

Beautiful theology

by [Mark Noll](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

Amy Plantinga Pauw, who teaches theology at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, has written a sophisticated but quite accessible book about Jonathan Edwards's surprisingly rich musings on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Pauw is among the younger academics who over the past two decades have transformed Edwards scholarship into the most serious, most extensive and most important effort at theological retrieval in American history. Like others of this cohort, she makes full use of the splendidly edited *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, which have been appearing with accelerating regularity from the Edwards shop at Yale, under the direction of Harry Stout and Kenneth Minkema.

Pauw is also a master of the vast corpus of Edwards's unpublished writings--writings that include theological notes (the "miscellanies"), manuscript sermons and private commentary on scripture (Pauw herself edited the recently released vol. 20, *The "Miscellanies"*: 833-1152). Because she has perused the books that Edwards himself read (many in Latin), she is able to show that Edwards, however creative in some of his formulations, was far from the isolated wilderness genius depicted in once-standard accounts. And with several of the younger scholars, along with veterans like Sang Hyun Lee, she is also fully committed to using Edwards not simply as an exceptional figure from the past, but also as a worthy interlocutor for contemporary theological discussion.

The great strength of this book lies in its picture of what Pauw describes as two distinctive lines of trinitarian reasoning that appear in a few of the sermons, treatises and letters known during Edwards's lifetime, but in much greater profusion in his unpublished work. The first of these models presents a psychological understanding more or less in the tradition of Augustine, where the Trinity is parsed as a harmonious unity of all-comprehending mind (Father), all-knowing wisdom (Son) and all-embracing love (Spirit).

The second is a social model that more or less follows the 12th-century Richard of St. Victor, in whose thought the Trinity appears as a divine "family of three" in which

the members delight in love of each other and also in their unified work among humans. As a historian of theology, Pauw makes an especially fruitful connection by linking Edwards's 18th-century trinitarian thought to the thought of the more spiritual of 17th-century Puritans (e.g., Richard Sibbes, John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, John Cotton). Like these "spiritual Brethren," Edwards drew parallels between the shape of intratrinitarian harmony and a harmonious plan for human salvation extra-Trinity.

Pauw shows clearly how fully Edwards developed both trinitarian models in connection with his other basic convictions. Those convictions included a commitment to scripture as God's infallible written revelation and a general satisfaction with the distinctive doctrines of the Reformed tradition (especially the covenant as organizing principle for understanding the Trinity and its relations to humanity, along with doctrines of election, predestination, penal substitutionary atonement, and the eternal damnation of the lost).

The Supreme Harmony of All is at its most compelling when Pauw describes the close fit between Edwards's psychological trinitarianism and his well-known emphases on beauty, harmony, consent and excellency in describing the divine character and in accounting for the nature of true virtue. Drawing especially from the miscellanies, she shows how these standard Edwardsean themes were rooted in a profound apprehension of specifically trinitarian realities. In considering how well the two modes of Edwards's trinitarian thought cohere with each other and with Edwards's other theological commitments, Pauw makes excellent use of a number of 20th-century authors, including Karl Barth, Robert Jenson, Kathryn Tanner and Rowan Williams.

Pauw takes most obvious exception to Edwards when she suggests that his social model of the Trinity overrode or contradicted insights from his psychological model. She wonders, in particular, if Edwards's commitment to the traditional Reformed covenant might not have led him astray. In Edwards's doctrine of the covenant of redemption Pauw glimpses a tendency toward subordinating the Son to the Father that violates the ideal of divine harmony expressed in his psychological Trinity. The unfortunate result of such intratrinitarian subordination is, in Pauw's view, support for the sinful subordination of women to men both past and present.

Similarly, Pauw wonders if Edwards's resolute defense of traditional Reformed teachings on predestination and the eternal punishment of the damned reflect a not-

too-subtle economic Trinity (where the Father judges despite the Son's work of reconciliation and despite the Spirit's overflowing love for sinful humanity). In Pauw's account, these traditional Reformed doctrines entail a sacrifice of the psychological model where, because of the mysterious three-in-one character of the Trinity, the Father effects the all-embracing salvation secured by the Son and mirrors the all-encompassing love of the Spirit.

On such questions Pauw uses aspects of Edwards's psychological trinitarianism that parallel settled convictions among some modern theologians (especially concerning God's desire for universal salvation and the ultimate election of all people in Christ for eternal life), in order to challenge other aspects of Edwards's thought that contradict these modern convictions. Pauw calls Edwards's work on such matters a "cobbled trinitarianism" or labels it more simply as "mistaken." In her perspective, Edwards illustrates the damage done when the use of scripture or theological tradition is "not guided by more general construals of God's gracious relationship to creation."

Yet a question could be asked of Pauw in return. Is it possible that she is not able to see coherence in Edwards because her commitments as a modern theologian obscure the way that, to Edwards, the idea of a psychological Trinity overflowing with love could fit smoothly with the idea of a social Trinity active in personal election, substitutionary atonement and eternal damnation? Pauw is exceptionally good on Edwards's commitment to scripture (and his willingness to speculate beyond the exact words of scripture). Yet is it possible that because of her own modern interpretations of scripture she is not able to grasp why Edwards thought he was only following the Bible when he offered what to Pauw seems discordant?

If Edwards's understanding of scripture and his approach to theological traditions led him to see no contradiction in asserting both divine love and divine wrath in ways that to Pauw now seem incoherent, perhaps there was less friction between his trinitarian models than Pauw claims. Pauw, in short, finds it easier to describe how modern theological convictions spotlight apparent tensions in Edwards's theological convictions than to imagine how a possible coherence among Edwards's commitments (including his models of the Trinity) might challenge modern theological convictions.

To raise such questions about Pauw's dialogue with Edwards does not in any way detract from one's admiration for the skillful historical and theological arguments of this fine book. For these and much else not mentioned here--including Edwards's

Trinity-influenced description of his marriage with Sarah Pierrepont Edwards as an "uncommon union"; the possible connections between Edwards's trinitarian reasonings and his problems as a pastor in Northampton; the difficulties latent in combining Edwards's philosophical idealism with his robustly actualized trinitarianism; and the ironic relation between his communal trinitarianism and the individualism of revival--this coruscating volume merits the most serious attention from both students of Edwards and writers of modern theology.