

UNHOLY HATE: THE ESSENCE OF HUMAN EVIL IN THE THEOLOGY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

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Abstract: *In Jonathan Edwards's theology, unholy hate is the essence of human depravity. Edwards followed the ideas of Augustine, Calvin, and the Puritans connecting sin to self-love. Hostility to God springs from God's opposition to human self-idolatry and pride. This hostility is usually hidden from open expression as a result of self-deception and other factors such as an awareness of God's distance. God's common grace also moderates the expression of this enmity through psychological barriers created by religious beliefs and influences, such as the expectation of divine judgment. Prominent among sin's effects is the corruption of human reason. Sin eviscerates the entirety of human life—damaging relationships, promoting deception, and sapping vitality. In contrast to some contemporary theological writers and religious popularizers, Edwards urges the necessity of confronting inborn evil as a powerful disease in each individual. Without that, God will be robbed of glory, and people will be deprived of salvation.*

Key words: *Jonathan Edwards, sin, evil, total depravity, common grace, self-love, moral virtue*

Among many these days we encounter great zeal to eradicate evils such as racism from human societies. When perceiving an evil to be embodied in emblems of past injustice and oppression, such as statues of historical figures, many people cannot abide their continued existence. Yet we know from both the Bible and the sad chronicle of human history that evil cannot be so easily purged from the scene. It keeps bursting forth in new forms, wearing new faces. Ironically, moral evil can operate under the guise of striving against injustices and other evils. Therefore, a proper, biblical understanding of sin is indispensable. Even many evangelicals, however, appear to be deficient in this basic understanding. A 2020 Barna survey of Americans found that over two-thirds of evangelicals believe that people are basically good.¹ The scripturally-grounded insights of Jonathan Edwards can contribute much to a better understanding of the nature of human evil.

This theologian does not mince words in depicting humanity's moral condition. In one sermon he states it thus: "Enmity against God is the principle from whence all acts of sin flow."² As a result, evil actions demonstrate that people "are

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¹ "Survey Shows Most Americans Believe 'Humans Are Basically Good' But Don't Think Life Is 'Sacred,'" Christian News Network, updated 26 July 2020, <https://christiannews.net/2020/06/26/survey-shows-most-americans-believe-humans-are-basically-good-but-dont-think-life-is-sacred/>.

² Jonathan Edwards and Don Kistler, *Unless You Repent: Fifteen Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Fate Awaiting the Impenitent* (Orlando, FL: Soli Deo Gloria, 2005), 16.

engaged in a war against God.”³ For Edwards, “total depravity” means “complete enmity.” That enmity encompasses fellow humans as well. In one miscellany he explains, “All sin may be resolved into hatred of God and our neighbor.”⁴ There is a kind of symmetry in Edwards’s moral universe. Just as holy love constitutes the essence of virtue, unholy hate is the essence of depravity. In one sermon Edwards declares about the unconverted that “they have not one spark of love to him [God], but their hearts are full of hatred towards him.”⁵

Such deep-rooted hostility toward God has the effect of perverting all aspects of human existence relating to piety and morality. Thus, evil is not simply the absence of good but enmity toward the good, especially as seen in God himself. Prominent in this analysis is sin’s tendency to deform the power of reason to apprehend truth in relation to God. Furthermore, along with inflicting harm on fellow human beings, sin has infected humanity to such a degree that it aims ultimately at the murder of God himself.

Edwards’s stark depiction of human evil may seem overstated. However, he does not simply dogmatize about it but contends rationally for the truth of his concept of sin. Out of deep reflection on Scripture and the human condition, he meets various objections and rival ways of conceptualizing sin. Furthermore, he draws out insightful practical implications from this idea of sin. Relatively little has been written about the psychological analysis of human evil in Edwards’s writings, though scholars have commented on his philosophical apology for the concept of mankind’s universal guilt in Adam.⁶ This article concentrates on his commentary about the nature of human evil.

I. EDWARDS’S CONCEPT OF HATE

Significantly, the word “hate” keeps cropping up in contemporary political and moral discourse. In current campaigns against bigotry, bigotry and hatred are frequently treated as one and the same thing. Thus a “hate crime” is now defined as one that arises from hostility toward a certain group of people based on their race, religion, or sexual behavior. Often hate is invoked as the essence of human evil.

Jonathan Edwards would agree that hate has a great deal to do with human evil. However, he would not limit hate to bigotry, nor would he brand hatred itself as necessarily evil, since he argued that people can legitimately hate the devil, de-

³ William C. Nichols, ed., *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies* (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 2001), 30.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “The ‘Miscellanies,’ no. 779,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online* [hereafter *WJE Online*], vol. 18: *The ‘Miscellanies,’ 501–832*, ed. Ava Chamberlain (Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008), 436.

⁵ William C. Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion* (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 2003), 16.

⁶ Trying to justify universal guilt as a result of Adam’s transgression led Edwards to come up with a unique philosophical apology for it. This unfortunately involved him in a number of conundrums and self-contradictions. Paul Helm probes this problem in Edwards’s thought in Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding*, Faith and Reason (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 152–76.

mons, and eternally damned human beings.⁷ As the book of Proverbs puts it, “the fear of the Lord is to hate evil” (8:13). There is such a thing as “holy hate,” which the holy God himself bears toward evil. Many Christian writers, including Edwards, have acknowledged this.

In Edwards’s thinking, hatred is essentially antagonism and opposition to something or someone. Edwards maintained that genuine love for God produces hatred for those things that offend God, and he considered this hatred to be necessary evidence of real Christian love. Edwards explicates the relationship this way: “From love arises hatred of those things which are contrary to what we love, or which oppose and thwart us in those things that we delight in.... From a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love to God, will necessarily arise other religious affections: hence will arise an intense hatred and abhorrence of sin.”⁸

This idea that hatred arises from love matches everyday experience. When someone mistreats a beloved family member, that person incurs a strong negative reaction from other members of the same family. Moreover, few people would censure the hatred of someone who declared, “I hate human trafficking.” Edwards considered hatred to be the proper response to something odious. Unfortunately, as Edwards understood well, a great deal of the hatred in our fallen world is not commendable antagonism to evil but rather the opposite—unholy hate.

II. UNHOLY HATE AND SELF-LOVE

In his book on the history of pastoral care, church historian E. Brooks Holifield comments that the modern church world has largely grown “impatient with too much dreary talk about sin.”⁹ Instead, many churches now offer therapeutic advice to further self-development and higher self-esteem. In contrast, Edwards drew on the tradition of Augustine and Calvin in regard to self-love. That tradition generally held that human self-love after the fall was very closely related to the problem of sin. Augustine describes the redeemed community as “the children of grace, the citizens of the free city, who dwell together in everlasting peace, in which self-love and self-will have no place.”¹⁰ Similarly, John Calvin considered self-love to be a deluding, maddening influence operating to keep fallen human beings from a real apprehension of how bad they are. He believed that “since people have a disordered and blind love of themselves, they gladly believe that there is nothing in themselves worthy of being despised.”¹¹ Puritan writers such as Richard Baxter and

⁷ Bruce W. Davidson, “Not from Ourselves: Holy Love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards,” *JETS* 59.3 (2016): 578.

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *WJE Online*, vol. 2: *Religious Affections*, ed. John Edwin Smith (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2009), 108.

⁹ E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 353.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Civ.* 15.1 (*NPNF¹* 2:286).

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), Kindle loc. 885–88.

Matthew Henry generally concurred with Calvin, although they, like Edwards, sometimes recognized some beneficial aspects of natural self-love.

Paradoxically, according to Edwards, self-love both gives rise to fallen man's unholy hate and also often restrains its blatant manifestation: "God hath wisely and mercifully so ordered things in this world that self-love in one thing is a restraint to self-love in another thing."¹² In other words, concerns about personal well-being prevent people from indulging all their self-centered, destructive desires. However, corrupted self-love will eventually lead to irrational self-destruction.¹³ As a result of fallen self-love, "God was forsaken and fellow creatures forsaken, and man retired within himself and became wholly governed by narrow, selfish principles."¹⁴

How does fallen self-love lead to enmity toward God? The answer is that God strongly opposes idol-worship, including self-idolatry. Edwards explains, "The gods which a natural man worships, instead of the God that made him, are himself and the world.... They love their idolatry, but God does not approve of it, but exceedingly hates it."¹⁵ Something else aggravates them even more: "He threatens them with everlasting torments for their self-exaltation."¹⁶ Hostility arises from the psychological fact that "self-love, if it be the governing principle, will dispose a person to hate all that happens to stand in his way."¹⁷

An outgrowth of fallen self-love, sinful pride inspires enmity toward divine truths that offend it. A prideful belief in human moral ability rejects the idea that "men are naturally helpless, and dead in trespasses and sins, and can do nothing for themselves."¹⁸ Likewise, prideful confidence in their intellectual abilities results in rejection of ideas that their minds cannot easily digest. Edwards observes, "They are scarcely willing to allow anything that is true to be above their comprehension, and therefore, are very ready to question the truth of things that are so."¹⁹ Thus prideful self-love accounts for the existence of strong opposition to notions such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and other doctrines that exceed human ability to comprehend. The same self-love makes people hard to correct or teach: "[They] won't hearken to instructions and counsels of others: they're too wise to be taught."²⁰

III. DO PEOPLE REALLY HATE GOD?

Edwards had no difficulty finding scriptural support for the concept of sin as enmity toward God. Nevertheless, he was aware that common opinion frequently resists such an idea. Many seem willing to admit that people are guilty of sin in

¹² Nichols, *Knowing the Heart*, 106.

¹³ Bruce W. Davidson, "The Four Faces of Self-Love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *JETS* 51.1 (2008). This article explores in detail Edwards's complex analysis of various types of self-love.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "Charity and Its Fruits," in *WJE Online*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008), 253.

¹⁵ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards' Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 35–36.

¹⁶ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards' Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 37.

¹⁷ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 101.

¹⁸ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 21.

¹⁹ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 23.

²⁰ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 26.

some limited sense and will plead that “nobody’s perfect.” However, far fewer endorse the idea that humanity is fundamentally hostile to God. Edwards addressed this: “There are few, if any at all, whose consciences are so blinded as not to be sensible they have been guilty of sin.... And yet few of them are sensible that they are God’s enemies.”²¹ Furthermore, he observed that many reject the notion of inborn sin altogether and prefer to view humanity as morally neutral by nature, “like a piece of white paper without any writing upon it.”²²

In his time Edwards had to contend with a kind of ethical humanism represented by people like the Earl of Shaftesbury.²³ Smith believes that we ought to see Edwards’s writings on human evil in the context of the commitment of his Enlightenment contemporaries to the basic goodness of human nature.²⁴ Likewise, Cherry comments that “the age was giving its attention to the goodness—the innate moral virtue—of enlightened, enterprising man,” so Edwards was going against the tide of the times.²⁵ Furthermore, Shaftesbury even argued that a negative view of human nature worked against the development of moral people.²⁶ Along similar lines, Francis Hutcheson believed that the ranks of the morally good can include even those who are unaware of the existence of God.²⁷ So Edwards came up with an arsenal of arguments to establish rationally as well as scripturally mankind’s universal hostility to God.

To begin with, the same prideful confidence in their intellectual abilities causes people to deceive themselves about their true stance toward God. In general, they deceive themselves in various ways about their own evil, and it is very difficult for them to become aware of it: “When men deceive others they may know it, but when they deceive themselves they know it not.”²⁸ As an example, he notes that many of the Jewish leaders in Christ’s time were not aware that they had any hatred of God, though they obviously hated Christ.²⁹

Moreover, people have a conspicuous tendency to rationalize their questionable actions and attitudes. For instance, when they are vengeful and envious, they often think it is only “just resentment of the injuries they have suffered.”³⁰ A num-

²¹ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 23.

²² Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 211.

²³ Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

²⁴ John E. Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 82.

²⁵ Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 197.

²⁶ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, 226.

²⁷ John McHugh, *Francis Hutcheson: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2014), Kindle loc. 334.

²⁸ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 21.

²⁹ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 27.

³⁰ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 30.

ber of contemporary psychological researchers concur that people frequently deny responsibility for their moral defects and transgressions.³¹

The same holds for their religious exertions, though these seem to demonstrate devotion to God. Such activities are often done with “no devotedness of heart to God; no exercise of any love to God.”³² Furthermore, the object of such hypocritical piety is not really the true God: “You do not realize it, that he is so holy a God as he is: you do not realize it, that he has such a hatred of sin as indeed he has ... you do not find such a sensible hatred against that god which you have formed, to suit yourself.”³³ Edwards means the narcissistic religious imaginations of sinful people create false gods that become the real object of their devotion.³⁴

The multitude of the world’s religious activities appears to contradict this notion of fundamental enmity to God, but Edwards was not fooled by appearances. He countered that the real issue is not one of quantity but one of quality. In one of his rare flashes of humor, Edwards employs *reductio ad absurdum* to unmask that apparent piety, with a marriage analogy: “[It is like a man thinking] that his spouse was a good wife to him, because, although she committed adultery, and that with the slaves and scoundrels sometimes, yet she did not do this so often as she did the duties of a wife. These notions would be absurd, because the crimes are too heinous to be atoned for, by many honest actions.”³⁵

Furthermore, piety and moral behavior only continue in the world thanks to God’s restraining hand, which usually holds back human iniquity from creating a hell on earth. Edwards finds God’s common grace in operation in various spheres of human experience. Moral philosophers of the time, such as Francis Hutcheson and the Earl of Shaftesbury, did not seem to recognize such divine limitations on human evil but rather attributed everything wholesome to innate human goodness. In contrast, Edwards calls on people to be grateful for God’s restraints on human evil, a “glorious work” similar to his ruling the violent ocean.³⁶

In Edwards’s estimation, a number of factors providentially join together to inhibit the open expression of human hostility to God in this world. In a sense, the results of sin itself hold back human enmity from open display. Practical atheism—a sense of God being unreal—prevents people from being conscious of any hatred. Even when they acknowledge God’s existence, they often think of him as too remote to attack, which also dampens their hostility.³⁷

³¹ Carol Travis and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2008).

³² Jonathan Edwards, “All that Natural Men Do Is Wrong,” in *WJE Online*, vol. 19: *Sermons and Discourses, 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2001), 525.

³³ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 41.

³⁴ Bruce W. Davidson, “Narcissism: The Root of All Hypocrisy in the Theological Psychology of Jonathan Edwards,” *JETS* 57.1 (2014): 140.

³⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *WJE Online*, vol. 3: *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2001), 133.

³⁶ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 52.

³⁷ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 41–43.

Religious influences create more psychological barriers to the conscious experience of enmity toward God. For one thing, people hope to get things from God, and that requires approaching him with respect. They have also been taught to view enmity to God as blasphemous, which makes them afraid to admit such a disposition to themselves.³⁸ Edwards attributed apparent respect for God among many religious people to nothing more than habits inculcated in a pious environment and godly parental education. In the same way, others learn ugly language and behavior from their surrounding influences. In addition, people keep their hostility to God in check in order to maintain their good standing among devout people.³⁹

Finally, belief in future judgment has done a great deal to restrain human enmity from breaking out into public view, even among the heathen. In particular, there is the threat of “a hell of eternal misery for the punishment of wickedness,” which becomes “a great restraint upon the wickedness of the world.”⁴⁰

In summary, Edwards urges us not to underestimate the operation of God’s providence in restraining human evil. At the same time, all of these factors added together have “no certain influence” and may prove ineffectual.⁴¹ People retain a “seed of malice” against God, which often reveals itself in provocative circumstances.⁴² The ultimate proof of this hostility was the murder of God incarnate — “when once God became man and came down to dwell here among such vipers as fallen men, they hated him and persecuted him; and never left him till they had imbrued their hands in his blood.”⁴³ On top of that, the Passion account shows them carrying the murder out with “the utmost malice and cruelty.”⁴⁴

IV. ORIGINAL STUPIDITY

In view of sin’s powerful noetic effects, insensibility about this inward hostility toward God is not so surprising. In one sermon Edwards asserts, “Man is naturally a miserably darkened and blind creature and his blindness chiefly consists in two things, *viz*, his ignorance of God in his divine excellency and next to him he is most ignorant of himself.”⁴⁵ As a result, a fallen person “won’t see the truth of the plainest thing in the world because sin bids him shut his eyes.”⁴⁶ Instead, we find that sinners tend to believe what they want to believe, often without even any pretense of rationality.

³⁸ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 43–44.

³⁹ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 46–47.

⁴⁰ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 107–8.

⁴¹ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 102.

⁴² Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 29.

⁴³ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 33.

⁴⁴ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 3:182.

⁴⁵ John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Powhatan, VA: Berea, 1992), 2:347.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “Wicked Men’s Slavery to Sin,” in *WJE Online*, vol. 10: *Sermons and Discourses: 1720–1723*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 1992), 343.

Edwards prized human reason very highly, and he considered its ruination by sin to be a great tragedy in the human story. He shared this respect for rationality with secular Enlightenment thinkers of his time. However, unlike many of them, he accepted the limitations of reason in a fallen world. Now overborne by the power of strong preconceptions and evil inclinations, human rationality has been seriously corrupted and perverted.⁴⁷ We can observe this in the way that people often are “so sudden and rash in the judgments which they pass upon things ... when they once drink in a notion, nothing will beat them off from it.”⁴⁸

In Edwards’s view, biblical belief is eminently reasonable. When people refuse to believe, it is not because of lack of proof or serious difficulty in comprehending basic truths about God.⁴⁹ For instance, Edwards points out that biblical history provided ancient people with many proofs of God’s reality, which they ignored. For example, the flood no doubt left visible evidence in the remains of its destruction, yet humanity soon sank back into a godless condition after Noah’s time. All nations after the flood sank into ridiculous idolatry, even in times of great intellectual and cultural sophistication, such as ancient Greece and Rome at their zeniths.⁵⁰ Similarly, the divine destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah should have deeply impressed the Canaanites, but they became even worse after that judgment. In the case of the ancient Hebrews, the plagues on Egypt before the exodus of the Israelites apparently did not result in national repentance from idolatry.⁵¹ Yet despite this clear depiction of idolatry as a manifestation of human perversity, some Edwards scholars have argued that Edwards was seriously contemplating the possibility of the salvation of non-Christian heathen.⁵²

Even without such proofs, God’s reality is obvious, but church-going people are prone to ignore it and hardly respond to explicit teaching about it. Apparently drawing on his own pastoral experience and that of others, Edwards observes, “What need of a constant repetition of admonitions and counsels.... How many

⁴⁷ Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 351.

⁴⁸ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 25.

⁴⁹ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 3:156–57.

⁵⁰ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 3:147–50.

⁵¹ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 3:169–74.

⁵² Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 580–98. Though Edwards obviously regards idolatry and paganism as outgrowths of human depravity, McDermott and others have striven to prove that Edwards gradually became favorably disposed toward the idea of salvation for unbelieving heathen. In Bombaro’s summation, McDermott argues that Edwards’s theology “was stealthily becoming ever more inclusivistic as a result of the logical trajectory of his dispositional ontology.” Bombaro remarks that McDermott fails to provide much convincing evidence for this view and disputes this contention, in part because McDermott’s thesis is “essentially irreconcilable with the whole character of his [Edwards’s] Calvinistic thought.” Moreover, Bombaro notes that we find Edwards preaching sermons critical of heathen morality and maintaining their lack of real virtue until the very end of his pastoral career. In *Original Sin*, he uses paganism, Islam, and Catholicism as proof of the power of sin to corrupt devotion to revealed, divine truth. John J. Bombaro, *Jonathan Edwards’s Vision of Reality: The Relationship of God to the World, Redemption History, and the Reprobate* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 254–68.

arguments, and often renewed, and variously and elaborately enforced, do men stand in need of, to convince 'em of things that are self-evident?"⁵³

In addition to their insensibility to God's reality, humanity persistently exhibits a many-faceted, incorrigible inconsistency, which Edwards continually emphasized. Gerstner sums up Edwards's critique: "They dislike things as they are but they refuse to have them otherwise. They dislike God as he is but they wouldn't have him otherwise. They do not like Him holy or unholy (because if He were unholy they could not depend on Him)."⁵⁴

Many behaviors express this tendency "to act contrary to reason." Above all, as already noted, the absurdity of idolatry stands out, which has been a pitfall to the heathen, Jewish, and Christian worlds. Moreover, people often act as if it is not really worth looking into the possibility of endless misery or eternal happiness.⁵⁵ Active, doctrinally orthodox religious people can be equally inconsistent, as Edwards understood very well. An outwardly pious demeanor may conceal something incongruous: "There is a body upon the knees. But [if] we could look within there, we should see an [*sic*] heart proudly exalting itself against God."⁵⁶

Our own time abundantly confirms Edwards's (and the Bible's) bleak assessment of fallen humanity's confusion. It has become difficult to invent parodies more absurd than the blatant instances of inconsistency and hypocrisy we observe on a daily basis in many spheres of life. No amount of proof will prevail to convince many to change their views. Indeed, the very concept of rational justification for beliefs has been widely rejected. The professing Christian world is hardly an exception to this contemporary ruination of reason.

V. OTHER EFFECTS OF SIN

Obstinate stupidity and open rebellion against God present obvious manifestations of sin, but in Edwards's analysis much more often sin assumes other shapes. These are not easily identifiable yet still bear the hallmarks of enmity. They range from the seemingly benign to things that are blatantly malevolent. Sin infects and perverts practically everything that people do.

Though sinners behave with a great deal of inconsistency and hypocrisy, in one respect they are often consistent: They tend to make their beliefs line up with their evil desires. In a sermon on 2 Timothy 4:3 titled "Men Are Exceedingly Prone to Bring Their Principles to Agree with Their Lusts," Edwards traces heresy and false teaching to this inborn hostility toward God's truth: "They don't like the truth; it don't suit their disposition and relish."⁵⁷ Mention has already been made of the antagonism proud people feel toward being described as hopelessly depraved. Similarly, concepts like baptismal regeneration and universal salvation also appeal to

⁵³ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 3:154–55.

⁵⁴ Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 349.

⁵⁵ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 3:151–54.

⁵⁶ Edwards, "All That Natural Men Do Is Wrong," *WJE Online*, 19:528.

⁵⁷ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 211–12.

corrupt minds.⁵⁸ In this way, Edwards considered doctrinal heresies, Islam, and Roman Catholicism to be the products of evil desires and hostility to divine truth.⁵⁹

Among the multifaceted manifestations of human rebellion Edwards includes not only false religious teachings and sinful actions but also subtle instances of antipathy to God. For example, people often view it as a troublesome task even to think about God. When they do reflect on him, they feel distaste for certain aspects of God: “They hear God is an infinitely holy, pure, and righteous Being, and they do not like him upon this account; they have no relish of such kind of qualifications.”⁶⁰ Rather than finding pleasure in contemplating the praiseworthy characteristics of God, they enjoy criticizing other people for their objectionable traits.⁶¹

Of course, frequently there is nothing very subtle about human sin. In the sermon “Man is a Very Evil and Hurtful Creature,” Edwards expands on mankind’s greatness as beings made in God’s image, who can even figure out how to catch huge whales. However, he also remarks that much of that amazing inventiveness is offered in service to evil ends. In fact, despite being God’s special creature, human violence exceeds what can be found among animals.⁶²

Sin eviscerates the entirety of human life. According to the sermon “Wicked Men’s Slavery to Sin,” a person finds himself unable to love the true God but instead “believes, wills, loves, nor thinks nothing but what sin allows of and commands.”⁶³ In sinning, people debilitate themselves, since sin tends to sap their vitality in this life while they live in fear of future judgment.⁶⁴

On a larger scale, sin’s influence ruins human society, and so-called “Christian civilization” is no exception, in Edwards’s view. In fact, Edwards finds special proof of sin’s great power in the apostasies that so frequently beset the Christian world, which “has been transformed into that which has been vastly more deformed ... than the state of the heathen world before.... The poor savage Americans are mere babes ... in comparison of multitudes that the Christian world throngs with.”⁶⁵ Standing the famous love-hymn of 1 Corinthians 13 on its head, Edwards ruefully comments that those seeking to reform the rebellious frequently find that “the tongue of men or of angels cannot persuade them to relinquish their opposition to God.”⁶⁶

Within Christian communities and movements, sin gives rise to much self-deception about the presence or absence of real faith in God. Consequently, there is a great need to warn people about the possibility of false confidence that they are in a state of salvation. For instance, Edwards observes that some people mistake moral attitudes for evidence of conversion, while others believe that simply making

⁵⁸ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 214.

⁵⁹ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 217.

⁶⁰ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 27–28.

⁶¹ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 103.

⁶² Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 97–99.

⁶³ Edwards, “Wicked Men’s Slavery to Sin,” *WJE Online*, 10:344.

⁶⁴ Edwards, “Wicked Men’s Slavery to Sin,” *WJE Online*, 10:342.

⁶⁵ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 2:183.

⁶⁶ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 31.

a resolution to trust in Christ constitutes genuine conversion.⁶⁷ Still others inwardly are convinced that “they shall, by degrees, work in themselves sorrow and repentance of sin, and love toward God and Jesus Christ.”⁶⁸ This is precisely what many advocates of a mystical approach to Christianity promote—the gradual cultivation of inward spirituality.

Being immersed in a religious environment supplies a basis for some to deceive themselves. In some instances, people “flatter themselves” that having godly Christian parents assures their salvation.⁶⁹ They may also imagine that their presence among many earnest believers proves that they are saved.⁷⁰ Even if they admit their unregenerate condition in such circumstances, they often expect that they can easily obtain salvation at any time by some pious efforts.

VI. CONCLUSION

Jonathan Edwards’s unabashed depiction of human depravity in all its ugliness contrasts sharply with much of the contemporary Christian scene. In Edwards’s elucidation of sin as unholy hatred, he brings to light a number of things worth pondering.

To begin with, Edwards pleads for the importance of acknowledging inborn human evil as a very real and a very powerful thing. However, many recent religious thinkers and popularizers have moved in the opposite direction. They focus instead on human dignity and worth. Others accept the theoretical reality of human evil but are convinced that emphasizing it is either bad publicity for the cause or else unhelpful medicine for the masses. In Edwards’s time some took a similar view, such as the Earl of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson.

Regarding that outlook, Edwards had this to say:

I am sensible, it is not suited to the taste of some, who are so very *delicate* (to say no worse) that they can bear nothing but compliment and flattery.... If we, as we come into the world, are truly sinful, and consequently miserable, he acts but a *friendly* part to us, who endeavors to discover and manifest our disease. Whereas on the contrary, he acts an *unfriendly* part, who to his utmost hides it from us.⁷¹

Truly, in salvation as well as in medicine, recovery begins with confronting the truth about ourselves. In one sermon Edwards declared, “Tis necessary in order to a remedy of your corruption that you should first see it.”⁷² He stoutly maintained that a profound reckoning with one’s personal sin is an absolute necessity in order to grasp the meaning of justification by faith in Christ alone. Authentic conversion also requires it. Comprehending one’s deep-rooted enmity to God will lead to the

⁶⁷ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 32–34.

⁶⁸ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 12.

⁶⁹ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 16.

⁷⁰ Nichols, *Seeking God: Jonathan Edwards’ Evangelism Contrasted with Modern Methodologies*, 10.

⁷¹ Edwards, *Original Sin*, *WJE Online*, 2:423–24, italics his.

⁷² Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 112.

abandonment of attempts to merit God's favor by religious activities or moral effort. Conversely, resistance to the scriptural concept of sin likely reveals that one is still in thrall to "corrupt habits of the soul."⁷³

Though many maintain that it is offensive and degrading to depict people as sinners who hate God, Edwards emphasized that a focus on sin actually enhances compassion and fellow-feeling. In one sermon titled "Wicked Men's Slavery to Sin," he asks, "What heart is so hard, and who is so inhuman, as not to pity and compassionate the poor sinner who is in such dreadful bondage to sin?"⁷⁴ Edwards does not mean a type of condescending, censorious pity but rather something arising from a sense of our common plight: "We are by nature, companions in a miserable helpless condition; which, under a revelation of the divine mercy, tends to promote mutual compassion."⁷⁵ Significantly, among those who put little emphasis on individual sin and instead promote the notion of corporate guilt, we do not in fact find much pity for the guilty, as the current prevalence of "cancel culture" and group shaming attests. In any case, far from driving people away from the gospel, bold declarations by Edwards and others about sin often had the opposite effect in the eighteenth century in the revival phenomenon we call "The Great Awakening."

Holbrooke demonstrates that eighteenth-century antagonism to the notion of inborn sinfulness was not very different from that of our own age.⁷⁶ Similarly, Smith compares eighteenth-century opposition to the idea of universal depravity to "attempts made in our own time especially on the part of social scientists, to absolve us from responsibility for much of the evil that is in the world."⁷⁷ No doubt, from Edwards's perspective, it would be even more futile and misguided to try to isolate evil within entities such as nations, classes, cultures, or races. In his view, ultimate hope lies in genuine conversion and revival rather than in campaigns for moral and social reform. Time and again, historical events have confirmed Edwards's (and the Bible's) depiction of incorrigible human evil. Revolutions aimed at creating social equity instead have usually produced despotism and oppression. Edwards emphasized that the problem of sin mainly confronts each sinner as an individual moral agent.

Jonathan Edwards argued for an uncompromising, scripturally grounded concept of sin. However, nowadays many professing believers appear to derive much of their thinking about human evil from trends in contemporary academia and the mass media. Clearly, as a result of fallen mankind's "original stupidity," human thinking about evil has also been radically perverted; therefore, little confidence can be placed in it. In fact, experience finds the case to be just as Edwards describes: Ideas about human evil in the world are often shallow, inconsistent, or ridiculous.

⁷³ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 210.

⁷⁴ Edwards, "Wicked Men's Slavery to Sin," *WJE Online*, 10:345.

⁷⁵ Edwards, "Charity and Its Fruits," *WJE Online*, 8:424.

⁷⁶ Clyde Holbrook, "Jonathan Edwards Addresses Some 'Modern Critics' of Original Sin," *JR* 63.3 (1983): 211–30.

⁷⁷ Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher*, 89.

In writing and from the pulpit, Jonathan Edwards proclaimed a concept of sin that exalted the work of God in saving sinners from incorrigible enmity and rebellion. Moreover, he understood that a defective concept of human depravity leads to an aberrant understanding of salvation, which ultimately robs God of glory and people of salvation. At the end of a sermon titled “All That Natural Men Do Is Wrong,” Edwards exulted, “Therefore the grace of God in the conversion of a sinner is exceeding glorious and wonderful.”⁷⁸ In the closing remarks of another sermon titled “Man is a Very Evil and Hurtful Creature,” Edwards directs his hearers to “learn how excellently the gospel is adapted to the state of mankind.”⁷⁹ Through Christ’s saving work, people who hate God can be transformed into those who love him above everything else.

⁷⁸ Edwards, “All That Natural Men Do Is Wrong,” *WJE Online*, 19:530.

⁷⁹ Nichols, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion*, 110.