

Understanding
Jonathan Edwards

*An Introduction to
America's Theologian*

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009

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Introduction: How to Understand the American Theologian

Gerald R. McDermott

At one point toward the middle of my time in grad school, I was rummaging around for a dissertation topic. I had been planning, tentatively, to write about the intersection of religion and politics (which scholars then called “civil religion”) in the antebellum period (the period before the Civil War). As I searched through the writings of pastors and theologians and other intellectuals during the period, I was struck by a common theme that seemed to pop up everywhere. Nearly everyone seemed to refer to “the great President Edwards” (he had been president of the College of New Jersey—the later Princeton), and many of the theologians insisted they were simply carrying on what President Edwards had started. Even when they weren’t!

In other words, if you were a pastor or theologian back then and wanted to gain a hearing, you had to claim the mantle of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) to be considered legitimate. This wasn’t true of everyone, or of every school of theology, but it was surprising to see that even those who clearly rejected important parts of Edwards’s thinking, such as Charles Finney, nevertheless felt compelled to claim connections to Edwards and his theology.

So I decided that if I was to understand antebellum America, I would have to go back almost a century, to the mid-eighteenth century, to learn what this towering figure had to say. I imagined I could spend a week or two there, get control of Edwardsian basics, and then return to more interesting things in the nineteenth century.

Well, I went back and got stuck. Or, to put it more accurately, I became entranced by this deep and penetrating mind. Now, more than twenty years later, I am still attracted to its brilliance. Let me try to explain what has fascinated me and so many others over the centuries.

Why Edwards?

First, not everyone who reads Edwards is attracted to him. Harriet Beecher Stowe complained that Edwards's sermons on sin and suffering were "refined poetry of torture." After staying up one night reading Edwards's treatise on the will, Mark Twain reported, "Edwards's God shines red and hideous in the glow from the fires of hell, their only right and proper adornment. By God, I was ashamed to be in such company."

Generations of Americans have drawn similar conclusions after reading his "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon in their high school and college literature classes. They would be surprised to learn that Edwards was obsessed by God's beauty, not wrath, and that, as historian Patrick Sherry recently argued, Edwards made beauty more central to theology than anyone else in the history of Christian thought, including Augustine and the twentieth-century Swiss Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar.

They would also be surprised to learn that Edwards is widely regarded as America's greatest philosopher before the twentieth century, and arguably this continent's greatest theologian ever. One measure of his greatness is Yale University Press's critical edition of his works, which has twenty-six volumes—but even that represents only half of his written products. Another token of Edwards's importance is the three-volume *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience*, which contains far more references to Edwards than to any other single figure.

Although Edwards was revered for his piety and intellectual prowess in antebellum America, the Unitarians who gained cultural power after the Civil War dismissed him as an anachronistic symbol of the Puritanism that allegedly slowed America's advance to modernity. There were demurrals: Edwards was the hero of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Kingdom of God in America* (1937), and Ola Elizabeth Winslow's biography of Edwards won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. But intellectuals generally did not take Edwards seriously again until 1949, when the Harvard historian Perry Miller published his acclaimed biography of the New England thinker, suggesting that only Edwards's unshrinking assessment of evil was capable of dispelling modernity's naïve utopianism.

Since the middle of the twentieth century Edwards scholarship has exploded, with the number of dissertations on his work doubling every decade.

The most prestigious university presses and journals have published hundreds of books and articles on his thought and influence.

Why such a profusion of interest? One reason is certainly, as William Sparkes Morris once put it, “because genius fascinates,” but also because of the extraordinary range and depth of his thinking. For Miller, Edwards was a prophet of modernity. Miller said famously that Edwards stood so far above and ahead of his immediate culture that our own time is “barely catching up.” Edwards’s understanding of the human psyche was so advanced that “it would have taken him about an hour’s reading in William James, and two hours in Freud, to catch up completely.” Edwards scholars have concluded that Edwards’s relationship to modernity was far more ambivalent, but Miller’s comment shows the intrigue that Edwards has excited in many thinkers outside the bounds of the Christian churches.

Another reason for the breadth of Edwards’s influence is the wide range of his work. Historians have studied Edwards’s role as a pastor and the effect of his sermons and books on the Great Awakening, the American Revolution, the modern missionary movement, and the course of both American theology and philosophy; theologians appreciate his insights into the history of salvation (he relates sacred to secular history in his *Work of Redemption*), the Trinity (each Person in the Trinity has distinct roles), the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom (some say he did as well as anyone showing how the two are compatible), original sin (he linked our sin with Adam’s, but not without showing our complicity in Adam’s), typology (he believed all the world was filled with divinely implanted pointers to Christ and his kingdom), and spiritual discernment; ethicists profit from his writings on true virtue and Christian morality and his attack on Enlightenment ethics; literary critics are fascinated by his masterly employment of imagery and other literary strategies; students of aesthetics point out that he related God to beauty more than anyone else in the history of Christian thought; historians of American philosophy argue that he was America’s premier philosopher before the great flowering of American philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century. Some scholars even suggest that Edwards offered the eighteenth century’s most penetrating critique of the Enlightenment and has something to teach us about how Christians should think about non-Christian religions!

Perhaps most important for serious readers of religion and theology, Edwards is widely recognized as America’s greatest theologian. Nearly twenty years ago Robert Jenson, the great American Lutheran theologian, published a monograph entitled *America’s Theologian*. The nearest competitor to Edwards for that moniker, H. Richard Niebuhr, confessed that he was greatly indebted to Edwards and saw himself as extending the Edwardsian vision. Nineteenth-century

American theologians at Andover, Princeton, and Yale nearly universally claimed his mantle. But it wasn't only the theologians who were impressed: in large sections of antebellum America many homes contained two books—the Bible and a collection of Edwards's writings.

Those antebellum Americans were drawn to Edwards for some of the same reasons he attracts legions of followers today outside of academia. Many are captivated by what the prolific pastor and writer John Piper calls Edwards's "God-entranced vision of all things." Others desire personal renewal or corporate revival for their communities and find in Edwards a singular guide to spiritual renovation. J. I. Packer, the Oxford-trained theologian who has written enormously popular books for average Christians, thinks Edwards's theology of revival is the most important contribution Edwards makes to today's church. Others have considered his *Religious Affections* to be the most penetrating guide to spiritual discernment ever written. Still others are drawn to his rigorous pattern of spiritual discipline, his logical and compelling sermons, and the way he includes God's holiness and wrath in the larger picture of divine beauty.

Edwards's Theology

Edwards's theological project was gargantuan, addressing hosts of issues both parochial and perennial. Because his thought is so complex and multidimensional, a brief description such as this can easily distort. But one can say that much of his work was related to his lifelong battle with deism, the early modern rationalist movement that identified religion with morality and judged all religious expressions by what its thinkers deemed to be "common sense"—which was by no means common even to those in its own era.

Deists claimed that ordinary reason can determine what is true religion, so that the problem with bad religion and human relations generally was a failure to use reason properly. Edwards responded that this analysis of the human condition was too superficial. There is no such thing as "ordinary" or "naked" reason because the mind is darkened and disabled by indwelling sin. Hence reason is not neutral but conditioned by self-interest. It is no wonder, he remarked more than once, that intelligent people are responsible for great evil.

Deists assumed that all human action proceeded from good or bad thinking. But Edwards insisted that the springs of human motivation lie much deeper than the thoughts of the mind. In his famous formulation, he asserted that all human feeling and thinking and acting are rooted in the "affections," the underlying loves and dispositions that incline us toward or away from things. (These are not the emotions, as many scholars have erroneously reported, but

something akin to what earlier traditions called the “soul,” from which emotions arise.) This is the source of true religion as well as all other human perception and behavior. Hence true religion, Edwards wrote, must influence and spring from these deepest levels of the human psyche. The Scriptures, he said, confirm this. They place the heart of religion in the affections: fear, joy, hope, love, hatred, desire, sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal.

On the one hand, then, Edwards defended the religion of the heart against the critics of revival who condemned emotionalism to the point that they were left with a religion of the head only. But Edwards also denounced religion that was merely emotion, devoid of cognitive understanding of basic Christian truth. In a manner unmatched by most other spiritual theologians, Edwards linked head and heart, experience and understanding.

Because true religion comes from sources much deeper than human thinking, Edwards insisted that we need a “divine and supernatural light.” The Spirit must penetrate beneath the surface convictions of human reason to awaken a “sense of the heart” focused on the glory of the divine nature and the beauty of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the essence of true religious experience is to be overwhelmed by a glimpse of the beauty of God, to be drawn to the glory of his perfections, and to sense his irresistible love. George Marsden once wrote that it is something like being overwhelmed by the beauty of a great work of art or music. We can become so enthralled by the beauty that we lose consciousness of self and self-interest and become absorbed by the magnificent object. So also we can become drawn out of self-absorption by the power of the beauty of a truly lovable person. Our hearts are changed by an irresistible power. But this power gently lures; it does not coerce. Edwards taught that our eyes are opened when we are captivated by the beautiful love and glory of God in Christ, when we see this love most powerfully demonstrated in Christ’s sacrificial love for the undeserving. Then we feel forced to abandon love for self as the central principle of our lives and turn to the love of God.

Edwards describes our side of this experience as like being given a sixth sense: a sense of the beauty, glory, and love of God. He observes, “The Bible speaks of giving eyes to see, ears to hear, unstopping the ears of the deaf, and opening the eyes of them that were born blind, and turning from darkness to light.” Therefore the spiritual knowledge gained in true conversion is a kind of “sensible” knowledge—as different from intellectual knowledge as the taste of honey is different from the mere intellectual understanding that honey is sweet.

True Christian experience, then, is sensible and affective. The Christian, says Edwards, does not “merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has

a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart. . . . For as God is infinitely the Greatest Being, so He is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory; God . . . is the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty.”¹

If Edwards challenged the religion of the Enlightenment (deism), he also took on Enlightenment ethics and cosmology. When nearly all eighteenth-century moralists were constructing ethical systems based on self-interest, presuming that human nature naturally seeks the good, Edwards countered that the affections are fallen. Therefore true virtue can come only from a heart spiritually transformed so that it sees God’s glory and seeks his will and the public good rather than private interest.

Deists in the eighteenth century were also disconnecting the world from God’s immediate control, positing a clockwork cosmos that runs on its own. The result was to objectify the universe, separating nature from the human and its feelings so that it could be used for technological purposes. But Edwards was relentlessly God-centered. He taught a kind of “pantheism” in which no part of the creation is ever independent of God, but all is sustained by God, moment by throbbing moment, as an emanation of his being.

Yet Edwards was no pantheist. God is not the same as the universe. Just as a sunbeam is sustained by the sun but is different from the sun, so the world is sustained by God as his emanation but is different from God. So while Enlightenment theorists said that the universe is a great machine that operates autonomously, Edwards said that God sustains it nanosecond to nanosecond. In fact, God’s power is literally the binding force of atoms: the universe would collapse and disappear unless God upheld its existence from moment to moment (Col. 1.17: “In him all things consist”). As Avihu Zakai has recently put it, Edwards reenchanting a cosmos that had been stripped of the divine.²

This is one of the many ways Edwards was ahead of his time. He anticipated post-Newtonian physics, in which all matter is ultimately seen in terms of interacting fields of energy, with every part dependent on every other part, and the forces governing these rather mysterious. Physicists have been concluding for almost a century what Edwards declared two and a half centuries ago: there are no independent substances that can subsist on their own.

Why This Book?

The presses have been groaning under the weight of books on Edwards in the past fifty years. But this book is different.

Most books on Edwards have been one of two sorts. Many have been written by non-Edwards scholars. They have often been helpful, but they are largely unaware of the many new insights gained by Edwards scholars. And some in fact misrepresent this profound thinker.

Then there are the scholarly books on Edwards. Many of these are extremely insightful, but most are written by scholars and for scholars. They are full of academic jargon that is nearly impenetrable to nonspecialists and often address rather narrow and arcane subjects.

This is the first Edwards book that is written by a collection of Edwards scholars—some of the best in the world—but self-consciously addressed to nonspecialists. The chapters that follow go out of their way to use plain language and to define technical terms when they appear. The subjects of the chapters are broad and expansive and represent much of what Edwards considered central to his own concerns: revival, the Bible, beauty, literature, philosophy, typology, and even world religions. So rather than being a series of narrow and technical papers, these are expert essays on the broad themes of Edwards's thinking that will appeal to a wide range of readers.

Because this book treats the most important Edwardsian themes with accessible language from top Edwards scholars, it is perhaps the ideal introduction to the American theologian. It will serve well as both a personal guide to the interested reader and as an engaging textbook for classes on American religion or the American theologian.

At the same time, this volume offers a fresh approach to Edwards. Every essay is new and represents a new reflection on its subject by scholars who have been thinking through their topic for (often) decades.

This book provides yet another new feature. In keeping with its goal of reaching nonspecialists and nonscholars but bringing the best of scholarly insights to that audience, each chapter is followed by a response from a European scholar not previously familiar with Edwards.³ These responses show the impact of Edwards on those outside of Edwards studies. They also show the relevance Edwards has for non-Americans—and some of the reasons why this eighteenth-century mind continues to attract so many readers and thinkers.

The Chapters That Follow

This book targets what we consider to be many of Edwards's chief interests. Edwards was concerned first and foremost for what he called "true religion" and worked zealously to bring it to life in his own and other churches. This was the motivating force behind his passion for revival. In chapter 2, Harry S.

Stout, the Jonathan Edwards Professor of American Religious History at Yale University, gives us an elegant overview of Edwards's work for revival—which the Massachusetts theologian believed is the key to all of history. Stout argues that Edwards used the history of revival to develop a whole new way of doing theology. Instead of writing a systematic theology, with its traditional list of theological topics, Edwards believed that history—especially the history of redemption that is driven by revival—provides the most penetrating and enjoyable access to divine mysteries. Stout compares Edwards's way of revival to that of the preeminent revivalist of the era, George Whitefield, and concludes that the (in)famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is arguably America's greatest sermon.

Edwards also had a passion for the Bible. Far too little scholarly work has been done on his use of the Bible, which rivals in quantity and insight that of any in the history of Christianity. Douglas Sweeney, a church historian and the editor of one of the Yale volumes on Edwards's private notebooks, gives us a detailed survey of Edwards's approaches to the Bible in chapter 3. He explains that Edwards recommended church members to make the study of the Bible a habit of life because of his overwhelming conviction that the Bible is a supernatural revelation of the mind of the Creator. Yet a “divine and supernatural light” is essential, he said, to understand that mind. Edwards was fully aware of that era's historical criticism of the Bible, but he was not afraid—unlike many of today's Bible scholars—to interpret the text both historically and theologically. In other words, he boldly asserted not just what the text meant in the ancient world, but also what it means for today. He took a middle road on biblical allegory and typology, rejecting the extreme of seeing unbiblical allegory everywhere, but regarding the Bible as a unified book that is linked integrally between Old and New Testaments.

In his interpretation of the Bible, Edwards used typology (the science of symbols or signs that God has placed in the Bible and the world) extensively. In fact, this eighteenth-century Bible interpreter said we cannot make sense of how the Bible works unless we have a thoroughgoing knowledge of typology. This is why we enlisted the Hungarian expert on biblical typology, Tibor Fabiny, to write chapter 4. Fabiny lays out the contours of Edwards's biblical typology and proposes that the center of that system was the paradoxical nature of beauty, found most poignantly in Christ's dying sacrifice. For Fabiny, this was what Edwards thought to be the inner meaning of both the Bible and its typology. Fabiny then goes on to compare Edwards's typology to those of Shakespeare and Luther.

No book on Edwards can ignore his aesthetics, which is his understanding of beauty and its relation to God. As we have seen already, this was absolutely

central to his view of reality. In chapter 5 Sang Hyun Lee, the Princeton theologian and author of one of the most influential analyses of Edwards of the past two decades, sketches Edwards's conception of beauty. Lee argues that for Edwards the fundamental nature of anything that exists is beauty, and the most distinctive characteristic of God is his divine beauty. To know and to love God, therefore, is to know and love the beauty of God, and to know the ultimate nature of the world is to know and love the world as an image of God's beauty. Lee's chapter contains perhaps the most incisive short treatment in print of the heart of Edwards's theological vision.

Readers of Edwards, even those who haven't liked his theology, have usually admired the tools he used: words that are connected in often lyrical fashion to sketch his vision of all that exists. He both loved language and was frustrated by its limits. He devoured most kinds of literature and believed he was a far better writer than speaker. Wilson Kimnach, a literary scholar who has edited all the sermons volumes in the Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, provides in chapter 6 an exquisite overview of Edwards's interest in and production of literature. Kimnach argues that Edwards had literary ambitions even greater than his contemporary, Benjamin Franklin. His appetite for reading was almost unlimited, and he enjoyed not only the *Ladies Library* but also the novels of his day. His greatest contribution to literature was his perfection of the sermon genre, which focused on the essential heart of religion rather than doctrinal formulae. He strove to move his congregation by the application of the rhetorical lash and philosophical reasoning. He used the traditional Puritan "plain style" and the Ramist analytical method (dividing each thing simply and clearly into two parts), in contradistinction to the easy generalities and elegant fluency of Tillotsonian moralists (influenced by John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury 1691–1694).

If Edwards wanted to use words to move the world's affections toward a vision of God's beauty, he also wanted to change the thinking of the intellectual elite. He therefore took philosophy very seriously and addressed a good part of his treatises to the philosophical world. The result was the most influential American philosophy before the Civil War and a system of thinking that, according to Miklos Vetö, is not only important in the history of philosophy but also has relevance today. Vetö is a distinguished philosopher in France and the author of a celebrated book on Edwards's philosophy. His chapter 7 gives us a lucid introduction to these philosophical breakthroughs. According to Vetö, Edwards employed philosophical reasoning in a far more profound and systematic way than his Puritan predecessors did, focusing on three themes or domains: being, knowledge, and the will. Vetö concludes that Edwards's theory of knowledge is the veritable culmination of the Western philosophical tradition's

attempt to comprehend the metaphysical specificity of spiritual knowledge; that his understanding of the will is unprecedented before Kant in its incisive grasp of the autocratic nature of the will and its *sui generis* intelligibility; and that in his rethinking of dogma through philosophical argumentation, Edwards is comparable to Augustine and Aquinas.

Very few Edwards scholars and nonscholarly Edwards fans have known this, but Edwards became more and more fascinated by world religions the older he got. He knew that if he was to complete his magnum opus of Christian theology properly (which his untimely death prevented), he was going to have to place Christian faith within the context of the history of other religions. His massive private notebooks are filled with notes toward this end, showing that this was of huge interest to him. In chapter 8 I give a brief outline of how he came to understand non-Christian religions and their place in the history of redemption. I explain that a principal stimulus to his interest was the deists' use of other religions to attack Christian orthodoxy. Edwards used three approaches to counter deism and understand the religions: (1) the *prisca theologia* (literally, "ancient theology"), an ancient Jewish and Christian apologetic tradition that claimed other religions were derived indirectly from Christian revelation; (2) his conviction that God speaks through all of nature and history (typology); and (3) his thinking about the possibility of salvation for non-Christians (dispositional soteriology).

So what? Of what use is Edwards today? This introduction has hinted at a number of answers to this question, and each of the succeeding chapters suggests more. But in the conclusion I try to draw a number of these suggestions together and advance a few additional ones. Among other things, I argue that Edwards's religiophilosophical thought is especially helpful in a twenty-first-century world that is frightened by violent religion and confused by religious pluralism. Edwards shows that true religion at its heart is consumed with beauty and peace, and that Christian theology has a way of seeing truth and beauty in other religions while at the same time pointing to final truth. His vision of God as both joy and beauty, understood through both Scripture and reason, provides a bridge between the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions and offers inspiration to every mind seeking God and beauty. Furthermore, Edwards has helpful things to say about shaping a social and political order that ensures both freedom and pluralism. I also comment on what he has to say about conversion and spiritual formation, missions, preaching, ethics and community, what it means to be human, and the Reformed tradition.

Last, and not least important, who was Edwards as a man? We cannot appreciate Edwards and his work without knowing something of his biography. For this we have called on Kenneth Minkema, the executive director of

The Works of Jonathan Edwards at Yale. In chapter 1 Minkema gives us a balanced (admiring but warts-and-all) introduction to the American theologian's life and career. There is no one else who can say, as Minkema can, that he has devoted the majority of his working weeks for more than twenty years to Edwards and his writings. In Minkema's informative overview of Edwards's life and career, we learn about his international and colonial worlds. For example, Minkema tells us that Edwards thought of himself as a British subject loyal to the Empire but was at the same time sensitive to his colony's grievances. He was ambivalent toward Indians (hating their religion but loving many of those he knew personally), a philosopher who picked and chose from the world's best thinkers, and a religious thinker whose theology sowed the seeds of the very democracy he feared. He defended slavery but opposed the slave trade and offered Janus-faced positions on gender. His spirituality was intense, his influence immense: four thousand books, dissertations, and articles have been distributed in the past half-century. And because of the worldwide expansion of evangelical Christianity, his star is rising around the world.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 111; Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 8: 550–51.
2. Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
3. The one exception is my response to the essay by Tibor Fabiny, a Hungarian expert on biblical typology.