

# Generational distress: jonathan edwards and aaron burr



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BUSTER**

Jonathan Edwards straddled two definitive eras in American history: the hardline beliefs of the Puritans he was raised by in the Connecticut Valley and the freethinking, logical reasonability of the Age of Enlightenment (Norton Anthology 396). These ideas are blended fascinatingly in Edwards's Personal Narrative, a seemingly day-to-day account of his ideas on The Bible and God thought through in the most logical manor he could conceive given the information at hand, and his upbringing as the son and grandson of famous reverends. His life was at great odds with that of his even more renowned grandson Aaron Burr, born into the middle of the Age of Enlightenment. Although Edwards only lived into the second year of his progeny's life (Chernow 277), both his accomplishments and mistakes seem to have had a massive effect on the way Burr viewed religion, politics, and even writing itself.

Edwards's mind was filled with thoughts of religion that he meticulously documented. In his Personal Narrative, he begins talking about his childhood views on religion, the reawakening of the spirituality of his father's congregation, and his own dutiful religious practices. His worldview is purely Puritanical. There were certain expectations put upon Puritans to serve God the best that they could, working tirelessly to do so, objecting to anything that could distract them from their reverential mission. Edwards's beliefs on the sovereignty of God, one of the core Puritan principles, testifies to his old-fashioned way of thinking that his parishioners dedicated themselves to. He said his, " mind was wont to be full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty," on page 399, but then goes on to explain, " God's absolute sovereignty, and damnation, is what my mind seems to be rest

assured of, as much as anything that I see with my eyes." Edwards would continuously repress any doubts of his beliefs with the feeling that worshiping gave him. Burr would have abhorred the musings about God that seemed to flow from his ancestor's pen as if it was coming from his very heart.

Aaron Burr didn't actually write much of anything down, for his " habits were to never trust himself on paper, if he could avoid it, and when he wrote, it was with great caution" (Chernow 278). While his grandfather remained married to the Puritan way of life, Burr was working to become renowned in a different field all together. Although he lived with another reverend growing up, the religious fervor of the rest of his family did not pass onto him. Burr truly embodied an even newer stage of the Age of Enlightenment, for he wasn't a statesman crafting documents that would come to define the United States to this very day, but a politician intent on seeking power (Chernow 279). Their differences cannot be summed up more effectively than a comparison of Edward's sermon entitled *A Divine and Supernatural Light* and Burr's commencement speech as he graduated Princeton, a school his grandfather briefly presided over, entitled *Building Castles in the Air* (Chernow 277). In his sermon, Edwards quotes from scripture, " thou knowest what God alone can teach thee." (Edwards 417). Burr's speech directly disdains the thinking his grandfather cherished and demonstrated in his *Personal Narrative*, for *Building Castles in the Air*, which " declaimed against frittering away energy on idle dreams." (Chernow 277). As a man who valued his distinguished place in society, and dreamt of the highest office in the land, Burr surely would have found Edwards's musings to be a

waste of time and energy. The simplistic belief in God as a feeling is also in direct odds with his grandson's logical thinking.

The men's differences may be summed up most succinctly in the mistakes they made that would later define their respective careers. Jonathan Edwards lived his life in expression of his deeply held beliefs, and was propped up by them. From his childhood building places of worship with his friends, to choosing his mate in Sarah Pierpont, and finally the wish to return his church to its former glory by naming backsliders from the pulpit and crafting a return to the old form of communion that would get him dismissed from his church (Norton Anthology 389) he lived through his religion. Aaron Burr, after keeping his views to himself throughout his career, found a scapegoat in Alexander Hamilton and shot and killed him. This over calculation on Edwards's part, and under calculation on Burr's shows the weaknesses in both of their ideologies. Edwards was so involved in his brain and his Bible, he didn't look up to see where the tides of culture had taken his congregation, and Burr kept his grudge against the other revolutionary alive for so long, it exploded in one ill-advised duel. Burr may have avoided the mistakes of his grandfather, but created one of his own.

The age of Puritan rule giving way to the Age of Enlightenment, like any revolution, wasn't an overnight event. Enlightenment took years transformation from writers like both Edwards and Burr to come into its cultural dominance. For although Edwards represented an old-fashioned way of thought by the time his grandson rose to prominence, those thoughts became the building block for how Americans were going to grapple with the

religious fervor that cyclically falls upon the nation and the reasoned thinking that the nation was founded on.

## **Works Cited**

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