Gerald McDermott and Ronald Story, eds.


Theologian McDermott, a well-known Edwards scholar with no less than five major books on this most renowned of America’s theologians, and historian Ronald Story, most recently author of the acclaimed *Jonathan Edwards and the Gospel of Love* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), have teamed up in this little gem of a book to expand on a portrait of Edwards that is little known, and often overlooked. Herein are windows into Edwards as a social, if not public theologian (a topic on which McDermott first cut his scholarly teeth three decades ago when he wrote one of the first dissertations and then books on this aspect of Edwards’ thought), albeit approached from the perspective of Edwards as a preacher and even philosopher of the common good. Although the secondary and scholarly literature on Edwards continues to expand at an exponential rate, work specifically on the social or public dimensions of the Edwardsian corpus remain relatively underdeveloped. How does this anthology attempt to shift the tide of Edwards’ reception, interpretation, and reappropriation?

Twenty sets of selections derived from across Edwards’ body of work are here collected, some as short as three and others as long as ten or twelve pages. They are organized by chapters mostly chronologically, although there is one short chapter (three) of three entries from Edwards’ journals spanning a decade that throws off a strict historical sequencing. The majority of the book comes from Edward’s sermons (at least a dozen chapters) that reveal him as deeply engaged with the issues confronting his congregation, township, and wider community, as well as give us insight into how he understood what happened at the local level to have wider, national and even international, relevance and impact. In many of these cases, our editors helpfully situate the sermons in their original context—through page-long introductions leading off each chapter—so that contemporary readers can understand the original audience, the issues (social, historical, economic, political, etc.), and the rhetorical design through which Edwards may have hoped to motivate certain responses or behaviours and achieve certain ends in and among his listeners.

Also included among the readings are short segments from Edwards’ published treatises—e.g., *A History of the Work of Redemption, Religious Affections,* and *The Nature of True Virtue*—as well as sections from his notebooks, journals, and letters (in this one case, a letter to Massachusetts House of Representatives speaker, Thomas Hubbard, in 1751, addressing matters related
to the Stockbridge Indians, shortly after Edwards left Northampton for his wilderness mission among the Native Americans). Deserving special mention is the ‘Church Covenant’ Edwards introduced in 1742, through which he hoped to motivate the townspeople to live as people of faith in their private and, more importantly, public lives. Throughout readers see how Edwards connected personal spiritual piety—for instance: living at peace, resisting the sense of envy or a selfish spirit, nurturing charity and love, being merciful, etc.—with social attitudes and behaviours. Herein also Edwards is unveiled as a God-oriented thinker whose theology was not without social ramifications if not direct applications.

As all of the Edwards material come from the multi-volume Yale University Press edition of his collected oeuvre, there is in this sense nothing ‘new’ in this offering. Yet there is a substantive editors’ introduction to the book that provides orientation so readers can appreciate not only what follows but the Other in the book’s title. To be sure, even still, many readers will have difficulty overcoming previous prejudices to giving Edwards a fair shake on these matters, particularly since even with these new venues into his thinking, the various themes presented still have to be understood within the broader framework of Edwards as a Calvinist, anti-Arminian, anti-Roman Catholic, slave-owning, patriarchalist, and hierarchicalist man of the eighteenth century. Some might press the question: how much energy should we spend on retrieving such a legacy in a twenty-first century context that is so very different, even contrastingly so, when set alongside Edwards’s sensibilities and those of his time?

While sympathetic to such a pessimistic stance, might I also suggest that The Other Jonathan Edwards lets us peek into elements of an otherwise thoroughly ransacked life in order to see complexities not only of thought but also of attitudes, postures, and behaviours. Further, and perhaps more importantly, they illuminate how one with deep convictions attempted to live faithfully in ways that contributed toward the common good, as far as this could be comprehended and heralded, given the finitude, fallenness, and frailty of the human condition. From that perspective, it is arguable that times have not changed much. Those in the present who work in the arena of public theology do so more often than not with the awareness that we need today to do more, not less, in order to make the world a better place, and often find ourselves working against the paradoxes and contradictions that mark our own worlds, not to mention our own lives. As such, then, we may, regardless of from whence we have come or whither we are headed, resonate with Jonathan Edwards who struggled mightily, if not despairingly in his own day against currents that seemed to doom the best and most noble of human intentions and thwart the redemptive grace of God. Even if we cannot inevitably do better than he in