

BOOK REVIEW

of

Gerald R. McDermott, editor,
Understanding Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to America's Theologian,
Oxford University Press, 2009.

June 2009

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Jonathan Edwards is considered by many to be the greatest theologian of America, and one of the greatest of all time. That is, of course, a subjective judgment, but there is evidence to support it. It is the opinion of the editor of the current book under review, as stated in the introduction. It also appears to be the opinion of Perry Miller, general editor of the Yale University Press Works of Jonathan Edwards, as he favorably quotes Paul Ramsey, editor of volume 1 of the Works of Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, at the beginning of that volume as follows: "This book alone is sufficient to establish its author as the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene." Volume 1 of the Yale University Press Works of Jonathan Edwards was published in 1957. Volume 26 was published in 2008. The literary output of Jonathan Edwards is truly phenomenal, especially considering that he died at the age of 54. He was a pastor, theologian, missionary, revivalist, and for a brief time just before his death a college president. His most well-known and influential books include the already-mentioned *Freedom of the Will*, *Religious Affections*, *Original Sin*, and a book that greatly influenced modern missions *The Life of David Brainerd*. Many books and articles have been written about him or specific ideas that he promoted. A "key words" search for Jonathan Edwards on Amazon.com yields over 13,000 results. If someone unfamiliar with him would like some small volume to introduce him, the current volume under review would be a good place to start. I would, however, like to suggest that the current volume may well be of significant interest even to those who have already read a number of Edwards's works. The reason being that this volume gives a "big picture" overview that could well be missed by all but the most accomplished Edwardian scholars. The current volume covers the sweep of Edwards's life and career, revival, his approach to the Bible, typology, beauty, literature, philosophy, and other religions. On the back cover, the book is endorsed by Mark Noll, author of *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, calling the current volume an "unusually helpful book".

The book is unusual in its organization in that there are two chapters on each topic, the first being perhaps the lead chapter written by one author, and then followed by an alternative point of view chapter by another author. Yet the entire book is only slightly more than 200 pages long. The book begins with an overall introduction written by the volume's editor, Gerald McDermott. This is followed by two chapters on Edwards's life and career, chapter 1 by Kenneth Minkema and chapter 2 by Chris Chun. Chapters 3 and 4 are on revival, the first by Harry Stout and the second by Willem van Vlastuin. Chapters 5 and 6 are on the Bible, the first by Douglas Sweeney and the second by Wolter Rose. Chapters 7 and 8 are on Biblical typology, the first by Tibor Fabiny and the second by Gerald McDermott. Chapters 9 and 10 are on beauty, the first by Sang Hyun Lee and the second by Katalin Kállay. Chapters 11 and 12 are on Edwards's literary life, the first by Wilson Kimmach and the second by Anna Svetlikova. Chapters 13 and 14 are on philosophy, the first by Miklos Vetö and the second by Magdaléna Ševčíková. Chapters 15 and 16 are on Edwards and world religions, the first by Gerald McDermott and the second by Michal Valco. This is followed by a conclusion (Edwards's relevance today) by Gerald McDermott. Having this many authors, and two making contributions to each topic, is no doubt an attempt at giving a balanced perspective on Edwards, and also perhaps to indicate the broad interest given to Edwards. Some of the authors are evangelical, and likely others are not.

In the Introduction, McDermott discusses why the study of Edwards is important and introduces the content of the book. At the time of Edwards, deism (belief in an impersonal God who created the universe but is not actively involved in it) was common, and Edwards actively fought against it. "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." In referring to Vetö's work, McDermott comments 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."

In Chapter 4 on revival, Willem van Vlastuin comments on the content of Edwards's preaching. While he is known for his philosophical and theological depth, his lengthy, extemporaneous prayers and heart-felt sermons are perhaps not as well known. "We can better understand the life and labors of Edwards if we see his passion for revival and the millennium. His deeply earnest sermons were meant to awaken sinners. To that end, he preached God's absolute sovereignty, the sinfulness of sin, and eternal punishment in hell. Throughout, he made a sharp distinction between the real work of God and counterfeit conversion. There was nothing he feared so much as superficial conversions. These heavy themes were intended to bring sinners back to the feet of a gracious God. Edwards is best known for his hellfire sermons, but in fact he preached more about sanctification and our need for holiness."

In Chapter 5 on the Bible, Douglas A. Sweeney comments on Edwards's commitment to the study of the Bible as the Christian's authoritative document. Sweeney writes: "he thought the Bible to be 'an infallible guide, a sure rule which if we follow we cannot err.' . . . Edwards spoke often of the need to study 'what reason *and* Scripture declare.' He echoed the common Calvinist dictum that those who would understand the world and its relationship to God need the 'book of nature' *and* the 'book of Scripture.' But he emphasized consistently the priority of the Bible." Because of Edwards's location in semi-rural Northampton, Massachusetts, or very rural Stockbridge, Massachusetts, it may be thought that he might have been isolated from the developments in Biblical criticism primarily in Europe. If such were the case, then Edwards's writings could perhaps be thought of a precritical. However, Sweeney writes as follows: "In an era characterized by the rapid spread of biblical criticism, theological skepticism, and religious minimalism, Edwards demonstrated a robust faith in Scripture's credibility, expounding it with confidence in traditional Christian methods. . . . Despite his reputation as a 'precritical' reader or 'premodern' thinker, he was fully apprised of recent trends in modern critical thought." Wolter H. Rose in Chapter 6 appears to concur with Sweeney, as he writes: "Here is a theologian of the caliber of Augustine and Calvin living in the Age of Enlightenment, who showed a strong interest in the new intellectual mood and made an effort to answer the questions the new thinking raised. At the same time, he laid the groundwork for modern religious psychology in his writings on the nature of religious experience."

At least to my thinking and I suspect many others, beauty is a concept that is subjective and a matter of taste. Yet even so, we frequently speak of "good taste" and "poor taste," at least suggesting that maybe there are some objective standards even if we are not able to articulate them. Therefore, Chapters 9 and 10 on beauty are perhaps especially helpful. Edwards, who could write with such insight and philosophical skill on the freedom of the will, could also preach a revival sermon, could also lead his congregation in an hour of spontaneous prayer, and could also express penetrating thoughts about the nature of beauty! Sang Hyun Lee writes in Chapter 9 reflecting Edwards's thoughts: "God is not only beautiful but beauty itself and the foundation and fountain of all beauty. God's nature, according to Edwards, is the true beauty, beauty itself, and the criterion of all beauty, and the source or fountain of all beauty." "The same disposition that was fully exercised within God is what causes God to create the world – true beauty or love that wants to communicate itself. In creating the world, God has to have an aim or a purpose. That aim has to be the highest good, or whatever is the most valuable thing. But the highest good is God himself. If this is the case, then what could be the aim that the perfect God would have in creating the world? Edwards's answer is that God, in creating the world, aims at 'an increase, repetition, or multiplication' of his perfect beauty in time and space. . . . The purpose in creating the intelligent beings is that they may participate in and promote God's own end (purpose) in creation."

In Chapter 13 on philosophy, Miklos Vetö comments as follows: "this great Protestant theologian, defender of justification by faith alone, reformulator of the doctrine of original sin, and innovative theoretician of spiritual experience and ecclesiastical affiliation, is more comparable to such metaphysicians as Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas than to Calvin or Barth." "In his passionate defense of the church's teachings, Edwards unceasingly calls into question the moral theories of his time, but through his brilliant denunciation of the absurdities to which those philosophies lead, the polemicist succeeds in developing a highly consistent and complete doctrine of the will." Magdaléna Ševčíková, in Chapter 14, agrees with Vetö: "Edwards's philosophy of the will, as Vetö has represented it, is a stern challenge to moral relativism. This poisonous philosophy leads to a moral dead-end that renders us incapable of discerning the difference between good and evil. Edwards's philosophy of the will opens up an exit filled with light and clarity. . . . Edwards's philosophy encourages public theology. It rejects the position that faith is merely a personal matter. On the contrary, it is logical and coherent to see God in everything. One reason Christianity is facing a crisis in Europe today is that it permitted faith to be restricted to a limited field of mere emotions and personal choice."

In the Conclusion, McDermott argues for the relevance of Edwards today. Two of McDermott's arguments will be given here. First, is the role of fear in preaching. While our modern sensitivities shy away from hell-fire preaching, McDermott thinks we have perhaps not understood the role of fear: "Anyone who believes that sin matters, and that much human misery is the result of sin, should consider what role religious fear can play in checking social evil. It is probable that down through the ages, many thousands – perhaps millions – have come to faith because of fear. It's also probable that in many cases that fear was later transformed into loving awe before God's beautiful love. Edwards would say that churches that condemn all use of fear in preaching are missing something integral to both faith and human psychology." Another of McDermott's arguments for the relevance of Edwards today is the insights he has provided in reconciling God's sovereignty and human responsibility. He describes this primarily in terms of Edwards's book *Freedom of the Will*. "In four months he wrote the book that set the agenda for philosophical discussions in America until the Civil War: *Freedom of the Will*. In this work he argued that human freedom and divine sovereignty are compatible, and several essays in this book have explained briefly how he thought the two can work together."

While one unfamiliar with Edwards would not do wrong by initially reading one of his books such as *Freedom of the Will*, *Religious Affections*, etc., or by reading one of the many books about him, such as a biography (there more than a half dozen biographies of Edwards available through Amazon, such as those by George Marsden, Iain Murray, David Vaughan, and Perry Miller). However, this book edited by McDermott has the advantage of giving, as mentioned above, the big picture of Jonathan Edwards's life and work, and the resultant influence that he has had and continues to have.