

*Edwards in Our Time*, edited by Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo

reviewed by [Amy Plantinga Pauw](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

Toward the end of the 19th century, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote an obituary for Jonathan Edwards's theology: "The truth is that [his] whole system of beliefs . . . is gently fading out of enlightened human intelligence, and we are hardly in a condition to realize what a tyranny it once exerted over many of the strongest minds." Holmes's pronouncement was premature. In our time it is confidence in "enlightened human intelligence" that is fading. This change has contributed to a vibrant new interest in the theology of Edwards, the 18th-century preacher, revivalist and metaphysician. Edwards's ways of addressing recurrent questions about God and human existence have gained new plausibility in the post-Enlightenment era. For the nine contributors to this stimulating volume, he continues to be "a wellspring for contemporary philosophical and theological reflection."

The ongoing vitality of religious traditions requires the periodic rediscovery of their central theological figures. Twentieth-century retrievals have been excitingly ecumenical. The Luther revival has been more than Lutheran, the renewed interest in Maximus the Confessor has been more than Orthodox, and the rediscovery of Edwards has been similarly ecumenical. Lutherans, Calvinists, Methodists, Baptists and even agnostics have found him deserving. The four national conference on Edwards held during the past 15 years have attracted an interdisciplinary group of historians, philosophers, theologians and scholars of literature.

The editors of this volume, which originated in the 1996 Philadelphia conference on Edwards, represent this ecumenical and disciplinary diversity. Sang Hyun Lee is a theologian from a mainline seminary and Allen Guelzo is an American historian from an evangelical college. The writers of these essays bring Edwards into a still wider contemporary conversation, stretching from Karl Rahner and Thomas Merton to the Promise Keepers and Jacques Derrida.

It is refreshing to read constructive theology based on the creative retrieval of a voice from the tradition, instead of the dismissive caricatures one often finds--caricatures that function merely as a foil to the author's own proposal. Exploring

Edwards's thought and extending it into their own contexts, the writers of these essays discover resources for an aesthetic of responsibility (Roland Delattre), the rehabilitation of a biblical eschatology (Robert Jenson), and hopefulness about humanity's access to divine revelation (Gerald McDermott).

To be sure, careful attentiveness to Edwards's voice also yields criticism. Guelzo is gloomy about the usefulness of the harmony Edwards posited between necessity and free will. It may have suited a hierarchical, premodern society but has little relevance for ours. Walter Eversley steers contemporary pastors away from Edwards's failed attempt to "institutionalize revivalism." And Helen Westra's fascinating analysis of Edwards's use of "event-texts" in his revival sermons reveals his manipulative and censorious side. Slavish adherence to Edwards's thought would be unfaithful to him as a thinker who accepted the title of Calvinist "for distinction's sake," yet insisted that he could not "justly be charged with believing in everything just as [Calvin] taught." But one must also understand how he remains a person of his own time.

There is a difference between creatively extending Edwards's ideas and invoking his name only to leave him behind. Stephen Daniel's essay hovers on this boundary. In his quest to show the "distinctive postmodern character" of Edwards's philosophy, he provocatively redefines the key Edwardsean terms "glory" and "excellence" as "creativity" and "intelligible identity." Many readers will not find a God who is "a function of a discursive matrix" to be recognizably Edwardsean.

Yet Daniel is exactly right to probe the theological implications of what Edwards called his "new concept of being." For Edwards, God's reality is to be understood as a dispositional, communicative harmony rather than as an immutable, self-contained substance, and this makes his conceptions of the Trinity and of God's relationship to creatures surprisingly contemporary.

Sang Hyun Lee has been a pioneer in the appropriation and development of Edwards's dispositional reconception of God, and has influenced much contemporary theological work on Edwards. In his rich essay Lee builds on his previous work to show how "every created entity is to be a repetition or image of God's beauty," thus making room for a new appreciation of the physical creation. But Lee's "dispositional ontology" does not adequately reflect the strong communal themes noted by other contributors to the volume.

John E. Smith points to Edwards's sense of "the unities that connect individuals, of the communities that express a common heritage and endure though individuals come and go." Robert Jenson recalls Edwards's eschatological vision of "a society in the highest degree happy." Edwards's ontology is better construed as relational, which leaves room for both its dispositional and communal emphases.

How wide will the ripples of the growing interest in Edwards's theology spread? Beyond the English-speaking world? Beyond Protestantism? This volume is a hopeful sign that Edwards is, as John E. Smith claims, a "perennial" figure, who can help us address "the recurrent problems facing religion on the contemporary scene."