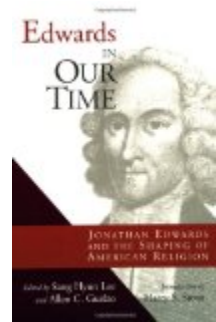


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sang Hyun Lee, Allen C. Guelzo, eds. *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999. xiv + 214 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-4608-2.

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## A Usable Edwards

In this volume, the essayists contend that Jonathan Edwards' voice should be heard in contemporary dialogue on religion, ethics, and culture, since his conceptions of nature, being, agency, and salvation (among other things) offer surpassingly resilient foils for our present-day concerns. To use a word from the title of one of the essays, Edwards concerned himself with "perennial" questions that were as relevant in his own time as they are in ours. There are obvious interpretive hazards associated with the search for contemporary relevance in historical subjects, but in general, the authors successfully wrest some profitable insights by reading Edwards in light of modernity, of both the mid-eighteenth and late-twentieth century varieties. The result is a sympathetic treatment of Edwardsian thought and its resonance across a sweeping terrain of (so-called) things that matter, from Aristotle to Edwards to the Niebuhrs and beyond.

The occasion for this volume was a 1996 conference on Jonathan Edwards, held in Philadelphia under the title, "Edwards in Our Time." As Harry S. Stout points out in the introduction, this was but the latest in a series of conferences on Edwards, all of which generated published essay collections.[1] These collections join several recent monographs on Edwards' theology, and couple of current biographies in a body of work that taken as a whole, represents the crystallization of a modern field of Edwardsian studies.[2] The present volume, like many works in this field, owes a clear debt to the Yale series of the *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, which appears to have

served as the gateway of research for several of the individual essays. Perhaps it should be acknowledged that the level of maturation in this field reflects, in part, the influence of the Yale series, and by extension, the editorial wisdom of its helmsmen over the past few decades.[3]

Eight of the essays are gathered into doublets under the headings, "God, Being, and Nature," "Ethics," "Preaching and Revival," and "Eschatology," with an additional essay in the opening to give the collection a bit of conceptual focus. In this particular piece, titled "The Perennial Jonathan Edwards," John E. Smith considers three Edwardsian concepts that provide ways to address "recurrent problems in the world of religion as that world bears on the fabric of society," (p. 2). These are the notion of religious affections, the idea of the oneness of humanity in connection with original sin, and finally, the view of history as both cyclical and developmental. To Smith, these concepts, properly understood, can help us to cope with contemporary "problems" like "pride in the assurance of being 'converted' and in declaring others to be hypocrites," and "identifying sin...with some particular sphere of human experience such as sexuality," (pp. 6, 9). Much to his credit, Smith renders these concepts as distinctively "Edwardsian" responses to the peculiar eighteenth-century intellectual milieu, even as he demonstrates the utility of these ideas in light of contemporary culture.

Smith's essay effectively frames the more detailed and issue-specific assessments of Edwardsian thought

that follow. In his essay, "Edwards on God and Nature: Resources for Contemporary Theology," Sang Hyun Lee carries forward themes in his earlier work to demonstrate how Edwards' dispositional ontology can help us to address theological difficulties posed by process theology. The thinking here is that Edwards characterized God as fully actual and self-sufficient, but also disposed to "further actualizations," (p. 17). In this way, God retains transcendence amid on-going involvement with creation. As a result, God, humanity, and nature possess a kind of mutuality that results in their collective enlargement, an idea that may help to produce "an ecologically responsible theology of nature," (p. 43). The other essay in this doublet, Stephen H. Daniel's "Postmodern Concepts of God and Edwards' Trinitarian Ontology," critiques substantialist theories of the trinity by utilizing Edwards' embryonic understanding of what is currently framed as the "communicational character of God," (p. 58). Connecting Edwards to the postmoderns through Karl Barth, Daniel asserts that Edwards' trinitarianism is essentially discursive, and this feature of God's intra-trinitarian relation renders the divine an intelligible entity. To Daniel, Edwards can therefore teach the postmodern world how to escape the clutches of nihilism, to transform the world from "lacking significance to being inherently significant," (p. 63).

Daniel's essay has a depth and maturity that is matched by the essays in the ensuing doublet, Roland A. Delattre's "Religious Ethics Today: Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Beyond," and Allen C. Guelzo's "The Return of the Will: Jonathan Edwards and the Possibilities of Free Will." As Daniel does with Barth, Delattre sets Edwards in dialogue with another twentieth-century theologian (hence the subtitle) in order to discover the basis for an "authentically religious life." Delattre interprets Edwards as wedding together aesthetics and ethics in his notion of what constitutes a well-formed existence. "Beauty enlarges and enhances being," Delattre argues, and therefore the divine emanation through creation brings God's fullness within human reach (p. 70). As he concludes in a phrase repeated throughout the essay, "beauty is our home if we ever have a home," (p. 74).

Guelzo's essay is most keenly interested in establishing something like a Great Conversation between ancient, early modern, and contemporary theologians and intellectuals to explain the demise of "compatibilism" in the debates over free will and determinism. Edwards, Guelzo contends, deployed an ambiguous notion of "motive" to explain human volition in response to the deter-

minists of the eighteenth century, thereby salvaging a version of compatibilism. His evangelical heirs, however, subsequently abandoned compatibilism as they sought shelter from the hard determinism of cognitive science in the so-called "openness theology."

In the third section, the essayists turn to more practical matters associated with Edwards' ministry in Northampton and elsewhere. Walter V. L. Eversley's "The Pastor as Revivalist" presents sacramentalism and conversionism as potentially conflicting focal points of ministry. Edwards worked to harmonize these divergent imperatives, but when he arrived at "a high church view of the sacraments with a low church view of participation," he inverted the preferred arrangement of the congregation he inherited from his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard (p. 127). His fate suggests to modern ministers the importance of stressing one or the other only in response to the perceived needs of their congregation. Edwards' Northampton experience is also the subject of Helen P. Westra's "Divinity's Design: Edwards and the History of the Work of Revival." Westra provides a close reading of several key sermons to illustrate the importance Edwards attached to the "revival-declension-revival" pattern in his overall understanding of God's providential design. Edwards made exegetical use of events in Northampton, both mundane and sublime, as pseudo-texts encoded with "divine messages pointing to the dangers of apathy, hypocrisy, and declension," (p. 155).

In the final section, Robert W. Jenson's "The End is Music" reflects on the history of eschatology from Edwards to the present, and finds in Edwards' doctrine of the trinity a satisfying way to characterize the eschaton. Jenson laments the suppression of eschatology in the rationalistic "theology of modernity," and its byproduct of an "antimony of hope" in the contemporary world. He concludes that an avenue of escape from this condition can be found in Edwards' metaphor of "mutual love as music," since the "harmony of our love, finally perfectly harmonized with the supreme harmony," reflects the manifest beauty and harmony of a triune God (p. 170). The final essay, Gerald R. McDermott's "A Possibility of Reconciliation: Jonathan Edwards and the Salvation of Non-Christians," examines Edwards' personal notebooks and other writings to assess his approach to the problem of the unreached "heathen." Edwards meditated on the concept of "prisca theologia," his own dispositional ontology, and finally, typological understandings of world religions in response to deistic criticism of the Reformed tradition's circumscribed soteriology.

Edwards, McDermott contends, ultimately accepted the possibility of the heathen reaching the divine reward in some fashion other than direct knowledge of Christ, even though he doubted that this outcome would be widely attained.

This volume cuts across the disparate fields of ethics, theology, social thought, church history, literature, and philosophy of religion – to name a few – which testifies to Edwards' wide appeal as a focal point of study in American letters. Researchers in the aforementioned fields would profit from grappling with the different uses to which Edwards is put in these essays, and Guelzo's and McDermott's essays should be of particular benefit to historians of American religion. Readers might find the volume somewhat uneven in scholarly timbre and diffuse in focus, which is perhaps endemic to the format. Further, neither the editors nor the essayists engage in a sustained discussion of the difference between merely reflecting on the past to illuminate our own times, and decontextualizing concepts that were forged in the crucible of fires that long since dimmed. Nevertheless, the essays reflect an energetic and committed effort to take seriously the contribution of Edwards to American religious, intellectual,

and cultural history, and thus deserves a wide readership.

#### Notes

[1]. These include *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (New York, 1988); *Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and the Representation of American Culture*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and Harry S. Stout (New York, 1993); *Jonathan Edwards' Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (Bloomington, 1996).

[2]. This recent wave of scholarly interest in Edwards is neatly assessed in George Marsden's "Jonathan Edwards, American Augustine," *Books & Culture* (November/December, 1999): 10-12.

[3]. A recent bibliography is available through Greenwood Publishing Group, *Jonathan Edwards: An Annotated Bibliography, 1979-1993*, comp. M. X. Lesser (Westport, 1994)

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