Edwards drew the common distinction between the two kinds of theological knowledge, the first speculative...and the second practical...The aim of [Edwards'] theology was to nurture a “sense” of divine things that took one deeper into their nature than the speculative understanding alone could penetrate and to “guide and influence” us in our practice.

Thus states E. Brooks Holifield in *Theology in America*. Although Holifield asserts that Edwards’ aim and distinction of theology may have been indebted to the Reformed scholastic Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), many in Edwards scholarship on the theology of Edwards, such as Ridderbos, Cherry, Gerstner, Holmes, and Lee, have overlooked such indebtedness, which may be an underlying or overarching theme in the interpretation of the nature of Edwards' theology. One reason for such oversight is that many of Edwards' sources remain in untranslated Latin, as Amy Plantinga Pauw points out, following Norman Fiering. Another reason may be, as Gerry McDermott recently remarked, “more scholarly work needs to compare him [Edwards] with European thinkers and issues, and thereby include him in the ongoing discussions of international philosophy and theology.”

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1 This essay was presented in various forms as an inaugural address, March 2010 at UFS (*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXVIII(2)), a scholarly paper at the Jonathan Edwards Society Conference, October 2011, Northampton, MA, and will be published in part and translated in Portuguese in *Fides Reformata* (Šao Paulo: Mackenzie University, Graduate School of Theology, forthcoming).


Therefore, this essay attempts to evaluate Edwards’ theological inquiry by a more in-depth view of Protestant scholasticism and its trajectories. I focus on a single document wherein Edwards most distinctively lays out his understanding of the nature of theology—a sermon of November 1739, published as The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth (1788).

The period 1737–1742 was a challenging and transitional time for New England’s history. War (French-Indian raids, War of Jenkins’ Ear) and awakenings shaped America’s early history and theology in unprecedented ways in particular following the Great Awakening, an event that is fixed to that towering figure in intellectual history: Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), preacher, theologian, philosopher, missionary, pastor, and university president.6

Though steeped in seventeenth-century English Puritanism and continental post-Reformation reformed thought, New England’s theological orthodoxy and practice were put to the test during these years. The rise of Arminianism, the dissemination of Deism, and the news about the “New Methodists”7 such as John Wesley (1703–1791) and George Whitefield (1714–1770), all contributed to division and realigned allegiances in the British colony. The concern over Arminianism, was expressed in the latter exchanges in March 1739 between Capt. Benjamin Wright and the Rev. Benjamin Doolittle of Northfield, Mass. Doolittle accused his parishioner Wright of having “Signified nothing of a desire of peace and love,” while Wright charged that his pastor had “often advanced Arminian principles both in pulpit and private conversation.”8 The danger of Deism was not only generally known in New England but the congregation of Northampton in particular was, thanks to their pastor, well versed in it. In sermon twenty-four of the History of the Work of Redemption series of mid-1739, Edwards warned:

Again, another thing that has of late exceedingly prevailed among Protestants, and especially in England, is deism. The deists wholly cast off the Christian religion, and are professed infidels. They ben’t like the heretics, Arians and Socinians, and others...They deny any revealed religion...

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8 Edwards, Correspondence by, to and about Edwards and His Family, in WJE Online 32:C56. See also, WJE Online 32:C55, C57.