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THE EDWARDS OF HISTORY AND
THE EDWARDS OF FAITH

R. Bryan Bademan


George M. Marsden. Jonathan Edwards: A Life. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003. xxii + 615 pp. Illustrations, maps, chronology, appendices, notes, and index. $35.00 (cloth); $22.00 (paper).


The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University (http://edwards.yale.edu).

In 1888, a century and a half after Jonathan Edwards delivered his well-known sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” the liberal Congregationalist Lyman Abbott reflected on religious change in America. Arguing that Edwards was the “most characteristic preacher of the Calvinistic school in New England in the eighteenth century,” Abbott took sordid delight in quoting some
of the most provocative and no doubt to his readers, offensive portions of the
now widely reprinted sermon. What had taken place in the intervening one
hundred fifty years, according to Abbott, was a sea change in popular belief,
nothing less than a “new Reformation.” And the reform was all for the better.
Abbott relished the thought that “no minister could utter such sentiments in
any pulpit in New England to-day and retain his pastorate.” For all his bril-
liance and alleged colonial typicality, Edwards had become an embarrassment
to the Gilded Age Christians of his own backyard, a relic of a bygone age of
religious barbarism and intolerance. The sovereign and capricious Almighty
of Edwards had become an “Indulgent Parent,” happily tempered through
the American experience.1 Henry Ward Beecher, Abbott’s famous predeces-
sor at Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church, had thought similarly about Edwards’
“Sinners”: “I think a person of moral sensibilities, alone at midnight, reading
that awful discourse, would well nigh go crazy.”2 So influential were these
sentiments that by the early twentieth century one writer would subtitle her
book on Edwards The Divine Who Filled the Air with Damnation and Proved the
Total Depravity of God.3

Despite Edwards’s dismissal from the halls of nineteenth- and early-twen-
tieth-century religious propriety, he has strangely, in the past half-century or
so, reemerged in some of the cultural spaces formerly eager to see him go.
Edwards has made his way back onto the map.4 This work was begun in large
part by Harvard’s Perry Miller in the mid twentieth century, but Yale Uni-
versity Press’s willingness to edit and publish The Works of Jonathan Edwards
(WJE [1953–]), not secured without some considerable nudging from Miller,
has resulted in Yale’s centrality to the revival of scholarship on Edwards.
While Miller anticipated just a few volumes in the Yale edition, his succes-
sors as editors—John E. Smith and, especially, Harry S. Stout and Kenneth
P. Minkema—have expanded the series now to twenty-seven volumes. This
well-funded and superbly executed set of critical editions has not only made
readily accessible the bulk of Edwards’s most important work, but each of
the volumes contains substantial editors’ introductions that orient research-
ers to new work on Edwards’s life and thought as much as to the documents
themselves. Some of the best specialized scholarship on Edwards, in fact, can
be found in these pages. Although the print edition, which Allen Guelzo calls
“the premier scholarly editorial project in American intellectual history,” should
be coming to a close in the next year, the editors of the WJE have decided to
maintain its momentum by launching the Jonathan Edwards Center (JEC)
at the Yale Divinity School. With fifty-plus years invested in completing the
letterpress edition, its hefty volumes will only release approximately half of
Edwards’s extant writings.5 This year the JEC will commence uploading the
other half, including hundreds of unpublished sermons, to the E-Text Project
of the Works of Jonathan Edwards Online (http://edwards.yale.edu). The full corpus of Jonathan Edwards’s writings will soon be available online, with a state-of-the-art search engine, to scholars and libraries by subscription.6

It would difficult to overstate the importance of the WJE and now the JEC in the revival of scholarship on Edwards. Not only have these projects placed previously obscure and, given Edwards’s miniscule script, nearly illegible manuscripts in the hands of scholars and Edwards’s devotees, but the project has also channeled funding toward innovative scholarship on Edwards’s life and times over the course of the last two decades through five major conferences, each of which has generated a published volume of specialized essays.7 But even this work is just icing on the cake. Scholarly interest in Edwards continues to accelerate, according to a recent survey by Minkema, and there are no impending signs of a slow down. The number of secondary publications on Edwards is now reaching 4,000, making the controversial Northampton divine the most studied American intellectual figure before 1800—including some of the founders.8

Recent scholarship has not so much overturned the negative assessment of Edwards proffered by Abbott and his peers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as it has complicated it. Critique of religious liberalism’s Edwards-bashing habits first came from theologians like H. Richard Niebuhr and A. C. McGiffert, Jr. and from historians like Ola Winslow and Joseph Haroutunian, but the scholarship of Perry Miller ultimately overshadowed these initial attempts at resuscitation. Miller saw in Edwards an intellectual alternative to the blithe optimism of the progressive tradition as well as to the cultural and moral paralysis of the depression years. His embrace of Edwards as the key to the meaning of America seems retrospectively naïve—George Marsden calls it a “triumph of the imagination” (p. 61)—but Miller served in his time to clear away several generations of opprobrium heaped upon The Fiery Puritan, as one biography from 1930 termed him.9 Miller’s concerns, of course, were not religious but intellectual. He sought to recover Edwards’ incisive intellect and his profound sense of human limitation. The preface of his biography asserted: “The real life of Jonathan Edwards was the life of his mind.”10 One of the results of this largely ahistorical approach was that Edwards emerged in Miller’s scholarship as generations ahead of his time. In a now famous passage, Miller claimed that it “would have taken [Edwards] about an hour’s reading in William James, and two hours in Freud, to catch up completely” with modern thought. As “intellectually the most modern man of his age,” Edwards received a promotion in reputation but at the cost of a striking dislodging from any cultural context that he would have recognized.11

Miller’s actual writings on Edwards, like his writings on the Puritans more generally, brilliant though they were, nonetheless set up straw-man
interpretations that subsequent scholars have enjoyed toppling. The WJE that Miller spearheaded ironically played no small role in this latter project of undermining his recommendation of Edwards as a modern. As Philip Gura noted nearly twenty-five years ago, the WJE show Edwards “more profoundly steeped than ever in his own historical moment.” An additional quarter of a century’s books and essays on Edwards have only reinforced Gura’s point.

The recent spate of scholarship reviewed here continues this important work of locating Edwards in the eighteenth century by advancing three trends in Edwards scholarship. First, these works have encouraged a fresh consideration of Edwards’s philosophical and intellectual commitments and his relationship to that transformation of thinking known as the Enlightenment. Second, they have continued to explore aspects of Edwards’s cultural location in the Connecticut River valley and in the colonies generally. Particularly in Marsden’s new biography, we see some of the implications of Edwards’s station at the borderlands of empire. And third, these works have opened new windows on Edwards’ long, vast, and complex legacy, a legacy that continues to this day—and, as we shall see, not only or even principally among scholars.

* * *

The latest installment of Edwards scholarship, in the first place, carries on a sustained investigation into the trajectory of Edwards’s intellectual interests at the end of his life. While former generations of scholars have generally concentrated on Edwards’s finished treatises and writings—on the will (WJE 1, 1957), religious affections (WJE 2, 1959), original sin (WJE 3, 1970), true virtue (WJE 8, 1989), and creation (WJE 8, 1989), in particular—the new generation is freshly considering Edwards’s unfinished writings such as the “History of the Work of Redemption” (WJE 9, 1989), the “Harmony of the Old and New Testament,” and “A Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Faith Attempted” (this last Edwards left in outline form, known and now published as “Miscellanies” [WJE 13, 1994; 18, 2000; 20, 2002; and 23, 2004], though in the nineteenth century portions were published, characteristic of that age, as “Evidences of Christianity”). Robert Brown, who has made the most impressive strides in situating Edwards in the context of the early Enlightenment, maintains that many of Edwards’s better-known finished treatises ought actually to be understood as “conceptual prolegomena” to the later unfinished works (p. 164). With this bold contention, Brown argues that Edwards’s entire body of thought is poised for major scholarly reassessment.

The title of Brown’s book, Jonathan Edwards and the Bible, suggests that he has written a book on Edwards’s use or views of Scripture. Brown has certainly done this much, but he has in fact accomplished much more. This ambitious and
penetrating intellectual history is an illuminating account of eighteenth-century American interpretive habits firmly set in the context of the early European Enlightenment. Far from a book simply on Edwards’s reading of the Bible, this is the best account available of Edwards’s remarkable reading habits. Interestingly, though it will not be surprising to those who have worked on the cultural history of the Bible in America, Brown finds that Edwards’s wide-ranging reading is unified by its near obsession with biblical themes and concerns about the erosion of biblical authority. Brown only mildly exaggerates the case when he says that “the problem of biblical criticism is a ubiquitous feature of Edwards’s work” (p. xv). Ultimately, Brown contends that understanding Edwards’s relationship to new critical approaches to the Bible opens a window onto a deeply rooted conservative strain in colonial Hermeneutics.

The backdrop of Brown’s study will be well known to intellectual historians. During Edwards’s lifetime new standards of criticism threatened to undermine loyalties to religious traditions and texts. Simply put, a cohort of Enlightenment thinkers began to argue that religious knowledge, to be credible in the new intellectual climate, needed a secure foundation in sensory impressions, or experience. The corollary to this argument was that any appeal to external authority—whether the Scriptures, a clerical magisterium, or ecclesiastical tradition—could not meet these new standards of veracity. Even some religious figures, like the deist Matthew Tindal, specifically called into question the historicity of the biblical text and the credibility of many of its claims. Brown demonstrates that the bibliophile Edwards was acutely aware of these intellectual trends and deeply worried about their threat to the traditional claims of Christianity. Combing Edwards’s “Catalogue” of books, which included a staggeringly wide range of authors from all over the eighteenth-century republic of letters, as well as tracking his careful reading in periodicals such as *New Memoirs of Literature, The Republick of Letters*, and the *Spectator*, Brown is the first scholar to interrogate Edwards’s reading practices with a focus on the relationship between his personal immersion in the biblical text as a pastor, his broader theological project as reflected in his unfinished projects, and the early Enlightenment’s engagement with critical history. Brown also charts Edwards’s growing conviction that he was to play a chief role in framing a defense against the new methods of biblical criticism.14

The key argument of Brown’s study is that Edwards’s engagement with the emerging sciences forced him to rethink both his hermeneutics and ultimately Christendom’s entire theological project. Prior to the eighteenth century, Christian interpreters generally took the truth of the Bible for granted and explicated that truth by a process of “identification”—what Brown, drawing off Hans Frei, calls a “realistic reading of the biblical narratives” (p. xiii).15 Biblical stories were not subjected to criticism so much as reentered and relived.
Thus, the biblical story became the story of stories; its truth rested principally in its ability to make sense of ordinary, everyday experience. In the early eighteenth century, however, Edwards realized that such views of Scripture could not pass muster in the changing intellectual climate. Increasingly, the Bible’s story was perceived as just one narrative among other competing narratives. In response, Edwards began to devote a considerable portion of his time and energy to defending the historical veracity of the biblical account. While Edwards’s ultimate goal was to subvert the new criticism and to defend the authority of the Bible and the Christian ministry, he did so, argues Brown, by meeting his opponents on their own ground. And thus in his attempt to outwit the moderns, Edwards essentially became one. Though the bulk of popular and academic writing in the second half of the twentieth century has generally tended to run counter to Miller’s portrayal of Edwards as the “most modern man of his age,” Brown refashions the argument about Edwards’s modernity—but not, as Miller did, by bringing to light his non-theological writings. Rather Brown rests his case for Edwards’s modernity solidly on his theology and biblical interpretation. In turn, Brown suggests that “critical biblical interpretation offers an important window on nearly every other aspect of [Edwards’s] thought” (p. 199). Edwards’s solution was ambitious even by his own standards; he sought to recast the “body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history.” 16 Brown makes a strong case that Edwards took the presidency of the College of New Jersey in Princeton with the intention of using it to pursue the academic study of these critical historical concerns (pp. 57–9).

What did Edwards do? And, more importantly for this interpretation, what would Edwards have done had he lived to see his project through to fruition? His goal, as Harry Stout explains in his preface to the Yale edition of his 1739–1742 sermons, was to construct a historical narrative in some ways “even grander than Scripture,” for his story would be framed historically like Scripture, but would include the continuing history of the church as well as episodes from secular history. Brown advances a fresh interpretation of the “History of the Work of Redemption” that understands this important series of sermons from 1739 in this light. Convinced that the era of systematic theology was coming to an end, Edwards imagined that history would come to replace theology as the bedrock of theological science. As Stout explains, “history was emerging [for Edwards] as nothing less than a container for the synthetic whole of theology and, indeed, of God’s innermost self-revelation” (pp. 4–7). 17

Such efforts have been at least partially self-defeating for Edwards’s heirs. His strategy served to reinforce the modern dilemma that the biblical text’s truth and authority hinged on its historicity, and the historicity of the text has been steadily questioned since Edwards’s day. For Brown, however, this only
highlights Edwards’s importance, as his hermeneutical method bound him to the set of assumptions that came to dominate philology, historiography, epistemology, and natural philosophy. Scholars have attended to the role that critics of the Bible have played in this hermeneutical transformation; Brown’s work recovers the role of the conservatives. In fact, he argues that the “conservative participation” in the move to modern interpretive strategies was at least as important and influential as the contribution of the radicals (p. xvii). In the history of biblical scholarship, Brown provocatively suggests that “Edwards and his contemporaries stood at the headwaters of the modern approach to history and biblical interpretation” (p. xix).

Avihu Zakai’s Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History does not achieve the nuance and precision characteristic of Brown’s intellectual history, but it does eloquently explore a theme to which Brown gives slight attention. The history that Edwards sought to inscribe for posterity was not a simple chronology of events, divine or otherwise, but a history actually told from God’s point of view. And in God’s time, Edwards believed that nothing was as paramount as redemption. While this divine historiography ran on a different level than secular time, the two came closest to meeting discernibly in special seasons of mercy—namely, the occurrence of revivals. Accordingly, in Edwards’s thought “redemptive activity is inextricable from the historical process” (p. 18). Zakai’s study excels in showing the centrality of conversion and the revival experience to Edwards’s conception of history itself.

Zakai believes that Edwards’s real significance lay in his ability to offer conceptions of space and time that at once answered Enlightenment critiques of traditional Christianity and defended the Protestant Reformed view of the sovereignty of God over all creation. It was precisely in this project that Edwards’s evangelical experience connected so profoundly with his intellectual agenda, and this observation is perhaps the signal contribution of Zakai’s book. For Edwards, the experience of conversion had a controlling influence over his understanding of both sacred and secular history. Revivals were God’s means of moving time forward. They “represented the historical agent[s] upon which Edwards could establish his ideology of history.” By grounding history’s unfolding in seasons of revival Edwards could thus establish that “God’s redemptive power defines and directs the historical process” (p. 154). In this way, Edwards shared the Enlightenment’s rejection of “traditional ecclesiastical history”—namely, that God worked mysteriously but redemptively through the agency of the visible, institutional church (p. 18). Edwards of course did not reject redemptive history, but he did shift its focus to the experience of individual conversion. The primacy of conversion in revivals, so compelling and glorious to Edwards, became for him the defining event in God’s interaction with human beings. Though Zakai does not stress this point, Edwards’s
unique historiography thus unwittingly shared with the Enlightenment’s secular history a fundamentally subjective basis. Somewhat more brashly, Zakai argues that Edwards single-handedly created an “evangelical historiography” that ultimately became a dominant American tradition in the early Republic through the popularity of his “History of the Work of Redemption,” the Life of David Brainerd, and his accounts of revivals (p. 23).

This novel philosophy of history was calibrated to attack the new mechanistic philosophies emerging in Europe. While Brown firmly situates Edwards in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment (“as a product of, and not an exception to, the forces producing the eclipse of biblical narrative in western culture” [p. xviii]), Zakai’s Edwards rather tends to stand outside and above it; his Edwards is reactionary, courageously taking exception to the Enlightenment’s secularization of time. Hailing Edwards as the “American Augustine,” Zakai argues that his writings provided a theory of history analogous to The City of God, the fifth-century saint’s magisterial treatment of the relationship of sacred and secular history. The allusion to Augustine is telling, for Zakai’s treatment at times reads like historical theology; indeed much of it was written, he tells us, at the Center for Theological Inquiry on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary. More than any of the other books reviewed here, this one is concerned with the question of Edwards’s place in the history of Christian theology and specifically how the theologian Edwards engaged the rapidly changing intellectual climate of the early Enlightenment. Edwards’s immediate interlocutors may have been the English latitudinarians but Zakai places him in conversation with Luther and Calvin, and even Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Rudolf Bultmann.

If the first general tendency in recent Edwards scholarship aims to locate the Northampton divine intellectually, the second is a move to locate him culturally, socially, and religiously. Two new biographies carry out this task with considerable skill. The first to appear, George Marsden’s Jonathan Edwards: A Life is a lucidly written, comprehensive, and critical account, pushing six hundred pages including notes, and yet one exceedingly sensitive to the public and private dimensions of Edwards’s carefully reasoned faith. Marsden makes full use of Edwards’s manuscripts, particularly those in the WJE, and recent secondary work on his social context to show that Edwards was more a product of his cultural moment than many of his twentieth- and twenty-first-century admirers have cared to recognize. While he never traveled far from his birthplace in the Connecticut River valley, Edwards was an active observer of and occasional participant in the European republic of letters, he was deeply committed to what he perceived as the continuing Protestant Reformation (especially as manifested in the transatlantic evangelical revival), and he contributed in various ways to what we now understand as the political
and cultural expansion of the British Empire around the globe. Recognizing such cultural commitments challenges facile depictions of Edwards's timeless grandiosity, but Marsden achieves a delicate balance in this regard. Although he does not whitewash Edwards's weaknesses of character, instances of intellectual shortsightedness, or other cultural blind spots (Edwards owned slaves, for example\textsuperscript{39}), in several major respects Marsden appreciates Edwards's achievements in their own time and cautiously alludes to their potential instructiveness for ours.\textsuperscript{20}

What gives Jonathan Edwards: A Life its distinction is Marsden's unsubtle argument that understanding Edwards the man properly begins with an appreciation of his Calvinist theological convictions. Thus, as Marsden puts it, the biography is a history with an "eye on the theological question" (p. 502). He weaves together the social, cultural, and political context with Edwards's own sense of himself as a Christian, a minister, and indeed, eschatologically, a saint. "Edwards was extraordinary," Marsden writes in the opening sentence of the Introduction, in large part because he took his theology with such "utter seriousness" (pp. 1, 4). The result of this approach is that the work is consumed with the relationship between the historical person and his theology. Thus Edwards's famously ambitious "resolutions" (the first began, "Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory")\textsuperscript{21} are explicated as the spiritual longings of an intensely pious twenty-year-old in the burgeoning cosmopolitan port city of New York. His dramatic rise to international evangelical fame in the wake of the Connecticut Valley awakening of 1734–1735 culminating with the publication of his Faithful Narrative (1737) serves as the important background for his participation in the clerical politics of New England over the spread of Arminianism. And his famous exchanges with the anti-revivalist faction in New England Congregationalism set the context for his articulation of voluntarist faculty psychology. Preaching, Edwards believed, must touch the affections, not merely the intellect. Throughout the work, Marsden integrates historical context with Edwards's brazenly theological outlook. Thus, despite Marsden's disclaimer that he is "not attempting a theological work," theology nevertheless receives a certain pride of place in this Life (p. 6).

Marsden's historical sensitivity to the fine points of Edwards's theology enables him to help reconcile the Edwards cherished by some contemporary evangelical and Reformed Protestants—the "Edwards of faith," we might say—with the Edwards known to the academy—the increasingly important "Edwards of history." Clearly, these constituencies overlap in important ways, but at their extremes there are significant tensions in historical understanding. To oversimplify the case, Edwards is a spiritual hero in one rendering, while in the other he is often depicted as a problem—undeniably influential and
brilliant, but troublingly so. (The two Edwardses are actually related historiographically, as I will argue below.) Marsden writes with a foot in each community. For scholars, Marsden's sympathetic treatment highlights the strange and complex appeal that conservative Calvinism and proto-evangelicalism held for colonial New Englanders and their American heirs.

Philip F. Gura's new biography, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical*, is another work concerned with placing Edwards in his cultural context, but Gura, while also appreciating aspects of Edwards's thought, follows a different narrative line. In probably a third of the space, making Gura's book more appropriate for the undergraduate classroom, he covers much of the same ground as Marsden. But rather than emphasize a fervent Calvinist's theological engagement with his often trying circumstances and the broader world of ideas, Gura accentuates the "deeply mystical understanding of the world [that] captivated Edwards" (p. 40). While Marsden does not ignore these aspects of Edwards's thought, particularly in Edwards's defense of the revival, his wider concern is to explain Edwards theologically. Gura, on the other hand, while of course not ignoring the theological, stresses the philosophical and ideational aspects of Edwards's religious thought. For Gura, "Edwards's doctrine [of the 'divine and supernatural light'] was as unexceptional as it was orthodox." Theology set aside, more significant for Gura was the "new vocabulary" Edwards employed; he effectively "provid[ed] experiential and affective referents for topics that hitherto had fallen on deaf ears" (pp. 68–9). Edwards's later and more extended defenses of the revival were significant in that they "enshrined a unique way to understand the religious life, one that emphasized spiritual experience as a transformation of the inner self that later eventuated in good words" (p. 133). Herein lay the genesis both of America's tradition of spiritual awakenings and America's longstanding fascination with spirituality.

Ever cognizant of his intellectual abilities, Edwards expected (and hoped) that he would play a leading role in the history of Christianity through his theological writing. Brown, Marsden, and to a lesser extent Gura all discuss the ambitious but unfinished works that Edwards outlined in the last decades of his life. While Brown demonstrates the extent to which Edwards's thought and writing in the intervening years was framed by these larger projects, Marsden, more graphically, describes Edwards lugging carefully packed boxes of manuscript notes and books from Northampton to Stockbridge, and finally from Stockbridge to Princeton—a vivid depiction of work yet to be done. While Stockbridge was certainly no writer's paradise, and Marsden shows that in many respects Edwards was just as embroiled in politics there as in Northampton, he certainly had fewer souls to care for and so was finally able to see some of his projects come to fruition. In a flurry of productivity in his
final years, Edwards wrote many of the works he is now known for: *Freedom of the Will, Original Sin,* and *The Nature of True Virtue.* This was, of course, to be just the beginning. Edwards’s untimely death from smallpox in the months after his move to Princeton left the bulk of his writing plans unfinished.

Some thirty years and a revolution later, Ezra Stiles, then president of Yale College, predicted that Edwards’s works would fade into oblivion in the new American nation, a relic of a “singular and whimsical” age. Stiles even suggested that his works would constitute “the rubbish of Libraries” (Gura, p. 222). Marsden and Gura’s biographies, along with the *Works of Jonathan Edwards,* are telling reminders that Stiles was no prophet. Edwards has not been left behind. His strict Calvinism and pro-revivalism, and more generally his religious conservatism, have ebbed and flowed in America, but they have clearly never faded into oblivion. Nor are there any indications that they will. And this is the final lesson of Edwards’s life for both Marsden and Gura: Edwards is a “perennial American story” (p. 8) and “America’s evangelical” (p. 222). For Marsden, the Puritan migration from which Edwards descended was just one case among many in America of an ethno-religious community that “brought . . . Old World ideals concerning the one true religion” (p. 8).

The fact of religious pluralism in America has rarely signaled the demise of religious particularism. For Gura, the resuscitation of Edwards in the nineteenth century by revivalists entering what became the Second Great Awakening led to “the nineteenth-century invention of ‘Edwards’” as a progenitor of a new “culture of sentiment” and “religion of the heart” (pp. 222, 224). That this was partly an inverted Edwards has to no small extent played into Edwards’s considerable posthumous reputation.

Edwards was a better philosopher and theologian than he was a historian or prophet, but Edwards did predict one thing quite accurately. He “was correct in anticipating a momentous worldwide expansion of evangelical Protestantism” (Marsden, p. 259) And it is precisely this explosion of evangelical religion that best explains Edwards’s continuing, albeit uneven, ability to attract followers. *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad* is a collection of essays that helps explore aspects of this connection, “the first major collection of essays dedicated exclusively to Edwards’s legacy” (p. xiv). The essays move well beyond the trails previously blazed by Joseph Conforti, Allen Guelzo, Douglas Sweeney, and Mark Valeri (all of whom principally focus on intellectual cultures in America), offering new interpretations of Edwards’s views of women and children, his continuing American cultural influence, and his relationship to the world beyond America, including his impact on the missionary enterprise.22

Catherine Brekus’s essay attends to some ironic consequences of Edwards’s ministry to children. Following Puritan convention, Edwards taught that
children “out of Christ” were depraved and “infinitely more hateful than vipers” (p. 40). But most of Edwards’s contemporaries, if they held such a view at all, were having trouble fully articulating it by the second third of the eighteenth century. Brekus places Edwards’s treatment of this thorny issue in the wider context of his battles with the humanitarianism of the Enlightenment and the more optimistic views of human nature it was encouraging. She suggests his unusual clarity on this issue (Edwards was notoriously willing to threaten misbehaving little ones with damnation) stems from his unwillingness to compromise with these currents of the Enlightenment. But recalcitrance in the face of the Enlightenment opened a window for Edwards to devote an unprecedented amount of attention to the needs and concerns of children, a step that tended to subvert the “traditional hierarchies of age and wealth.” Hence Edwards could well be remembered as someone highly abusive to children, or as “one of the first ministers to treat children as religious equals” to adults—or perhaps both (pp. 47–8).

Ava Chamberlain’s chapter on gender in eighteenth-century Northampton is equally provocative. Again, Edwards plays the protagonist challenging aspects of the Enlightenment. In this new treatment of the “bad book” affair, Chamberlain suggests that Edwards’s opposition to the young boys stemmed from his rejection of the notion of a private male self—a notion that cultural historians have traced back to this period. Instead, Edwards held that men should be held accountable for their “private” behaviors. Connecting this episode with Edwards’s later dismissal from Northampton, she observes that among Edwards’s supporters when he lost his pulpit in 1750 were women “whose hearts are broke” (p. 81).

Essays by James D. German and Mark Valeri explore the relationship between Edwards, his followers, and the market economy. Valeri’s argues that Edwards’s self-conscious entrance into the marketplace of ideas through his writing set the stage for his son’s—Jonathan Edwards, Jr.—explicit defense of free trade during the American Revolution. Edwards, however ambivalent “toward a liberal commercial order,” essentially legitimated the market through his behaviors (p. 91). German’s “The Political Economy of Depravity” shows how Edwards’s ideas might have laid the groundwork for his descendants’ embrace of capitalism. Connecticut’s Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth both subscribed to Edwards’s views on original sin and human nature in the early republican era, concluding that “truly virtuous behavior is a moral impossibility” (p. 102). These convictions, German suggests, led them to believe that grace or supernaturalism was irrelevant to public life. The more important political principle, they urged, was the fact of self-love, not the possibility of a redeemed moral order. While Edwards the Younger, Sherman, and Ellsworth broke no new ground in the tradition of political economy, their thought
suggests one of the ways that pious Americans came to embrace naturalistic economic thinking.

Despite the strength of these essays on Edwards’s American context, this volume’s real contribution lies in its final section, titled “Edwards and the World.” The global scope of these essays challenges a peculiarly American reading of Jonathan Edwards. True, Edwards did once, during the height of the Great Awakening, muse that the millennium might come first to American shores. But as McClymond’s essay in this volume points out, the more mature Edwards muted these claims and seems rather to have had his sights set on global accelerations in the progress of the gospel. He carried on an extensive correspondence with Old World Britons and was tremendously eager to hear about gospel triumphs outside the English-speaking world. Thus it is fitting that this dimension of Edwards’s legacy is finally receiving some attention. David Bebbington’s essay provides an overview of the international dispersion of his writings, noting that until 1775 more of his works were published abroad than in America. In the eighteenth century, Edwards had admirers in England, Scotland, Germany, and the Netherlands. In the nineteenth, add Wales, France, Switzerland, and, most strikingly, Beirut. In these places, as M. X. Lesser’s bibliographical essay demonstrates, foreign editions of several of Edwards’s works were published. William Carey brought some of his works to India, where an edition of the Humble Attempt was published in 1859. The Church Missionary Society, in the early nineteenth century, also published an edition of the Humble Attempt as well as the Life of Brainerd, and missionaries carried these works around the world. Finally, Bebbington shows that Edwards’s international reputation, like his national reputation, suffered in the late nineteenth century and then underwent a fragmented revival in the twentieth.23

Edwards’s relationship to the missionary movement occupies the essays by Andrew Walls and Stuart Piggin. Both chapters argue that Edwards should be seen as a foundational figure in the modern missionary enterprise. Walls, in particular, stresses that he was an unusually early advocate for the globalization of Christianity and, perhaps more important, that his work on the Freedom of the Will and Religious Affections “helped to liberate English (and perhaps Scottish) Calvinism,” which broadly served as the theological context of the first generations of British missionaries (p. 251). Later generations of missionaries also helped in adapting Edwards for evangelistic purposes, deemphasizing his “Old World” outlook and accentuating his and David Brainerd’s personal roles in bringing Christianity to native Americans beyond Christendom.

One aspect of Edwards’s legacy that these essays do not treat is the blossoming interest in Edwards among contemporary English-speaking evangelical and Reformed Christians. As the opening of this review makes clear, this
broad sympathy for Edwards, while not unprecedented, is a relatively new development for modern American Christianity. During much of the twentieth century, Edwards was more an embarrassment for the Protestant establishment than a hero of faith. But recently Edwards has been reclaimed by Protestants across a relatively wide evangelical spectrum, ranging from charismatic to Reformed, and this new popular and theological religious interest in Edwards has undeniably shaped the scholar’s Edwards—both by giving some Edwards scholarship an unusually eager reception and, since some of these theologically committed scholars have played a role in resuscitating Edwards, by raising the quantity and quality of the scholarship produced.

Religious appreciation for Edwards has, over these years, generally emerged from two sometimes-overlapping constituencies. For some, Edwards stands with a cohort of English Puritans as a hero of Reformed Christianity. This “Reformed” following has provided Edwards a continuing, mostly theological readership into the twenty-first century. Books sales, of course, do not tell the whole story but they do hint at the general pattern. For example, the Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company (P&R), a small press that services America’s Reformed tradition, has released since 1992 two editions of the controversial “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (one that modernizes Edwards’s language). Together these popular editions have sold nearly one hundred thousand copies. Similarly, the Banner of Truth, a well-established Edinburgh publisher that services the English-speaking evangelical Reformed world, currently sells approximately twenty thousand copies of unabridged works by Jonathan Edwards per year. Perhaps more tellingly—and hinting at his appeal among American evangelicals—in the year of his tercentenary, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis hosted a conference for pastors specifically to honor Edwards’s life and consider his relevance for today’s evangelical churches. This decidedly non-academic event drew over two thousand Christian pastors and other leaders to the city. Bethlehem Baptist’s pastor, John Piper, has played no small role in the Edwards revival. Since the 1980s Piper has tirelessly recommended Edwards’s “unmodern” theology as a remedy for spiritual deficiencies in American evangelicalism. His bestselling book *Desiring God* (1986) is replete with Edwardsian themes, and more recently Piper edited and introduced an edition of Edwards’s dense treatise “On the End for Which God Created the World” that has sold nearly thirty-five thousand copies.

At the other end of the spectrum of Edwards’s evangelical admirers are those for whom Edwards stands as a model of a life lived in devotion to God as well as a selfless promoter of Christian revivalism. In his biography, Gura suggests that Edwards’s most important legacy lies here and not in his narrower theological heritage. By 1800, Gura suggests, “a large segment of American culture
had realized the congruity of Edwards’s life and work to their own experience and so adopted him as their spiritual godfather and his works as talismans for their own efforts to reform American society” (p. xiv). Although Edwards imagined that he would be remembered for his great theological works written in his last decade of life, in fact, Gura argues, “The cornerstone of Edwards’s legacy and his subsequent import for American culture is his writing about personal religious experience and how it is constituted and evaluated” (p. 229). This is the Edwards that Guy Chevreau invoked in 1994 in justification of the “Toronto Blessing,” a charismatic outbreak of holy laughter. 28 It is “this Edwards,” Gura stresses, “the rehabilitated, highly edited, and ‘Romantic’ Edwards . . . who came down to us as America’s evangelical” (p. 225).

It would be difficult to assess which evangelical constituency has had a greater impact on Edwards scholarship. Certainly the former, Reformed evangelicals have done more to funnel young talent into academia. Particularly in the past 30 years, American evangelicals have hailed Edwards as the luminary of their tradition, someone who made a lasting contribution to American intellectual life while remaining resolutely pious. Some evangelicals, heeding a series of warm recommendations, are self-consciously following Edwards’s example of faith and scholarship and are pursuing vocations in the academy. 29 In a recent review of Edwards scholarship, Leigh Eric Schmidt called this trend an “evangelical renaissance,” noting that “Edwards stands as a beacon of the evangelical aspiration for greater intellectual heft.” 30 But the latter, less theologically inclined Edwards devotees have historically played a greater role in solidifying the link between Edwards, America, and the expansion of evangelical Christianity. These evangelicals, for whom the Edwards of Great Awakening fame is paramount, set the stage in the nineteenth century and again in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries for Edwards’s wide-ranging appeal.

Whether via the Reformed or the revivalist evangelicals, the idea of an academic evangelical renaissance with Edwards as its chief intellectual inspiration is not a comforting thought to many in the academy. Not only is there concern that the Edwards of faith might overwhelm the Edwards of history and thus promote bad scholarship, but there is the deeper sense that the Edwards of faith is simply best left behind. In his recent book The Transformation of American Religion, Wolfe concisely summarizes the reigning stereotype of Edwards’s theology: “For Edwards, God is great, humans are meek, and our only recourse is to accept the arbitrariness of his inscrutable grace.” (Actually Edwards would have offered much more in the way of “recourse.”) Wolfe writes to set to rest the notion that contemporary evangelicals really follow in Edwards’s illiberal legacy, instead arguing that evangelicals are “democratic in their political instincts, geographically and culturally mobile, [and] attracted
to popular culture more than to the written word.\textsuperscript{31} Simply put, American liberals have nothing to fear from contemporary evangelicals in part because evangelicals have abandoned Edwards.

But have they? Or have they rather elected to follow an Edwards more consistent with American norms? Gura provocatively suggests that the Edwards most Americans have appropriated (knowingly or not) is the Edwards who "insisted on the central role of the emotions in one's spiritual life," who told people "that spiritual knowledge was available to any," and who "welcomed the exhilaration of individuals who thought about themselves in wholly new ways as they discovered the peace and glory for which they so long had searched." Edwards later qualified these stances, especially in Religious Affections, and Gura even argues that "his great treatises of the mid-1750s can be regarded as attempts to cage the monsters that he had created prior to 1743 [in the revivals]" (p. 232). Edwards was to his death a "conservative revolutionary," as Marsden dubs him (p. 253).

But the "monsters" have remained for the most part uncaged, running off in myriad directions in America's democratic atmosphere, helping to form new varieties of American Christianity. Edwards, as both an early witness and chief architect of the changes taking place, had initially hoped that the new revivalist faith, more genuinely international and better able to transcend cultural barriers, would be more authentically Christian than the old. But these works provide indications that Edwards would not have altogether appreciated the religious culture he helped to create.

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Religion

BADEMAN


See Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards in the Twentieth Century,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 47 (December 2004): 659–87. Some of the material in this and the following paragraph is drawn from Minkema’s insightful essay. Minkema included intellectual figures that died before 1800, e.g., Benjamin Franklin.

As a commentary on the rapid pace at which Edwards scholarship proceeds, in the time since this essay was commissioned, several new books on Edwards have been or will soon be published: Sang Hyun Lee, ed., The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards (2005); Stephen Stein, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards (forthcoming from Cambridge University Press); and Perry Miller’s biography has come out in a new edition from Bison Books (2005) with a forward by John F. Wilson.


Miller, Jonathan Edwards, xxx, 305.

Ibid., 183. Miller’s interpretation was a reaction to scholars like Vernon Parrington, whose writings famously place most of America’s subsequent problems at the feet of the Puritans. For the cultural appropriation of Edwards over the course of the long nineteenth century, see Joseph A. Conforti, Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, and American Culture (1995).

Philip F. Gura, “Seasonable Thoughts: Reading Edwards in the 1980’s,” New England Quarterly 53 (September 1980): 391. Based upon his assessment of The Great Awakening and Apocalyptic Writings (volumes in WJE), Gura predicted in 1980 that the decade of the 1980s would use Edwards “to lead us more accurately to the intellectual center of the eighteenth-century American mind,” to a “vision of history which had, at its core, a profound millennial hope” (p. 391).


16. WJE 16, 727.
17. WJE 22, 4-7. See also Brown, Jonathan Edwards and the Bible, ch. 6.
18. In fact Edwards argued that “this history will be carried on with regard to all three worlds, heaven, earth, and hell: considering the connected, successive events and alternations.” WJE 16, 728. Stout calls this a “tri-world narrative.” WJE 22, 16.
20. Readers who know Marsden’s The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship (1997) will recognize, for instance, that he appreciates Edwards’s ability to bring Christian perspectives to intellectual life.
21. WJE 16, 753.
25. Among Banner of Truth’s best-selling Edwards works, see The Works of Jonathan Edwards (a facsimile of Edward Hickman’s two-volume 1865 edition); Jonathan Edwards on Revival (comprising two of Edwards’s works on revival); Religious Affections; Jonathan Edwards on Knowing Christ (sermons); and Charity and its Fruits (also sermons). Information courtesy of Jack Smith, Manager, The Banner of Truth.