

Professional Development Grant Final Report

# Frontier Missionary, Enlightenment Theologian: The Role of Stockbridge and Native Americans in Jonathan Edwards's Enlightenment Critique

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Presented at:

The Australian and New Zealand Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies Conference

December 13-15, 2017

Brisbane, Australia

For this professional development project, I attended the 2017 Australian and New Zealand Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies conference, which was hosted by Griffith University and the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia over the Christmas break. At the meeting, I presented my paper, “Frontier Missionary, Enlightenment Theologian: The Role of Stockbridge and Native Americans in Jonathan Edwards’s Enlightenment Critique,” on the “Practices of Theology” panel and attended numerous other panels at the ANZSECS conference that have enhanced my teaching of eighteenth-century historical topics. Below is a summary of the results of each of these professional development activities.

### **A. Restatement of Research Problem**

In my paper I explore the relationship between Jonathan Edwards’s temporal occupation as a missionary pastor to the English and Housatonic/Mohawk congregations in Stockbridge, Massachusetts from 1751 to 1758 with his primary intellectual occupation composing a rebuttal to the major intellectual currents of the Enlightenment and a reassertion of Calvinist theology within the changed intellectual landscape of his day. What I found is that Edwards attempted to accurately communicate aspects of his more complicated and obtuse theological points to his Indian audience, though his use of a translator and the issue of translation in general from a linguistic standpoint likely impeded his ability to effectively explain these ideas. In that light, Edwards shifted to rely on natural metaphors to bridge this divide because he believed that nature provided universal metaphors that transcended cultural and linguistic differences.

### **B. Brief Review**

There is a dearth of research regarding this period in Edwards’s life outside of biographies, as well as the connection between his lived experiences and his intellectual and philosophical writings. The research that does exist suggests that Edwards developed his thought

independent of his experiences with Native Americans. Some scholars, such as Rachel Wheeler, have begun to challenge this narrative, but her pioneering research on Original Sin and its humanizing effect when applied to Native Americans overreaches in arguing that this overcame cultural and theological enmity towards Indians. Taking a more robust view of Edwards's theology as a whole with the introduction of ideas developed in *Freedom of the Will* suggests that there was an alternative reading of Edwards. The forceful case for determinism outlined in this treatise had the chilling effect of promoting indifference towards Native American missions and conversion under the assumption that God did include them in his predetermined number of elect saints. The popularization of Edwards by a later generation of missionaries and evangelists in the nineteenth century led to an efflorescence of new editions of his classical works, reintroducing these ideas to American religious discourse during the Second Great Awakening.

### **C. Summary of Findings and Experiences**

My research suggests that the impact of Edwards's philosophy produced unintended consequences by highlighting a paradox deeply rooted in Calvinist theology. Edwards's emphasis on God's sovereignty as an omniscient and omnipotent being in *Freedom of the Will* sought to undercut deist arguments that man makes decisions from a state of equilibrium or indifferent using the faculty of reason. He was bothered by this notion in particular because he foresaw this thinking leading orthodox (Calvinist) Christians to adopt a free-will, Arminian perspective, which was then a slippery slope to deism and, possibly, outright atheism. By attempting to shore up the bulwarks of his faith he created a logical construction of reality that rendered all actions taken by every individual who ever lived as predetermined by a great chain of causation going back to God as the "first cause." This supported an attitude that I term "missionary indifference" when Edwards and other notable missionaries like his protégé David

Brainerd confronted challenge and resistance from Indian Christians or potential converts. When events did not transpire as English missionaries expected, they could fall back on the notion that their targets might never be saved as justification that they were not at fault and that God was just in taking this action. This historical example provides an illustration of the side effects derived from this vein of thought, which remains popular within the presuppositionalist school of Christian apologetics and Reformed and Southern Baptist circles today. I am confident that I will be able to publish my results in either a well-respected journal on colonial and/or church history or as a chapter within my book manuscript entitled *A Communion of Churches: Indian Christians, Puritan Ministers, and Congregations in Early New England, 1600-1775*.

Attendance and participation at the international conferences for ANZSECS provided me the opportunity to give back to my profession and network professionally with a number of scholars who were in attendance. As a faculty member in the early stage of my career, these connections will prove invaluable moving forward. In particular, I established a connection with my fellow panelist Sophie Gee (Professor of English, Princeton University). Gee is close friends with Sarah Rivett, a leading professor of colonial history at Princeton who researches the scientific and intellectual aspect of Native American missions in transatlantic religious discourse. Professor Gee is going to provide an introduction between the two of us in the coming semester that will enable me to approach Professor Rivett as an informal or formal reviewer for my book manuscript as I begin the publication process.

#### **D. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Overall, the funds from my ATU professional development grant allowed me to attend a stimulating conference within my profession. I received positive feedback on the paper presentation, as well as some suggestions (like exploring the natural metaphors in Edwards's

writings even more broadly) on how to enhance our findings. The insights that I gained from panels on topics as diverse as anatomical and medical sciences, imperial ambiguities in colonial spaces, the sensory world of the Enlightenment, and pluralistic approaches to nature will make me a better teacher as I continue to develop courses for ATU.