

Article

Michael Edwards: A Poet's Vision of the Untimely Message of God

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Abstract: Michael Edwards, professor of English literature at the Collège de France in Paris, poet, critic, and the first British subject to be elected to the French Academy, has turned his attention in recent years to biblical literature. In 2016 he published *Bible et poésie* (Paris, Fallois). A translation of the sequel, *Pour un christianisme intempestif* (Paris, Fallois), was released in February of 2022 by Fortress Press under the title, *Untimely Christianity*. In the same year, the English translation of his 2016 volume, under the title *The Bible and Poetry*, will be published by New York Review Books. This study examines the poet-scholar's perspective on scripture, on theology, on the art of translation and his opinions of various modern translations of the Bible and highlights the most useful insights he contributes. The notion of Christianity's radical alterity is an important key to Edwards's work. Christianity is foreign to us, it is strange, so the scriptures that reveal it are also radically *other*. We Christians have been so desensitized to that otherness by our familiarity with the text that we seldom are challenged by it with the force that energized it originally. Its immense countercultural potential for transforming us and our world is blunted so that we don't truly *hear* the voice of God in it. Edwards's essential purpose is to help us reawaken our ability to *hear* the Bible in its untimely, countercultural power.

Keywords: Michael Edwards; biblical poetry; poetic language; Christianity as counter-cultural; alterity



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1. Introduction

Michael Edwards, professor of English literature at the Collège de France in Paris, poet, critic, and the first British subject to be elected to the French Academy, has turned his attention in recent years to biblical literature. First he published *Bible et poésie* (Edwards 2016), a book that attracted enough attention that the University of Oxford organized in May of 2019 an entire conference on the book: "A Vigilant Wonder: Michael Edwards, Poetry, and the Bible". Four years later, a sequel appeared, *Pour un christianisme intempestif* (Edwards 2022), a translation of which, titled *Untimely Christianity* (Edwards 2022), was published by Fortress Press. The English translation of *Bible et Poésie* will also be published soon by New York Review Books.

I first encountered Edwards's work in the 1980s when I was researching a study of the Christian presence in French fiction. The secondary sources I consulted were a bit disappointing to me, but I found Edwards's *Towards a Christian Poetics* (Edwards 1984) to be the most useful resource available. In fact, that text already contains what can be seen as the germ of his writings on the Bible. Literature, for Edwards, and the need for story are patterned on the "cosmology of Christianity", which is "creation, fall and re-creation" (Edwards 1984, p. 4).

If the biblical reading of life is in any way true, literature will be drawn strongly towards it. Eden, Fall, Transformation, in whatever guise, will emerge in literature as everywhere else. . . . Literature occurs because we inhabit a fallen world. Explicitly or obscurely, it is part of our dispute with that world, and of our search for its and our own regeneration. (ibid., p. 12)

In writing *Towards a Christian Poetics*, Edwards's discovery of the Christian cosmology of creation, fall, and re-creation was the key to a career-long exploration or quest that he described in recent emails to me in the following terms:

Since *Towards a Christian Poetics*, I've sought essentially to discover what Christianity is, and how it can enable one to understand everything else. Since I was a student at Cambridge, in fact, when the sequence Eden, Fall, Heaven (and especially "new heavens and a new earth") enabled me to rethink Christianity and to put together everything in which I was interested, by illuminating not only tragedy and comedy but the nature and finality of literature, language, painting, music. My purpose has been, and is, philosophical, in the proper meaning of the word. And when stressing the Bible as poetry, my main concern was to persuade people to read it as we read poetry, to realize that, as with a sonnet of Shakespeare, for instance, the text itself is what matters, not the commentaries and ideas to which we've become accustomed.¹

One might ask how Edwards defines philosophy, since he asserts that his "purpose has been, and is, philosophical" in the quotation referred to above. For one thing, one must not confuse theology with philosophy. As for its etymology, it of course means the love of wisdom, and a considerable amount of the biblical poetry that Edwards explores is classified by biblical scholars as wisdom literature. Biblical wisdom literature can be analyzed as poetry and as philosophy, as well as theologically. But philosophy operates on the plane of human reason, whereas theology relies on revelation as well. As a poet who is also a believer in divine revelation, he uses the philosophical intellect, plus revelation knowledge (a "knowing," as he likes to express it) to demonstrate the "otherness" of both scripture and poetry. All this is articulated in his own philosophical vision of how to make sense of the world and art. One might also observe that wisdom itself can be defined biblically and non-biblically, and the two definitions may well differ in some ways.

Bible et Poésie and *Untimely Christianity* go far to elaborate and specify the relationship between Edwards's Christian poetics and sacred scripture (the Bible). This study examines this poet-scholar's perspective on scripture, on theology, and on the art of translation, as well as his opinions of various modern translations of the Bible, most of which he finds woefully impoverished. "The translation of the Bible", he comments, "is . . . an art, an art in the service of hope" (Edwards 2022, p. 86).

This study also seeks to demonstrate in some measure how the itinerary of Edwards's various works brought him to a philosophical elaboration of what he sees as the meaning of Christianity and how it enables one to make sense of the world and of art in all its various domains. The strangeness of Christianity, as well as of an artist's imaginative world, leads us in this "dispute with the world" toward an awareness of the world's and our own mysterious "regeneration", which occurs in the light of God's revelation in Christ.

Poet Kevin Hart of the University of Virginia, in introducing a recent lecture by Edwards titled "On the Perpetual Strangeness of the Bible" (Hart 2022), was reminded of Karl Barth's famous 1917 lecture, "The Strange New World within the Bible" (Barth 1917). But Hart's distinction between the approaches of the two thinkers is an accurate assessment of the special value of Edwards's work on scripture: "Michael Edwards's reading of the Scriptures is not burdened with a barely veiled attack on theological liberalism, as Barth's talk was. It follows hidden paths that go from book to book, even from verse to verse, in the Scriptures, and does so not in the service of a distinctly formed theology but rather with all the insight of a well-practiced literary critic and poet".²

2. Poetry in the Bible

Bible et Poésie takes the reader through the more obvious poetic genres of biblical literature—the Psalms, *Song of Songs*, the Old Testament prophets—and demonstrates how deeply poetic, in fact, most of the Bible is. Rather than simply a statement of propositional truth, it is, according to Edwards, a supremely poetic text. "Reading the Bible", he writes, "is a 'poetic' experience. It offers us a theology only in the etymological sense of the word:

a word concerning God” (Edwards 2016, p. 16). Poetry, after all, he insists, is itself a form of revelation. His analysis of biblical poetry is enriched by his own calling as a poet, having published several volumes of poetry in both French and English.

Edwards believes that we all too often read scripture poorly, in part because theology gets in the way. He believes the prominent place that poetry occupies in the Bible provides a key to a more insightful and faithful reading of it. He notes that the first recorded human words in Genesis 2:23 are presented in verse:

At last this is bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called “woman”,
Because she was taken out of man.

Then he points out that when God asks Adam, “Where art thou?” in the next chapter, Adam’s postlapsarian speech comes forth in prose: “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself” (Genesis 3:10). Edwards wonders if human language before the fall had a more intimate relationship with the objects it named, a relationship “which we are incapable of recovering” (Edwards 2016, p. 8). This might help explain how Adam was able to name all the animals. “If the language from before the fall was poetic or produced poems at moments loaded with meaning”, observes Edwards, “does then poetry represent for us the apogee of our fallen speech, its beginning and its end, its nostalgia and its hope?” (ibid., p. 9) Thomas Day makes much the same point in a review of Edwards’s most recently published collection of poems in English named *At the Brasserie Lipp* in 2019:

Adamic language possessed the capacity to perfectly match signifiers to signifieds, thus to express the true essence of things in a way that later human languages could not. Bathed in “the light of childhood”, this certainly resembles a kind of prelapsarian first world. (Day 2020, p. 44)³

Contemporary poets such as Dana Gioia insist that poetry is a spoken genre, a performative art whose sounds, rhythm, and texture must be physiologically savored. This understanding of poetic language as embodied meshes with Edwards’ view. In an interview with Erika Koss in *Image*, Gioia remarked:

A post-print world is not a bad place for poetry. Poetry is an art that predates writing. It’s essentially an auditory art. A poet today has the potential to speak directly to an audience—through public readings, radio broadcasts, recordings, and the internet. Most people don’t read poetry, but they do like to hear good poems well-recited. I write mostly for the ear, and I find large and responsive audiences all over the country. (Gioia 2019, p. 155)

In his poetry readings, Gioia always recites from memory, whether he is reciting his own or others’ poems. He observes elsewhere that poetry originated as a recitation and that it must recapture that live, sensory experience. As we have seen, Edwards identifies that sensory experience of poetic language as a natural forerunner to the experience of Biblical poetry. Since the Lord created the heavens and the earth by speaking them into existence, the Word of God is both speech and action combined. The Psalms were originally sung liturgically by the faithful and still are in the more liturgical churches. If we in our era read them silently, we risk not truly hearing the voice of God. The human body, which was originally involved in singing the words, is now absent from the reading experience, which becomes more abstract and intellectual.⁴

3. The Meanings of Silence

Now actually hearing God’s voice—whether by reading scripture or somehow hearkening to his “still, small voice” in watchful prayer or dream or vision—is certainly a lofty goal.⁵ Edwards believes that “One must listen to all Scripture ‘given by inspiration of God’ (2 Timothy 3:16) in silence with the hope of hearing and understanding” (Edwards 2022,

p. 16). Silence, as David Jasper says in “Revisiting a Christian Poetics” (2019), comes in quite different forms. Referring to Edwards’s penetrating chapter on “Sublunary Music” in *Towards a Christian Poetics*, he writes:

There is, on the one hand, a dark silence of absence and, on the other, there is a light-filled fullness of silence that is the conclusion of all speech and music. (Jasper 2019, p. 61)

Regarding the first form of silence in Jasper’s quote, one thinks of the intimidating silence of the blank page, with its threat of sterility, which Mallarmé faced as a poet, whereas the “light-filled fullness of silence” could be compared with the sublime silence of God’s harmony that Simone Weil—quite unexpectedly—finds in Jesus’ anguished cry on the cross. Weil speaks in ecstatic terms of the moment on the cross when Christ cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46):

The cry of Christ and the silence of the Father together make the supreme harmony, of which all music is only an imitation. Those of our harmonies that are at once most agonizing and sweetest remotely resemble it. The entire universe, including our own existences which are small fragments of it, is only the vibration of this harmony. (Weil 1985, pp. 168–69)

In his chapter on “sublunary music”, Edwards says, “The mind can also hear silence as a virtual perfection that precedes sounds and discloses their imperfection” (Edwards 2022, p. 194). It is no doubt this kind of contemplative silence—preserved, for example, in the Trappist way of life—that he says is necessary for truly hearing the voice of God. One final quotation from the same chapter may provide some depth to the picture: “A theology of sound . . . might begin by placing us dialectically, as hearers, between the sound of Eden and the sound of Paradise. They of course are inaudible” (ibid., p. 192).

One normally thinks of the beauty of music as residing in the notes of melody, but what value would the melody have without the pauses and rests, which introduce the element of silence? And do not we preserve the silence between movements of a symphony or sonata in order to allow silence to give them more resonance? “Words [as well as music, we might add] breathe and speak into silence, allowing us to hear, if only for a moment the divine language, lifting us from our endless daily distractions and chatterings” (Jasper 2019, p. 61).

4. The Radical Alterity of Scripture

We must keep in mind that the Word of God is his Son, who lived out the word in an incomparable incarnation of it. The Gospels record his spoken word, which is full of poetic utterances—both his own and those he quotes from the prophets and psalmist. If we read them in search of no more than propositional truths, we fail to grasp the richness of their revelation. As noted above, Edwards says poetry itself is a kind of revelation, in the sense that a genuine encounter with reality in its power to convey more than what we see or feel on the surface is a revelation, and so it demands an openness to hidden meanings. The truth of the Bible partakes of the unseen world of faith. It is radically *other*. For a sympathetic understanding of both scripture and poetry, precisely because of their alterity, the childlike openness of a passionate seeker is a prerequisite. The childlike openness and wonder referred to here⁶ are also explored in the chapter on inspiration in poetry in *Untimely Christianity*:

Language “inspires” the poet; reality as well. Absolutely any apparently insignificant parcel of that strange All that sustains us can call him, capture his attention, launch him into the course of questions, or rather repetitions of a single question, whose gravity children understand but adults little by little lose the habit of asking, “Why?” (Edwards 2022, p. 128).

Radical alterity is an important key to Edwards’s work. Christianity is foreign to us, it is strange, so the scriptures that reveal it are also radically *other*. We Christians have been so desensitized to that otherness by our familiarity with the text that we seldom are

challenged by it with the force that energized it originally. Its immense countercultural potential for transforming us and our world is blunted so that we do not truly *hear* the voice of God in it. Edwards's essential purpose is to help us reawaken our ability to *hear* the Bible in its untimely, countercultural power. In Thomas Day's review of *At the Brasserie Lipp*, which he titles, with a quote from one of the poems, "The Weird Real", he states:

"[T]he real" is "weird" . . . in that it is cause of wonder, but also because the otherness of the real resists the writer's attempts to render it in language . . . so much so that the breakthroughs, when they come, seem mysterious, quasi-miraculous even. The poet, in Edwards's conception, aims to release the real by bringing to it a freshness of perception and a quality of wakeful attention. (Day 2020, p. 43)

5. Childlike Openness and Wonder

At the Brasserie Lipp contains further clues to the importance of childhood in Edwards's imaginative world, a world that obviously enriches his exegetical acuity. "The light of childhood is clean, it adds/like the sun nothing but itself to the scene", reads the two-line opening of the third poem in section 17. Thomas Day's review expands on the childhood theme, using a passage from Edwards's essay on Pierre Emmanuel in *Of Making Many Books*:

The poet—that is, the person who handles words with the greatest knowledge and intimacy—is "the stranger to names". This estrangement arises because the poet sees the world through the eyes of the child becoming aware of it, and naming it, for the first time; to the adult, the bond between word and thing has hardened through habitual association so that "the name attached to it does not create it, but defines it". (Day 2020, p. 44)

"The light of childhood is clean, it adds/like the sun nothing but itself to the scene" (Edwards 2019, p. 42). Edwards's two lines find resonance as well in Jean-Louis Chrétien's reflections on the concept of witness or testimony in *Under the Gaze of the Bible*: "Light has no need of another witness for itself" (Chrétien 2015, p. 87). Light is unmistakably self-evident.

The consequences of a child-like position, in Edwards's sense, before scripture can be significant. An historical illustration could be useful. In the Antebellum American church, preachers repeatedly used certain problematic passages of the Bible, taken out of context, to defend the institution of chattel slavery. They no doubt felt quite virtuous in preaching obedience and submission to the slaves. The culture in which they lived blinded them to the more challenging dimensions of scripture. They were reading the Bible through a culture-bound lens or filter that veiled the deeper meaning from their sight. Their lives were already wedded to the institution of slavery as a necessity for economic prosperity. Rather than hearing the word of God in its transformational power, they were using it to justify their way of life and avoid having to change it. In an analogous way, medieval Christians in the wake of Constantine presumptuously arrogated to themselves such titles as the *Holy Roman Empire* and referred to western Europe as Christendom, as if it were actually the Kingdom of Christ.

For Edwards, the transformational power of scripture that was missed in the above examples exerts itself in the smallest actions of childlike attention:

A few words are enough for everyday reality to be entirely transformed, for the blindness and deafness that prevent us from seeing and hearing to be in the blink of an eye, albeit very partially, healed. The first virtue of poetry would be to change our manner of grasping the real, as a foretaste of its veritable change at the end of time. (Edwards 2022, p. 65)

The above quotation is taken from Edwards's meditation on the Lord's Prayer. He interprets it as a poem spoken extemporaneously by Christ when the disciples ask him to teach them to pray. The Our Father is in fact a poem, and Edwards shows us how faithfully

it follows the norms of Hebrew prosody. John Hittinger calls this chapter “a tour de force that shows the reader how a more careful look at the pattern and meaning of words opens up the teaching of Christ as a surprising and compelling account of human existence in relation to God”.⁷ The power of words, in particular words given to us by the Son of God, unfolds new dimensions of spiritual reality. The Lord’s Prayer, when prayed “in spirit and in truth”, is an entrance into Kingdom reality. “‘Our Father’ places us suddenly in an incommensurable world of eternity and vastness. . . . As at the beginning of any great poem, a door is opened onto another world, or a world that is other” (Edwards 2022, p. 62).

The sense of wonder that this door opens is heightened when we realize that the first person plural of “Our Father” makes it necessarily a prayer we share with “all the saints”, both on earth and in heaven. One might also compare the “opened door” to another world here to the way Edwards describes his first encounter with the French language. As a foreign language teacher, I identify with what Edwards says about learning a foreign language and the potentially spiritual value it may hold for the student.

To learn a foreign language, for him who really pays attention to it, is to enter into a new world, to recognize that there exist many others, and to look with an amazed eye at the world that one has always inhabited and that one considered unique. Such an apprenticeship—perhaps the most precious we can offer a student—possesses a profoundly moral dimension: it brings us out of ourselves and lets us feel the intelligence and the sensibility of another. It can even have a spiritual dimension according to the religious definition of the word: whatever comes from the Holy Spirit is spiritual, if ever this initiation to the strange—to the strangeness of all that is implied in a foreign language and to the strangeness of all that was once familiar—is transformed into the intuition of another alterity. (ibid., p. 86)

Learning a foreign language is an opportunity to take on, as it were, a new self. Getting inside a culture that is so different in many ways gives students a heightened sensitivity to new ways of thinking and can thus give them greater tolerance and a deeper understanding of their own culture, and even, Edwards suggests, a more acute spiritual sensitivity. Consequently, the alterity of foreign languages can lead us to a better understanding of the word of God in its even greater alterity.

6. Faith and Belief

The predominance of parables in Jesus’ teachings challenges our understanding of his message. They require an effort of creative imagination, much like the effort necessary for truly *hearing* the voice of the poet in secular poetry. They also invite a meditation on lived reality and a living application of their truths. Jack Sammons writes that parables operate “pedagogically by orienting, disorienting, and then reorienting the listener to matters drawn from common life such that he or she can come to view these matters in a way that is radically different”. He adds that they reorient the reader or listener “by a jolting reminder of things he or she already knows” (Sammons 2005, pp. 47–48). The Bible does not always use this parabolic method, but it does awaken in us “things we already know”, that were planted in us when we were quickened by faith, which Edwards defines as a “knowing”.

Faith, says Edwards, is to be distinguished from belief in a number of ways. In the original French version of *Untimely Christianity*, he resorts to the English word *knowing*. “The English language allows us to express its reality with exactness: faith is less a knowledge than a knowing, the entering into a relationship with something or someone. . . . It is distinguished from credulity and intellectual assent because it is . . . a *secure knowing*” (Edwards 2022, p. 24).

Edwards sides with Pascal against Descartes in that he refocuses us on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, “not of philosophers and scholars” (Pascal 1995, p. 285). Fallen humanity’s rational explorations of the Divine are useless, and proofs of God, he maintains, actually distance us from the God of the Bible. I am reminded of a story by the late French

novelist Vladimir Volkoff (titled “La Preuve”—The Proof, [Volkoff 1997](#)), in which the Soviets make valuable use of a supposedly unassailable proof of God’s existence as a tool for exterminating genuine faith. Both Volkoff and Edwards, while rejecting the notion of faith as a blind leap, also maintain that faith is not dependent on rational proof.⁸ Edwards cites the epistle of James, in which he finds biting irony: “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble” (James 2:19), and then comments: “Believing in the existence of God raises us to the level of the demons, who are not troubled by unbelief and doubt. With a few words, James sweeps away in advance the proofs of God by showing that the type of belief that they assume has nothing to do with faith” (ibid., p. 41). In *Untimely Christianity*, he adds: “If ever one happened upon a totally convincing proof—and Christians themselves have often endeavored to elaborate such proofs, as if the presentation of the gospel, of the good news, entailed them—one would find oneself in the presence, not of God, but of his logical counterfeit” ([Edwards 2022](#), p. 122).

Edwards’ understanding of the nature of faith leads him to put little stock in apologetics. One might compare his position to the passage in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, where the Reverend John Ames, in the wisdom of advanced age, realizes he cannot hope to persuade the young skeptic Jack Boughton of the truth of the Gospel. “Well”, he says, “I have had a certain amount of experience with skepticism and the conversation it generates, and there is an inevitable futility in it. It is even destructive. . . . Because nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense” ([Robinson 2006](#), p. 177).

This understanding of faith is connected with the language of poetry for Edwards, because poetry in its closeness to the strangeness of reality is closer to prayer than are rational arguments or theology. Poetic language is more incarnational, less abstract than rational argument. Edwards develops this incarnational understanding of language, writing:

Human words are already flesh. Their sounds emerge from our mouth and penetrate our ears (even when read silently), their rhythms move in our bodies. Thought does not await the poem in order to be incarnated; it is already incarnate in the person who thinks and in the language of his or her thought. Rather, what is proper to poetry is the making sensible of the corporal nature of language. ([Edwards 2016](#), p. 69)

This last sentence is very hard to translate into English, but what Edwards is getting at is that the poet wants us to *feel* the poem with all our senses. In another passage he seems to elaborate along these lines: “Even profane poetry awakens ‘a feeling of presence’ and allows us to approach the being of what it evokes. The Bible, at a totally different level if we’re able to hear it, resounds with a divine Presence whose authority needs nothing to make itself felt” (ibid., p. 47). This “authority” is what Jean-Louis Chrétien, as we observed earlier, refers to when he writes that Christ’s testimony does not require a witness ([Chrétien 2015](#), p. 87).

One factor in the Bible’s way of making itself “felt” has to do, argues Edwards, with some of the stylistic features of Hebrew poetry. The Bible features a radically different prosody from poetry in English or French. Meter and rhyme are absent from Hebrew poetry. “The short, two-part sentence form or couplet is the basic unit of Hebrew poetry”, according to *The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* ([Mills 1990](#), p. 697). Consequently, and happily, the voice of biblical poetry in translation is more accessible to our ears than is that of French poetry. Edwards writes:

We can hear the Hebraic poetry more easily than other poetries translated into a foreign language by the fact that it is grounded neither in the length nor the counting of the syllables, nor in the rhyme, but in figures of construction and, in particular, in various sorts of repetition. These figures stand out in the translation. ([Edwards 2016](#), p. 130)

Much of what Edwards says about Hebrew poetry is reminiscent of what Robert Alter writes in his Introduction to his wonderful *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* ([Alter 1997](#)). Alter and Edwards both find fault with translators who cannot resist the temptation to

interpret scripture rather than simply translating. A common tendency among modern biblical translators is to make the “lesson” of a passage more evident, often by resorting to ways of seeking to make it more “relevant”. Such tendencies only obscure the original, timeless power to open up the unseen world of the spirit that is mysteriously unveiled by the Bible’s ever untimely, counter-cultural impact.

Edwards’ confidence in the power of Biblical poetry to communicate its strangeness informs his sense of the salutary strength of Christian faith. His *Untimely Christianity* is a call for a counter-cultural Christianity, the message of which is never in harmony with any era; hence “untimely”. The subtitle could be rendered literally as “Learning to *Hear* the Bible”. It is an eloquent, prophetic effort to recapture the revolutionary power of the Bible for transforming our lives, the way we view the world, and how we live in that world.

Edwards’s argument is that the biblical text must be taken for what it says in its original impact and context. He finds that readers have been inoculated against the raw power of the word by their familiarity with it. For him, the Bible partakes of such a different reality from normal daily living that we need to adjust to its *strangeness* or *alterity*—both key words throughout. He also argues that what we normally think of as reality, or “the real”, is actually much less real than the *other* realm that is communicated through God’s word.

In the final chapter of *Towards a Christian Poetics*, Edwards talks about St. Paul’s radical transformation in his Damascus Road experience as an example of how the familiarity of scripture can mask its deeper and more challenging meaning (Edwards 1984, pp. 234–35). Before his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ, Saul had been trapped in the cultural paradigm that masked the messianic prophesies of the Hebrew scripture, in which he had been thoroughly schooled by the great Gamaliel. After the Damascus Road, “he rejected the reading of it in his culture, a misreading that produced a sort of hallucinated Hebraism, a collective neurosis all the more potent in that it had the true God for its object” (ibid., p. 234). Edwards warns that Christians today may all too easily lose themselves in a similar cultural misreading of the Gospel.

What is the antidote for such a misreading? We have seen it in the way Edwards argues for continuity, despite ultimate difference, between the power of poetic language to make us see, and the Bible’s strange sort of clarity. “To read the Bible with understanding, [or truly to *hear* the Bible when reading it] one must listen to it resonate, the way one reads a poem, but with this difference: the voice that speaks is God’s, addressing each reader individually” (Edwards 2022, p. 17). In passages like this one, Edwards implies that Bible-reading and prayer are inseparable. The believer must read sacred scripture prayerfully and pray prayers filled with scripture. He also agrees, once again, with Jean-Louis Chrétien, who writes that we must not so much *read* the Bible as submit to *being read and examined* by the word. For Edwards, “The Bible is a continuous questioning of the reader and a prodigious expansion of reality” (ibid., pp. xxi–xxii).

7. “Beyond a Common Joy”

This prodigious expansion of reality through biblical revelation of the possibility of knowing God is what affords us access to the joy that consists in that relationship. There may be no more foreign word in our post-Christian world than joy. Yet Edwards devotes an entire chapter of *Untimely Christianity* to the biblical theme of joy, pointing out that St. Paul repeatedly commands us to cultivate joy as a specifically Christian virtue. For the skeptic or unbeliever, this kind of joy cannot be experienced, since it is supernatural. To speak of joy in our day is bold. Even in 1929, Georges Bernanos was no doubt considered a bit out of touch with reality when he published a novel titled *La Joie*. The protagonist of that novel, Chantal de Clergerie, is patterned after Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who was extraordinarily endowed with the gift of supernatural joy. She discovers that joy is what frees the soul by saturating it with the awareness that it can do nothing other than what God does through it. “The certainty of her impotence”, writes Bernanos of Chantal, “had become the dazzling center of her joy, the core of that flaming star” (Bernanos 1961, p. 681,

my translation). The kind of joy evoked by both Bernanos and Edwards is quite obviously of a supernatural character.

“Is it improper to speak of joy?” writes Edwards. “Cruel, when the world is suffering? No, as long as we proceed with fear and trembling, and discern in joy something other than an agreeable emotion. As long as we feel that joy, far from isolating us in our well-being, opens us to others and to the real” (Edwards 2022, p. 49). What the world understands by joy certainly would be at least insensitive in the face of the suffering in our world today: oppression, pandemic, wars, famine, natural disasters, racial and religious strife. Yet we have seen how a deeper joy can sustain the believer despite the challenges. Not only in the saints like Thérèse de Lisieux and Mother Teresa, but in obscure servants who minister to Jesus by serving “the least of these”.

Edwards illustrates how the arts at their best lift us, pointing us to the joy that is a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit, even if they cannot bring us all the way there. “True joy” he writes, “is other and much more than the joy we ordinarily conceive and feel. Literature and all forms of art offer us reflections of it” (ibid., p. 45). He finds apt musical and artistic illustrations in Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden* and in Rembrandt’s *Slaughtered Ox*, both of which take tragedy and violence and somehow produce, paradoxically, a kind of cathartic pleasure.

The joy of form is undeniable, it takes hold of us as soon as we direct our attention to it. It transcends the simple Aristotelian pleasure of good imitation, of the success with which something, even unpleasant, like the hanging carcass of an ox or King Lear’s madness, is represented. It constitutes a kind of *excess* of the work. (ibid., pp. 45–46)

This excess, or superfluity, that art produces strikes me as another secular foreshadowing of the spiritual gifts. Edwards also finds this kind of foretaste of supernatural joy in Coleridge’s poem “The Nightingale” (Coleridge 1931).

However, the highlight of the chapter on joy is Edwards’ two-page reflection on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which he makes very clear the relationship between the timely experiences of joy through art, and the untimely joy found in Christian experience. The miraculous resolution of all the problems in the play, according to Edwards, is not just another *happy ending*. It is welcomed in one of the truly sublime passages of Shakespeare with the two lines: “O, rejoice/Beyond a common joy” (V, i, 206–7). The miraculous dénouement, says Edwards, is “the glimpse of a true miracle. The audience as well as the characters pass ‘beyond a common joy,’ cross a threshold, encounter a new world where the divine reigns” (Edwards 2022, p. 46). Edwards further enriches his commentary by mentioning the meaning of the Latin word behind the now somewhat old-fashioned term for a storm that Shakespeare chose for his title: *tempestus*, which literally means “coming at the right time”. Perhaps he was reminded of this etymology by the adjective “untimely” (*intempestif*) in his own book’s title. So Prospero’s tempest is timely, whereas the Christian faith is *untimely* in all eras to the extent that it does not conform to its time. We might also invoke the biblical concept of *kairos*, the appointed time in the purpose of God, as in Mark 1:15: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent ye, and believe the gospel”.

These illustrations of artistic, musical, and literary foretastes of biblical joy come from a poet. Yet this poet is also a believer steeped in orthodox Christian theology and a lover of scripture. He is thus careful to delineate the differences among these various kinds of joy. The joy he finds in *The Tempest* “is not a simple joy of the aesthete, a delight that fails to concern the whole person and that excludes the consciousness of reality. Perhaps the intuition of a beauty that contradicts life’s misery and allows us to glimpse something beyond the misery” (ibid., p. 46). It is indeed a rejoicing beyond a common joy.

These reflections on the supernatural form of biblical joy seem to call for a revisiting of its evocation in Hebrew scripture. Nehemiah 8:10 articulates the well-known biblical principle: “The joy of the Lord is your strength”. I find it apropos of Edwards’s discussion that the context of this verse is one of repentance, of intense conviction of sin. The public

reading of the covenant to all the Hebrew people makes them weep and wail over their sinfulness. But Nehemiah and Ezra tell them not to become consumed with mourning:

Then he said unto them, “Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength”.

Joy can thus actually follow earnest repentance. Similarly, in a masterful poetic commentary on the Book of Lamentations, Edwards speaks of a “joy that transcends lamentation”. This acrostic poem by Jeremiah, which is structured on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, “reveals, not [God’s] wrath, but his goodness”. The gift of “biblical poetry, inspired by God”, he suggests, “is a way to God, and a sign, perhaps, of his own joy” (Edwards 2022, p. 114). Now the Hebrew word for joy also has the meaning of “fortress”. The weeping prophet is the one who proclaims that the joy of the Lord is our strength and our fortress against the attacks of Satan.⁹

8. Aesthetic and Spiritual Experience

As a poet and a lover of all the arts, Edwards brings considerable creative gifts to the task of scriptural exegesis. The joy beyond a common joy that a relationship with the Divine affords can indeed be at least suggested by the arts. But even though all forms of cultural expression have the potential to evoke spiritual reality, they cannot, in fact, actually lift us into the heavenly realm. “The limited role of art is explained in that it can attain beauty, if such is the desire and capacity of the artist, but not that which seems to stand beyond beauty: glory” (Edwards 2022, p. 84). In an email exchange with Edwards, I asked him whether some of the more sublime moments in music (such as Handel’s *Messiah* or Vivaldi’s *Gloria*) are not capable of transporting us into heavenly realms. I was intrigued by his reply because it helps us understand the importance of the distinction he makes.

On the question of art, beauty and what lies beyond beauty: “art” there refers to all forms of art, including music, and although a Christian may sense that he is almost in the presence of glory (not only in listening to explicitly Christian works, but to, say, the last piano sonatas of Schubert), the “almost” is important, in fact decisive [emphasis mine]. We shall know glory after the resurrection; what we have now are powerful hints—in poetry or painting as much as in music—and the beauty of the natural world seems to me the greatest of these. Beauty gives us an inkling of a world at once Edenic and recreated. Music can seem more “glorious” since all we need to do is listen, whereas in poetry we also have to take in words and their meanings, and in painting we look but we also see a valley or someone’s portrait. If we can achieve the same concentration in poetry and in painting as in music, we find the same overwhelming intuition and perhaps more: the transfiguring of the world present in words or images. All that is of course subject to caution! I may sound as if I’m sure, but I’m still searching.¹⁰

This said, I do not want to suggest in any way that Edwards minimizes the powerful interplay of the arts and the unseen, unheard realm of spirit.

Christianity furnishes the reason for culture and for the art that is found at its center in numerous forms. Culture is born of the banishment from Eden, from man’s and the world’s happy harmony, which we have no trouble imagining but which does not correspond to reality as we live it. (Edwards 2022, p. 75)

9. The Person of *Alètheia*

So how is one to arrive in this unseen realm of the spirit where a joy beyond a common joy may be appropriated? Our poet guide in the radically “other” world of the word provides his best answer with a meditation on the well-known threefold promise that Jesus proclaims in Matthew 7:7–8 and Luke 11:9–10: “Seek and Ye Shall Find”. His interpretation amounts to a reminder that the key to understanding the word is seeking the Word. In six concise lines of poetry, the Lord tells us to seek, to knock, and to ask. One must seek above

all a Person rather than answers to philosophical questions. “‘Seek and ye shall find’ means: ‘seek to know the Other and agree to become another person yourself’” (Edwards 2022, p. 126). Exploring the mystery of repentance, Edwards suggests that the very moment of opening the door of seeking translates us into the world of the spirit. He quotes Pascal’s famous line: “You would not seek me if you had not found me” (Pascal 1995, p. 290). To the question, “How must one seek?” Edwards replies:

Since one must seek, not the truth of Christianity, but Christ himself, the privileged intermediaries are first of all the Scriptures, the word of God that reveals the Word of God, and then Christians who read them and can make them understood. (ibid., p. 128)

And this seeking is not just a passive waiting for God’s gift of faith. In a line reminiscent of Philippians 2:12–13,¹¹ Edwards provides readers with the salutary reminder that “We do not seek alone and in a sort of void. God also is at work” (ibid., p. 129).

Indeed, for Edwards, believers are set free by the truth because we know the truth as a man knows a woman. Knowing Jesus as the truth is the kind of knowledge that he claims for faith, except that he prefers the verb form, knowing. This means partly that knowing the truth is a relational action rather than an intellectual assent. He reclaims the Greek *alètheia*, even though it runs counter to Greek culture in that for him truth is not a concept but something—or rather Someone—we engage actively. His claim is that:

[Jesus] returns to the point of view of the Old Testament, in which “to walk” in the truth of God defines, repeatedly, the way of life that is demanded of the faithful. To do the truth rather than to think it recovers the Hebrew perspective on the true and immerses us in a world where the Greek idea appears inadequate. (ibid., p. 170)

The conclusion at which Michael Edwards arrives at the end of his journey through writing two books that explore the mystery of sacred scripture, then, amounts to a virtual altar call. The ultimate truth we seek is not that God exists or that he gave his Son to humanity to save them, but rather:

The truth is Jesus as the Son of God. One finds the truth little by little by walking with Jesus and in him, as one finds it in letting the life of Jesus be in us. The words “I am the truth” are not only an assertion; they arrive as an invitation. If Jesus is the Truth indeed, he is also the truth for us. (ibid., p. 140)

If we are to find the truth that sets us free, we must, says our poet-guide in the radically other unseen world of the spirit, accept the invitation to seek, trusting that the truth we seek is a Person who will warmly greet us with his arms spread wide to receive us in his bosom.¹²

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Notes

- ¹ Emails from Michael Edwards to John Dunaway on 31 July and 4 August 2022.
- ² Richard E. Myers Lectures, 29 March 2022, University Baptist Church, Charlottesville, Virginia. Used with the gracious permission of Professor Hart.
- ³ Day goes a bit further than Edwards in claiming that Adam had “the capacity to perfectly match signifiers to signifieds.” To assert that human language before the Fall was endowed with more poetic utterance and a power for naming things because of a deeper communion with those things does not necessarily entail a claim for human perfection before the Fall. Adamic language was undoubtedly not perfect. Adam and Eve were finite, though without sin, perfect only in the sense that they were perfectly fitted to the use for which they were designed, not that they were on a par with God.
- ⁴ In Kevin Hart’s introduction for the Myers Lectures cited above, he refers to Karl Rahner’s 1960 essay, “Poetry and the Christian” (Rahner 2021), in which Rahner “tells his audience that they simply cannot hear the word of God until they have learned to hear poetry”.
- ⁵ An outstanding source for practical insights on cultivating the ability to hear God is Dallas Willard’s *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Willard 2012). Willard and Edwards share quite compatible approaches to scripture. Willard as a philosopher combined intellect with acute spiritual sensitivity, whereas Edwards combines intellect with acute spiritual and poetic sensitivity. Hence my choice of Willard as the person to whom I dedicated the translation of *Untimely Christianity*.
- ⁶ One thinks in this regard of a Proust or a Bernanos. The latter even proclaimed that he knew his public would not be vast, simply because the public for which he wrote included only three categories: children, heroes, and martyrs.
- ⁷ From the endorsements at the beginning of *Untimely Christianity*.
- ⁸ Edwards also appears to be in agreement with Volkoff when he says, “Have those who think they have ‘lost their faith’ not rather lost their belief and a set of beliefs?” (Edwards 2022, p. 26). Volkoff once remarked rather sardonically that he could never understand how people could say they had lost their faith, almost in the way they’d lost their keys!
- ⁹ Fortress Press changed the subtitle to “Hearing the Bible in a Secular Age”. Edwards tried to object that this version gives the impression that his book is directed at secular readers who misunderstand scripture out of ignorance, whereas he intended primarily to address believers themselves, who misunderstand it because of their familiarity with it. Hence his effort to recapture the alterity of the original text.
- ¹⁰ Email from Michael Edwards to John Dunaway, 24 September 2021.
- ¹¹ “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”
- ¹² This essay is a general introduction to Michael Edwards’s thinking concerning holy scripture. Several points considered briefly here could easily be taken up for future development by other scholars. One possible area could be placing his work in conversation with certain philosophers associated with what is commonly called the “theological turn” in French phenomenology, such as Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and the late Jean-Louis Chrétien. He quite clearly is much closer to Chrétien, though he does occasionally engage the other two in his writings. I wish to acknowledge here the incredibly gracious assistance of both Michael Edwards and Stephen Lewis, as well as my wife Trish, in this essay.

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