine faith. However, he was equally insistent that this experience be rational, biblical, and sober. As Smith observes, Edwards believed “affections can and must be subject to critical judgment.”³⁰ Smith also warns that “Edwards’s position will never be understood correctly by anyone who comes to it with some sort of head/heart dualism.”³¹ In many ways, Edwards can be considered a preeminent example of a Christian critical thinker.³² He traced irrationality to human depravity, so a concept of mysticism that puts it beyond rational critique was alien to his thought.³³ The conventional modern mindset severing the logical mind from the emotions, including religious experiences, is not to be found in Edwards’s outlook. In fact, one of the signs of hypocrisy on which he puts his finger is this very false dichotomy of head and heart: “True Christians only receive a deep, real, living conviction of the truth and excellency of divine things. A false Christian may have that [which] may be very affecting and moving, but it is not attended with a real conviction of soul.”³⁴ According to him, hypocrites often embrace and ex-

²⁶ Edwards, *Works* 25:309-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 304.

²⁸ Davidson, “Four Faces of Self-love” 96.

²⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (ed. Edward Hickman; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1834) 920.

³⁰ Edwards, *Works* 2:48.

³¹ John E. Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 31.

³² Bruce W. Davidson, “Does Religious Faith Mean Uncritical Thinking? Exploration of a False Dilemma,” *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 16/1 (1996) 58–60.

³³ Bruce W. Davidson, “Reasonable Damnation: How Jonathan Edwards Argued For the Rationality of Hell,” *JETS* 38 (1995) 55–56.

³⁴ Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards* 152.

plot the false dilemma of choosing religious feelings over rationality. In Edwards's soteriology, authentic conversion involves illumination of the mind and understanding by the Holy Spirit to perceive the glory and reality of divine truth. When that rational understanding is evidently absent, the authenticity of conversion also comes into question. Intense emotions do not necessarily manifest real belief in supernatural realities: "A man may be greatly affected in reading of a romance, that he at the same time knows is nothing but a fable."³⁵

In practical terms, real believers submit themselves to the truth of written divine revelation, while those with spurious faith take the opposite approach. With the "inner light" of the Quakers specifically in mind, Edwards commented that "we see it to be common in enthusiasts, that they depreciate this written rule, and set up the light within or some other rule above it."³⁶ So a devaluation of Scripture in comparison to mystical experience is a clear sign of hypocrisy to Edwards. In contrast, genuine believers come to value and love the truths of the gospel, along with having "high and exalting thoughts of the Divine Being."³⁷ Moreover, the necessity of truth is not at all superseded by love in Edwards's outlook. He recognizes that love, either for God or for fellow religionists, does not by itself indicate authentic faith. The mutual affection between co-religionists may arise from nothing more than the camaraderie found among a "company of pirates," people bound together in opposition to the world outside.³⁸ Love becomes a meaningful sign of authenticity only when the condition of adherence to scriptural truth is met as well. Otherwise, love may be only affection for one's own idol-deity or social self-love for like-minded comrades. Edwards looked for the presence of "holy love," the kind that elevated the mind and heart to a transcendent deity and his revelation in Christ.

Though people often divorce heartfelt piety from doctrinal conviction, Edwards held any religious emotion or experiences disconnected with any such cognitive knowledge to be worthless: "Holy affections are not heat without light; but evermore arise from some information of the understanding, some spiritual instruction that he mind receives, some light or actual knowledge. . . ."³⁹ Furthermore, apathy toward doctrinal matters does not describe genuine faith. Edwards instead maintained "such an inward, real conviction of the truth and divine excellency of spiritual things is peculiar to true Christians."⁴⁰ However, hypocrites often minimize rational understanding of truth.

A similar irrationality appears in their lives, which tend to be marked by a great deal of variation and inconsistency over time. Ultimately, they do not really change much as a result of their faith:

Men may have alterations of their ideas, and a great many changes in what passes in their minds, and in their feeling, and in their affections, and yet they not be

³⁵ Ibid. 153.

³⁶ Edwards, *Works* 4:254.

³⁷ Ibid. 256.

³⁸ Ibid. 257.

³⁹ Edwards, *Works* 2:266.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards* 153.

changed. Everything that is new and extraordinary in a man's mind, don't change the man, any more than putting on a new garment, or going into another room. There are many new ideas that men have excited in 'em, and new affections, and very strange and extraordinary feelings, that don't change the man to make him new...⁴¹

One example of such inconsistency would be refusing to restore what one has wrongly taken from someone else.⁴² Another would be the persistent neglect of a private prayer life.⁴³ Such inconsistency results from the essentially selfish character of their faith, which spurns the costly elements of the religious life. Edwards remarks about the hypocrite:

[The hypocrite tends to] quit the laborious parts of religion and those things in it that are contrary to his own interest... this shows that the man regards religion not for its own sake but only as a thing bye-the-bye, and just to serve a turn, and shows him indeed to be no real friend to the thing itself.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Edwards recognized that genuine saints can still lapse into grievous sin at times. Furthermore, he believed that the heightened sensitivity to sin of genuine believers tended to make them more conscious of the remaining sin in their lives, making it seem to them that they are still very inconsistent and flawed. A more damning sign of self-centered inconsistency would be complacency, the absence of desire or effort toward devotional and moral self-improvement. Such an attitude is incompatible with the "holy love" for God that authentic converts experience: "Holy love makes them long for holiness. Divine love is a principle, which thirsts after [increase]. It is in imperfection and in a state of infancy in this world, and it desires growth. It has much to struggle with in the heart...⁴⁵ The influence of love for God's holiness planted in them by the Holy Spirit does not allow them to rest content in sinfulness and imperfection. As for hypocrites, the "tendency of a false hope [is] evermore to stupefy."⁴⁶

However, Edwards points out that God has already established one effective mechanism for unmasking many such false converts—tribulation, which strikes at the thing that differentiates hypocrites from real believers—their self-centeredness. Doing the godly thing often requires someone to invest sacrificial effort or bear personal loss and pain. Edwards explains:

False Christians are not religious of free choice; they don't choose God and Christ... for their own sakes, and of inclination to those things in themselves, but always for some by-ends. Self-love is the highest principle that a false Chris-

⁴¹ Jonathan Edwards, "The Work of God in the Heart Not a Whim But a Reality" 859. Sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:11 (March 1747), accessed August 18, 2011 at the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

⁴² Jonathan Edwards, "Duty of Restitution" 823. Sermon on Luke 19:8–9 (May 1746), accessed August 18, 2011 at the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

⁴³ Jonathan Edwards, *The True Believer* (ed. Don Kistler; Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2001) 50.

⁴⁴ Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards* 192.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 388.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards* 202.

tian acts from. He is either acted by fear, or from an aim of the praise of men, or from a self-righteous principle, hoping to commend himself to God... therefore, it is no wonder that his religion don't abide... for it is found but dull, heavy work to follow him."⁴⁷

Here Edwards shows psychological insight into how hardship produces apostasy among hypocrites. Trials force them to choose God or worldly self-interest, and being self-centered, they naturally choose the latter. Since they have no love for God apart from self-interest, they often have no desire to cling to God in the face of severe difficulty. So hardships—especially persecution for the faith—often motivate hypocrites to abandon their faith. As Edwards puts it, “when they can’t be for God without suffering much ... in such instances they ben’t willing to be for God, but choose to be for themselves.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, their abandonment of God reveals the absence of the real work of the Spirit, since “the divine Spirit is not a wayfaring man.”⁴⁹

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Jonathan Edwards’s comprehension of the corrupt and self-deluding nature of self-love was far ahead of his time. He had many insights that modern psychological researchers are only now beginning to attain. In recent years, research psychologists have debunked the widespread belief in the benefits of self-love and high self-esteem. Instead, research has revealed that high self-esteem encourages violence among criminals and narcissistic self-delusion among others. For purposes of self-justification and ego-protection, even memory has been shown to play amazing tricks of self-deception. Sometimes as a result of hypnosis or counseling, people create memories of victimization that never occurred, and they often cling to them stubbornly even after their falsehood is revealed—a condition known as False Memory Syndrome. In general, humanistic psychotherapy and popular psychology have encouraged these problems. For many years, a naïve faith was placed in the therapeutic power of self-love. Now many are finding that self-love can lead to delusions and destructive behavior.⁵⁰ Psychological researchers are not alone; many others have remarked on the evils of modern narcissism.⁵¹ Edwards was right to see unbridled self-love as the root of great evil, including religious hypocrisy.

Yet ironically, at the very time when self-centered popular psychology is being undermined by scientific inquiry, self-esteem ideology, self-realization programs, and self-centered mysticism are making great headway in the realm of Christian

⁴⁷ Ibid. 154.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 155.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 165.

⁵⁰ Roy F. Baumeister, Jennifer D. Campbell, Joachim I. Krueger, and Kathleen D. Vohs, “Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth,” *Scientific American* 292/1 (January 2005) 84–91; Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008).

⁵¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978).

belief. Churches often promote psychotherapy and distribute self-improvement manuals. They tend to focus on feelings and market techniques for attaining states of higher consciousness rather than teaching doctrine or biblical morality. Many reject any objective standard for evaluating experiences and instead plunge indiscriminately into spiritual experimentation. For them, God often seems not to play any role apart from idiosyncratic mysticism and self-actualizing therapy.⁵²

Just as Edwards observed, theological innovation follows on the heels of religious narcissism. With its preference for subjectivity over objective credibility, postmodernism has become an ideal philosophical credo for religious narcissism. Likewise, theologies such as Open Theism qualify as innovations helping religious narcissists to trim God to a more palatable size. On top of this, a growing number of church leaders and attendants have come to reject the idea of hell, which conjures up an image of God that repels them.⁵³ Even though Edwards is most famous for one of his sermons about hell, many Edwards scholars also reject or downplay the theme of hell in his writings, arguing that the doctrine is a dispensable aspect of his thought.⁵⁴ Modern bizarre brands of revivalistic Christianity provide even more striking confirmation of Edwards's contentions about religious egotism. In many ways the situation has become far worse than the excesses of the Great Awakening in Edwards's time. We have witnessed the sad spectacle of self-indulgent, hysterical behavior in many Pentecostal and charismatic circles, as well as their widespread obsession with gaining self-centered benefits such as health, wealth, and worldly success. Citing Edwards, Hanegraaff rightly indicts this as a "counterfeit revival." Making use of Edwards's insights into bogus spirituality, Hanegraaff criticizes the movement as largely "characterized by the elevation of egocentric love. Rather than exalting Jesus Christ, the Counterfeit Revival effectively reduces Christ to a means to its ends."⁵⁵ In particular, he concludes that this movement "replaces esteem for Christ with esteem for self, eternal verities with earthly vanities, expositional preaching with wild enthusiasms, essential Christian doctrine with esoteric biblical interpretations, and ego-effacing love with egocentric proclivities," all of which Edwards pinpointed as signs of false conversion.⁵⁶

Having observed that dramatic experiences do not necessarily demonstrate religious sincerity, Edwards clearly explicated the dangers of a neo-Romantic exaltation of feeling over reason. Edwards explored religious hypocrisy as a problem rooted in basic human self-love unbounded by real love for God, ineradicable but by divine grace in Christ. His insights drive us to acknowledge the radical hopelessness of the human condition, mired in narcissism even when engaged in spiritual activities. Moreover, his analysis reveals the authenticity of faith that focuses on

⁵² Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *Psychoheresy: The Psychological Seduction of Christianity* (Santa Barbara: EastGate, 2012).

⁵³ Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

⁵⁴ Bruce W. Davidson, "Glorious Damnation: Hell as an Essential Element in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *JETS* 54 (2011) 810–12.

⁵⁵ Hank Hanegraaff, *Counterfeit Revival* (Nashville: Word, 2001) 127.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 117.

God rather than self and transcendent truth rather than personal feeling. He challenges Christians to exercise greater discernment about what they accept as genuine experience and to “inquire whether ever you have had that sense of the excellency of God or his attributes, or of Christ and his salvation, that has penetrated your heart and reached the bottom of [it], that has broken it and melted, and drawn it to God.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards* 164. I want to express my appreciation to Kenneth Minkema of the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University for his advice and for providing important scholarly resources for this paper, as well as for the Center’s allowing me access to a number of unpublished sermon manuscripts.