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# Wesleyan Theological Journal

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The Society's mission is to encourage exchange of ideas among Wesleyan-Holiness theologians; to develop a source of papers for CHP (Christian Holiness Partnership) seminars; to stimulate scholarship among younger theologians and pastors; and to publish a scholarly journal.

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## EDITOR'S NOTES

Richard Thompson observes that “postmodernism has helped us recognize that nothing, including matters of faith, can be mastered as objective entities. We really cannot understand the biblical texts or find meaning in them apart from ourselves and our reading community of faith.” In light of such a thesis, the whole issue of postmodernism and its implications for theology, biblical studies, and contemporary church life were the focus of the 1999 annual meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society.

Convened in Bethany, Oklahoma, on the campus of Southern Nazarene University, the Society's 34th annual meeting featured the theme “Wesleyan Theology in a Postmodern Era.” Albert L. Truesdale was program chair. M. Douglas Meeks delivered the keynote address and Douglas M. Strong the presidential address (both are found in this issue). A range of other papers from this significant meeting appear here, including an insightful exchange between Kenneth J. Collins and Randy L. Maddox on the subject “Wesleyan Studies and Wesleyan/Holiness Scholarship: Diverse Readings of the Tradition.”

In a worship setting at this annual meeting, Elaine A. Heath shared from her experience and her heart concerning the nature and purpose of being responsible theologians in a postmodern world. Following were her observations on that occasion.

First Corinthians 1:18-30 is a key passage for Wesleyan leaders in a postmodern age. It speaks forthrightly about the “foolishness” of the message of the cross of Christ, although for some this very message turns out to be power of God. It explores what it means to be truly wise and to know that real power and wealth come through sacrifice and poverty. We all have been purchased and have no room to boast—unless it is in the Christ. This is the premier text in all the New Testament for theologians in a postmodern age. It is a mirror into which God beckons us to gaze long and hard and often. I am going to be old-fashioned and say it out loud: this text is the Word of God—the Postmodern God. It is a message from the Postmodern God to those of us who do theology in the name of Jesus. It is the Postmodern God's prescription for powerful, effectual academic ministry to the church.

Last night at the annual WTS banquet we honored our esteemed colleague Dr. J. Kenneth Grider with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Throughout his teaching career Dr. Grider

stressed with his students: "We have to do theology in overalls." If our theology does not wear overalls, it is of no use to the church, and if it is of no use to the church, it is of no use to God, and if it is of no use to God, then why are we wasting our time? Today, more than ever before, theology in overalls is what the church requires. Theology in overalls is the prescription of the Postmodern God. But what does that mean for postmoderns? What is God's view of the academy? Of the academic?

First there is the Postmodern God's program of radical deconstruction motivated by a divine hermeneutic of suspicion. Intellectualism and philosophy, the text tells us, are all too often the vehicle for the idolatrous quest for power. Do we look at our theologizing with a hermeneutic of suspicion? Do we question the power-hunger within our own hearts? It probably is there. And what is the solution? The alpha and omega for the Christian philosopher, for the academic and theologian, is Christ crucified. Definitive power is found in the cross. Definitive wisdom is found in the cross. Definitive hermeneutics is found in the cross. God calls us in this text to return to a "pre-critical" exegesis—to narrative theology—to Christ crucified.

But there is more on the Postmodern God's agenda. The western church, the evangelical church, is stuck while the world is whitened for harvest! "Come," the Holy One challenges us theologians. "It is time to move from foundationalism to non-foundationalism, from a fixation on epistemology to a hermeneutical stance, from a supposedly "objective and distant" analysis of truth to a participatory knowing of Christ crucified. In this movement God rejects western egocentrism and urges us to join him in his holistic and inclusive dance into the world. God reaches out to but is not confined by Jew and Greek, affective and cognitive, male and female, one and the other. God stubbornly insists on remaining God. mystery remains intact, and wisdom is only fully embodied in Christ crucified.

Yes, God challenges us theologians to keep sight of our location, our context, our own reality. Our subjective reality is indeed real, but it is not the center of the universe nor the definitive reality. Only Christ can define ultimate reality. Only Christ can inspire the theologian to rightly interpret his or her context. "Look at your beginnings!" cries the Postmodern God. "Never lose sight of what you were and where you were when I first called you! Remember that *you are small*." According to our text:

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God. God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:26-30 NLT).

We must never lose sight of our own narrative of smallness and weakness. This narrative of ours is our greatest strength. It is the secret of powerful theology, for when we decrease Christ increases, and when we know that we are small we depend on the One who is large, and that is what theology is for.

I never want to lose sight of what I was when Christ first called me. I was in a tree, high in the branches on a summer day. I spent a lot of time in that tree, partly because I was eight years old and knew that God meant for trees to be climbed. But it also was partly because it was safer to be up that tree than in my house. I didn't know much about God, but I believed that God was there in the light that dappled on the leaves, and my heart first felt the call while I was there. It was a call to sheer worship.

It has taken many years for me to fully discern that God's call to me is to be a theologian, to be a teacher and a preacher who has a prophet's heart. There have been incredible obstacles along the way, each one of them stark testimonies to my smallness, weakness, nothingness. I don't want to forget any of those obstacles, or where I have been or what kinds of decisions I had to make to say "yes" to God's call. For it is only in my smallness, weakness, and nothingness that God's glory can burn like the noonday sun. And that is what theology is for.

What does it mean for me, for you, to stay "small" in light of our calling? What does it mean for us to be scholars whose message is the cross and whose boasting is only in the Lord? What does it mean for us to minister to both the "Jews" and "Greeks" in our corners of the world? What are the intel-

lectual temptations with which we struggle? In short, when we peer into the mirror of this text, what do we see? What is the Postmodern God calling us to become?

What might the work of David Ray Griffin contribute to Wesleyan philosophical theology, or *Forrest Gump* to understanding postmodern cultural patterns? What about the nature of religious knowledge or attitudes toward the world's religions in a pluralistic environment? Where do metanarrative and Phoebe Palmer fit in this picture? All of these questions and more are addressed in this issue.

Barry L. Callen, Editor  
Anderson, Indiana  
April, 2000

# **SANCTIFIED ECCENTRICITY: THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY HOLINESS PARADIGM**

by

**Douglas M. Strong<sup>1</sup>**

The big day finally arrived. After five years of research, rough drafts, rewrites, and then the preparation of a (supposedly) error-free manuscript—interrupted by the responsibilities of a full-time pastorate, my wedding, the birth of our first child, and the remodeling of the parsonage—finally, it was the day for my oral defense. The defense was held in “the Oratory,” a staid, two-hundred-year-old room with imposing high-backed chairs and a huge oak table, the same room in which generations of Princeton students have defended their dissertations. The inquisitors who sat around the table included the entire departmental faculty—and while all were eminent scholars, the most intimidating for me was a professor often referred to as the premier Civil War historian in America.

I was anxious, but ready. For two hours, I summarized my thesis and fielded questions about all manner of historical minutia and interpretative theories. Toward the end of the defense, I began to feel rather confident. But then the Civil War historian spoke up, his first and only contribution to the discussion. “You’ve written a fine thesis, Doug. But I have a question for you. My question is really quite simple: So what?”

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<sup>1</sup>This article was the presidential address delivered by Dr. Strong to the annual meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society convened at Southern Nazarene University in March, 1999.

“Pardon me?” I asked, hoping that I hadn’t heard him accurately. But again, he repeated, “So what? What difference does your thesis make for our understanding of the nineteenth century?”

So what? That unsettling question continues to haunt me even today. Part of the historian’s questioning was related to my particular topic: that is, what does the doctrine of entire sanctification have to do with the politicization of abolitionism? But more broadly, he was really asking about the relevance of nineteenth-century Wesleyan theology, and, therefore, the relevance of the Holiness Movement. As a secular, political historian, it was difficult for him to fathom how a religious community and a specific theological viewpoint could be so consequential to the larger cultural milieu. Thus, answering his question becomes representative of the kinds of questions that are essential to my vocation as a church historian. How important, really, was the emphasis on sanctification within the wider context of nineteenth-century American history? And when we push further to the specific concerns of the Wesleyan Theological Society, questions of relevance remain: that is, what difference does the nineteenth century Holiness heritage—which we claim to represent—mean for the broader understanding of the Wesleyan tradition? Or, for that matter, what does that heritage mean in relation to the pastoral concerns and challenges of the new millennium? What, if anything, is the retrievable or “usable” past that can be gleaned from the nineteenth-century Holiness paradigm?

There are different levels of response to these “so what” questions. On the most basic level, church historians need to continue to tell the story of the Holiness Movement so that secular scholars will understand the significance of our tradition within the larger historical narrative. On another level, the response to the relevancy question becomes an historiographical enterprise—an attempt to sort out the Wesleyan legacy. Was the Holiness message faithful to John Wesley or were there two different so-called “Wesleyan” trajectories, one eighteenth century and one nineteenth century? And if there were two trajectories, has the supposed difference between the two centuries been exaggerated? On a still deeper level, our response to these questions becomes central to our theological task, for the ways in which we interpret the Holiness message will shape our understanding and our communication of the gospel in the next century. In the end, then, I am asking the most basic of scholarly questions: Why do I study what I do, in my case the nineteenth century? And why do we, as Wesleyan/Holiness scholars, continue to look to the nineteenth-century Holiness heritage as a source for our theologizing?

### Three Critical Analyses of Nineteenth-Century Wesleyans

As we begin to address this issue of relevancy, we must first come to terms with several substantive critiques of nineteenth-century Wesleyan thought. These interpretative judgments must be addressed squarely before there can be any apologetic for the nineteenth-century paradigm or any retrieval of nineteenth century themes for contemporary theology. The three major critical analyses of nineteenth-century Wesleyanism have been: the Calvinist critique, the liberal critique, and the postliberal critique.

**1. The Calvinist Critique.** The first critical evaluation—the Calvinist critique—was the theological challenge that American Methodism confronted from its very beginnings on this continent. Since Calvinist forms of Christianity predominated within early American religion, Methodism was considered to be a theological intruder in relation to the dominant spirituality of the early Republic.

Interestingly, this Calvinist critique has re-emerged among historians in the latter half of the twentieth century, articulated by self-proclaimed guardians of evangelical orthodoxy, nearly all of whom hail from Calvinistic or Calvinistically-inclined Baptist traditions and see the Wesleyan heritage as theologically dangerous. These neo-evangelical historians interpret nineteenth-century American religious history primarily as the story of fanatical emotionalism, anti-intellectualism, and works righteousness.<sup>2</sup> They agree that the nineteenth century was the “Methodist century,” as some religious historians have called it.<sup>3</sup> But they believe that this fact was exactly the problem with the nineteenth century.

Although this generic, late twentieth century, Baptistified neo-evangelicalism is not at all theologically congenial to the Wesleyan message,

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<sup>2</sup>John H. Gerstner, “The Theological Boundaries of Evangelical Faith,” in David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, *The Evangelicals* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 26-28; Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 110, 115-31, 142, 249; Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 103-66. For a similar interpretation from the British perspective, see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>C. C. Goen, “The ‘Methodist Age’ in American Church History,” *Religion in Life* 34 (1965): 562-72; Winthrop S. Hudson, “The Methodist Age in America,” *Methodist History* 12 (April 1974): 3-15.

nevertheless many Holiness churches have been assimilated under its all-embracing umbrella. Holiness churches, for example, have happily participated in the burgeoning prosperity of American neo-evangelicalism. Ironically, although Holiness churches were long resistant to cultural accommodation, they have now fully identified with the consumerism that typifies today's American evangelicals. It seems that late twentieth-century Holiness churches have forgotten their nineteenth-century roots. Many of them have largely lost their distinctiveness—thriving numerically, but without their saltiness. This may be what Keith Drury is referring to when he states that the Holiness Movement is dead.<sup>4</sup> It is dead because, on the popular level, it has accepted the Calvinist neo-evangelical paradigm in place of its own.

**2. The Liberal Critique.** If the first critique of the Wesleyan/Holiness message in America came from the Calvinists in the early part of the nineteenth century, the second critique came later, and it came from the liberal, bourgeois wing of Gilded Age Methodism. Since Holiness advocates often came from socially marginalized contexts and exhibited ecstatic, Spirit-filled faith expressions, the rising middle class of Methodism disdained this enthusiastic reminder of their own unsophisticated frontier past.

By the twentieth century, most Methodist leaders viewed Holiness institutions as a relic of a bygone era, soon (they hoped) to fade away into the woods. Thus, many of the newly-gentrified, mainline Methodists dealt with the Holiness message and Holiness people by simply ignoring them. This was not too difficult to do theologically since most early twentieth-century liberal Methodists had no interest in appropriating what they considered to be Wesley's antiquated ideas. Mainline scholars in the first half of this century did not consider the older Wesleyan theological tradition as something that had any currency for the modern world. When Holiness people claimed that they were the ones who were consistent Wesleyans, their affirmations fell on deaf ears.<sup>5</sup> Mainliners were not interested in who

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<sup>4</sup>Keith Drury, "The Holiness Movement is Dead," *Holiness Digest* 8.1 (Winter 1994): 13-15.

<sup>5</sup>In the first half of the twentieth century, the few mainline Methodists who bothered to comment on entire sanctification or other Wesleyan themes articulated by the Holiness Movement were usually people who had defected from Holiness churches and repudiated the Holiness heritage. See, e.g., John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1956).

was being faithful to Wesley but, rather, who was most accepting of progressive theological trends. According to Methodist liberals, then, the Holiness movement was deemed irrelevant because it had not engaged sufficiently with the claims of modernity.

**3. The Postliberal Critique.** If the liberal contention is that Holiness advocates were not modern enough, then the postliberal contention is that Holiness advocates were too modern. As the third major group of nineteenth-century critics, the postliberal critique has arisen relatively recently, in conjunction with more generalized negative appraisals of modernity. Among United Methodists, the postliberal perspective has developed in combination with the late twentieth-century resurgence of Wesleyan studies, which, following the lead of Albert Outler, rediscovered Wesley as a theological mentor. In the process of reclaiming Wesley, Outler and other scholars judged the nineteenth-century American articulation of the Wesleyan message to be inadequate. For many of these scholars, nineteenth-century Methodism was so hopelessly flawed by modifications made to the original Wesleyan message that they intended to leapfrog right over the nineteenth century and go directly back to the eighteenth.<sup>6</sup>

David Lowes Watson, for example, states quite bluntly that American Methodism failed by the mid-nineteenth century. This failure was due to the relaxation of its original religious discipline, as evidenced by the Church's accommodation to slavery, by its acceptance of worldly wealth and power and, especially, by the gradual decline of the class meeting as a mechanism for mutual accountability. Robert Chiles saw the problem as one of theology more than praxis, but he also identified Methodist modifications to Wesley's message as the major culprit. Similarly, Randy Maddox views the problem as one of shifting views of moral psychology.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these criticisms are directed at the compromises of mainline nineteenth-century Methodism, particularly the liberal emphasis on moral development rather than the traditional Wesleyan stress on the new creation in Christ, and the nurturing platitudes characteristic of the Sun-

<sup>6</sup>Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964), 31, 51.

<sup>7</sup>David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 145- 47; Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1965); Randy L. Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33:2 (Fall 1998), 29-66.

day School replacing the spiritual disciplines that were characteristic of the class meeting. In addition, Nathan Hatch asserts that mainline Methodists appealed “to the petty bourgeoisie, [to] people on the make.” Hatch believes that because the Methodist church participated so uncritically in an accommodation to the emerging capitalist society, it became thoroughly “domesticated,” and became “the prototype of a religious organization taking on market form.” Mainline Methodism, according to Hatch, represented “the bland, uninspired middle of American society.”<sup>8</sup> In part, the agenda of the Holiness Movement was a response to these notorious aspects of mainline Methodism’s capitulation to modernity. Holiness folks, for instance, condemned Methodism’s neglect of the marginalized as well as Methodism’s acceptance of liberal theology.

### The Holiness Movement Paradigm

Despite the Holiness rebuke of mainline Methodism, the Holiness Movement has also received a negative judgment from the postliberal critique. The critics assert that the Holiness Movement must admit its share of responsibility in the nineteenth-century alteration of Wesleyanism. As both Watson and Maddox point out, Holiness people substituted the Wesleyan stress on the disciplined life of habitual affections with a series of individuated spiritual experiences.<sup>9</sup> For many men and women within the Holiness churches, the pattern of repetitious, guilt-induced times of consecration produced a cycle of spiritual fluctuations that often led to burnout, frustration, a dependence on emotions, and legalistic moralism.

Given this pattern of spirituality, postliberal historians and theologians want to lift up the eighteenth-century model and reject the nineteenth-century model. One of the speakers at a recent Wesleyan Theological Society meeting, for example, called on us to “rid ourselves of the exclusively Western, nineteenth-century, now lifeless concept of holiness.”<sup>10</sup> There are ways in which this is a very persuasive appeal, and I have been won over by the force of many of the arguments regarding the problems of the Victorian mindset. Once we perceive certain concepts

<sup>8</sup>Nathan O. Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” *Church History* 63:2 (June 1994): 180, 186, 188; A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), xxii-xxiii.

<sup>9</sup>Watson, 145-47; Maddox, “Reconnecting the Means to the End.”

<sup>10</sup>Michael J. Christensen, “Theosis and Sanctification,” paper delivered at Wesleyan Theological Society, Nampa, Idaho, November 1995, 18.

such as the intellectualist moral psychology, the Enlightenment individualism, the American triumphalism, the unintended reification of experience, and the unbounded, romantic faith in human potential, it is evident that an uncritical appropriation of the nineteenth century cannot be supported.

But despite the accuracy of interpretations that see additions and accretions to Wesley's message, and despite the problems inherent in the nineteenth-century adoption of modern categories of thought, I am still convinced that there are important lessons to be learned by studying the Holiness Movement—and not only as a negative example of sincere but misguided souls. Put simply, I accept the need to evaluate critically American accommodations to Enlightenment thought, but it is not essential that we throw out the Holiness baby with the bath water of modernity.

Let us grant, for instance, that Wesley's message was modified somewhat by his nineteenth-century heirs. Should that surprise us? Should it even bother us? Who would want a repristinated Wesleyanism that was not relevant to the current situation? Wesley—always the practical theologian—would not have tolerated such irrelevancy. Rather than deny the differences, then, I would like to plumb their depths.

Indeed, as an historian, I am drawn to study and even to appropriate certain characteristics of American Wesleyanism. Perhaps what is most intriguing to me about the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement is the way in which it was simultaneously both very modern and not very modern at all. In fact, the claim—both by postliberals and by Calvinist neo-evangelicals—that nineteenth-century folks were uncritically captured by modernity fails to comprehend the nuanced approach to modernity by Holiness people. Similarly, the typical liberal assertion that Holiness people were unsophisticated, unthinking backwoodsmen who failed to engage with the challenges of modernity misses the Holiness point altogether. The Holiness Movement displayed a more subtle interplay with its culture than is often recognized, accepting certain aspects of modernity while deftly excluding others.

Let us take the early nineteenth-century proclivity toward optimism, for example. It is true that antebellum Wesleyans were postmillennial optimists regarding the possibility of reform. They truly believed that God's kingdom could come on earth—that the nation could be converted to Christ and that Christ's reign of justice could be effected soon: "within three years" was the famous assertion by Charles Finney. Such an idea

obviously represented the Enlightenment belief in the goodness and progress of human potential. But before we dismiss this antebellum concept as naively quixotic, let us remember that it was precisely this conviction that motivated sanctified abolitionists to popularize the crusade against slavery—a crusade that had, until then, been perceived by the public as being merely an idiosyncratic notion of the Quakers. This postmillennialism also led many Wesleyans to champion women's rights, temperance, and other social reforms. They may not have ushered in the Kingdom, but they did help to move America toward a more just society.

But even this is not the whole story, for at the same time that antebellum Methodist theology was presenting the possibility of God's soon-arriving Kingdom, it was also "pessimistic about human nature" because of its belief in the persistence of sin.<sup>11</sup> Antebellum Wesleyans knew the difference between the optimism of grace and the optimism of culture. This subtle, but important theological discernment is evident when we survey the religious history of the postbellum period. While mainline Methodists eventually transformed their religious optimism into a modernist notion of self-help and an unquestioning acceptance of American global expansionism, Holiness advocates began to have doubts about the inevitable progress of human society. Eschatologically, they became premillennialists. That is, Holiness advocates embraced modern concepts of human potential early in the nineteenth century when those concepts coincided with Wesleyan views of the optimism of grace, but then rejected the trends of religious modernity and liberal progressivism later in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth century when those positions were unable or unwilling to be critical of the surrounding culture.

Twentieth century liberalism, which downplayed the inherence and pervasiveness of sin,<sup>12</sup> construed the Holiness pessimism about social progress as defensive backwardness. Perhaps we should recognize, however, that the mixed Holiness appraisals of social potential were closer to reality than the uncritical optimism of the liberals.

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<sup>11</sup>James H. Moorhead, "Social Reform and the Divided Conscience of Antebellum Protestantism," *Church History* 48 (December 1979): 416-30; Leonard I. Sweet, "The View of Man Inherent in New Measures Revivalism," *Church History* 45 (June 1976): 206-21.

<sup>12</sup>Chiles, 115-43; Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 170-96.

Another debated emphasis of nineteenth century spirituality was the importance placed on making individual decisions for Christ, particularly as those decisions were related to the key soteriological events of the new birth and entire sanctification. This trend toward particularly-defined experiences was heightened by the Methodists' appropriation of the rather un-Wesleyan, but typically nineteenth century stress on free will.<sup>13</sup> Did this emphasis on volitional actions represent a capitulation to Enlightenment-inspired "common sense" categories of moral psychology? Did the stress on free will eclipse the traditional Wesleyan stress on free grace, and thus move dangerously close to Pelagianism? The answer, in this case, is yes.

But, again, what is a problematic issue on the one hand has positive elements on the other. The decisionistic spiritual formula is less troublesome when one looks at it in terms of Christian praxis and not only as a theological system. This stress on volitional choice is the kind of piety expressed in the hymn "Once to Every Man and Nation Comes the Moment To Decide," a great statement of religious commitment and moral courage. This hymn was written during the Mexican War when Wesleyan Methodists and other sanctification-motivated Christians decried the racism implicit in the war effort. My own dissertation research examined how the decision to accept the grace of entire sanctification became the primary impetus for direct political action against slavery. Just as the new birth was often connected to the acceptance of abolition, so the deeper commitment of entire sanctification was connected to the deeper antislavery commitment of political advocacy.<sup>14</sup>

Yet another factor needs to be considered in regard to the stress on volitional decision. Although nineteenth-century Christians insisted on certain momentary spiritual events, the reality of religious life for Holiness people was a continual religious enthusiasm. When we study the lived religious experience of participants and not just the doctrinal pronouncements of leading theologians, we come to realize that the central factor for nineteenth-century Wesleyans was the immediacy of the power

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<sup>13</sup>The transition within American Methodism from Wesley's original stress on "free grace" to the nineteenth-century stress on "free will" is narrated in Chiles.

<sup>14</sup>Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999). Though "Once to Every Man and Nation" was written by a Unitarian (James Russell Lowell), it nonetheless reflected many popular concepts held by evangelical abolitionists.

of God through the Holy Spirit—the present experience of God. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, in their study of growing religious movements, report that thriving churches are always indicated by a “vital otherworldliness,” or what I would prefer to refer to as a vital sense of God’s presence.<sup>15</sup> Immediate access to God meant that their faith was vibrant, often ecstatic. Holiness spirituality simultaneously affirmed and rejected aspects of modernity; by stressing experiential faith, they affirmed the Enlightenment need for empirical verifiability; but that experience was with a radically transcendent God, a God who breaks into the lives of human beings. In a very un-modern manner, the Holiness Movement was a master at making the extraordinary ordinary, for they were unwilling to domesticate grace and the radical otherness of God.

The primary religious phenomenon for the revivalists was the overwhelming grace of God as experienced in regeneration. As we sing in the words of the nineteenth-century hymn: “What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul.” It was a love that one could feel and know and participate in, thus creating a spirituality based on relationality. The nineteenth-century gospel message promoted connectedness with God and with one another. To know God was to be transformed, so that the vital, intimate relationship with Jesus modeled an intimate relationship with others. The faith life of Holiness men and women consisted of God’s indwelling leading to concrete ethical action. For example, the abolitionists of the 1840s with whom my own research has centered drew from the deep spiritual well of God’s relational love in Christ in order to advocate a social construction that enhanced relationships. The inclusive fellowship of the nineteenth-century Holiness folk was evident, for instance, in the ecstasy of the campmeeting, where, at least initially, gender, racial, and class barriers were dismantled at the altar. Such overturning of traditional distinctions offered participants a glimpse of God’s new creation—a model of personal and social transformation. Many have interpreted the campmeeting experience as highly individualistic when, in fact, it was a thoroughly social—and often multicultural—occasion. The religion of nineteenth-century revivalism was intensely personal, but never private.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup>Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 86-87.

## Holiness Ethos: A Usable Past

The problems with the nineteenth century are easily identifiable. Optimism could lead to a liberal stress on human sufficiency; decisionism could lead to Pelagianism; experiential immediacy could lead to emotional fanaticism; moral earnestness could lead to legalism; and inclusive fellowship could lead to sectarian separatism. But it is important to lift up commendable qualities, as well. In my quest for a usable past, I have tried to discern the characteristic marks or features of nineteenth-century spirituality that have value for us. Rather than simply a particular doctrinal emphasis, Holiness men and women expressed an ethos, a vision, a distinctive spirituality.<sup>17</sup>

But how do we describe this Holiness ethos? Once, while researching an obscure revival preacher named Cary Allen, I found a phrase used by his nineteenth-century biographer. Allen was said to have had a “sanctified eccentricity.” This expression conveys the best of nineteenth century emphases. Eccentricity was a common designation among revivalist preachers, for they gloried in their peculiarity and scoffed at pretension and ascribed status.<sup>18</sup>

“Eccentricity” refers to something off center, someone who deviates from the established pattern of accepted conduct. An accusation of being “eccentric” was considered a badge of honor among those who saw themselves as challengers of existing structures. Like many of the Holiness preachers who followed Cary Allen, those dismissed by modern religious society as “holy rollers” may have actually been making an important ideological statement by their behavior. Eccentrics were deliberately contrasting themselves with the polished mores and religious sophistication of genteel culture—values that represented the privileges only available to a few. They challenged the hierarchical power structures of their day, and especially the institutionalism of the mainline churches.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Post-modern World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>18</sup>William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical, Second Series* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1855), 223-40; Lorenzo Dow, *History of Cosmopolite: or the Writings of Rev. Lorenzo Dow: Containing His Experiences and Travels, in Europe and America, up to near His Fiftieth Year. Also, His Polemic Writings. To Which is Added, The “Journey of Life,” by Peggy Dow*. Revised and Corrected with Notes, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: H. M. Rulison, 1855).

<sup>19</sup>Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987); Finke and Stark, 153-69.

As Methodists, for example, became more affluent and refined, Holiness people became more countercultural and eccentric. One contemporary observer noted that the disheveled appearance of a Holiness preacher was not the result of careless slovenliness, but rather exhibited his desire to be “independent from the changeable fashions of this age of superfluities.”<sup>20</sup> Reform-minded Wesleyans resisted the aspects of modernity that contradicted the gospel as they understood it, such as the modern stress on economic efficiency over interpersonal relationships or the racist notion of social Darwinism over the Biblical notion of ethnic equality—in short, any emphasis on progress at the expense of people.

It is typical to dismiss the Holiness ambivalence regarding the benefits of progress by describing it as evidence of their cultural backwardness. While some Holiness disdain for modern values may have been a conservative resistance to change, for others it was a radical refusal to accommodate the claims of the gospel to the debilitating effects of consumerist culture, which undermined faith in God and community with others by encouraging the sins of envy, greed, pride, and indulgence. Holiness men and women repudiated what they considered to be anti-Christian aspects of commercialized enculturation.

Because we have been accepted by God, Holiness people declared, then we are called to accept others. The converts at the campmeetings welcomed the strangers in their midst—those left aside by the larger society. They were able to be so open-hearted because their spiritual union with Christ impelled them to move beyond themselves toward others. Just as Christ does not exist merely for himself but extends himself for the sake of human beings, so Christian believers are truly human when we move outside of our own self-centeredness. Theologically, this self-limiting vulnerability becomes evident initially in the life of Jesus—what Barth intriguingly calls Christ’s “eccentric” existence—and is then mirrored in our own human “eccentricity.” Through our self-limitation we are set free to love the Other. “The human person,” Barth writes, “experiencing the power of the divine. . . cannot exist for [self alone]. . . but. . . awakened rather to genuine humanity,. . . also exists eccentrically.”<sup>21</sup> To be fully human, we step outside of the circle of ourselves in order to bring

<sup>20</sup>Marilla Marks, ed., *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks, Minister of the Gospel* (Dover, NH: Free-Will Baptist Printing Establishment, 1846).

<sup>21</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), IV, 2, 547-48.

others into the larger circle of reconciliation. Eccentricity is the very nature of Christ, and thus, it should be so of us.

Seen from this renewed perspective, the “sanctified eccentricity” of the nineteenth-century Holiness paradigm offers us a living tradition from which to draw, one that is particularly well-suited for the postmodern world. Those who were transitioning from a premodern to a modern society provide examples for us as we struggle with the transition from a modern to a postmodern society. That is, we share with our friends from one hundred and fifty years ago a suspicion that modern assumptions have their limitations. We suspect that quality of life in the postmodern world will no longer depend solely on the modern capacity to change structures or to produce more.

In important respects, today’s postindustrial America more closely resembles the preindustrial America Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about than the industrial America of big business, big labor, big government, and big institutions. Today, we seem to be returning to a country more like the one that Tocqueville so well described. Centralization, hierarchy, and secularism, which historian Robert Wiebe identifies as the dominant characteristics of American life for most of the twentieth century, are yielding to decentralization, equality, communitarianism, and an interest in religious faith. In this new, yet old America, the rules are different from those most of us grew up with.<sup>22</sup>

As postmoderns who acknowledge continuity with our past, we can strip away the modern blinders that have prevented us from seeing clearly our need for genuine connectedness with God and one another. In so doing, we will be able to re-create the experiences of women and men who promoted the immediacy of God’s presence for the sake of God’s world—a sanctified eccentricity. It is in the recovery of this ethos that our nineteenth-century Holiness forebears can help us the most.

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<sup>22</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York: Harper and Row, 1966; original edition, 1835); Michael Barone, “The Road Back to Tocqueville,” *Washington Post* (7 January 1996): C1-2; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

# **WESLEYAN THEOLOGY IN A POSTMODERN ERA: THE SPIRIT OF LIFE IN AN AGE OF THE NIHIL**

by

**M. Douglas Meeks**

It would not do for Wesleyan theologians to ignore the liberative philosophical thinking of postmodernity. Its passionate, unrelenting pursuit of the moral and its search for a kind of “holy living” is likely to attract Wesleyans as much as its stoic humanism, clothed in obscure new scholastic language, will tend to repel. Furthermore, Wesleyan theologians should not refuse to come to grips with postmodernity if for no other reason than that our children speak its language and many “seekers” in our churches and schools find its grammar and imagination fascinating. And, finally, if we are indeed in a postmodern world, must we not be *in* it even if we are not *of* it? But what is postmodernity?

Everybody talks about “postmodernity,” but not many mean the same thing by it. Do we mean by postmodernity a new historical epoch? Or is postmodernity simply a hyper-extension of modernity? Would we say that everything in the Wesleyan theological project depends on our negotiating postmodern thinking and values? Or would accepting postmodernist perspectives make Wesleyan theology impossible? Must we accept the radical critiques of knowledge, power, and truth which postmodern philosophers lodge against modernity so that the new postmodern philosophy would actually determine the parameters of theology in yet a new way? Can there be, after all, a postmodern Wesleyan theology?

Modernity set limits to Christian theology, especially epistemological limits. Many think postmodern philosophies free theology from the limits determined by liberal philosophies. Some evangelical and postliberal theologians increasingly appreciate postmodern philosophy for this reason.<sup>1</sup> And so do liberation and feminist, process and pragmatist theologians. The attraction of postmodern philosophies is that they seem to fund the struggle for freedom against all forms of domination concocted by modernity and thus gain a hearing from those who have suffered from modernity.

But postmodern philosophies also set their own limits on Christian theology. The “Radical Orthodoxy” school, led by thinkers like John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, use postmodern philosophy, especially that of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, to engage in a radical criticism of modernity and of liberal theology in order to free theology from modern secular reason.<sup>2</sup> But they find in postmodern philosophy a profound nihilism that must be exposed, subsumed, and transcended by returning to the premodern Christian tradition, especially the Augustinian and other Platonic strands of the tradition. Agreeing with some aspects of this project, I will argue (1) that modernity in many of its misery-causing as well as liberative aspects is not over, (2) that postmodern thinkers have on their own terms failed in their attempt to address many misery-causing aspects of modernity, and (3) that there may be little

<sup>1</sup>See Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997); Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998); David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997); J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); idem., *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); idem., *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999). For misgivings about this project see David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

in postmodern philosophy that can help us with the constructive task of Wesleyan theology. And yet I think (4) that some postmodern philosophers are describing the human plight in our time, often in exquisitely perceptive ways. In this sense, postmodern philosophy is a crucial partner in elaborating the points in postmodern life where Wesleyans must work theologically.

### **Postmodern Conditions of Life**

If we speak of “postmodernity” as a new period in history, two terms epitomize its conditions: *cyberspace* and the *global market*. Graham Ward describes the postmodern experience in the cyberspatial modes with which nearly anyone who would read this essay would be intimately familiar:

Surfing the net is the ultimate postmodern experience. Facing your SGVA screen-low radiation/anti-static-poised over the multimedia controls, you launch into new forms of spatiality created by the flows of electronic information. In Disneyland colours you download texts, pictures, video chips, voices from anywhere in the world, regardless of time zones. Electronic libraries in São Paulo, chat-lines in Florida, info sites in Sydney, data banks in Vancouver, on-line shopping in Paris, audio-visual tours with 3-D graphics of the Vatican, the White House, the Kremlin, the Taj-Mahal—are all available at your fingertips, twenty-four hours a day. Time and space as conceived by empiricists collapse in omnipresence and multilocality. And the ride is continuous, for the electronic tide maintains you on the crest of impending satisfaction, far above any ocean floor, fast forwarding toward endless pleasures yet to be located and bookmarked. Time disappears, boredom is deflated. The drug of the ever new, instant access to a vast sea of endless desire which circulates globally; browsing through hours without commitment on any theme imaginable; dwelling voyeuristically in one location until the pull of other possibilities reasserts the essentially nomadic lifestyle of the net-surfer: these are the characteristic experiences of living in cyberspace. Cyberspace is an unidentified spatiality, like the contours of a perfume, and you are an adventurer, a navigator in uncharted waters, discovering the hero inside yourself. You act anonymously, simply as the unnamed, unidentifiable view-

point of so many interactive network games, and where an identity is needed, you can construct one. Reality is soft, malleable, permeable, and available only through the constant discharge of electronic energy signaling across the cosmos. Discourse is energized, sexualized. It issues from nowhere and sheers off toward a thousand synthetic horizons, all presented like so many Hollywood sunsets and sunrises. In this land of fantasy and ceaseless journeying, this experience of tasting, sampling, and passing on, truth, knowledge, and facts are all only dots of light on a screen, evanescent, consumable. This is the ultimate in the secularization of the divine, for here is a God who sees and knows all things, existing in pure activity and realized presence, in perpetuity. Divinization as the dissolution of subjectivity within the immanent, amniotic satisfaction, is the final goal and object of postmodernity. Cyberspace is the realization of a metaphor used repeatedly by Derrida, Irigaray, and Kristeva—the Khora, the plentitudinous womb, dark, motile, and unformed, from which all things issue.<sup>3</sup>

Two facts about life in cyberspace, however, lead us immediately to the reality of the global market. First, this “god” occupying cyberspace can only be accessed by those with sufficient means of exchange to purchase its techné and media. Second, hardly any page on the “net” exists without the representation of a commodity to be bought and sold. That is to say, the postmodern condition is indissolubly connected with the new realities of the global market.<sup>4</sup> There is already as much scholarly ink spilled over the question of the periodization of the postmodern as there was over dating modernity.<sup>5</sup> The best answer, it seems to me, is that postmodernism began with the end of the Second World War when we witnessed not only the human power to destroy the earth but also the world

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<sup>3</sup>Graham Ward, “Introduction,” in *The Postmodern God*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>4</sup>David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernism: An Essay into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 112 and passim. See also Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1998) and Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1998).

conditions for the spread of the market over the globe.<sup>6</sup> Thus the most convincing analysis of the historical conditions of postmodernism is, to my mind, Frederic Jameson's depiction of the effect of the global market on our culture.<sup>7</sup>

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the trend throughout the world is that we have everywhere not only a market economy, but also what Karl Polanyi calls a *market society*.<sup>8</sup> In a market society all social goods that must be distributed for life are reduced to commodities: food, housing, learning, healing, even the delivery of justice and the generation of the generations. Everything is a commodity. Information, signs, and images themselves become commodities. Transactions in signs are particularly prized for their profitability because they easily traverse spatial barriers in cyberspace. This makes disposability of communal relationships even more severe. Everything is for sale. There are no commons. It is no longer possible to conceive *oikoumene* separate from *oikonomia* or the church in abstraction from either. The new *catholica* called globalization spawns fragmentation, dividing peoples and communities through increasing income gaps and dissolving subjects so that they can no longer imagine a genuine catholic narrative that includes all people in a household of peace for survival of the day.

To be genuinely *in* the postmodern world, then, Wesleyan theology should address itself to the question of power within these current conditions.

### The Postmodern Project and Wesleyan Holy Living

The postmodern philosophical project seeks to deconstruct the dominative power that lurks everywhere in modernity by attending closely to everyday practices. It takes up Nietzsche's claim that behind all appearances is the Will to Power. If you peel off the layers of any phenomenon or

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<sup>6</sup>Other dates that are crucial in postmodernism are 1968 (the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Paris student revolt, the Czech invasion, the riots at the Democratic National Convention), 1973 (the OPEC crisis), and 1989 (the year the "seventy-five years war" [1914-1989] ended).

<sup>7</sup>Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>M. Douglas Meeks, "God's *oikonomia* and the New World Economy," in *Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era*, edited by Max L. Stackhouse, Peter L. Berger, Dennis P. McCann, and M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 111-126.

entity, you will find desire expressed in power, usually leading to violence against human beings and nature. The familiar litany of giving a moral account of power itself could be heard in every institution over the past three decades, including seminary and college faculties and the church, as we attempt to become conscious of our social location in terms of race, gender, class, nation, religion, and species. We ask repeatedly how power is manifesting itself among us? How do we feel it, embody it, institutionalize it, recognize it, claim it, deny it, repress or suppress it, resist, release, or recycle it?<sup>9</sup> Postmodern thinking leads to a new self-consciousness of power relations, for a social location is nothing but a venue of powers and counter-powers in constant interaction and mutual resistance.

According to Michel Foucault, power is the “subtle, all-pervading force of social control.” It is not something easily located hierarchically at the apex. Power “is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through net-like organization.”<sup>10</sup> Power is a function of relations and only exists in action. Foucault’s work has given rise to a generation of intellectuals who no longer dream of large power structures that can realize justice or, for that matter, any macro alternatives to massive human misery caused by global systems.

In order to analyze power in modern culture, the Foucauldian strategy is to look at everyday practices such as those in prison systems and sexual relationships. It is not enough to criticize whites, males, Republicans, capitalists, etc. If you want to get at power, say the postmoderns, you’ve got to attack its source. Power is lodged in the human subject itself, in subjectivity. Both the bourgeois establishments and revolutionary movements of the last two centuries find their power base in the way the modern self joins knowledge and power. Epistemology is the problem. Or, in the thought of Jacques Derrida, language itself (especially writing) is the problem. Subjectivity reveals an “epistemic imperialism” of the dominant subject over the other.<sup>11</sup> The prescription therefore is to undermine

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<sup>9</sup>Catherine Keller, “Power Lines,” in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 67.

<sup>10</sup>Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 98, 89.

<sup>11</sup>“Where there is power, there is also a resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” *Ibid.*, p. 99.

every logocentrism holding together the modern self. Everything that bears traces of homogeneity in civil, legal, and pedagogical institutions must be expelled. Any kind of totality and closure which would distort the full expression of the particular and concrete has to be subverted and left behind as modern detritus.

Knowledge is power, and since the human subject is reason, the modern self has to be deconstructed. Postmodern deconstruction of the self breaks down the liberal theological alliance between God and the self, but at the same time destroys all metaphysics of presence and identity. There is no way in which God can be experienced in the present. Deconstruction also extends to the traditions and metanarratives on which the modern self has grounded itself.<sup>12</sup> Whatever modernity has prized in its traditions is submitted to parody and irony. Thus, human beings are expected to live without foundations in a postmetaphysical world. This gives rise to the ethical problems of relativism and pluralism.

We are inexorably led to the question of whether there can be any human community or any non-parodied morality. How do a nonfoundational culture and a decentered self deal with the sociopolitical implications of confronting the other? When we decenter the subject (especially as the male and European), how can we move beyond power relations to envisage another way for communities to be formed and be present to each other? Can there be any moral community in postmodernity? If there can be no moral community, does this not undermine the possibilities of altering this endlessly ramified monolith of power? Does the radical postmodern undermining of the dominative power lodged in the modern self lead to the negation of any power that can resist or transform destructive power now expressed with global scope through media, technology, and market?

Wesleyan theology in a postmodern age cannot escape these questions of power and in particular whether there can be a community that can act morally in relation to creation-destroying power. In fact, something like this question is precisely what John Wesley has bequeathed us. From first to last, chronologically and thematically, Wesley was concerned with holy living. He was driven, one might say, by the question, What makes holiness possible? How can we serve the righteousness of

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<sup>12</sup>Jean-François. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

God in the world?<sup>13</sup> How does God make it possible to serve the conditions of life against death? In a *formally* similar way, postmodern philosophers are also haunted by the question of whether human beings can live in a way which will survive the threat of death in the powers and principalities.

Wesley's morphology of God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace exists for the sake of the practices of discipleship which, in turn, are devoted to God's renovation of the world. God restores to us the image of God, so that, living in the Triune God in history, we may love through grace, even in the face of death-serving powers. This means that a critical Wesleyan spirituality should make sense in the context of the experience of postmodern power. Do the Wesleyan practices of spirituality do more than simply allay the sense of suffering or offer an antidote to powerlessness? How does the work of the Holy Spirit in our practices of discipleship actually change causes of suffering? What difference does life *coram Deo* make for justice and peace in a postmodern world?

I believe that there is a stunning parallel between Wesley and postmodern thought in that Wesley's theology was also addressed to those who were paralyzed by the politics of power. The message he offered was that power was already in their midst and accessible to their reception. By concentrating on the work of the Holy Spirit instead of a metaphysics of presence, Wesley looked for the new humanity in Christ, created by the gift of Jesus Christ and embodied in the mutuality of the sanctified gift-giving community. Wesley was every bit as realistic as the postmodern philosophers about the possibility of moral life: We are commanded by God to love. But we cannot love on our own; only the grace of God makes it possible for us to love God and each other. God's economy is constituted by the constantly announced and relearned generosity of God, by gifts that give in being given and create dignity in being received. Unless we mean by the church's identity and mission only what the market intends, then the mystery by which we participate in the divine community of gifting and understand ourselves and our community as gifts to be gifted must open up time and space for actual gifting. How else will God redeem the world except through God's grace, God's love freely given for God's justice in the world?

<sup>13</sup>For a fresh treatment of this question, see Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

But it is the reality of this grace/gift and love that postmodern thinkers most call into question. In confrontation with postmodern thought at these points, Wesleyan theology can be helped to regain its identity for these times. God's grace, as uncovered in the gift of Jesus Christ and the power of love—which is the cross of the resurrected one, come to the fore as the realities that separate the church from the postmodern perspective; they are also the realities to which the church is commanded to witness in the postmodern world.

### **The Postmodern Gift**

Is gifting possible in the postmodern conditions of the global market society? Can a gift be given? Has our culture become so saturated by commodity exchange that there can be no such thing as a gift anymore? In the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu the traditional suspicion about gift as a means of domination turns into full-blown modern and postmodern cynicism about gift.<sup>14</sup> For Bourdieu gift economies are inherently deceptive and must therefore be disenchanted. He accepts the anthropological definition that religion is “commerce between the gods and human beings” and revives Plato's critique of the theater as the means of concealing through portrayal the reality submerged beneath the ritual. Religion's work of reproducing established relationships while concealing the relationships of the material economy is labor intensive and expensive in time and money. While the ritualized gift in feasts, ceremonies, and courtesies squanders wealth and wastes time, what seems most useless turns out to be most profitable. “Wastage of money, energy, time, and ingenuity is the very essence of the social alchemy through which an interested relationship is turned into a disinterested, gratuitous relationship, overt domination into misrecognized, ‘socially recognized’ domination, in other words, *legitimate authority*.”<sup>15</sup> Gift economies, according to Bourdieu, are thus soft forms of exploitation because, absent political bonding systems, they can inculcate obligation without force. Ritualized social relationships merely mask the stubborn fact of scarcity. But, after all, the original eighteenth-century theorists of the modern market celebrated the fact that the authority (and ceremonies) of the church, as well as the coercion of the state,

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<sup>14</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 192.

could be eliminated because, in these latter days, it is now possible to organize mass human behavior by the mechanism of commodity exchange.

Within this new and measurable grid, everything that appears to be a gift is merely a contract, merely a disguised exchange of commodities.<sup>16</sup> The pretense of gift conceals coercion at work and reconciles all to such coercion. Gifting at bottom hides contractual exchange and usurious reality. In this mentality gift becomes synonymous with blunder, foolish candor, and private sensibility. Everyone is suspicious of gifts, for they make one "much obliged." Gifts destroy freedom, the freedom to follow one's whim. Gifts are for private, sentimental occasions. This is why public policies assume that all solutions to all social problems should be market and contractual solutions. This also is why the stewardship of the church is usually governed by Andrew Carnegie's rules of philanthropy.

Nietzsche's framing of giving as a linguistic and moral problem forms the backdrop for the amazing philosophical concentration on gift by Jacques Derrida.<sup>17</sup> In his profoundly unreadable book, *Given Time*, Derrida argues that, if giving constitutes a circle of reciprocity, it is hardly giving at all.<sup>18</sup> Only if there would be an effraction of the economic circle, an act of grace, a nonidentical repetition, could we speak of a gift. The gift in order to be gift must not be returned.<sup>19</sup> The gift is ruined if it is consumed by exchange. And yet, by obligating a return gift, the gift always becomes a form of exchange. The very fact that we can think about what is given is a way of receiving and returning the gift and thus makes it an aspect of exchange. "It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible. Not impossible but *the* impossible."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup>"If gifts are only given in order to render indebted, to ensure continued exact compliance with what has been laid down, marked by the powerful, both dead and living, then there can be, we must judge, no real gift." John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 119-161, 129.

<sup>17</sup>I follow here the resourceful study of gifting by Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup>"If the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex circulation of a long-term deferral or difference." Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

Here I think we should stand with Wesley. If there is no such thing as a gift, if a gift cannot be given, then there is no content to Christian faith and no possibility of the church of Jesus Christ. Our faith, our hope, and our love depend utterly on the gift (*charis*) God has given and on the gifting God enables us to do. If there is no real space and time for gifting, what chance is there for human life? The crisis of the churches in the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions may be that we have forgotten how to conceive grace, for its reality of gifting has become arcane and perplexing to us. We have forgotten how to be gifted and to gift. So accustomed to the logic of exchange are we that the logic of grace seems foreign. Are we trying to be Christians without the actual practice of grace/gifting?

### **Death as the Ethical Horizon**

For Derrida, the return of the gift ruins the gift quality of a gift, and yet a gift always demands a return. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock (proponents of the “Radical Orthodoxy” school of theology) connect the inability to return the gift with the “nihilistic consummation of philosophy” in the trend from Nietzsche through Heidegger to Derrida (and in part Levinas) to see *death* as the horizon or ground of possibility for ethical action. The nihilist reconstitution of subjectivity as the moral self depends on the notion of pure and unrewarded self-sacrifice in the face of the finality of death.<sup>21</sup> Observes Pickstock:

It would seem that Derrida shares these morbid ethics of his predecessors: death alone guarantees our singularity, and as death is uniquely our own, it is the only thing we can offer. Indeed, for Derrida, death is the only example of the pure gift, for it is supremely unreturnable, supremely silent, and therefore the optimum moment of disappropriation. Thus the offering of our death for the other is seen as the ultimate ethical good, alone guaranteeing our responsibility for the other, although it is not clear that, for Derrida and Levinas, this ethic can be put into practice.<sup>22</sup>

The free, one-way gift supposedly defines the good in postmodern ethical thought, for only the readiness to die precludes the will to power.

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<sup>21</sup>John Milbank, “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” *First Things* (March 1999), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup>Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 111.

What makes us aware of the self in the first place is the double intrusion of death: (1) the cry of the vulnerable other, which elicits (2) our preparedness to negate our own life. “The notion that a sacrificial offering without hope of return is the only true gift suggests that to be ethical is to be prepared to lose oneself for the other.”<sup>23</sup> The vulnerability of the other places an ethical demand on me, and thus God becomes a shadow of the “other” transformed into the “Other,” rather than the source of life against death.

In opposition to this ethics based on death, the church must seek an ethical life based on the resurrection of the crucified one. In this perspective self-sacrifice is not the paradigmatic good. The good toward which we are aimed both eschatologically and pneumatologically is rather the mutual giving of the community made possible through the grace of God’s love. The resurrection and crucifixion of Jesus make gifting possible and point to the trinitarian community of gifting as the source of gift. The life of Jesus in the horizon of God’s promises to Israel gives the shape of the gifting community.

### **The Trinity and the Return of the Gift**

I refer again to my claim that if a gift cannot be given there is no content to Christian faith and no possibility of the church of Jesus Christ. I now argue that an important function of trinitarian doctrine is to help us again to distinguish between commodity exchange and gift giving, without denying the crucial point that gifts must be returned.<sup>24</sup> The Trinity as a hermeneutic of God’s gracious giving and the theory of the practice of gifting through the grace of God opens up the possibility of thinking, not only of God’s being through the hyperbolic logic of giving, but also the return of God’s gift. The Trinity is the community of extravagant, overflowing, and self-diffusive goodness. The gratuity of God’s giving is the

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<sup>23</sup>According to Derrida and Levinas, we acknowledge the other person only after we have sensed a “trace” of his or her pain and responded sacrificially to that pain and thus after we are no longer in communication with the other. But Milbank responds that this other is a “totalized other, an other reduced to ourselves, since we can only imagine it by projecting our own subjectivity on it. One would not die then for a specific diversity and concrete difference—but just any old invisible other.” Milbank, “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” p. 34.

<sup>24</sup>For the following cf. M. Douglas Meeks, “Trinity, Community and Power,” in *Trinity, Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood), forthcoming.

mystery of God's being.<sup>25</sup> This fecundity is at once God's withdrawal to give space to God's creatures and God's indwelling in God's creation. The gift is nothing other than Godself. God's being as love is essentially other related, ecstatic, and passionate. God's being as love seeks affiliation, a society of persons who are both free and connected through acts of excessive and mutual giving. God aims at a community that responds to giving with further giving, creating relationships of obligation and responsibility. God's excess creates space and time for human reciprocity.

The gift always precedes the act of passing it along. God's hyperbolic giving initiates all our giving and thus points to a certain surplus of unilateral giving over reciprocity. God always gives without the guarantee of return. But God's love should not be depicted as so transcendent and idealized that God's gratuity excludes human giving in return. Response to God's giving should not be the logic of exchange, but God's giving does create more than gratitude (that is, gratitude narrowly construed as less than a real return of the gift). God's grace creates human mutuality and further giving. The perfect sacrifice of our worship, our gratitude to God, opens up the possibility of our giving "like" God's giving, though the gift God gives us is a "crucified" gift that qualifies all the possibilities of our giving under the conditions of suffering, deceit, and violence in history. But even under these conditions giving is the way in which God is received.

The Father's gift is infinitely great, so great that we are in infinite debt. We must speak the Trinity in order to speak the narrative of the cross. In giving the Son, God gives God's own life. In order to save us from slavery, God becomes a slave (Phil. 2:4-12). If one gives so much that a similar gift cannot be returned, then the receiver thereby becomes enslaved. This violates the duty to receive, namely the duty to give in such a fashion that one expects to receive in turn. God would then look like the "strong man" of archaic and modern economies who gives in order to subjugate the receiver. Why is not this the case with the Triune community? The answer of Paul and Luther is the mystery of freedom in justifying grace. The Father is not the "strong man," for in giving the Son, the passionate love of God seeks out what God has created and this in great vulnerability to the subjection to death to which we have fallen.

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<sup>25</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) has taken this direction in a very creative but in the end too extreme way.

The reason that the immensity of this gift does not destroy us is that in giving the Son, God for-gives us our debt (Rom. 7:6, 8, 12). The gift of the crucified, risen Son is appropriate; it may not be what we desire but it is the one thing needful for life. The power of God's love freely given us is the only power that is stronger than death, evil, and sin. All other powers eventually destroy themselves. This, then, is the freedom in obedience which we know in justifying grace.

But if we do not go beyond justifying grace, we are not yet living in the fullness of the Trinity, for we have not yet returned the gift. Holiness means the practice of love in justice as the return of the gift of God's love. We have been forgiven our debt, and yet in the life of grace we receive a new command: "Owe no one anything except to love one another" (Rom. 13:8). Love is not the fruit of our will and yet, for all that, it is the subject of a strange command: "love one another even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Sanctification is our return of God's gift. God the Holy Spirit gives us the power to return the gift of God. God the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to serve the life-giving grace of God in the world. The work of the Holy Spirit, both in the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, is the return of the gift of God.

The gift is inseparable from the return; giving from giving back.<sup>26</sup> How then is giving different from exchange? When we give a gift, what we receive in return is asymmetrical; it often surprises us precisely because it is different from what we gave. Second, a return gift may be for a long time delayed; the giver may require no exact guarantee of when it is to be returned. Third, even if it seems to repeat the initial gift, the return gift will repeat non-identically. Thus it is not primarily the circumstances (i.e., how free, how unconstrained it is, with what expectations it is given), but rather the content of a gift that indicates "giftness."

Moreover, it is the character of a gift not to be coerced. The one who receives the gift is free to determine when and what to return. But the failure to return a gift is met by the giver and the community with a certain sense of wounded or incomplete justice. The one who does not return gifts is "punished" by more gifts, more grace. But, in the end, the failure to return, the hoarding of gifts, and possessive individualism lead (as is the case of Isaiah's landowner who buys the property of all his neighbors) to the hell of isolation.

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<sup>26</sup>For the following cf. Milbank, p. 122.

Modern theology, on the whole, has not helped in the contrast between gift and exchange, but in many ways has only exacerbated the problem. In response to the sharp distinction between free gift and contract, modern theology has developed a notion of gift as “pure gift” that is defined in opposition to commodity exchange but has no power to offer an alternative to commodity exchange. This can be seen in Nygren’s definition of *agape* as pure giving as opposed to the *eros* of desiring.<sup>27</sup> It can also be seen in the Social Gospel understanding of love that was accepted uncritically by two generations of ethicists, but then was confined to the private realm. This is especially true of Reinhold Niebuhr’s ethics.<sup>28</sup> The result is an approach to love and gifting that precludes a doctrine of sanctification that would seek to find correspondences between trinitarian love and giving in the congregation and public spheres.

This theological understanding of pure gift that is limited to justifying grace is very similar to the modern character of gift. The character of the modern gift, defined as it is over against commodity exchange, is that it does not expect a return gift. It is unaffected in its gift character by the gratitude or lack of it on the part of the recipient. It is given as a whim. The content of the gift does not matter. A gift can be anything. What matters is correct intention and lack of constraint in the circumstances surrounding the act. This is a formalistic and unilateral definition of gift. There is nothing duty-bound about the gift. As in a commodity exchange, there may be sentiment but not emotion. This cleavage between gift and commodity exchange reflects the modern distinction between the private and public spheres of life.

Gifts literally cease to be gifts if they are not used and if they are not given further.<sup>29</sup> When gifts are sold or traded, they change their nature. That something will come back to the giver is not the condition of the gift, though the character of gifting is that something does come back. Market exchange, on the other hand, aims at an equilibrium. You pay in order to balance the scales. In gift-giving, however, an imbalance is created that causes momentum and creates new relationships. In commodity exchange there is neither motion nor emotion; the whole point is to keep

<sup>27</sup>Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. by Philip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982).

<sup>28</sup>Cf. John Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrianism,” in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 233-254.

<sup>29</sup>For the following, Meeks, *God the Economist*, p. 118ff., 179f.

the balance, to make sure that the exchange doesn't consume anything or involve one person with another. The point is that consumer goods are to be consumed by their owners, not by the relationship or transaction. When a thing is bought or sold, it goes out of circulation and ceases to be a gift. As is demonstrated in countless fairy tales, our choice is to keep the gift moving or be eaten by it! Our property can devour us if we hoard it. God the gift-giver seeks to keep the gift in motion by catching up all things necessary for life into the dance of life.

A commodity is truly consumed when it is sold because nothing about the exchange assures its return. The peculiar reality of gifting, however, is that, when the gift is used, it is not used up. The gift that is passed along remains abundant. Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical abundance. Gifting replaces the bloated satiety that results from narcissistic consumption and competition for scarce goods with the liberating fulfillment that stems from sharing. Thus a theological alternative to the "nihilistic gesture," making death the sole horizon of the ethical, would be:

. . .to assume that *nothing* is one's own, but rather that everything, life and death alike, arrive not as possession but as gifts. Thus they cannot be owned without ceasing to be themselves, and so we can only receive such gifts in the very act of passing them on. The two movements of receiving and passing on are mutually constitutive and perhaps one could add that the act of receiving is indistinguishable from, or is itself, a counter-gift of return. Such circulation of gift is only possible in a theological order genuinely spoken in the middle voice, an wholly other mode which authentically outwits the shuttling between the action and passion of the secular order. For, according to a theological reading of the gift, to give is already to receive the return which is the gift *to be able* to give. The "giving up" of the gift occurs in trust of a "return" with difference, but this return is not something we can earn, nor is it over against the moment of giving up. It is neither subject to any calculation, nor is it a giving-away in order for others to be grateful for the price one has paid. In contrast to Derrida, one can speak of a return indissociable from the act of giving, simultaneous with it, a condition of its possibility, and yet *not* reducible to an economic market exchange—not reducible because the return

is not simply something one is hoping to receive later, but is something one is already receiving in giving.<sup>30</sup>

The ethical, then, is constituted by sharing rather than one-way giving and the horizon of the ethical is the ultimate community of the resurrection feast. Sharing with another, convivial enjoyment of another is, therefore, the telos of God's justifying and sanctifying grace rather than suffering on the other's behalf. Attention to the other (the sense of the ethical) is not grounded in death but in God's power for life which creates the communion in which the self must be fully present in communion rather than sacrificed.

The biblical history of "God and bread" shows that bread is the symbol for all those things human beings need for life and life abundant. Giving food to those who lack what is necessary for life "can occur as a one-way gift from those who have to those who have not, or it can occur in a feast, where all eat together. In the feast, egotism is mitigated, since here one eats only if one eats along with others; and yet at the same time one does eat, and so selfhood is not eradicated. This image of the feast suggests . . . that what is supremely good is the ecstatic—not in the sense of departing from life, but in the sense of departing from oneself while in this very departing receiving oneself back again."<sup>31</sup> Modern philanthropic and bureaucratic forms of "giving" miss the sense in which sacrificial gifts come from communion and create communion. In isolating gifting from communion they produce either giving as self-gratification or welfare giving that results in making neighbors strangers.<sup>32</sup>

God expects a return to God's gift. What is our appropriate gift to God? We owe only what God gives us to give further: our lives.<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>30</sup>Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 111-112.

<sup>31</sup>Milbank, "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," p. 35.

<sup>32</sup>Teresa Odendahl, *Charity Begins at Home: Generosity and Self-Interest Among the Philanthropic Elite* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers: An Essay on Privacy, Solidarity and the Politics of Being Human* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985); Susan A. Ostrander and Paul G. Schervish, "Giving and Getting: Philanthropy as a Social Relation," in *Critical Issues in Philanthropy: Strengthening Theory and Practice*, ed. Jon Van Til (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

<sup>33</sup>This is true for the sacrifice of Jesus: "Jesus' sacrifice accomplishes our reconciliation only when we are actually brought together with him and his Father in one community; that is, in that their communal Spirit becomes that of a community in and by which we live." Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 192.

sacrificial giving of Jesus in the cross enables our self-giving, but it ends sacrifice as our way of assuring salvation. Sacrifice is not in itself the good, but rather what sustains the way to communion in the face of everything that negates communion. Giving up oneself in love is not an end in itself, even though it will be frequently required as we journey on the way with Jesus. This is true because we are never in the company of Jesus without the company of those in whom Jesus makes himself present: those who are sick and dying, those who fail, those who are made commodities in the global market, and those who lose their identity in cyberspace. To preserve the feast, to keep alive a community of generosity, one may very often have to act in one-sided ways, without apparent return. Indeed, in “a corrupt, fallen world, the only way to the recovery of mutual interaction will pass through sacrifice unto death.”<sup>34</sup> But the gift of surplus unilateral giving in such “sacrifice” is God’s gift of the cross, the gift of suffering love, which is grounded in and aimed at, not death, but the life of resurrection. The hope for a reciprocal gift, if it does not occur in today’s communion, has its sustenance in the promised resurrection banquet.

The sacrificial gift of ourselves will not come back in the same form. And therein is the surprise and joy of the sanctifying gospel. In order to retain the character of gift, gifts are transformed in their circulation. They are changed by the character of the one who receives or the community that receives. The joy of the gift, if it succeeds in establishing an understanding too deep for words, is the mutuality of peace. When we receive a reciprocal gift (even if it is only gratitude) we receive the same gift of mutuality that we had first offered. But now gifter, giftee, and the gift are all transformed into the mutuality of the new creation. Participating in the eternal movement of divine love “would therefore be a form of exchange of gifts in which the other does not emerge as a debtor, because she has already given by having joyfully received and because even before the gift has reached her she was already engaged in a movement of advance reciprocation.”<sup>35</sup> It is this character of perfect donation in the trinitarian love of God out of which our life in community arises, even if under the conditions of sin our self-giving is often one-sided and asymmetrical. In any

<sup>34</sup>Milbank, “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” p. 35.

<sup>35</sup>Miroslav Volf, “‘The Trinity is Our Social Program’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998), 403-423, 412-413.

case, no one more than John Wesley held out for sanctified giving in love already here and now.

I have tried to show that the dialogue with postmodern thought is urgent precisely because it presses Wesleyan theology to say why and how grace in the face of death can lead to life. Wesleyan theology of grace in a postmodern age will be a theology of life against death. That postmodern philosophers raise so stringently the problem of gift and claim that the single horizon in which gift is possible is death compels Wesleyan theology to the ground of grace in the self-giving, life-creating love of God. Holiness has its one and only habitat in this community of love. I do not see how we can perform Wesleyan theology in the postmodern world except by practicing gifting and the life born of the resurrection in full view of the cyberspatial urge to commodification.

# **GOOD CONSCIENCE OR GOOD CONFIDENCE: A POSTMODERN RE-THINKING OF ETHICAL REFLECTION IN THE WESLEYAN-HOLINESS TRADITION**

by

**Henry W. Spaulding II**

One horizon of the engagement between postmodernism and Wesleyan-Holiness theology concerns the relationship between holiness and morality. Can a holy person be a moral person? For many within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition the relationship between holiness and morality assumes a nearly self-evident status. Such a conclusion makes “holiness ethics” a redundant term. Yet, it may be contradictory rather than redundant. Philosophically, this becomes clear with a more rigorous and creative engagement with postmodernism, especially in its postliberal form. There is also a theological consideration which may question the association between holiness and morality. Specifically, holiness comes by grace and is received as gift. It flows from a pure heart empowered by a vision of the triune God. Morality is constructed from choices directed by reason, either as a response to duty or toward a good end. When holiness and morality are linked it can turn the gift into a mere human product. When this happens holiness is reduced to a human construct devoid of the consciousness of the gift of a holy God. Then, holiness loses itself in a preoccupation with standards, principles, and human achievement.

John Milbank makes a helpful distinction between “conscience” and “confidence.” Conscience refers to moral reflection and the attempt to secure virtue by appeal to reason, end, or duty. It refers to the capacity to

make a “moral” decision, which is the end of moral reflection. This is problematic for holiness. Milbank also talks about confidence, which is more about faith and, in fact, is a contradiction to the morality arising from conscience. He says:

So no, the Christian is not a moral man, not a man of good conscience, who acts with what he knows of death, scarcity, and duty to totalities. He has a bad conscience, but a good confidence for he acts with what he does not know but has faith in. In absolute trust he gives up trying to be good to sustain a right or of government within himself. The *Romans* that Paul wrote to did this already, but they still needed a letter from Paul—to hear what? Simply to hear the other, receive the other, and through the other receive the gratuitous God. Cease to be self-sufficient in the face of scarcity. Instead be good as first receiving from the all sufficiency of God, and actions excessively out of this excess.<sup>1</sup>

Here Milbank sets the precise issue which informs any attempt to re-think moral practice in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. The purpose of this paper is to examine this question in some detail with the hope that it will lead to a richer appreciation for the resources within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition for engaging postmodernism and re-thinking the time-honored association between holiness and morality.<sup>2</sup>

### The Postliberal Critique

The postmodern era has challenged those within and without the church to think about paradigmatic commitments. Postmodernism is a

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<sup>1</sup>John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Culture, Language* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 231.

<sup>2</sup>In order to fully address this question and examine my argument it is important to define terminology precisely. I will use ethical reflection and moral reflection as the systematic reflection upon and application of values to conflict of duty. Morality and ethics will be linked to moral and ethical reflection, thus they will be understood as the concrete form of these activities. Moral theory will be used to indicate the consideration of methodological questions. Moral theology will be used to reflect the mutual interpenetration of theology and moral practice. It will be used as a positive term reflecting the priority of practice for faith as well as virtue. Virtue will be used as a neutral term, which can be used for either philosophical or theological ethics. It is in this sense that virtue is equated with morality. Moral practice will indicate the priority embodiment/activity over disembodied principle.

wide-ranging discussion that includes many disciplines and points of views. It affects not only philosophical and theological reflection, but also biblical studies, historical studies, and even pastoral practice. One of the more interesting and helpful members of the postmodern family is postliberalism. Three individuals, Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Milbank can be associated generally with the postliberal critique of modernity. Together they point to a version of moral reflection which might allow Wesleyan-Holiness theologians to “think-again” about the more fundamental aspects of the Christian faith and specifically moral practice.

Alasdair MacIntyre, a relentless critic of the failed Enlightenment project, has written many books and articles, which have contributed to a reconsideration of moral theory.<sup>3</sup> He argues against the attempt to secure morality in universal/rational principles. People holding such principles separate morality from culture, occasion, history, etc. This leads to an unhealthy climate for making important moral choices. According to MacIntyre, some theorists following universal principles conclude that the only possible form of moral theory is emotivism.<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre argues that this kind of moral thinking will not work, and in fact has failed as a viable theory.

MacIntyre offers an alternative approach, arguing that “man in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, is essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth.”<sup>5</sup> This suggests that morality emerges from those habits and practices which guide life through its many twists and turns. The disembodied principle, which has nourished the individualism of modern ethics, cannot be finally justified according to MacIntyre. If he

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<sup>3</sup>See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Second Edition. (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 1984), 39.

<sup>4</sup>See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*: “A moral philosophy—and emotivism is no exception—characteristically presupposes a sociology. For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real social world” (23). He continues by arguing that emotivism makes embodiment less likely.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 216.

is right, then another account of moral theory must be suggested. He argues that habits and practices offer such a pathway.<sup>6</sup>

Stanley Hauerwas is one of the more provocative voices in the church today. His energy and insight have unquestionably changed the theological landscape of the church. Hauerwas is also a vigorous critic of the way in which many have unconsciously or carelessly bought into the assumptions of liberal/democratic society. He finds that making the assumptions of liberation theology a comprehensive description of Christian existence "is a mistake, given the background of much of our recent intellectual and political history."<sup>7</sup> He looks instead to the underlying narratives of the Christian community for the formation of character, asserting the importance of a truthful narrative that will help engender the kind of character capable of freedom, justice, compassion, and liberation.<sup>8</sup> The truthfulness of the Christian claim about virtue is not dependent on rational justification, but on the kind of character emerging from Christian community.

Virtue emerges from the character of a person formed by truthful narrative. This is the task of the church as a community of character. Hauerwas writes eloquently regarding his understanding of the church:

. . . the truthfulness of Christian convictions resides in their power to form a people sufficient to acknowledge the divided character of the world and thus necessarily ready to offer hospitality to the stranger. They must be what they are, i.e., the church, exactly because the story of God that has formed them requires them to understand and acknowledge the divided character of the world. The task of Christians is not, therefore, to demonstrate that all possible positions are false though critical questions . . . but to be a witness to the God that they believe embraces all truth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>MacIntyre says, "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." *After Virtue*, 187.

<sup>7</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and A Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 55.

<sup>8</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1988), 29.

<sup>9</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 93-94.

This suggests the alternative epistemology embraced by Hauerwas. Rational grounds do not justify virtue; rather the lives of those people who are formed by the truth are the justification. The church is the community called into being by the Spirit and the preaching of the Word and is nourished by Spirit-inspired habits and practices in order to form the character of those willing to embrace the adventure.

John Milbank moves with ease through theology, philosophy, and sociology. He points to an “ontology of violence” which is said to lie at the root of secular reason.<sup>10</sup> This is problematic for Christians to the extent that much theology, and in particular liberalism, has bought into the assumptions of secular reason. To overcome secularism’s influence, Milbank calls for the theologian to perform the task “of redeeming estrangement; the theologian alone must perpetuate that original making strange which is the divine assumption of human flesh, not to confirm it, but to show it again as it surprisingly is.”<sup>11</sup> His point comes through clearly in the last chapter of his *Social Theory*:

The task of such a theology is not apologetic, not even argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos*, and call again for Christian *praxis* in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a way as to make it strange.<sup>12</sup>

He affirms a “Counter-Ethics” which challenges the attempt to conform moral practice to the theoretical tendencies of secular reason. Instead, he argues for an Augustinian point of view which acknowledges the “difference” between the City of Man and the City of God. He can make this claim because “it implies both that the part belongs to the whole, and that each part transcends any imaginable whole, because the whole is only a finite series which continues indefinitely towards an infinite and unfathomable God.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>This phrase, ontology of violence, is used by Milbank to describe the tendency to assume the priority of coercion, struggle, and force in the world. He assumes that theology need not assume these as prior. When they are assumed to be prior, theology becomes complicit with the secular.

<sup>11</sup>John Milbank, 1.

<sup>12</sup>John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1990, 1993), 381.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 405.

These three important theologians have pointed to some of the obstacles which stand in the way of moral practice. Their analysis points to the way in which the search for an adequate moral theology within the church is subverted by alien assumptions. Consequently, the church can run the risk of making moral practice a liberal notion of universally established ideals. These men also suggest that often our moral theory can rest upon rational justifications, instead of the habits and practices which finally engender virtue. They also question the autonomous self which is assumed by modern ethics, pointing rather to the socially constructed self and the accompanying need for community. Finally, they question the tendency of the church to make sense of the world. The wonder if such a task is a worthy goal at all.

### **The Trajectories of Wesleyan-Holiness Ethics**

The historical relationship between “Methodist perfection and . . . moral ability”<sup>14</sup> seems indisputable. Yet, larger questions remain. Does this mean that Wesleyan-Holiness theology is wedded to a particular ethical scheme? Is there a danger in linking the holy life with the moral life? Is there a difference between an association of holiness and the discipline of ethical reflection? Is there a difference between the expectation of a holy life and a commitment to moral theology? These questions reach beyond the particular way in which moral practice has been engendered in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. In fact, they go the way in which this tradition has attempted to “think itself” and thus to “go on.”<sup>15</sup> In order to more fully appreciate the dilemma and the possibilities of these “theological” questions, we look at the trajectories of Wesleyan-Holiness ethical reflection.<sup>16</sup> Since, the Holiness Movement, even with the qualifier “Wes-

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<sup>14</sup>Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Glouster, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), 114.

<sup>15</sup>The term “go on” is used in the Wittgensteinian sense of solving a philosophical problem.

<sup>16</sup>I realize that any attempt to categorize Wesleyan-Holiness ethical reflection must only be a preliminary investigation. There is no fully developed “moral theology” within the tradition that I am aware of. I am developing these trajectories only as a preliminary investigation, as a way of beginning a fuller dialogue on this subject. It is my fundamental conviction that such an investigation will be required in order for Wesleyan-Holiness theology to fully and creatively engage postmodernism. I further believe that such an engagement is not only warranted but will result in a more adequate expression of the themes of Wesleyan-Holiness theology.

leyan” added, is quite diverse, we will only be able to examine the debate in its broadest terms. I hope to show that a careful analysis of the theological issues at stake point to an impasse and suggest a way to “go on.”

**1. Wesleyan-Holiness Deontology.** One way in which moral reflection has proceeded in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition can be linked to deontological ethics. This is clear in the theology of H. Orton Wiley who says, “As theology is the science of God and the mutual relations of God and man, so ethics, as the science of duty, has to do with the end, the principles and motives of obligatory conduct.”<sup>17</sup> He thinks of Christian ethics as revealed in the sense that it is centered in divine revelation.<sup>18</sup> This is important for him because it separates “Natural” and “Revealed” ethics. In fact, it grounds the demand, which becomes a duty, in God. Out of this he attempts to locate the principles of Christian ethics in liberty, love, and conscience. The business of ethics is the “application of moral principles in the regulation of human conduct.”<sup>19</sup> As Wiley expands his discussion of Christian ethics he carefully connects duty at all levels. He talks about duties to God,<sup>20</sup> duties to oneself,<sup>21</sup> and duties we owe to others.<sup>22</sup> Wiley’s ethical reflection centers on duty, principles, and right.

Charles Carter is another Wesleyan-Holiness theologian who develops a deontological vision for ethical reflection. He begins his treatment by noting the importance of principles in Judeo-Christian ethics.<sup>23</sup> He also talks about the business of ethics as the application of absolute principles to particular situations. Carter also reveals his deontological commitments by his reference to the Decalogue, which “was designed by God to be the *objective moral norm and directive* for man in his fallen, perverted, subjective moral state.”<sup>24</sup> Carter looks at the scripture as “the

<sup>17</sup>H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*. 3 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1943), 3:7.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:24.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:36.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:37.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:47.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:68.

<sup>23</sup>Charles Carter, “God’s Ethical Ideal for Humanity,” in *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology: Biblical, Systematic, and Practical*. 2 vols. Charles Carter, R. Duane Thompson, and Charles Wilson, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House/Francis Asbury Press, 1983), 2: 955.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:963.

grace of God in Christ that saves, supports, and directs the believer in the way of right conduct toward God and one's fellow human beings."<sup>25</sup> Partially, because of his interpretation of Christian/Wesleyan ethics as deontological, he sees the work of Joseph Fletcher and John A. T. Robinson as damaging. He feels that these works profess to be Christian, but turn out to be "subjectivistic."<sup>26</sup> Carter juxtaposes objective and subjective, associating objective with Christian ethics. He observes, "Out of the contemporary ethical situationalism produced by these and other influential relativistic thinkers, a general moral revolution resulting in the near collapse of much of Western society is taking place."<sup>27</sup> He laments the lack of ultimate norms in situation-based ethical reflection. "In fact," he argues, "there can be no right or wrong where this philosophy is accepted."<sup>28</sup> While Carter moves from biblical to situational ethics in this article, his basic understanding of moral reflection is clear. He finds that any ethical system which is Christian, much less Wesleyan, must work from ultimate, objective, universal norms. Such norms he finds contained in the Scriptures. All moral norms must be measured against the righteous character of God as it is revealed in the scripture through the Holy Spirit.

Richard Taylor is another prominent Wesleyan-Holiness theologian whose moral reflections are deontological in character. He talks about the "ethical standard that is to mark holy living. . . ."<sup>29</sup> Even Taylor's talk of liberation from the law is couched in a higher moral expectation. He warns: "Professors and exponents of holiness, above all, should be absolutely blameless in ethical practices."<sup>30</sup> Taylor urges that "it is the duty of the Church to set ethical standards and raise ethical issues, if for no other reason than to discharge its teaching responsibility."<sup>31</sup> He looks at the life of holiness as a living out of the duty inherent within the Christian faith. There is even some suggestion that holiness people have a special responsibility to live a moral life:

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:993.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:998.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:999.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>Richard Taylor, *The Theological Formulation in Exploring Christian Holiness*. 3 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1985), 208.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 209. While Taylor uses the term "practice," it is clear that he is using it in a way that is rather disembodied, thus it does not connote the moral practice as it is used in this paper.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 210.

Where the Bible speaks with clarity, the sanctified believer aligns himself accordingly. . . . The disposition of the sanctified person will be to keep uppermost in mind the honor of Christ, the welfare of the church, and the home, the sanctity of human life and of human personality, and the eternal salvation of souls. These will be the fixed landmarks from which he will take his bearings and determine his directions.<sup>32</sup>

The language of duty, fixed landmarks, standards, etc., indicates that moral reflection for Taylor is deontologically conceived.

These are but a few of the theologians who have attempted to delineate Christian ethics within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. They share a commitment to clear, objective standards which define duty. Each is suspicious of any attempt to allow the situation to overly influence moral choice. They each think that the self is capable of conceiving Christian duty in the context of the revelation of God, scripture, and the church.

**2. Wesleyan-Holiness Teleology.** The work of H. Ray Dunning is an example of Wesleyan-Holiness teleological ethical reflection. He suggests in *Reflecting the Divine Image* “the necessity for a theologically based ethic . . . that grows out of and is informed by a comprehensive theological vision.”<sup>33</sup> He thinks that “the Wesleyan vision is peculiarly fitted to provide such a theological underpinning.”<sup>34</sup> Dunning suggests that this is the case because “Wesley himself . . . recognized sanctification to be a thoroughgoing ethical concept.”<sup>35</sup> Dunning offers a brief section on Christian ethics in his *Grace, Faith and Holiness* where he talks about three approaches to ethics within the Holiness Movement. First, he talks about those who seek “to identify rules for conduct in the Bible and then apply these in a literalistic way to contemporary life.”<sup>36</sup> Second, he talks about ethical reflection in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition which “centers in law, obligation, and duty.”<sup>37</sup> Third, Dunning talks about the teleological

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>33</sup>H. Ray Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image: Christian Ethics in Wesleyan Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>36</sup>H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988), 500. I tend to think that this way of moral reflection is a naïve form of deontology, but it can be argued the way Dunning suggests.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 501.

vision within Wesleyan-Holiness theology which focuses on goals, ends, and happiness. He summarizes this discussion: "Historically, the holiness movement has utilized all three of these approaches, but the most adequate attempts to justify the holiness life-style used some version of the teleological approach."<sup>38</sup>

According to Dunning it is important to define an ethical principle for moral reflection. Such a principle is necessary so that the difference between right and wrong can be clarified. He also suggests that the principle should be transcendent so that the ethic will not be shaped by the standards of contemporary culture. Dunning states his own point of view: "I have come to the conclusion that Christian ethics, especially when viewed from a Wesleyan perspective, is thoroughlygoingly teleological."<sup>39</sup> The shape of ethical reflection within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is developed under the rubric of relation to God. One of the ways in which this becomes evident is that Dunning prefers the term "obedience" to "duty." This means that "the end of obedience is communion, not obedience."<sup>40</sup> Such an understanding avoids the legalism which often attaches itself to deontological schemes.

Dunning further suggests that this understanding of "image as relation to God" opens toward two moral principles. First, there is "a principle of discrimination concerning which aspects of life should be avoided and which should be embraced."<sup>41</sup> Relation to God is the substantive element which "umpires," "arbitrates," and "guides" one's life toward holiness. Second is the principle of separation which Dunning describes this way: "Since in my relationship with God I acknowledge him as absolute sovereign and loving Father, any activity that compromises that relation must be avoided."<sup>42</sup> These two principles offer Dunning the matrix in which to develop a Wesleyan-Holiness ethic.

One more idea is important for moral reflection according to Dunning. It is the church. He begins by noting that individualism tends to diminish the importance of the church and the meaning of moral reflection in general. He shows an interest in linking ethical reflection to the church in a way that allows it to be more than a "museum for moral

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 502.

<sup>39</sup>Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image*, 35.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

norms.” The importance of practice and sacramental life is largely missing, but Dunning does attempt to link ecclesiology with the moral life.

Although Dunning is the only theologian we have treated under this category, it is possible to draw a few conclusions regarding the point of view. It construes Christian ethics as directed toward particular ends. This position is no less convinced of the authority of the Scripture or the clarity possible for moral decision-making than the deontologists. Wesleyan-Holiness teleology tends to think that it captures the genius of Wesley more fully by linking principles to the decision-making of the moral agent.

**3. Preliminary Assessment.** The trajectories of Wesleyan-Holiness moral reflection, as we have treated them to this point, tell us a great deal about its paradigmatic commitments. Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell make an interesting observation which is relevant for our investigation:

It is our contention, however, that the standard account of moral rationality distorts the nature of the moral life by: (1) placing an unwarranted emphasis on particular decisions or quandaries; (2) by failing to account for the significance of moral notions and how they work to provide skills of perceptions; and (3) by separating the agent from his interests.<sup>43</sup>

Whether it is deontology or teleology, the question becomes an examination of paradigms.

An examination of those Wesleyan-Holiness theologians whose moral reflection is shaped by the deontological tradition leaves one with several impressions. First, moral reflection, when it is shaped by duty, implies a particular understanding of scripture. Perhaps at its most naïve level it implies a “biblical positivism” which is the attempt to lift from scripture moral prescriptions and apply them directly to life. But no one we have looked at in this section would agree with this form of moral reflection. Rather, we encounter this understanding in more nuanced ways in what J. Kenneth Grider calls “a homing instinct for the moral.”<sup>44</sup> I am

<sup>43</sup>Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, “From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics,” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*. Edited by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 163.

<sup>44</sup>J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 36.

not arguing here that Grider is a deontologist, much less a “biblical positivist” at the point of morality, for it is not clear from his *magnum opus* that he develops either a deontology or a teleology. Indeed, his brief discussion of a homing instinct could be interpreted either way. What I do want to suggest is that deontology within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is linked to an understanding of scripture that allows if not encourages a reduction of the scripture to disembodied moral norms. It encourages a separation between moral theology and systematic theology.

A second observation is that deontological moral reflection in the Wesleyan-Holiness theologians we have treated seems preoccupied with locating and defending a foundation. It is most clear in Carter, but it is evident in Wiley and Taylor as well. There would be no real problem with this if it were not for at least two things. It forces moral reflection to become preoccupied with producing epistemologically grounded proofs for moral standards. This almost guarantees that the rich diversity of the scripture will be reduced to a catalog of publicly defensible norms. There is also the inevitable wedding of moral reflection with modern philosophy. The irony of this merging of modern epistemology and holiness theology is the general antipathy of modern philosophy for revelation.

Wesleyan-Holiness moral reflection in the teleological tradition is clearly a very profitable avenue for ethical reflection. It seems to best capture the genius of Wesley. The principles that move this teleology easily become disembodied in the same way as duty in the deontological tradition. Further, the same kinds of critique made of deontology apply to teleology. Specifically, it is not at all clear that a different hermeneutic is employed, although teleology clearly moves in the right direction. It is also not clear that the foundational tendencies are avoided, but may only be relocated in consequences and ends.

There are significant limitations with either of these two traditions of moral reflection in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. While at some level it may seem that the choice between deontology and teleology is the only choice, it is worthwhile to look more carefully at the choices. The two traditions may, in fact, share in common much more than is at first apparent. For example, they are both dependent upon some rational grounding or justification for moral decision-making. The deontologist looks for objective norms and the teleologists looks for a transcendent principle, which is no less knowable.

Another issue worth considering is the human self as understood by deontology and teleology. The first sees a self that chooses by knowing the universal norms at stake. The second sees a self which is no less rational in its selection of appropriate ends. For both the self is capable, albeit with the Holy Spirit's help, of grasping the duty or end toward which a person is called to live. The deontologist resists the temptation to get lost in the situation for many reasons, but most of all because it makes it less likely that a sentimental understanding will cloud the vision of the objective norm. The teleologist embraces the situation, but feels that the transcendently secure principle will guide the moral agent through the maze with more compassion, but with similar results.

It is, perhaps, at this point that the issue becomes the clearest. It seems to be a conservative point of view as opposed to a liberal view. For some, Wesleyan-Holiness theology is inescapably and most appropriately conservative. That is, Wesleyan-Holiness moral reflection rests on certain irreducible truths which can be known and defended. For others Wesleyan-Holiness theology is more open in its engagement with the world. It is "liberal" in the best sense of the word. That is, Wesleyan-Holiness moral reflection builds bridges to contemporary culture. Thus conceived, Wesleyan-Holiness theology expresses itself in contemporary idiom. One approach of Wesleyan-Holiness moral reflection is conservative, the other is liberal; yet, with all the differences, the persuasiveness of either option is unclear. We are left to consider why this is the case. The answer may be found not in the difference between deontology and teleology, but in the construal of the moral enterprise itself.

An examination of the trajectories of Wesleyan-Holiness moral reflection indicates their common dependence on the "modern" paradigm. Perhaps this is part of what lies behind Milbank's provocative question, "Can morality be Christian?"<sup>45</sup> He answers, "Let me tell you the answer straightway. It is no. Not 'no' there cannot be a specifically Christian morality. But no, morality cannot be Christian."<sup>46</sup> This startling answer calls into question the quest to locate Wesleyan-Holiness moral reflection in either deontology or teleology. Milbank talks about the five marks of morality: reactive, sacrifice, complicity with death, scarcity, and generality.

<sup>45</sup>Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 219.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

Milbank critiques morality as reactive. In other words, virtue is seen only in the face of the greatest adversity. He says that “virtue is always reactive, it always secretly celebrates as its occasion a prior evil, lives out of what it opposes.”<sup>47</sup> He also talks about sacrifice: “In morality there is no love for the other nor opening to the other, but always and everywhere a principle of self-government, whether of the soul or the city.”<sup>48</sup> The third mark of morality for Milbank is complicity with death. He says: “If Reaction requires Sacrifice, then both concern death: in fact a threat of death repelled by a willing to die.”<sup>49</sup> Milbank adds: “So ethics must covertly celebrate death, for only our fragility elicits our virtue.”<sup>50</sup> The fourth mark is called scarcity, which is linked to death and sacrifice. Milbank observes: “because life is in short supply, because it might run out on us, sooner or later, we must invest, we must insure. . . .”<sup>51</sup> The fifth and final mark of morality for Milbank is generality. He observes: “It is this generality which ensures that the moral command is a law or general prescription, including a prescription of virtue.”<sup>52</sup>

The impasse of moral reflection that plagues all deontology and teleology is illuminated by this analysis. It does not matter so much whether it is a norm, duty, end, or principle; the problem does not reside there. It goes deeper to the difference between the nihilism and ontology of violence that is present in secular reason and even in liberal theology, perhaps in conservative theology as well. This suggests the need for a third option, one that emphasizes *character* over principles, *social formation* as opposed to resolution of conflict of duty, and one that recognizes the significance of *liturgical practice*. Herein lie the formative factors for a Wesleyan-Holiness moral theology capable of engaging postmodernity while avoiding its nihilism.

### Character and Holiness: The Grammar of Faithful Practice

It is the intention of this section to offer a preliminary reflection on the possibilities for moral theology<sup>53</sup> within the parameters of the Wes-

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 224-225.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>53</sup>I am using the term “moral theology” as an attempt to broaden the meaning of moral reflection to include a theological reflection.

leyan-Holiness tradition. Perhaps, such an investigation will be capable of successfully engaging postmodernism. Two underlying convictions guide this reflection. First, it is essential that theology and moral practice be understood together. Theology is well defined as a disciplined reflection on the forms of life engendered by Spirit, Word, and the sacramental life of the Church. Milbank is a powerful voice in this discussion when he calls for a “counter-ethics.” He means by this that the Christian faith “implies a critique not only of the prescriptions but also of the formal categories of antique ethics of arte, *phronesis*, telos, ‘the mean’ and so forth.”<sup>54</sup> He gives specific shape to this “counter-ethic” when he talks about the five notes of the gospel, which are to be distinguished from the five marks of morality discussed in the previous section. These five notes are gift, end of sacrifice, resurrection, plentitude, and confidence. They suggest the radical difference between moral theology and ethical reflection, even in its theological mode. For example, *gift* emphasizes a “divine creative act.”<sup>55</sup> *End of sacrifice* is shaped by the understanding that “I exist and persist also in giving, which is prior to any sacrificial loss.”<sup>56</sup> *Resurrection* is “the sustaining of joyful, non-reactive giving, by a hastening of death as the only way of continuing to give.”<sup>57</sup> The fourth, *plentitude*, is “to believe in the already commenced and yet-to-come restoration of Creation as Creation.”<sup>58</sup> The final note of the gospel is *confidence* which places moral reflection squarely in the “sufficiency of God, and actions excessively out of this excess.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, theology and moral practice share a common pathway. Re-thinking moral practice in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is congenial to this proposal.

The second conviction which informs my preliminary reflection involves what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls *grammar*. This is a strategy for confronting and creatively appropriating the nonfoundationalism of postliberalism. When we do this, two things will happen. First, we will understand and second, we will be able to go on. Wittgenstein says: “But there is also this use of the word ‘to know’: we say ‘Now I know it!’—

<sup>54</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 399.

<sup>55</sup>Milbank, *Word Made Strange*, 228.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 231.

and similarly ‘Now I can do it!’ and ‘Now I understand’” (PI 151)!<sup>60</sup> Understanding is the result of a “grammatical investigation.” The point that Wittgenstein wants to make is that understanding is more than getting hold of a formula. He says: “Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all—for that is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do you say, ‘Now I know how to go on,’ when, that is, the formula has occurred to me” (PI 154).<sup>61</sup> He adds:

Thus what I wanted to say was: he suddenly knew how to go on, when he understood the principle, then possibly he had a special experience—and he is asked: “What was it? What took place when you suddenly grasped the principle?” Perhaps he will describe it much as we described it above—but for us it is the circumstances under which he has such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on (PI 155).<sup>62</sup>

Theology is grammar according to Wittgenstein. I take this to mean that theology (and for that matter understanding) takes place within a complex of activities. Therefore, any consideration of moral reflection requires a grammatical projection. Re-thinking moral practice requires a consideration of the habits and practices of the Christian faith. Finally, a focus on grammar will help us to go on, to re-order our lives around Christian practices. This means that understanding moral practice in the postmodern era is not purely a matter of thinking, but of life; it is embedded in the forms of life.<sup>63</sup>

The interrelation between theology and moral practice, as well as the constructive possibilities of a grammatical focus, are the two underlying convictions of this project. We will now turn to a consideration of three elements which together point to a new way of “going-on” for Wesleyan-Holiness moral theology.

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<sup>60</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Third Edition. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1953, 1958), 59.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 61

<sup>63</sup>This focus is in Wittgenstein’s later work, which suggests that language and understanding are not so much intellectual activities as they are reflective of the language games embedded in the fabric of life.

1. *Doxology*. All theological reflection begins and ends in the worship of the Triune God.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, moral theology is first of all the worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Harmon Smith agrees:

Our worship—prayer, hymnody, psaltery, proclamation, and all the rest—is not *de novo*, self-generated, without antecedent, inaugurated by our own imagination. Whatever else may characterize worship in the traditions of biblical theism, it is plainly human response to divine initiative.<sup>65</sup>

The life of the Trinity serves as the clue for understanding all other aspects of the Christian tradition. Since moral practice is doxological in character, the first question concerns God. The fundamental assertion that the God we worship is triune is the first reality of the Christian life. It is the affirmation that God is related as triune without coercion or competition, and is eternal love that informs all moral practice. The worship of God is first initiatory and then recapitulatory; and one without the other weakens its meaning.

Worship as doxology includes sacrifice and praise, initiation and recapitulation. The very meaning of theology as doxology is that it begins as a reflection of the ever-present Triune God, continues in the outpoured love made incarnate in the Christ, and reaches outward as that creative moment engendered by the Spirit. This conception of theology has clear moral significance. According to the Geoffrey Wainwright, “Christian ethics

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<sup>64</sup>Concerning worship, the comment of Wainwright is worth considering: “The communion with God, symbolically focused in liturgy, is the primary locus of religious language for the Christian. Theological language belongs to the second order: it is the language of reflexion upon the primary experience. The language of worship mediates the substance on which theologians reflect; without that substance, theological talk would have no referent. Yet the ‘architectonic’ and ‘critical’ functions of theological reasoning, secondary thought that reasoning is in relation to substantial communion with God, play a proper part in shaping and pruning the primary experience. For the reflective person is part of God’s endowment to humanity and must therefore be included in the total picture of human communion with God. The second-order activity of theology is therefore, at its own level, properly doxological: the theologian is truly a theologian when, in his very theologizing, he is listening for the ‘echo of a voice’ and is contributing, even if indirectly, to the human praise of God. It is indeed a traditional dictum of Eastern Christianity that the true theologian is the person who prays” (*Doxology*, Epworth Press, 1980, 21).

<sup>65</sup>Harmon Smith, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Liturgy and the Moral Life* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 40–41.

is the confession of faith in praxis.”<sup>66</sup> It is the fundamentally the Christian affirmation that God exists as a being-in-communion, which offers vision and conviction to the Christian life.<sup>67</sup> Moral practice, therefore, begins in the life of a God who “lives as the loving friendships, the self-giving relationships, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”<sup>68</sup> Grammatically considered, moral theology is first a doxological practice centered on the God who exists in relation while reaching toward humankind. According to L. Gregory Jones: “God’s desire for communion with Creation leads God, as a sign of mercy, to draw human history into God’s life.”<sup>69</sup>

This means, in part, that moral theology is not in its first act a human construction which rises to meet the challenges presented to it. Rather, it is a reflection of the gracious move of God toward us; it is the reception of gift and the thanksgiving which follows. This suggests that moral theology, in order to be genuine, arises from our need for God to sustain our life together. Christian virtue does not exist as some disembodied duty or holy teleos for the Christian; rather, it is embedded in the worship of God. It is the grammar of faithful practice. The first act of moral theology is the worship of the Triune God. According to Milbank:

The harmony of the Trinity is, therefore, not the harmony of a finished totality but a “musical” harmony of infinity. Just as an infinite God must be power-act, so the doctrine of the Trinity discovers the infinite God to include a radically “external” relationality. Thus God can only speak to us simultaneously as the Word incarnate, and as the indefinite spiritual response, in time, which is the Church.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Geoffrey Wainwright, op. cit., 431.

<sup>67</sup>The meaning of human life is related to this understanding of theology. See Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1985): “We are working on a very different thesis: namely, that life is holy at its very base. It is religious in its structures and in the very fabric of the experiences associated with the drama of life from stage to stage. We are saying that the rites of life are not religious because we put religious meaning on them. Rather they are religious because God’s spirit is present in all of life; and the sacraments, for instance, are revelatory events illuminating that which is” (85).

<sup>68</sup>L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 112.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>70</sup>Milbank, *Social Theory*, 424.

Moral theology within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition will not be found in a therapeutic model of Christianity, which can only be sustained by an association of persons seeking to find vision in human need or Christian responsibility. Such a situation is really an attempt to treat virtue as a duty which comes from the outside. A grammatical understanding begins to see that moral theology arises in the worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The worship of the Triune God is not an attempt to deny the reality of the world; rather it is an attempt to see through “the storied practices of the church . . . the ultimate realism.”<sup>71</sup> Of course, the ultimate story of the world is the God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies through the power of grace. Milbank says: “Christian belief belongs to Christian practice, and it sustains its affirmations about God and creation only by repeating and enacting a metanarrative about how God speaks in the world in order to redeem it.”<sup>72</sup> This is, according to Milbank, a “counter-ontology” and we understand its significance in the practice of worship. Yet, it is often easy to miss the doxological dimensions of faith and practice in an attempt to react appropriately to the challenges presented by secular reason. It is just because of this that the beginning of a reconstructed Wesleyan-Holiness moral theology must arise out of the worship of God.

Following the above analysis, the difference between the “reactive” in morality and the “gift” of the gospel suggests something significant about the way we “go on.” The former makes ethics an attempt to answer secular reason; the latter is the joyful note in the midst of the secular which calls it to conversion.<sup>73</sup> Stanley Hauerwas says: “Trinity is the story that all that is,

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<sup>71</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

<sup>72</sup>Milbank, *Social Theory*, 422. Harmon Smith sounds a similar note: “Acknowledgment, hearing, offering, and celebration are the means by which Christian liturgies form us and our stories according to God’s holiness, God’s story. We Christians are a people who know who we truly are in the measure to which God’s story becomes our story; and we know that story by and through the recapitulation, the reenactment, the reappropriation of the epiphany of God in the Prophets, in the Torah, in Israel, and preeminently in Jesus. This is how God’s story forms us: it becomes our habit of being; it offers us a different way of seeing ourselves and the world as, we believe, God intends them” (Smith, 41).

<sup>73</sup>Milbank makes an interesting observation which is relevant to this point. He says: “Conversion is, of course, a central notion for Christian ethics, because only by admitting it can one conceive of the idea that inherited tradition might be fundamentally perverse, and unable without radical renewal any longer to guide us” (*Theology and Social Theory*, 413).

including us, is part of God's story."<sup>74</sup> He adds: "It is in worship that we learn to tell the story of creation as part of God's Trinitarian life."<sup>75</sup> Perhaps this is the pathway to re-thinking Wesleyan-Holiness ethics in a way which avoids what Milbank calls complicity with the secular.<sup>76</sup>

**2. Character Formed by Truthfulness.** The truthfulness of the gospel cannot be justified by an appeal to some exterior criterion. It cannot be demonstrated as a public reality in a way that is not circular. The character that arises out of its proclamation and its life within the church can justify the truthfulness of the gospel, including moral practice. This may sound strange, but what it suggests is fundamental to the meaning of moral theology. Moral reflection as it is usually understood tends toward a preoccupation with decisions made by an individual. Moral practice looks beyond principles to those forms of life capable of social embodiment. According to Hauerwas: "The self that gives rise to agency is fundamentally a social self, not separable from its social and cultural environment."<sup>77</sup> Moral practice has no meaning when separated from one's character. There is a tendency, especially in modernity, to reduce ethics to decisions. The key to moral practice is to be found in a character formed by the truth. In order that truth not become one more disembodied principle, it is essential that it be understood within the complex of activities engendered by the faithful practice of proclamation and sacrament.

This faithful practice is from the very start a rejection of the autonomous self. Going back to the importance of seeing God as a being-in-communion who creates humankind as a being-in-relation, it becomes abundantly clear that autonomy is a dangerous illusion. The truth comes

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<sup>74</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 255.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>76</sup>The extent of this complicity is evident according to Milbank in the denials of modern political theory. These are denials of what Milbank seeks to affirm. First, he argues for *poesis*, which places human making in the context of an opening toward the transcendent. Second, he argues for the Christian doctrine of creation, which stands in stark contrast to the Greek idea of rational insertion of order. Third, he argues for the priority of practice in the Aristotelian tradition as opposed to disembodied principles or rights of liberalism. These three ideas, *poesis*, creation, and practice, form the backbone of Milbank's attempt at the re-narration of the Christian faith (*Theology and Social Theory*, 148).

<sup>77</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame 1975), 33.

to human beings when they are lost in the illusion of self-sufficiency. It is that strange Word that Milbank says is the fundamental task of the theologian in our time. The strangeness is in part to be accounted for in the call to community in a time of alienation. It is also evident in the willingness to look beyond the façade, which often hides the truly important. The truth is not always pleasant, at least at first, but it is part of the redeeming presence that is evident in the first movement of moral practice.

Truthful narrative is more than words. It refers to those gestures of truth which form the heart of the church, i.e., baptism, eucharist, friendship, prayer, preaching, etc. According to Hauerwas, “Choice is the center of our action, but character is the determination of choice as well as its continuing result.”<sup>78</sup> Character gives a person a “nose” for the truth. One is prepared for moral discernment by being formed in truthfulness. Such a commitment to truthfulness requires courage and patience. Hauerwas puts it plainly:

The emphasis on narrative, therefore, is not first a claim about the narrative quality of experience from some unspecified standpoint, but rather is an attempt to draw our attention to where the story is told, namely in the church; how the story is told, namely, in faithfulness to Scripture; and who tells the story, namely, the whole church through the office of the preacher.<sup>79</sup>

Several important issues come into focus in this statement. First, we come into our humanity, not as a natural endowment, but through the truthful narrative. Second, we are given in the church God’s way of forming us in the truth. Third, the Scripture must be heard again as that narrative which reminds us that God (not ourselves) is the object of the story. Fourth, the importance of the preacher is affirmed and with it the work of helping people see again the primary task of ministry, that is, helping others see the truth. Finally, while it is not explicitly said, it is the Spirit who moves in the church as the envisioner of grace and as the movement toward moral reflection.

The practice of the truth which helps us embody moral practice is sustained in the instituted sacramental life of the church. It is in this way that we begin to “unlearn our habit of sin.”<sup>80</sup> Baptism teaches us who we

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 112-113.

<sup>79</sup>Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 61.

<sup>80</sup>Jones, 76.

are and the Eucharist reminds us of our past as it points to our real hope. The sacramental life of the church is shaped in the recognition of divine grace. It is the way in which our identity becomes evident as our destiny is envisioned. Wainwright says:

Where divine grace is met by human gratitude, the gratitude is truly expressed in free service to brother, sister and neighbour, and the chorus of thanksgiving resounds to the glory of God at the approach of his kingdom of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.<sup>81</sup>

It should be evident that the importance of truth as it is sustained through the instituted sacraments resides in its “Spirit engendered” concreteness.

The sacramental life of the church embraces the truth. It is because of this that it reaches to a world that needs to know that it is the world. Hauerwas says:

For the church to be, rather than have, a social ethic means we must recapture the social significance of common behavior, such as acts of kindness, friendship, and the formation of families.<sup>82</sup>

In other words, the sacramental life of the church is an important key to the grammar of moral theology. It is the visible re-narrating of life through the lens of the Triune God. Milbank talks about Christian “moral practice embedded in the historical emergence of a new, and unique community . . . situated in the re-narration of Christian emergence. . . .”<sup>83</sup> Of course, the narrative is an outgrowth of the story of the Triune God sustained in the church and by its sacramental life. In other words, as Hauerwas says:

We must be a community with the patience, amid the division and hatreds of this world, to take the time to nurture friendships, to serve the neighbor, and to give and receive the thousand small acts of care which ultimately are the heart blood of the Kingdom.<sup>84</sup>

**3. Sanctification.** The final movement in our consideration of moral theology is an examination of sanctification. The importance of this grand

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<sup>81</sup>Wainwright, 433.

<sup>82</sup>Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 11.

<sup>83</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 381.

<sup>84</sup>Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 105.

doctrine of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition may in fact turn out to be the tradition's true genius. It may help us realize the best of our theological heritage as it points to the future. The Holiness movement has continued to believe that the grace of God is sufficient to cleanse the heart, nourish our relationship with God, and empower us to service. If there has been a fault in this theological affirmation, it has been the tendency to be captured in the liberal democratic assumptions regarding selfhood, along with its implications for moral reflection. Hauerwas points to this in the following comment:

The problem with the language and practice of holiness in modernity is that it has been far too spiritual. To become holy has been presented as something we could will, something we could become if we just tried hard enough.<sup>85</sup>

When the self is construed atomistically, especially regarding sin and grace, the real genius of sanctification runs the risk of being lost. Hauerwas reflects this in his reading of Paul: "Holiness is not, for Paul, a matter of individual will. Holiness is the result of our being made part of a body that makes it impossible for us to be anything other than disciples."<sup>86</sup> When we continue to think of sanctification as a personal victory over a mountain of sin, inherited and actual, we lose sight of what is really important about holiness. All too often it seems "holiness folk" tend to get locked into holiness ethics and lose sight of a holy God, thus exchanging holiness for moralism. We tend to seek security in lifestyle and miss our mutual dependence on God. We begin to seek an experience instead of a God who is being-in-communion. We may seek our confidence in rigorous standards, but through time we tend to place the standards first, instead of Spirit-engendered praxis.

Sanctification is an important key to understanding moral theology in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. It also is timely since in a "post-age" there is no doctrine, no dictionary, and no foundation sufficient to establish the truth claims of the Christian faith. This surely means that a grammatical investigation of moral theology will require a full accounting of holiness. Milbank says: "The Church, to be the Church, must seek to extend the sphere of socially, aesthetic harmony. . . ."<sup>87</sup> Grammatically

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<sup>85</sup>Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth*, 89.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>87</sup>Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 422.

formed holiness will take full regard of the Triune God and the truthful narrative. The Spirit engendered culture that is the church.

The emphasis on holiness for understanding moral theology is important for many reasons. First, it reminds us that as the people of God we are pilgrims, some might say “Resident Aliens” or even “Exodus people.” We are people on the way to God’s future. We are not seeking to establish a kingdom on earth. Liberty, fraternity, and equality, which seem so obviously linked to the Enlightenment, cannot hope to engender moral practice beyond some intellectual or moral consensus. As exodus people, Christians know that conscience can mislead, but confidence placed in the Triune God can form us into a peculiar people. Second, holiness reminds us of our eschatologically framed journey. It is not a hope which presumes nor a hope lost in despair. It is not stranded in an understanding of the Christian life which detaches one from the difficulties of life. An eschatologically informed faith understands that the hope of the gospel does not deny the present as much as it frames it in an optimism of grace. Third, holiness reminds us that worship is not merely a segmented span of time when we sing, pray, and listen/preach. Rather, worship is a description of the character of lifebeing formed and lived in community before God. Wainwright reminds us that “the world is not an easy place in which to live doxologically.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, when life is so lived, it is the best if not the only justification of our moral practice.

Understanding the importance of Christian “perfection,” entire sanctification, and the many cognates of holiness within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition indicates one resounding conviction. The optimism of grace or trajectory of hope unites all Wesleyan-Holiness moral theology. Theodore Runyon reflects this core conviction:

What the renewal of the creature in the image of God requires is participation in the “energy” of God, an energy that transforms and creates anew. Thus what is called for is nothing less than a conscious encounter with grace!<sup>89</sup>

This kind of statement can be located throughout the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. It expresses the insight that holiness reaches toward the many relationships which characterize life, even the cosmos. Perhaps it is this very hope which is envisioned by Manfred Marquardt:

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<sup>88</sup>Wainwright, 415.

<sup>89</sup>Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 151.

The ethical power thus awakened and preserved, and firmly founded in connection with Christ, overcame the fatalism of the predestinarians and Deists and enables many to bring about social change in their vicinity. . . . The doctrine of sanctification and its possible and necessary growth at the same time filled this new morality with a dynamic that caused its growth and improvement to become an integral element of sanctification itself: the community of the converted became the core of a growing renewal movement that had an effect upon its environment.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, it is in moral practice that the doctrine of sanctification provides wisdom and is part of the grammar of faithful practice. The practice of holiness is shaped by grace and engendered by the Word, Spirit, and Sacrament as it reaches toward the brokenness of the world.

Moral practice arises out of the worship of the Triune God, finds embodiment in truthfulness, and is finally justified in holiness. If we are to sustain moral theology in our time it will be through a worship of the Triune God which is formed by the truth and incarnated in a community of character as it returns to the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Virtue does not hang in empty space and it is not a rationally defined and justified. It is not about securing self-worth or individual rights; neither is it about how we feel. This is only possible when we understand that embodying moral reflection is a doxological enterprise.

The question must be raised again. Can a holy person be a moral person? The answer depends upon whether one seeks a pure conscience or good confidence. It comes down to whether virtue is an appropriate reaction to a moral challenge or a response to a gift of grace. All else follows from this distinction and the answer will go to the future of holiness theology in the next millennium. The holy person lives out of the grace of God and knows that no human action can produce a good conscience. Therefore, a holy person depends on the grace of God who patiently and courageously responds with confidence. The holy person does not look for or need generality, but dares to respond to God amid the contingencies and possibilities of a particular practice, which engenders character. The

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<sup>90</sup>Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*. Trans. by John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 120-121. It seems clear that Marquardt is talking about moral practice as we are explaining it in this paper.

holy person can celebrate life instead of secretly celebrating death as a moral person does. The holy person knows the plenitude engendered by grace as opposed to the scarcity which characterizes a moral person. So the answer to the question becomes clear. No, the holy person is not a “moral” person. Yet, a holy person is so much more, for such a person lives with the confidence engendered by the Triune God.

Thus, moral theology is not about pointing to proofs, or building carefully crafted arguments based on rationality, nor it is about saying “Look, there is moral virtue.” Moral practice introduces a person to a new way of being in the world that is engendered and nourished by the Word and the Spirit as truthfulness, patience, and sacramental life. Moral practice is not about isolating a word and linking it to some transcendently secure meaning. Moral theology will only be able to “go on” as it is understood to be a gesture of a truthful story shaped by the practice of the grace of God.

# RECENT TRENDS IN WESLEY STUDIES AND WESLEYAN/HOLINESS SCHOLARSHIP

by

Kenneth J. Collins

It is a tribute to the Wesleyan Theological Society that it fostered the recent serious, energetic, and scholarly debate between Randy L. Maddox and me. What follows are my views on the major differences of the interpretations of two scholars as they continue to grapple with the theology of John Wesley and its ongoing significance for Methodism and the Holiness Movement.

## Preliminary Considerations

The work of Randy Maddox is well known for its articulation of the theme of “responsible grace” as the orienting concern of Wesley’s theology. What is less known is that this orienting concern forms part of a larger theological emphasis which is having a significant impact on the evaluation not only of themes in Wesley studies but also of those in the Holiness Movement as well. This larger emphasis in my view is most suitably described as “gradualism,” and it is characterized by the following traits:

1. Stresses incremental growth and development
2. Soteriological changes are ones that are largely different in *degree* (an increment), though not really different in *kind*.
3. Emphasizes Christian nurture in a way similar to Horace Bushnell
4. Deprecates the instantaneous motif in Wesley and in the works of others

5. Attributes an “intellectualist psychology” (which maintains that an autonomous reason orders the passions) to any view other than Wesley’s that emphasizes the instantaneous in its soteriology
6. Justification and regeneration are redefined and incrementalized in a way which departs from their usage in Wesley’s *Notes Upon the New Testament* and in his *Sermons on Several Occasions*.
7. The decisiveness and cruciality of justification, the new birth, and entire sanctification are all, therefore, muted.
8. Maintains that the “faith of a servant” is justifying faith in each and every instance (despite significant evidence to the contrary), with the result that the *qualitative* difference of being a child of God is obscured, even diminished
9. With a gradualist reading of Wesley’s soteriology, the crucial difference between prevenient grace and initially sanctifying grace (regenerating grace) is virtually repudiated.
10. Essentially rejects the distinction made by Wesley throughout his career between nominal and real Christianity.
11. Blurs the distinction between Christian and non-Christian in its gradualist reading of the outworking of prevenient and justifying grace in a diversity of cultures.
12. Identifies entire sanctification with mature adult states in an undue stress on process
13. Emphasizes a “Catholic” reading of Wesley without taking significant account of the “Protestant” Wesley as well.
14. Views grace preeminently in a synergistic context as divine initiative and human response rather than seeing this important synergism caught up in a larger conjunction where the sheer gratuity of grace as well as divine sovereignty are factored in.

Because of space constraints, only some of the more salient traits just enumerated will be explored in greater detail. However, those which do receive treatment should clearly display the major differences between Maddox’s reading of Wesley and my own.

### **Justification and the Faith of a Servant**

With his underscoring of the processive elements of Wesley’s doctrine of salvation, Maddox places justification (rudimentary justification) remarkably early in the Wesleyan *via salutis*. He links it not with the new birth, as does Wesley in his *NT Notes* and *Sermons on Several Occasions*,

but with prevenient grace. To illustrate, Maddox maintains that Wesley eventually came to the judgment that “God’s pardoning grace [justification] is effectual in our lives from the most nascent degree of our responsiveness, even the mere inclination to fear God and work righteousness (i.e., the faith of a servant).”<sup>1</sup>

Though Wesley did at times link the phrase “fear God and work righteousness” with justification,<sup>2</sup> he most often associated it with *preparation* for the forgiveness of sins and thereby maintained an important distinction between prevenient grace and justifying grace. For one thing, Wesley took great pride in *not* requiring the testimony of justification or the chronicling of a conversion experience in order to join the Methodists. Indeed, all that was necessary was simply a “desire to flee the wrath which is to come.” More important for the task at hand, Wesley expressed this very same sentiment using his idiom of “fearing God and working righteousness,” indicating quite clearly that the use of the phrase in this context was not identified with justification, properly speaking. Wesley elaborates in his journal:

I then met the society [at Reduth], and explained at large the rise and nature of Methodism; and still aver, I have never read or heard of, either in ancient or modern history, any other church which builds on so broad a foundation as the Methodists do; which requires of its members no conformity either in opinions or modes of worship, but barely this one thing, to fear God and work righteousness.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1994), 173. Bracketed material is mine; the parenthetical material is Maddox’s.

<sup>2</sup>Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vols. 1-4. *The Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 2:543. Linking the phrase “fear God and work righteousness” with justification in every instance can have the unfortunate effect of lowering the standards of what Wesley called “the proper Christian faith.” For more on this important issue, cf. Kenneth J. Collins, “Real Christianity as Integrating Theme in Wesley’s Soteriology: The Critique of a Modern Myth,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 51, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 15-45.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 4:469. Compare these judgments with those found in the *General Rules of the United Societies* where Wesley states that such a society “is no other than a company of men ‘having the from, and seeking the power of godliness.’” Cf. Rupert E. Davies, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., vol. 9: *The Methodist Societies, I: History, Nature and Design*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69.

Again, the grace entailed in “fearing God and working righteousness” is a measure of grace, to be sure, but if it were to be identified with justification and the forgiveness of sins in *each and every* instance, as Maddox suggests, then Wesley would have required nothing less than justification as the *condition* for taking part in the Methodist societies in the first place, a view which is beset with insuperable difficulties.

Moreover, in order to maintain the viability of his gradualist reading of Wesley’s soteriology as well as to make prevenient grace the proper interpretive context for justification rather than the doctrine of the new birth, Maddox has called for a repudiation of the demand, popular among Evangelicals, “for a *conjoined* experience of initial justification and regeneration,” since it supposedly “violates the basic point of the mature Wesley’s understanding of the faith of a servant.”<sup>4</sup> However, not only does Maddox fail to realize that, just as with the phrase “fearing God and working righteousness,” Wesley actually employed the phrase “the faith of a servant” in a two-fold way (one in terms of prevenient grace, the other in terms of justifying grace), but he also misses the antinomian implications of severing the link between justification and regeneration, implications of which Wesley himself was fully aware. In fact, the father of Methodism criticized Thomas Maxfield in 1762 precisely for severing the connection between justification and regeneration: “I dislike your directly or indirectly depreciating justification: saying a justified person is not ‘in Christ,’ is not ‘born of God,’ is not ‘a new creature,’ has not a ‘new heart,’ is not ‘sanctified,’ not a ‘temple of the Holy Ghost.’”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, how can aspirants of God’s grace *remain* justified if their very nature has not been transformed through the graces of regeneration, with the result that they will so quickly fall under the dominion of sin once more. Justification, then, must ever be conjoined with the new birth lest we begin to affirm that people can remain justified in the midst of the ongoing practice of sin.

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<sup>4</sup>Randy L. Maddox, “Continuing the Conversation,” *Methodist History* 30, no. 4 (July 1992): 235-41.

<sup>5</sup>W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., vol. 21: *Journals and Diaries V* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 395. Wesley’s concern here, of course, is the question of antinomianism. It is not surprising, then, that Wesley also addresses this issue in at least two places in his “Dialogue Between an Antinomian and His Friend.” Cf. Jackson, *Wesley’s Works*, 10:273-74 and 10:279.

Maddox's evaluation of the faith of a servant is also problematic because it fails to realize that Wesley also repeatedly linked this measure of faith with the conviction of sin in general and with the spirit of bondage in particular. In his sermon "The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption," for example, Wesley associates the spirit of bondage with the Jewish dispensation.<sup>6</sup> In the Conference Minutes of 1746 he defines one who is a Jew inwardly as a servant of God and, therefore, as one "who sincerely obeys him out of fear."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, careful study reveals that the phrases "the legal state," "the spirit of bondage," "the Jewish dispensation," and "the faith of a servant" are each at times linked with the others in Wesley's writings.<sup>8</sup> For example, in 1746 Wesley points out that "This whole struggle of one who is 'under the law, under the spirit of fear and bondage' is beautifully described by the Apostle [Paul]. . . ." More importantly perhaps, this linkage is not only indicative of the "middle" Wesley, but of the later Wesley as well. For example, the elderly Wesley specifically associated the spirit of bondage with the fear of death, an observation which casts light on his own spiritual condition on board the Simmonds during 1735-36. In his journal on December 27, 1773, Wesley observes:

I dined with one who in the midst of plenty is completely miserable through "the spirit of bondage" and in particular through the fear of death. This came upon him not by any outward means, but the immediate touch of God's Spirit. It will be well if he does not shake it off till he receives the Spirit of adoption.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Outler, *Sermons*, 1:263. In this sermon, the spirit of bondage is described in terms of the "legal state" and the latter is characterized by "sorrow of heart," "remorse," "fear of death, the devil, and other human beings." And these sinners who struggle under such a grievous weight, such an awful burden, can find no release through their own power: "He resolves against sin," Wesley notes, "but yet sins on." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 1:257-58.

<sup>7</sup>Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 8:287-88.

<sup>8</sup>For more information on this linkage, see Kenneth J. Collins, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993), 133-38.

<sup>9</sup>Outler, *Sermons*, 1:258. Bracketed material is mine.

<sup>10</sup>Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries*, 22:357. Several Wesley scholars, Maddox among them, have concluded that a "consensus" has emerged in terms of a reinterpretation of Aldersgate. Actually, posterity will record that such a reinterpretation has been contested in light not only of Wesley's motif of real Christianity, but also in terms of the motif of "the fear of death," elements which are remarkably illustrative of Wesley's early spiritual life. In this present context, for example, the fear of death is associated with the spirit of bondage, a spirit which does not characterize a child of God, properly speaking.

Moreover, demonstrating that the spirit of bondage, which is often expressive of the faith of a servant, is *not* justifying faith, Wesley reasons as follows in a letter to Thomas Davenport in 1781: "You have now received the spirit of bondage. Is it not the forerunner of the spirit of adoption? He is not afar off. Look up! And expect Him to cry in your heart, Abba Father! He is nigh that justifieth."<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, in this late period Wesley still did not confuse the issue of a measure of grace (prevenient) with justification, for those under "the spirit of bondage" are still waiting for the One who justifies. This means, of course, that these believers are in the way of salvation; consequently, if they continue in this grace, and unfortunately some will not, the One "who is nigh" will *justify*. Moreover, in 1788, in his late sermon "The Discoveries of Faith," Wesley advises the way to proceed in terms of those who labor under a heavy, fearful spirit: "Exhort him to press on by all possible means, till he passes 'from faith to faith'; from the faith of a servant to the faith of a son; from the spirit of bondage unto fear, to the spirit of childlike love."<sup>12</sup>

All of these preceding phrases ("the faith of a servant," "the spirit of bondage unto fear," and "under the law") *in this context* are descriptive of those people who have a measure of faith and grace, but who yet fall far short of the faith and prerogatives of those who are justified and born of God. That Wesley late in his career still maintained a relatively high estimation of justification, not confusing it with prevenient, convincing or awakening grace, is borne out in his observation made to Penelope Newman in 1780: "I have not known ten Quakers in my life whose experience went so far as justification."<sup>13</sup> However, if the faith of a servant is always identified with justifying faith, as it is in the writings of Maddox, then this can only have the unfortunate result of lowering the standards of the Christian faith or, worse yet, of giving rise to a presumptive or antinomian spirit against which Wesley continually inveighed.

<sup>11</sup>John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 7:95.

<sup>12</sup>Outler, *Sermons*, 4:35-36. Emphasis is mine. The late dating of this linkage between the spirit of bondage and the faith of a servant indicates that this conjoining is not simply descriptive of the middle Wesley, as Maddox has argued, but of the "whole Wesley," an interpretive lens that I have tried to maintain continually. Cf. Maddox, "Continuing the Conversation," 235-41.

<sup>13</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 7:26.

## Regeneration

As with justification, Maddox's gradualist reading of Wesley's soteriology links regeneration not simply with the new birth, but perhaps even more significantly with prevenient grace. Discerning increments of regeneration prior to the new birth, Maddox writes: "Wesley came to emphasize that there was a crucial degree of regeneration *prior* to the new birth: the universal nascent regenerating effect of prevenient grace."<sup>14</sup> In most contexts, Maddox calls this effect of prevenient grace *rudimentary* regeneration and identifies it with "the basic human faculties in all persons from the moment of their birth."<sup>15</sup> So understood, regeneration is not limited in terms of its actualization, but is universal.

Maddox's terminology of "rudimentary regeneration," which is nowhere found in Wesley's writings, is problematic. On the one hand, this language may leave the impression that one is *holy* from the moment of (natural) birth since many interpreters will normally associate regeneration with the beginning of sanctification. But is holiness linked to prevenient grace in Wesley's writings? To be sure, the distinctiveness of initial sanctification, which is ever tied to justification, may be obscured or even repudiated in light of the universality of a rudimentary regeneration which has already been instantiated. Put another way, since all are recipients of prevenient grace, and hence of rudimentary regeneration as well, the importance, indeed the cruciality of going on to regeneration, understood as initial sanctification, may lose its urgency. If, on the other hand, "rudimentary regeneration" does not imply holiness at all but simply the restoration of faculties such as conscience, a measure of free will, knowledge of the moral law and of the basic attributes of God—and all as a result of prevenient grace—then such a definition would indicate that this regeneration or renewal does not entail the inception of sanctification, an odd use indeed.

In light of this confusion, especially for the laity among us, it is better perhaps to describe the effects of prevenient grace by means of another

<sup>14</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 159. Another difficulty with Maddox's construct of "rudimentary regeneration" is that the evidence for it is remarkably sparse in Wesley's writings. If fact, the overwhelming majority of uses of the term "regeneration" as employed by Wesley are similar to those found in his "doctrinal standards," that is, in *The Notes Upon the New Testament* and *The Sermons Upon Several Occasions* where regeneration is ever conjoined with justification.

<sup>15</sup>Maddox, "Continuing the Conversation," 238.

terminology, a different rhetoric, and one which will not detract from the salience and cruciality of the regeneration which marks the beginning of holiness and which is ever conjoined with justification (temporally though not logically speaking) in Wesley's writings. Once again, the problem with rudimentary regeneration is that, if one is regenerated without evidencing the marks of the new birth, properly speaking, one of which is freedom from the power of sin, then how can one *remain* a child of God? As with justification, the antinomian implications of "rudimentary" regeneration are both obvious and disturbing.

## Sin

Maddox is creative, even gifted in conceiving and implementing models and interpretive frameworks which are then employed to discern and elucidate Wesley's theology. As creative as some of these are, they are not always accurate in their findings. Indeed, Maddox's choice of models, methods, and rhetoric at times may actually reveal more about his own theological judgments than about those of John Wesley. This dynamic is evident when Maddox considers Wesley's doctrine of sin. For-saking Wesley's own hamartiological distinctions, Maddox substitutes his own novel terminology as is evident in the following observation: "Wesley understood human salvation in its fullest sense to include deliverance (1) immediately from the *penalty* of sin, (2) progressively from the *plague* of sin, and (3) eschatologically from the very *presence* of sin and its effects."<sup>16</sup>

At first glance it may seem that Maddox's distinctions of *penalty*, *plague* and *presence* correspond to Wesley's vocabulary of *guilt*, *power* and *being* especially when the latter writes: "The *guilt* is one thing, the *power* another, and the *being* yet another. That believers are delivered from the *guilt* and *power* of sin we allow; that they are delivered from the being of it we deny."<sup>17</sup> This, however, would be a mistaken judgment because a subtle, though no less significant shift has taken place. Whereas Wesley associated freedom from the *guilt* of sin with justification; from

<sup>16</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 143. Sensing the problematic nature of this terminology, I once asked Maddox (in the context of a debate on the internet's "Wesleyan Theological Discussion" group) to abandon his own novel terminology because it is confusing and also because it unfortunately lowers the standard of deliverance which is evident in Wesley's articulation of the fruits of redeeming grace, one of which is freedom from the *power* of sin.

<sup>17</sup>Outler, *Sermons*, 1:328.

its *power* with regeneration or initial sanctification; and from its *being* with entire sanctification, Maddox disrupts this important linkage in a number of ways. First of all, he removes the issue of the *presence* of sin from practical consideration and relegates it to a purification process *after* death and to the event of glorification. "There is one further dimension to salvation that must be touched on briefly," Maddox notes, "our deliverance from the very *presence* of sin in the facet of the Way of Salvation known as Glorification."<sup>18</sup>

Second, Maddox maintains that believers must struggle under the *plague* of sin for much of their lives. That is, the kind of liberty that Wesley taught as expressive of even a child of God is, oddly enough, rejected. Accordingly, this contemporary scholar links the *plague* of sin, not with freedom from the *power* or *dominion* of sin and with the doctrine of the new birth as Wesley does, but with entire sanctification! Maddox states:

How much deliverance from the *plague* of sin can we hope for in this life? His [Wesley's] distinctive answer—for which he is most widely known (and often criticized)—was that there is a possibility of *entire* sanctification, or Christian Perfection, in this life.<sup>19</sup>

Add to this Maddox's gradualist reading of Wesley's soteriology, where entire sanctification is deemed to occur only after a *lengthy process* and is therefore ever relegated to mature *adult* states, and the picture which begins to emerge is one in which the victory motif in Wesley's soteriology is inadequately displayed, if not lost.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond this, the decisiveness of freedom from the *power* of sin, as championed in Wesley's theology (such that while believers remain in justifying and regenerating grace they do not commit sin) has been repudiated in Maddox's interpretive model that is well apprised of process, but which neglects the significant "instantaneous" elements which express the cruciality of liberation in Wesley's thought. Again, moving the issue of the *presence* of sin to glorification and shifting the matter of the *plague* of sin to maturity may result in a practical antinomianism for believers

<sup>18</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 190.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 180. Bracketed material is mine.

<sup>20</sup>For other references to the "victory motif" in Wesley writings, where it is affirmed that even babes in Christ are free from the power or dominion of sin, cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 1:327; 1:328; 1:332; 2:106; and 2:116-117.

throughout much of their lives. Indeed, though Wesley affirmed: “A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin. This is the glorious privilege of every Christian; yea, though he be but ‘a babe in Christ,’” Maddox balks at this measure of liberty and actually accuses Wesley of being, of all things, a Donatist for affirming it.<sup>21</sup> Here Wesley’s soteriology has not simply been explicated; it has also been re-interpreted.

## Real Christianity

Given Maddox’s judgments with respect to sin and grace, just enumerated, as well as his affirmation that the faith of a servant is unproblematically justifying faith in each and every instance, it is not surprising to learn that this scholar basically puts aside Wesley’s concern, evident throughout his career, of being not a nominal Christian marked only by the form of religion, but of being a real one, marked by both its form and power. According to Maddox, Wesley supposedly, for the most part, repudiated the distinction between an “almost Christian” and a “real” one in the wake of his articulation of (a) the faith of a servant and (b) his several modifications with respect to the doctrine of assurance. To be sure, the motif of real Christianity is hardly found in the pages of *Responsible Grace* (Maddox), though it plays a large role in Wesley’s own writings throughout his career.<sup>22</sup> For example, in October 1738, shortly after his Aldersgate experience, Wesley wrote to his brother Samuel, Jr.: “By a Christian I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin hath no more dominion over him; and in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May 24<sup>th</sup> last past.”<sup>23</sup> Later, the distinction between nominal

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 164. Maddox apparently rejects Wesley’s teaching that one cannot remain a Christian in the face of open, willful sin. However, a question that Maddox has failed to address is “how can initially sanctifying or regenerating grace (that grace which not only makes *holy* but which is also the very substance of redemption) remain given the disobedience and rebellion entailed in open, willful sin?”

<sup>22</sup>For an extensive articulation of this motif as well as its larger significance for Wesley’s theology, cf. Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 1:264. The significance of Aldersgate, at least as it appears in this letter, lies not so much in the matter of assurance (indeed, Wesley claims at this point that “the seal of the Spirit, the love of God shed abroad in my heart . . . this witness of the Spirit I have not; but I patiently wait for it.”) but in freedom from the power of sin. Again, Wesley exclaims: “Some measure of this faith, which bringeth salvation or victory over sin, and which implies peace and trust in God through Christ, I now enjoy by His free mercy.”

and real Christianity was beginning to take on a paradigmatic flavor in Wesley's writings such that he now began to speak not only of half Christians but also of half Methodists! Note his comments to Lady Maxwell in 1764:

And I entreat you do not regard the half-Methodists—If we must use the name. Do not mind them who endeavour to hold Christ in one hand and the world in the other. I want you to be all a Christian; . . .<sup>24</sup>

Late in his career Wesley crafted a letter to Ms. Cummins on June 8, 1773, in which he makes explicit the connection between being a real Christian and fearlessness in the face of death: "O make haste! Be a Christian, a *real* Bible Christian now! You may say, 'Nay, I am a Christian already.' I fear not. (See how freely I speak.) A *Christian is not afraid to die*. Are not you? Do you desire to depart and to be with Christ?"<sup>25</sup> This last example, then, is particularly significant because, not only does it reveal that this motif was employed by the elderly Wesley, indicating that it had not dropped out of his writings early on as was mistakenly supposed, but it also casts light on Wesley's pre-Aldersgate experience in a way that Maddox and others can only find troubling. Indeed, if a real Christian is one that is not afraid to die, then what does that make Wesley en route to Georgia? Remember those powerful Atlantic storms!

Beyond this, Maddox's soteriological expansion of the "faith of a servant" to include justification in every instance not only issues in the erroneous conclusion that Wesley was justified and born of God (and hence a real Christian in Wesley's own terminology) while in Georgia, but it has also rendered the motif of real Christianity virtually unnecessary. Therefore, every occurrence of this well-developed motif, especially in the later Wesley, can only prove to be an embarrassment. Little wonder that it is virtually ignored in *Responsible Grace* by Maddox.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 4:263-64.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 6:31. Emphasis is mine. As is also characteristic of this period, Wesley asked Ms. Cummins if she had "power over all sin." See also Wesley's journal of March 17, 1772, for an example of his ongoing use of the distinction almost/altogether Christians; his entry of August 12, 1772, for the use of the term "notional" believers; and his letter to Patience Ellison in 1777 where he links the distinction between almost/altogether Christian with being an outside/inside Christian. Cf. Ward, *Journals*, 22:311 and 22:345, and Telford, *Letters*, 6:274.

## Entire Sanctification

Maddox's gradualistic reading of Wesley's soteriology is no more pronounced and its consequences no more acute than when he explores the doctrine of Christian perfection. Largely neglecting the instantaneous motif and its function in Wesley's theology, Maddox essentially identifies entire sanctification with mature, adult Christian states. Consequently, the experience of children and young people is neglected if not outright repudiated. Maddox states: "Entire sanctification (or Christian Perfection) is not an isolated reality for Wesley, but a dynamic level of maturity within the larger process of sanctification, the level characteristic of *adult* Christian life."<sup>26</sup>

Oddly enough, in a way which seems to prejudice the discussion, Maddox refers to those holiness people in the nineteenth century who integrated Wesley's instantaneous motif into their judgments on Christian perfection as "partisan." He writes: "Partisan factions emerged in the early nineteenth century, [some insisted that] it [entire sanctification] was a state of Christian victory that could be entered instantaneously by any believer (however young in their Christian life) who simply claimed it in faith."<sup>27</sup> Equally troubling and prejudicial language is employed by Maddox in terms of the Aldersgate "debate" where he describes those who value the instantaneous elements in Wesley's soteriology (such as holiness folk, pentecostals, and charismatics) as operating out of a "partisan theological warrant," and he then depicts those who largely neglect this instantaneous element in favor of a gradualist reading (his own view and that of theological liberals) as evidencing "a dramatic professionalization in the field of Wesley studies."<sup>28</sup> Put another way, Maddox's categories, his interpretive grids, here as elsewhere, route the reader down a path of a number of conclusions that are *already* embedded in his method.

At any rate, the evidence from Wesley's own writings refutes the imbalance of Maddox's view and indicates quite clearly that those who

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<sup>26</sup>Randy L. Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End: A Wesleyan Prescription for the Holiness Movement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33, no. 2 (Fall 1998), 43.

<sup>27</sup>Maddox, "Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons from North American Methodism," *Asbury Theological Journal* 50, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 151.

<sup>28</sup>Maddox, "Aldersgate: A Tradition History," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1990), 133-46. See especially the categories that Maddox develops on page 137 (Aldersgate as Partisan Theological Warrant) and page 144 (Questioning Partisan Readings of Aldersgate).

are young, even children, may enjoy the very highest graces of God. On September 16, 1744, for example, Wesley wrote in his journal: "I buried, near the same place, one who had soon finished her course, going to God in the full assurance of faith when she was little more than four years old."<sup>29</sup> Since the phrase "the full assurance of faith" in Wesley's writings corresponds to Christian perfection, the reference is remarkably clear. Later, in 1764, Wesley took note of the sheer gratuity of grace, and of the sovereign action of the Most High, in the life of a twelve-year-old girl:

I have seldom known so devoted a soul as S— H—, at Macclesfield, who was sanctified within nine days after she was convinced of sin. She was then twelve years old, and I believe was never afterwards heard to speak an improper word, or known to do an improper thing. Her look struck an awe into all that saw her. She is now in Abraham's bosom.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, a decade later, in a letter to Miss March, Wesley waxed eloquently on the notion that a great work of grace can take place in a relatively short period of time. "[God] makes young men and women wiser than the aged;" Wesley declared, "and gives to many in a very short time a closer and deeper communion with Himself than others attain in a long a course of years."<sup>31</sup>

In light of the preceding evidence, it is affirmed that the two broad emphases of the gradual and the instantaneous, especially as they are factored into Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification, are not contradictory so long as it is realized that these temporal dimensions are a reflection of the larger issue of the relation between faith and works. In his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley notes:

And by this token may you surely know whether you seek it by faith or by works. If by works, you want something to be done *first before* you are sanctified. You think, "I must first *be* or *do* thus or thus." Then you are seeking it by works unto this

<sup>29</sup>Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries*, 20:39.

<sup>30</sup>Jackson, *Works*, 12:333.

<sup>31</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 6:132. This evidence, of course, does not deny the fact that, although Wesley believed that entire sanctification was a present possibility for all who are justified and born of God, he nevertheless realized in a very pastoral way that most people would not enjoy such liberating grace until just prior to death. Cf. Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 11:388, and Telford, *Letters*, 5:39.

day. If you seek it by faith, you may expect it *as you are*: and if as you are, then expect it *now*.<sup>32</sup>

Put another way, the instantaneous elements of Wesley's *via salutis* are his principal vehicles for underscoring the crucial truth that it is God, not humanity, who both forgives sins and makes holy. Recent interpretations, on the other hand, such as that of Maddox, conceive the language of "moment," "instant" largely in a chronological sense (probably because they are reacting against nineteenth century revivalism or the twentieth-century Holiness Movement), while Wesley utilized such terminology also, and more importantly, in a soteriological sense. That is, the instantaneous elements of Wesley's *via salutis* are his principal vehicles for underscoring the crucial truth that it is God, not humanity, who both forgives sins and who makes holy. Temporal elements, in other words, indicate *soteriological roles*. Some of the divine prerogatives, then, have been missed or at least obscured in the interpretative framework of *Responsible Grace* (Maddox).

### The Question of Synergism

Randy Maddox has developed the "orienting concern" of responsible grace in a way which suggests a synergistic flavor to Wesley's theology. Drawing largely on resources from the "catholic" tradition, Greek Orthodoxy in particular,<sup>33</sup> Maddox has underscored the prevenience of divine action which enables human response. In fact, in his *Responsible Grace* Maddox explores divine/human cooperation in the process of salvation by employing the basic image of a dance: "Perhaps a good image (even if traditionally un-Wesleyan) to capture salvation's co-operant nature is that of a *dance* in which God always takes the first step but we must participate responsively, lest the dance stumble or end."<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, there are at least two basic problems with this synergistic image of a dance. First, if divine initiative is *presupposed*, then the soteriological emphasis may in practice devolve on human initiative and works viewed, of course, as a "response." In other words, here the danger of moralism and self justification ever loom. Maddox, no doubt, rightly

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<sup>32</sup>Outler, *Sermons* 2:169.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences," *Asbury Theological Journal* 45, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 29-53.

<sup>34</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 151.

rejects these conclusions, but his theology may not be so carefully interpreted by those less gifted than he. And it is precisely attentiveness to the instantaneousness motif in Wesley, expressive of the proper relation between faith and works, which would go a long way in preventing or correcting any moralistic misunderstanding of Wesley's theology.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the ascription of a synergistic model to Wesley's theology might easily suggest an equality of soteriological roles in terms of God and humanity, even though the putative emphasis is on divine prevenient action. More to the point, in a well developed synergism, as displayed in *Responsible Grace*, once divine initiative occurs, God repeatedly and consistently acts *only* in *response* to ongoing human *response*. In other words, the decisiveness of God, the sheer gratuity of grace, as well as the sovereignty of divine action in the face of human impotence, may all be minimized if not repudiated. And though Maddox, no doubt, believes that the synergistic image of a dance affords the proper roles to God and humanity, probably because a role is included for each, the orientation of Wesley's theology is perhaps more aptly described by a much larger, more inclusive, *conjunction* which incorporates all of the insights of Maddox's synergistic model, but which then *adds* to it key elements drawn largely from the Protestant tradition, a tradition which has highlighted not only the sheer gratuity of grace, but also the sovereignty and decisiveness of divine action especially in terms of the doctrine of justification.

### **North American Methodism**

Maddox has not only reinterpreted John Wesley's theology by means of a gradualist, incrementalist methodology which leaves little room for the power and decisiveness of the instantaneous motif, but he has also applied this same methodology to the theology of North American Methodism in general and to the Holiness Movement in particular. For example, in his "Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons from North American Methodism," Maddox draws a distinction between an "affectional moral psychology" and an "intellectualist" one. The first psychology, which is characteristic of Wesley, identifies the will with the affections—affections which thrive in response "to our experience of God's gracious love for us." The second psychology, which is intellectualist, is supposedly descriptive not only of the Holiness Movement, but of nineteenth-century American Methodism as well. This intellectualist psychology

separates the will from the affections in favor of “rational control of the passions or affections.” Observe that in this second psychology the will is essentially identified with the power of rational self-determination. That is, self-governing reason supposedly brings about the great changes of the Christian life, even if it is aided in these changes by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever Maddox discerns that an author, past or present, has given significant attention to the instantaneous aspects of redemption, he immediately claims that author for his intellectualist psychology, the one supposedly so different from that of Wesley. Thus, the teachings of John Fletcher, Asa Mahan, and Phoebe Palmer are all subsumed under the intellectualist model by Maddox.<sup>35</sup> I do not believe this claim. To be sure, neither John Fletcher, Asa Mahan, Phoebe Palmer nor the earnest folk from the nineteenth-century American Holiness Movement ever became free from the *guilt*, *power*, and *being* of sin by living under their own will in the form of rational self-control, even if such control was empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is largely a scholarly concoction that bears little relation to the historical record. Indeed, Maddox’s “moral psychology” is simply another way of bringing his gradualist reading to bear on the interpretation of Wesley’s thought, subsequent Methodist theology, and the Holiness Movement as well.

To take just one example, the spiritual life of Phoebe Palmer does not, as is mistakenly supposed, support Maddox’s interpretive grid, but actually belies it. First of all, although Palmer is well known for her appreciation of Wesley’s instantaneousness motif, no doubt because of her perceptive understanding of the proper relation between faith and works, she is less known perhaps for her appreciation of the processive aspects of redemption, aspects which characterized her own spiritual journey. Thus, in terms of her own conversion experience Palmer could not even identify the specific time of this glorious transformation, though she was ever mindful of the process leading up to it as well as its ongoing significance. Of this dynamic Charles Edward White notes: “For the young

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<sup>35</sup>Randy L. Maddox, “Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons from North American Methodism,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 50, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 158 ff. At the beginning of this article, Maddox once again skews the discussion by immediately designating as “partisan” all those in the nineteenth century who maintained that entire sanctification could be entered into instantaneously. Cf. 151.

Phoebe the only disadvantage in growing up in such a devout home was that she never had a definite conversion experience. She had given her heart to Jesus at such an early age that she could never remember when she had done it.”<sup>36</sup>

Second, Palmer entered into the deeper realities of holiness not through rational superintendence of the tempers and affections of her heart, but through surrendering the control, the very management of her life to a God of holy love. Her way, in other words, was not through rational autonomy, but through self-surrender, not through self-directed discipline, but through a deep and abiding humility that invited God to be her all in all. Of the importance of humility and lowliness as conducive to spiritual growth, Palmer wrote:

The reason why many people do not get full salvation is, because they do not get down low enough. If they would only get down very low, the waves of salvation would roll over and over them! When I heard this, I resolved I would get down *low*. I did get down low—very low!<sup>37</sup>

Third, Palmer repeatedly emphasized in her writings that the highest reaches of grace are enjoyed by those who yield their hearts, mind, and will not to the direction of their own reason but to the gentle sway of the indwelling Christ. For example, in her book *Full Salvation* she maintained:

By a simple act of entire reliance on Christ, she became so fully united to Christ, that every secret spring of her being was set in motion, and brought into harmonious action with the Divine will. And who can tell what may be accomplished by the mighty inworkings of an indwelling Christ in this soul, now that all its vast machinery is in full and harmonious action? The secret of power is union with Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 2-3.

<sup>37</sup>Phoebe Palmer, *Full Salvation: Its Doctrine and Duties* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers, no date), 47.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 55. Palmer reveals that Christ is the principal agent in redemption, especially when she writes: “The moment you yield yourself up wholly to Him He will put His Spirit within you, and the things which you have felt you could not do will be the very things you will love to do; for Christ will work in you mightily to will and to do of His good pleasure.” Cf. 52.

Moreover, this Christological emphasis is maintained and developed by Palmer, rather than a supposed self-direction, as she notes in her writings that neither resolution nor determination nor even “the very act of entering into the bonds of an everlasting covenant,” are the causes of holiness. Accordingly, Palmer responded to some of her critics as follows:

It may be asked, And how did the process described in the preceding numbers eventuate in that disciple being brought into the holiest by the blood of Jesus? Did the resolution to be a Bible Christian—the determination to consecrate all to God by laying all upon the altar of sacrifice—or the act of entering into the bonds of an everlasting covenant to wholly the Lord’s—bring about this entrance into the new and living way? How could these purposes, however well intentioned, result in having the heart sprinkled from an evil conscience, and the body washed with pure water? Can aught but the blood of Christ do this?<sup>39</sup>

The experience of Phoebe Palmer, then, may be summarized in this way: “As her view of Christ increased, her view of herself decreased. Aware that only through Christ’s power had she come to this blessed experience, Phoebe lost her sense of her own importance.”<sup>40</sup>

In light of the preceding evidence—and much more could be cited—it is not a matter that Palmer’s own volition was assisted so that she could then engage in rational self-control and thereby manage her own spiritual and affectional life. On the contrary, Palmer submitted her *entire* will to God such that it was God’s will not her own that was the lodestar of her life. Indeed, rational self-control, even when invigorated by grace, leaves the believer very much at the center of one’s own life. But for Phoebe Palmer, it was God not she who was at the heart of her existence. Indeed,

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>40</sup>White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 19. Interestingly enough, Armstrong maintains that, though Palmer *knew* that the source of her own holiness was “direct communion with God at the heart of her faith,” she was evidently so embarrassed by all of this, growing up in a genteel culture, that in an “apologetic move,” she translated the affective, emotional nature of this source into a rational idiom. Here, in other words, Armstrong at least recognizes what Maddox is loathe to admit, though his postulation of an “apologetic move” can only suggest disingenuousness on the part of Palmer, a disingenuousness that, in my estimation, seems unwarranted.

how could it have been otherwise for a woman who was so preeminently holy, who had submitted her will in its fullness to the holy will of God, and who was at the helm of a movement that had transformed so many lives? This was not a rationalist nor intellectualist psychology, but a humble submission of the will to the ordering, the transformation of being, that a Holy God alone can bring.

### Summary and Conclusion

Randy Maddox's gradualistic reading of John Wesley's soteriology, as well his interpretation of North American Methodism, is evidenced by a number of elements: (1) the explication of justification and regeneration in the context of prevenient grace (rather than in the context of initially sanctifying grace, that grace which makes *holy*); (2) the monological, unnuanced, conception of the "faith of a servant" which in every instance is *assumed* to be justifying faith, despite significant evidence to the contrary; (3) the rejection of Wesley's hamartiological language of *guilt, power and being* and replacing it with *penalty, plague and presence* and then subtly shifting these terms soteriologically forward so that one element is now beyond the reach of practical Christian experience and believers are then left to struggle under the plague (dominion) of sin; (4) the rejection of the motif of "real Christianity" as one of the principal ways by which Wesley maintained his high soteriological standards in the face of his modulations in terms of Christian assurance; (5) the identification of entire sanctification with mature, adult Christian states, excluding young people and children from the highest graces of redemption; and (6) the failure to see that the "synergistic" flavor of Wesley's theology is actually a part of a larger conjunction which embraces divine, sovereign, gratuitous action. All of these elements have the unfortunate, cumulative, effect of lowering the high soteriological standards that John Wesley had maintained throughout his career (though not without modifications, of course) for what it means to be a Christian. Regrettably, these same elements may issue in a subtle and incipient antinomianism or perhaps undermine the theological wherewithal to articulate a clear and convincing doctrine of *conversion*, a doctrine that has played such an important role in the Wesleyan heritage.

Again, though the formal elements of religion such as its social dimensions as well as the employment of the means of grace are clearly

important,<sup>41</sup> as Maddox amply points out, they are simply not enough. Believers must not only have the form of religion, but also its power as Wesley clearly cautioned in his piece “A Word to a Protestant.” Moreover, young people, as well as adults who come to Christ late in life, may yet receive an abundance of grace and favor at the hands of the Most High in a relatively short period of time. And those sinners who suffer under the horrific bondages of sin, who have encountered evil, destructive powers far greater than themselves, do not have to wait for years upon years, incrementally receiving grace until they are finally delivered. On the contrary, they can be set at liberty today as St. Paul himself wrote: “Behold, now is “the acceptable time,” behold, now is “the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). To be sure, those afflicted by sin can enjoy a far greater victory and liberty than is affirmed by Maddox in his *Responsible Grace*, even freedom from the *guilt* and *power* of sin as the sons and daughters of God. God can and will deliver the captives with a mighty outstretched arm.

And finally, though Maddox has been repeatedly critical of the Holiness Movement and Phoebe Palmer in particular, it is ironic to note that at least this gifted and holy woman was at the helm of an actual *movement* through which so many people came to know the tremendous liberty of the gospel as well as its deeper graces. It is very doubtful, on the other hand, that Maddox’s reinterpretation of Wesley and the broader Methodist tradition, though artfully conceived and buttressed by all the formal elements of scholarship, will issue in an equal measure of grace, an equal measure of liberation.

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<sup>41</sup>My view affirms all the means of grace as Maddox does, as well as the conduciveness of group life (social religion) to holiness. The major difference between our interpretations, then, is that my view *includes* elements that Maddox, for the most part, neglects, especially the instantaneous elements of Wesley’s soteriology, the motif of “real Christianity,” as well as the gratuitous nature of divine grace. My reading is accurately described as “conjunctive.” It is not a matter of “less” but of “more.”

## **PRELUDE TO A DIALOGUE: A RESPONSE TO KENNETH COLLINS**

**by**

**Randy L. Maddox**

I am honored to be taking part in this collegial dialogue with Kenneth Collins over our respective approaches to interpreting John Wesley's soteriology. I consider it particularly fitting that our dialogue should be set in the annual meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society. It is a sign of the growing respect for and influence of the WTS that work by two long-time members should be at the center of current discussion in broader Wesley Studies circles.

The purpose of a community of scholars like the WTS is to nurture new insights and approaches, and to foster dialogue over the relative adequacy of resulting proposals. While proponents may take lead roles in such dialogue, the crucial discerning role is played by the scholarly community as a whole. In its probing, the community helps individual scholars to uncover presuppositions, clarify ambiguities, recognize limitations, and fine-tune proposals. Out of such work comes the best hope for progress toward scholarly consensus on the topics under consideration. I know that I have benefited greatly from the questions and challenges that many of posed to my proposals concerning Wesley's characteristic theological convictions and concern.

No one has been more faithful in offering my work such engagement than Kenneth Collins, and none have developed alternative proposals that are as comprehensive and thoroughly-researched. Ken's numerous publications have rightly earned him a reputation as a leading interpreter of

Wesley's soteriology. Ken and I have dialogued over differences of interpretation on individual issues in the past, and I think we made some progress in understanding one another better. The best example is the question of how Wesley understood the "faith of a servant" in his later years. Ken raised questions about my suggestion that there was evidence that the later Wesley saw the "faith of a servant" as saving faith. In the process of our dialogue we both admitted that the evidence is ambiguous. Ken's concern was to insist that not all of the later Wesley's references to "faith of a servant" are positive, a point that he takes to suggest that the few positive references relate to exceptional situations.<sup>1</sup> My concern was to insist that not all of the references were negative (as they had been earlier), a change that I take to apply more broadly than to just a few exceptional cases.<sup>2</sup> We agree that for the later Wesley not every one with the "faith of a servant" was lost, nor was everyone with such faith necessarily saved. While we continue to differ on the specific nuance of the "faith of a servant," we agree on the important point that Wesley always encouraged those with this faith to keep seeking the deeper assurance that characterizes the "faith of a son."

### **A Basic Difference in Approaches: "Conjunctive" vs. "Perspectival"**

As I understand it, the goal of this dialogue is broader than consideration of such individual matters. Ken and I have been invited to reflect on each other's overall approach to interpreting Wesley, giving particular attention to our sense of the most basic way in which one approach differs from the other. I am aided in my half of this task by Ken's articulate conclusion to his recent book on Wesley's soteriology.<sup>3</sup> He properly stresses how his presentation moves beyond the many predecessors that have highlighted Wesley's similarities to one or another theological tradition. Instead, Ken strives to demonstrate that Wesley's soteriology is truly "conjunctive" in nature, presenting a "well-crafted and intentional synthesis" of the many different emphases found in Scripture, and thus within the family of Christian traditions. This is an ambitious goal, and one with which I am deeply sympathetic. My work focuses as well on highlighting

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 141.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, Abingdon Press, 1994), 127, 155.

<sup>3</sup>Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 205-7.

how Wesley weaves together emphases that are too often isolated or counterposed in Christian debate. But as I have pursued Wesley's distinctive interweaving of these emphases I have come to doubt that his work is best captured by the model of an ideally balanced conjunction of divergent elements.

The foundational assumption of a model of conjunction is that the elements being joined do not include fundamental options that either negate or subsume their alternatives. Items of difference are viewed instead as counter-balancing poles of a continuum between which one can gravitate to an ideally-balanced synthesis. This assumption surely fits the focal elements in some classical Christian debates, but it does not fit universally. The reason for this is that in many classical debates the key issue is not whether contending elements should be interrelated, but a disagreement over which element should be considered most *fundamental*—providing the over arching emphasis that subsumes the important truths of the other elements into its larger pattern.

If I understand Ken rightly, he considers the focus of the latter debates to be unfortunate, inevitably leading to less than adequate conjunctions of Christian truth. I believe the focus of these debates is instead natural, and indeed commendable. It reflects the deeply human nature of theological reflection. As meaning-seeking beings we inevitably desire some orienting coherence among our various convictions. As finite and socially-located beings, our sense of this coherence concerning divine truths will finally be perspectival in nature. We can—and *should*—continually test and enrich our perspective by ongoing dialogue with others, but we cannot rise above all perspectives to some ideal conjunctive synthesis.

I could no doubt stop here and we could dialogue just about theoretical models of human theological reflection, but that is not the focal purpose at hand. Besides, such dialogues carried on in the abstract usually prove intractable. Test cases are more helpful, and our respective readings of Wesley offer such a test case. While Ken has tried to demonstrate that Wesley's soteriology offers a *conjunctive* synthesis of the range of Christian divergences, I have argued that it embodies a more *perspectival* interweaving.

To develop this point a bit, I contend that some of the most important differences between Eastern and Western Christian soteriology are perspectival in nature. They are not disagreements about affirming one element of Christian truth or another, but about which elements are most

fundamental; that is, which provide the thematic background against which the other elements add their distinctive accents. In *Responsible Grace* I offer a reading of Wesley as one who: (1) was raised in the ecumenical richness and ambiguity of eighteenth-century Anglicanism; (2) gravitated toward the Eastern emphases mediated through Anglicanism during his Oxford years, making them most foundational to his soteriology; (3) developed a heightened appreciation for Western distinctives in the events surrounding 1738; (4) moved increasingly over the next decades to integrate these Western distinctives into his foundational Eastern commitments; (5) repeatedly found it difficult to explain this integrated position in Western terms to his Western opponents; and (6) was not always successful in working out the integration himself. In this last regard, I sometimes propose refinements of Wesley's statements, suggest further applications of his principles, and point to directions in which Wesley's heirs might move in fleshing out his "orienting concern."

Obviously there is much here that can be the subject of debate. Even those who agree with my overall interpretive approach can question my proposed refinements, applications, and the like. At a more general level, those who agree that interpreters of Wesley must finally cast either the characteristically Eastern or Western elements of his theological convictions as most foundational to his overall theology can debate my option for the Eastern. And at the most general level, we can debate whether such a choice is either necessary or desirable. Whatever our other disagreements, where Ken and I appear to disagree most fundamentally is at this level. In championing Wesley's theology as a conjunctive synthesis, he charges that giving primacy in Wesley's theology to the emphases of one theological tradition over another (as I have done) inevitably distorts it.<sup>4</sup>

Ken's charge will be compelling precisely to the degree that he is successful in offering a truly even-handed conjunctive reading of Wesley. For if I am right about the perspectival nature of some of the central Christian debates concerning soteriology, then not only did Wesley have to opt at points for either a foundationally Eastern or Western perspective, but interpreters of his theology are faced with the same choice. Finally, they must make either the Western emphases in Wesley's theology most fundamental (working Eastern emphases into this larger pattern) or the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 206-7.

Eastern emphases most fundamental (working Western emphases into this larger pattern).

### The “Western” Perspective of Collins’ Reading of Wesley

This leads to my basic observation. What Kenneth Collins actually provides in his recent work is the most nuanced reading yet of Wesley from a foundationally Western perspective. He is particularly adept at showing the inadequacy of one-sidedly “Protestant” or “Catholic” readings of Wesley within this larger Western orientation. But it appears to me that he is less even-handed with more characteristically Eastern emphases, tending to subsume them (as I have argued is natural, one way or the other) within the preferred Western commitments. Since this evaluation dissents from Ken’s stated goal, I will devote my remaining comments to some examples that I believe point out the Western orientation of Ken’s reading of Wesley.

I will not take the time to repeat here the full sketches I offer in *Responsible Grace* of the different emphases concerning human nature, the fundamental human problem, and the central focus of salvation that came to characterize dominant voices in Eastern and Western Christianity.<sup>5</sup> I capsulized these differences there by talking of the West’s “juridical” emphasis in comparison with the East’s “therapeutic” emphasis. Like all short labels, these two have their limitations. What I intended them to convey is that Western Christianity has tended to make the soteriological issues of guilt and forgiveness foundational to all others, while Eastern Christianity has tended to make the issues of spiritual impairment and healing most foundational. But this is a matter of relative emphasis, not of exclusive treatment. Both sets of issues are biblical, and both branches of the church have classically fit the other set within the larger context of its focal emphasis.

This means that the distinction between “Western” and “Eastern” soteriology is not the simple equivalent of the distinction between justification and sanctification. The mainstream of both branches affirm both of these dimensions of salvation. Their difference lays not in the inclusion or exclusion of any dimension of soteriology, but in what serves as the “defining” dimension, casting other items in terms of its concerns and overtones. For the West this defining dimension has been justification,

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<sup>5</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 65-7, 73-7, 82-4, 86, 141-3.

bringing a juridical overtone to the various aspects of soteriology; for the East it has been sanctification, bringing a therapeutic overtone to the same.

### **Example of Cause or Rationale for Depravity**

To see how this plays out, take the question of human depravity after the Fall. Both Christian branches normatively affirm this depravity. Moreover, debates about the extent of human depravity are less centered between branches and more within the Western branch. Where the branches do differ is in their sense of the overall cause or rationale for depravity—the West viewing it more as our deserved *punishment* for the unmitigated guilt of the Original Sin, the East viewing it more as an inevitable debilitating *consequence* of our foolish and arrogant withdrawal from an enlivening relationship with God. The impact of this difference is that the East can hardly conceive that we could restore relationship with God without this counteracting significantly our spiritual debilitation, while the West has had to contend through its history with marginal voices that insist justification does little to offset our continuing sentence of depravity (“Christians are not different, just forgiven”).

How does this relate to Wesley, and our respective readings of Wesley? Both Ken and I note that Wesley’s suggestions about the cause of depravity underwent fluctuation. I have highlighted how his concern manifest in these fluctuations parallels that of the Eastern tradition, and argue that the late Wesley settled upon a stance closer to the Eastern therapeutic model than to Western juridical emphases.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Ken’s discussion of this topic includes no mention of the alternative Eastern approach. He emphasizes solely Wesley’s similarities to the Western (Augustinian) model, then naturally—and quite properly—has to stress how Wesley protected against the potential antinomian distortions of this model.<sup>7</sup> This seems to me to be less a “conjunctive” reading than a very nuanced placing of Wesley within the mainstream of Western concerns.

### **Example of the Basic Meaning of “Grace”**

If distinct emphases concerning the cause and rationale of our fundamental human problem (depravity) are one expression of the perspectival

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 78-81

<sup>7</sup>See Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 32-4.

differences of Eastern and Western Christian soteriology, another is found in their distinct emphases about God's grace as the fundamental solution to this problem.

A primary focus on the issue of guilt has inclined the Western church to define grace most eminently as the *unmerited favor* of God manifest in bestowing pardon for our sin (and for many, in imputing an extrinsic holiness that fits us for glory). With this starting point, the West has continually had to address the pastoral danger of emphasizing the unmerited nature of our pardon and/or the extrinsic nature of our imputed holiness in such a fashion as to undercut any role for Christian obedience. The main way of protecting against this has been to insist that God also graciously infuses some "power" for holy living in pardoned believers. The exact nature and extent of this power has been subject to much debate. More importantly, the emphasis on power for holy living (or observing the law in Christian life) has repeatedly provoked among Western Christians fears about reverting to works righteousness rather than relying on "grace alone." The most sophisticated resolution of this fear is to call for counterbalancing grace as unmerited favor with grace as power (often seen as a balancing of Protestant and Roman Catholic emphases).

While sympathetic with the goals of this resolution, Eastern Christians find its polar logic puzzling. Their primary focus on the issue of the spiritual debility resulting from our separation from God has inclined them to define grace most eminently as the *healing energy* of God's restored presence in our lives. They fully agree that God's pardoning initiative in restoring this presence is wholly undeserved, but they concentrate attention on the inherent purpose of grace to awaken and nurture loving response. Most importantly, they see no reason to cast this empowering effect over against the "gratuitous" nature of grace. Quite the contrary—the more we are transformed by participating in God's healing presence, the more deeply we realize how weak and undeserving we are in our own right.

Wesley repeatedly conjoins affirmations of grace as unmerited mercy with insistence that grace is also power for holy living.<sup>8</sup> Ken rightly stresses this and presents it as an example of Wesley balancing in a nuanced fashion Protestant and broadly Catholic (Greek and Roman [his

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<sup>8</sup>The best example is Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Spirit," §§15-16, *Works*, 1:309-10.

addition]) emphases.<sup>9</sup> But I would suggest that his model of Wesley's "balance" remains perceptively Western. To begin with, he operates within the Western assumption of a polar relationship between grace as unmerited favor and grace as power, framing his arguments in terms of the need to bring one or the other pole back into the picture. And his most passionate arguments are characteristically devoted to the danger that discussions of empowering works of grace will fail to keep focal the notion of grace as the unmerited favor of God, rather than to the polar alternative danger.<sup>10</sup> In other words, when pushed, he subtly privileges the notion of grace as "unmerited favor" over that of grace as "healing energy."

This in no way questions Ken's stated desire to truly integrate these two (or show that Wesley does so). But it may raise the question of why this proves so difficult. Eastern theologians have long suggested that what actually undermines this desirable goal in Western soteriology is the broad Western tendency to view grace as some created "thing" God bestows rather than as God's very "presence" shared with us. All created gifts will inevitably be partial, while God's restored presence can have truly holistic affect on our lives. Thus, from an Eastern perspective the most crucial question of all about grace is whether it is a "created" or "uncreated" reality. I have argued that Wesley clearly joins the East in seeing grace as fundamentally God's presence restored in the Holy Spirit, not some "thing" given to us, and that this is foundational to Wesley's holistic understanding of salvation.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Ken never directly engages the debate between the East and West on this issue. By default, however, his discussion retains the "created grace" overtones of the Western Augustinian tradition, even though I see hints of his uncomfortableness with this.

### **Example of Assumptions About Divine/Human Cooperation**

Another place where the perspectival differences of Eastern and Western Christian soteriology shine through is in their respective levels of comfort with emphasizing human cooperation with divine grace in salvation. It is well known that Eastern Christianity has never been comfortable with a model of unilateral salvation as found in some Western traditions that affirm unconditional election/reprobation. Most in the West have

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<sup>9</sup>Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 19-20.

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Kenneth J. Collins, "The New Birth: John Wesley's Doctrine," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32.1 (1997): 53-68, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup>Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 86, 119-22.

chafed at these models as well, insisting on some role for requisite human cooperation in the process of salvation. The way in which the resulting Western debates have been framed is telling. The concern is always raised that stress on a requisite role for human cooperation in salvation leads to “works-righteousness,” or the human attempt to “merit” justification. There are two things to note here, both flowing out of the juridical perspective of the West. First, it is assumed that the decisive soteriological question is, “Why are we forgiven?” Second, it is assumed that the necessary condition for forgiveness being gratuitous is the absence of all human agency at some crucial point (i.e., divine and human agency are finally cast in polar relation, just as were grace/mercy and grace/power). The strength of these assumptions is such that even those Western traditions (like the Arminian) which stress most the role of human cooperation in salvation take for granted that there must be at least a brief initial moment of Divine unilateral action to preserve the gratuity of salvation.

Once again, the Eastern branch of the Christian family has tended to be puzzled by this way of putting the issues. Their therapeutic perspective casts the issues in a very different light. For them the most decisive soteriological question is, “How are we healed?” In this realm the suggestion that expectation of our continual cooperation with the Great Physician’s ministrations might reflect a lack of trust in the gratuity of salvation makes little sense. Rather, any lack of cooperation is more likely to be censured as revealing ingratitude for the indispensable aid the Physician is freely offering. The issue at stake in our cooperation is not whether we can “merit” what we have received, but whether we will live faithfully in the life-giving regimen designed by our Physician—or neglect it to the detriment of our spiritual health.

In terms of these issues, Kenneth Collins reads Wesley as the epitome of the nuanced Western position. While he highlights and defends Wesley’s “synergism,” he consistently stresses that Wesley also affirmed God’s unilateral action at the decisive moments in the *via salutis* on the specific grounds that this insured salvation was a “pure gift.”<sup>12</sup> I concur entirely with Ken on this point about what Wesley actually says. But, while Ken heartily endorses Wesley’s affirmation, this is one of those places where I would suggest that Wesley was retaining a Western assumption that is not essential to his more characteristic Eastern perspec-

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<sup>12</sup>See esp. Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 44, 73, 154.

tive. Like many in the Eastern tradition, it is not clear to me why unilateral action by God is necessarily more expressive of the “prevenience” of grace to all human response (which is what Wesley wants to maintain) than is ongoing cooperant interaction between God and humanity.<sup>13</sup> In either case we can surely say with Wesley that we are able to “put to work” only what God is already “working” within us.

Let me develop this point in terms of one of the practical embodiments of this theoretical issue: the relative valuation given to instantaneous and more gradual transitions in Christian life. The connection between these two issues is the common (but debatable) assumption that divine unilateral action must be instantaneous—as a necessary correlate of God’s omnipotence and freedom from temporality. On this assumption, it is typically considered crucial from the Western perspective to insist that at least some transitions in Christian life are *theologically* instantaneous (because gratuitous) whether they are experienced that way psychologically or not. There has also been some tendency to privilege psychological models that highlight instantaneous transitions. With its refusal to privilege unilateral action as the sole (or even prime) expression of God’s prevenience, it is logical that the Eastern perspective would also question the assumption that instantaneous transitions are *theologically necessary* in Christian life. But they are not logically impelled to reject the theological possibility or demean psychological experiences of instantaneous transitions, nor do they typically do so. Their insistence is that *all* of God’s salvific work is cooperant—whatever form it might take.

It is not hard to document that Wesley embraced the standard Western assumption that instantaneous transitions are the necessary correlate of the gratuitous nature of salvation.<sup>14</sup> But in debate over these issues he also conceded that he was not so much defending a psychological model of these transitions as a theological evaluation of them.<sup>15</sup> Building on this point, I argued that the mature Wesley was moving toward a more funda-

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<sup>13</sup>Consider the analogy of the Cosmological Argument for God’s existence, where it has long been recognized throughout the church that God’s role as “First Cause” is more an ontological claim about God’s ongoing relation to all events than a temporal claim about God’s relation to the origination of the universe.

<sup>14</sup>The clearest examples are in the *NT Notes* comment on Acts 5:31; Letter to Charles Wesley (27 Jan. 1767), *Letters* (Telford), 5:39; and Letter to Ann Loxdale (12 July 1782), *Letters* (Telford), 7:129.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §I.5, *Works*, 11:107.

mentally Eastern view of instantaneous transitions—where they are honored but not viewed as the sole or mandatory expression of God’s gracious prevenient work in our lives.<sup>16</sup> At least implicitly, I also suggested that Wesley’s heirs should consider continuing to move in this direction. Ken has vigorously critiqued this reading of Wesley and its implied suggestion.<sup>17</sup> I fully understand his concerns. They are precisely the right concerns to raise from a nuanced, but still fundamentally Western perspective.

### Example of Definitions of Salvation

Let me touch briefly on just one more example. What difference do the West-East alternative perspectives make on how salvation itself is understood? Within their juridical perspective, Western Christians make justification the defining “core” of salvation. As one result they typically are very concerned to maintain precise dividing lines between anything that might precede the moment of justification (as not yet “saving”) and anything that follows it (as not “meriting” justification). Within their therapeutic perspective Eastern Christians make the recovery of health the defining “core” of salvation. By this they intend most immediately the recovery of spiritual health (sanctification or deification), but they insist that God also works salvifically to affect every dimension of human life to some degree in our present circumstances. Thus, they are very willing to talk about degrees of “salvation” which precede (and make possible) one’s responsive trust in God’s offered pardon—a response that is the condition of one’s ultimate or eschatological “salvation.”<sup>18</sup>

It was precisely Wesley’s characteristic definitions of salvation that first suggested to me his foundationally Eastern perspective. To quote what is perhaps the most articulate example:

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 153-4.

<sup>17</sup>See esp. Kenneth J. Collins, “Real Christianity as the Integrating Theme in Wesley’s Soteriology: The Critique of a Modern Myth,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 51 (1996): 15-43, p. 28; “The New Birth,” 63 n35, & 64-7; and *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 99, 228 n160, & 232 n89.

<sup>18</sup>Let me note in this regard that, when I proposed that Wesley treated Prevenient Grace as the most nascent degree of regeneration or salvation (*Responsible Grace*, 159-60), I was working within this holistic conception of salvation. The salvific affect of Prevenient Grace makes possible but in no way guarantees or precludes the necessity of embracing God’s offered pardon and the assurance this brings of eschatological salvation. Cf. Collins, “New Birth,” 27; and *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 40, 237 n79.

By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.<sup>19</sup>

Here it seems obvious that Wesley makes healing the defining “core” of salvation and views the role of justification precisely from this vantage point. Yet Ken argues at some length that Wesley’s vantage point for viewing the whole scope of salvation is instead justification.<sup>20</sup> While he goes on to protect carefully an essential place for sanctification, the overall effect seems less a “balance” than a casting of Wesley’s therapeutic emphases within a foundationally Western perspective.

## Conclusion

Hopefully these are enough examples to suggest why I believe that what Ken actually provides in his recent work is a reading of Wesley from a foundationally Western perspective. As I said earlier, it is the most nuanced such reading yet. And it is clearly a very plausible reading. But finally I do not find it as adequate as a reading that makes the Eastern elements of Wesley’s soteriology most fundamental. Of course, my opinion is of limited value in itself. This is an issue for corporate discernment, and I will be content if I have helped stimulate yet further dialogue in the service of this discernment.

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<sup>19</sup>*Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §3, *Works* 11:106.

<sup>20</sup>See esp. Collins, *Scripture Way of Salvation*, 108-9.

# **“CANDIDATES FOR HEAVEN”: WESLEYAN RESOURCES FOR A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS**

**by**

**Philip R. Meadows**

In Mark 9:38-39 we read of a man who, although not a follower of Jesus, was nevertheless casting out demons in Jesus' name. The response of the disciples was expected, but that of Jesus was not. Instead of forbidding the man to do this thing, Jesus actually rebukes his disciples for trying to prevent him. In his sermon on “A Caution Against Bigotry,” John Wesley enlarges this way on the attitude of Jesus:

Take care, first, that you do not convict yourself of bigotry by your unreadiness to believe that any man does cast out devils who differs from you. . . . Yea, if it could be supposed that I should see a Jew, a deist, or a Turk doing the same, were I to forbid him either directly or indirectly I should be no better than a bigot still. O stand clear of this. But be not content with not forbidding any that casts out devils. 'Tis well we go thus far; but do not stop here. If you will avoid all bigotry, go on. In every instance of this kind, whatever the instrument may be, acknowledge the finger of God. And not only acknowledge but rejoice in his work, and praise his name with thanksgiving. Encourage whomsoever God is pleased to employ, to give himself wholly up thereto. Speak well of him wheresoever you are; defend his character and his mission. Enlarge as far as you can his sphere of action. Show him all kindness in word and

deed. And cease not to cry to God in his behalf, that he may save both himself and them that hear him.<sup>1</sup>

There is something hospitable, open, and inclusive to be found in the theology of John Wesley, something that can make him optimistic about the activity of God in and through non-Christian people. In this passage he piles up exhortations to “acknowledge,” “rejoice,” “encourage,” “defend,” and even “enlarge” the mission of a “Jew, a deist, or a Turk.”

In attempting to recover Wesley’s openness to those outside the Christian tradition, however, it is not to be forgotten that he could be harsh and condemnatory toward the beliefs and practices of other religions. In this, he was a man of his time, without the wealth of real encounter, experience, and scholarly understanding that we have available today.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there is consistency in Wesley’s judgement that took him beyond such negative frames of reference. On the one hand, he was prepared to affirm all those ways of life in and through which he perceived the grace of God at work, whether Christian or not. On the other hand, he criticised all that he perceived to be contrary to the test of holiness, or love for God and neighbour, whether Christian or not.

I shall explore here some of the theological resources that Wesley offers for responding to religious pluralism. My approach is not to take isolated proof texts, but to identify what patterns of thought and modes of theological discourse provide the context for his open and inclusivist stance toward non-Christians.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, I hope to outline some possi-

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Baker, ed., *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), hereafter *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 38, “A Caution Against Bigotry,” IV.2-5.

<sup>2</sup>See David Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup>A number of scholars have recently studied Wesley’s inclusive attitudes to people of other religions. See, for example, Randy Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27 (1992), 7f and *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 33f; John Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 145f.; Frank Whaling, “John Wesley’s Premonitions of Inter-Faith Discourse,” and other essays in Tim Macquibban (ed), *Pure, Universal Love: Reflections on the Wesley’s and Inter-Faith Dialogue* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1995); Philip Meadows, “Wesleyan Theology for a World Context” and Elizabeth Harris, “Wesleyan Witness in an Interreligious Context” in Philip R. Meadows (ed), *Windows on Wesley: Wesleyan*

ble trajectories for constructing an authentically Wesleyan theology of religions.<sup>4</sup>

## Human Nature and Prevenient Grace

The place to begin reflecting on a theology of religions is with Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, which represents the pivotal concept in his idea of salvation and is deeply significant in its implications for understanding what it means to be human. The Augustinian tradition, coming down to us through the Reformers, describes human nature in terms of total depravity or the utter inability to work out one's own salvation unaided. Wesley accepts this view of human nature, but qualifies his position with the following remarkable statement:

There is no man that is in a state of mere nature . . . that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called "natural conscience." But

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*Theology in Today's World* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997), chapter 3; Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 215f. From the perspective of biblical studies, see Dean Flemming, "Foundations for Responding to Religious Pluralism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 31:1 (1996), 51f. Of these, only John Cobb has made some tentative suggestions for the framing of a coherent Wesleyan approach to religious pluralism, moving beyond re-statements of Wesley's own thought. The overwhelming tendency in such studies, however, is to make selective readings of the Wesley material, avoiding both the complexity and missing the subtle nuances of meaning that condition his evaluation of religious life as a whole, both Christian and non-Christian. This essay aims to locate the discussion in the broader context of Wesley's theological discourse on the nature of religion.

<sup>4</sup>Randy Maddox identifies a development over time in Wesley's *openness* to the possibility of gracious universal revelation (or light) among non-Christians, and the possibilities it affords for inviting a saving response (Maddox, "Wesley"). Although this essay draws primarily upon the mature reflections of Wesley on the religious responses of non-Christians (1780s and 1790s), his positive valuations of "heathen morality," his inclusion of all humankind in the one covenant of grace, and his unwillingness to condemn those who follow the dictates of their God-given conscience are themes which emerge as early as the 1740s and 1750s (note, for instance, Sermons 2, 6, 12, and 35). One should not, however, read this increasing *openness* in Wesley's thought as an increasing *optimism* of salvation. Wesley is consistent in his view that the non-Christian world is a place of greater darkness than light. On the other hand, neither should one read Wesley as being pessimistic. Openness is about neither optimism nor pessimism, but the possibilities of God's universal providence, grace, and mercy. It is being open to others through being open to the mystery of God's relationship with all of humankind.

this is not natural; it is more properly termed “preventing grace.”<sup>5</sup>

So, no human being actually occupies the limiting condition of total depravity, for prevenient grace is at work in all people through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. “No man living is without some preventing grace; and every degree of grace is a degree of life.”<sup>6</sup> It is through this “gracing” of human nature that the ability to discern between good and evil is incipiently restored, manifest in the form of “conscience” as that God-given capacity for critical self-reflection. Human beings who by nature are enslaved to their sinful dispositions are thus set free by grace, at least in a limited way, to *discern* and *do* what is good and godly.<sup>7</sup> Prevenient grace is to be understood as the transforming presence of the Spirit who enables all human beings to take responsibility for their own salvation.

We must understand what it means to be human, therefore, from two mutually conditioning perspectives. With respect to nature, human beings are spiritually inert, in bondage to sin, and unable to act rightly or salvifically. With respect to grace, the existence of conscience, liberty, and moral agency are all expressions of the Spirit’s ameliorating presence. Human beings cannot be reduced to *mere* nature.<sup>8</sup> So the doctrine of prevenient grace has the effect of immediately including all people in God’s plan of salvation, not as those standing outside and waiting to get in, but already indwelt by the transforming presence of the Spirit, simply by virtue of being human.

### Providential Dispensations of Grace

John Fletcher found that the universality of prevenient grace fit well with a “dispensationalist” approach to God’s grace in human history, an

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<sup>5</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” III.4.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958-59), hereafter *WJW*, 12:453, *Letter to John Mason* (21 November 1776).

<sup>7</sup>It is in this context that Wesley came to reject the common idea that good works prior to justification were but “splendid sins.” On the contrary, they can be thought to have saving significance on the basis that they are responses to prevenient grace.

<sup>8</sup>John Cobb has helpfully argued that, for Wesley, prevenient grace “is the life of God within human beings. That means that concrete human beings are constituted in part by the presence of God within them. The relationship to God is constitutive of out being” (*Grace and Responsibility*, 40).

analysis which Wesley himself explicitly adopts and develops.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, all people fall under a dispensation, distinguished by the degree of “light” or saving grace that God gives to each. A small degree of light is given to those under the “heathen” dispensation; a much greater degree of light is given to the Jewish nation; and the clearest light of all is given to those under the Christian dispensation.<sup>10</sup>

Fletcher uses the parable of the talents as scriptural support for this idea.<sup>11</sup> So, he interprets the different number of talents given to each servant as representing the different degrees of light or grace given in each dispensation. The analogy brings out two important considerations. First, it is not the degree of grace given, but what is done with it that counts. Second, God’s equity and justice lies in the general expectation that all are required to live up to the degree of light or grace which has been given, which will mean different things for Christian and non-Christian. So, Fletcher claims that “our salvation or damnation turns upon the good or bad use which we make of the manifold grace of God!”<sup>12</sup> In this regard, however, the criterion for judgement is the same for both Christian and non-Christian alike.

The idea of divine dispensations describes both the *historical unfolding* of divine self-revelation to the world and the *present variety* of God’s providential dealings with humankind. Objectively speaking, God is universally revealed to all humankind through creation, but with greater particularity through the Mosaic Law, and finally and most fully through the person of Jesus Christ. Subjectively speaking, the idea of living up to the light that one has takes its meaning from the operation of prevenient grace in human conscience and the divinely enabled response of faith, manifest in godly living. So, Wesley affirms that

. . . some great truths, as the being and attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, were known, in some

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<sup>9</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 106, “On Faith,” intro. 2-3; John Fletcher, “Third Check to Antinomianism,” in *The Whole Works of the Rev John Fletcher*, volume 1 (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1835), 75f.

<sup>10</sup>Wesley and Fletcher typically use the term “heathen” to denote all those who fall outside the Judeo-Christian traditions, although Wesley does frequently identify “Mahometans” (i.e., Islam) as a distinct category. This is a reflection of current scholarship which was largely ignorant of other religious traditions, such as Hindus and Buddhists, rather than deliberately lumping them together. See Maddox, “Wesley,” 10f.

<sup>11</sup>John Fletcher, “Third Check,” 80.

<sup>12</sup>John Fletcher, “Third Check,” 81.

measure, to the heathen world. The traces of them are to be found in all nations: So that, in some sense, it may be said to every child of man, “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; even to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” With this truth he has, in some measure, “enlightened every one that cometh into the world.”<sup>13</sup>

Wesley’s emphasis on divine revelation is grounded in the providential presence and activity of the Spirit *in all creation* and *in all human beings*, to flourish and to save. With respect to general revelation, God can only be known *through* creation because the Spirit is *in* creation; and God can only be known *by* human beings because the Spirit is at work *in* human beings. Similarly, the power of the Scriptures to reveal God depends on one’s reading being illumined by the same Spirit that inspired the original writing.<sup>14</sup>

**1. The Nature of Saving Faith.** In his sermon “On Faith,” Wesley defines faith as both the gift and response of grace. It is most adequately defined as a “divine conviction and evidence of things not seen.”<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, it represents the revealing light and perceptible presence of the Spirit (in the world and in the soul), bearing witness to divine reality. On the other hand, it involves an assent of both heart and life to this divine revelation, a responsiveness to the Spirit’s directing-transforming presence. Wesley also invites us to consider such faith as a dynamic reality which exists as different species, and in different degrees, according to God’s providential dispensations of grace. In a letter to Mr Theophilus Lessey, he says:

To believe the being and attributes of God, is the faith of a Heathen. To believe the Old Testament, and trust in Him that was to come, was the faith of a Jew. To believe Christ gave himself for me is the faith of a Christian. . . . When we urge any to believe, we mean, “Accept that faith which God is now ready to give.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 85, *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, para.1.

<sup>14</sup>I explore some of these ideas more fully in “Wesleyan Theology for a World Context,” in Philip R. Meadows, *Windows on Wesley*, chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 106, “On Faith,” para. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 13:136, *Letter to Mr. Theophilus Lessey*.

The faith of a heathen, then, is in the being and attributes of God, made known without the special revelation to be found in the Scriptures. Wesley gives content to such faith as a belief that “there is a God,” and that God is gracious and just and, consequently, “a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”<sup>17</sup>

In the sermon “On Faith,” however, Wesley’s guiding pastoral-evangelical concern was to engender a shift in his hearers from the prevailing *formalised* religion of the Anglican Church to a *transforming* personal and experimental relationship with God. This shift represents a development in faith from that based on “fearing God,” which issues in a works piety, to that based on the indwelling witness of the Spirit which causes one to cry out “Abba!, Father!” in filial love and devotion. The former type of Christian Wesley characterises as having the faith of a *servant*, and the latter as having the faith of a *son* or child of God. He goes on to claim, however, that “all the sorts of faith which we can conceive are reducible to one or other of the preceding,”<sup>18</sup> which implies that the faith of a heathen (so described) is equivalent to the faith of a servant.

The crucial move that Wesley makes in this sermon, taking as his basic premise the scriptural axiom found in the story of Cornelius (Acts 10:34-35), is to point out that even one “who feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him.”<sup>19</sup> In his *Notes on the New Testament*, Wesley restates this by claiming that “he who first reverences God. . .and, secondly, from this awful regard to Him, not only avoids evil, but endeavours, according to the best light he has, to do all things well is accepted of him.”<sup>20</sup>

But what is the faith which is properly saving; which brings eternal salvation to all those that keep it to the end? It is such a divine conviction of God, and the things of God, as, even in its infant state, enables every one that possess it to “fear God and work righteousness.” And whosoever, in every nation, believes thus far, the Apostle declares, is “accepted of him.” He actu-

<sup>17</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 74, “Of the Church,” para. 11. See also, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 1, “Salvation by Faith,” I.1; *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 54, “On Eternity,” para. 17.

<sup>18</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 106, “On Faith,” I.13.

<sup>19</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 106, “On Faith,” I.11.

<sup>20</sup>John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 434-435: Acts 10:34-35.

ally is, at that very moment, in a state of acceptance. But he is at present only a servant of God, not properly a son. Meantime, let it be well observed, that “the wrath of God” no longer “abideth on him.”<sup>21</sup>

The implication of these statements is that the faith of a servant, which we noted includes the genuine faith of non-Christians, can be a finally saving faith insofar as it involves the formation of righteous or godly living. Likewise, Fletcher points out that

all men, the chief of sinners not excepted, can through preventing grace, cease to do evil, learn to do well, and use those means which will infallibly end in the repentance and faith peculiar to the dispensation they are under, whether it be that of Heathens, Jews, or Christians.<sup>22</sup>

Here Fletcher takes the theologically consistent step of assigning particular forms of both repentance and faith to non-Christians, clearly affirming the inescapable conclusion that divine grace can only be accessed through the available means—which must be found in and through their own dispensational context. Fletcher puts it this way: “God’s purpose is, that all men should have sufficient grace to believe according to their dispensation; that ‘he who believeth shall be saved.’”<sup>23</sup> He consistently asserted that the theological pessimism which considers the bulk of humankind to be reprobates on their way to damnation must be overthrown by an optimism of grace which makes all people “candidates for heaven.” Indeed, he considers this universal saving potential to exemplify the perfection of divine justice and salvation. He says:

. . . the moment man is considered as a candidate for heaven, a probationer for a blissful immortality; the moment you allow him what free grace bestows upon him, that is, a day of salvation, with a talent of living light, and rectified free agency, to enable him to work for life faithfully promised, as well as from life freely imparted; the moment, I say, you allow this, all the divine perfections shine with unsullied lustre. . . .<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 106, “On Faith,” I.10.

<sup>22</sup>Fletcher, “Third Check,” 80.

<sup>23</sup>Fletcher, “Third Check,” 85.

<sup>24</sup>Fletcher, “Third Check,” 85.

**2. The One Covenant of Grace.** This Wesleyan dispensationalism, however, is not to be confused with those modern forms, rooted in Luther's theology, which interpret such covenanting initiatives as radically discontinuous, and force a dualism between law/works and gospel/grace.<sup>25</sup> Wesley makes it quite plain that all God's saving activities represent an unfolding of the *one* covenant of grace made with all humankind, and what is revealed *historically* is also true *concurrently*.

Wesley does say that Adam, before the fall, was under a covenant of works, "requiring perfect universal obedience, as the one condition of acceptance; and left no place for pardon, upon the very least transgression." He continues, however, to make the point that

. . . no man else was ever under this [covenant of works], neither Jew nor Gentile; neither before Christ nor since. All his sons were and are under the covenant of grace. The manner of their acceptance is this: The free grace of God, through the merits of Christ, gives pardon to them that believe; that believe with such faith as, working by love, produces all obedience and holiness.<sup>26</sup>

Or again, "it is the covenant of grace," says Wesley, "which God through Jesus Christ hath established with men in all ages (as well before, and under the Jewish dispensation, as since God was manifest in the flesh)."<sup>27</sup> There are two things to be noted from this. First, the basis of salvation has remained the same in all ages and dispensations, i.e., through the divinely *enabled* response of faith to the divinely *implanted* work of grace.<sup>28</sup> It is, then, the faith of the heathen or the Jew which is the condition of their acceptance, not the fear of God or the working of righteousness as such.

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<sup>25</sup>For a helpful discussion on the hermeneutics of dispensationalism and covenant theology, see Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>26</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 35, "The Law Established Through Faith," I, II.3.

<sup>27</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 6, "The Righteousness of Faith," para. 1.

<sup>28</sup>Recent biblical scholarship has rejected the idea that viewing the Jewish dispensation as one of salvation by works is to misread the salvation history of Israel through "Reformation" spectacles. The human responsibility to each of God's covenanting initiatives with the world has, in fact, been faith (whether it be the faith of Noah, Abraham, or Jesus). See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977); James Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law* (London: SPCK, 1990).

Second, it is the merits of Christ that ground this universal possibility in some transhistorical sense—a key point to which we will return.

**3. Justification and Final Salvation.** Both Wesley and Fletcher reject Calvinism by making faith the condition of justification and holiness (by which they mean entire sanctification) the condition of final salvation.<sup>29</sup> The Minutes of Conference 1745 not only affirm this condition to be true for all people, but insist that it is generally available to all those who truly seek it. Note:

Q. 2. What will become of a Heathen, a Papist, a Church-of-England man, if he dies without being thus sanctified?

A. He cannot see the Lord. But none who seeks it sincerely shall or can die without it: though possibly he may not attain it till the very article of death.<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen, Wesley's theology and Fletcher's dispensationalist synthesis affirm the reality of different degrees of grace, repentance, and saving faith. The logic of this stance, however, led Fletcher to go further than Wesley in also positing four "degrees" of justification or right relation with God, revealed by successive dispensations (historically speaking), but which apply to all dispensations (concurrently speaking).<sup>31</sup> The first degree he identifies as the universally indwelling presence of the Spirit who mediates prevenient grace as a potentially saving relationship between God and all humanity. Second, there is that justification which accompanies repentance and faith, the forgiveness of sins and new birth.

<sup>29</sup>For a helpful discussion on the conditionality of final justification on holiness, see Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (London: Epworth Press, 1950), 198f. See also Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 191f.

<sup>30</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 8:285, *Minutes* (2 August 1745).

<sup>31</sup>Wesley does, however, talk about degrees of justification insofar as it is entirely consistent with, and correlates to, degrees of faith. In contrast to the static notion of faith and justification presented to him by Peter Böhler, Wesley came to see that "there are degrees of faith; and that a man may have some degree of it, before all things in him are become new; before he has the full assurance of faith, the abiding witness of the Spirit, or the clear perception that Christ dwelleth in him. . . . Accordingly, I believe there is a degree of justifying faith (and consequently, a state of justification) short of, and commonly antecedent to this." See *WJW*, 1:257, *Journal* (31 December 1739).

Third is “the justification consequent upon bringing forth the fruit of a lively faith *in the truths that belong to our dispensation*.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the marks of a continuing and deepening relationship with God are expressed through the obedience of faith, or holiness of heart and life, pursued through the particularities of each dispensation. Fourth is final justification, or final salvation, “for those who bear fruit unto perfection, *according to one or another of the divine dispensations*.”<sup>33</sup> So, not only are there degrees of grace, repentance, faith, and justification, but of perfection also, each defined by their own dispensational context.

Fletcher is clearly broadening the idea of justification to denote the more dynamic and relational counterpart of the personal transformations of God’s grace. This does not mean that Fletcher reversed Wesley’s priority of salvation by making sanctification the ground of justification. That would amount to a semi-Pelagianism which he sought to avoid as vigorously as Calvinism. Rather, it is to pursue the idea, found at the heart of Wesley’s theology, that justification and sanctification are inseparable strands of the one way of salvation. In other words, spiritual growth encompasses both a renewal of the human heart and a deepening relationship with God.<sup>34</sup> Godly living can only spring from a life made right with God.

### Evaluating Religion

It is important to note that Wesley was not operating with a notion of “religion” that we typically use today. Ours is inherited from the academic study of religions as an abstract category which can be instantiated by different systems of belief and practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that neither Wesley nor Fletcher discuss the saving potential of other religions

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<sup>32</sup>Fletcher, “Third Check,” 91. Emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup>Fletcher, “Third Check,” 91. Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup>In contrast to the view that “justification is complete the first moment we believe, and is incapable of augmentation,” Wesley replies, “Not so: There may be as many degrees in the favour as in the image of God” (Jackson, *WJW*, 10:320, *Preface to the Treatise on Justification*). Here, he is clearly affirming the logical connection between degrees of sanctification and degrees of justification—which is not so much about degrees of acceptance, but degrees of favour, or a deepening relationship with God. This analysis raises a question about the relationship between justification and new-birth, which Wesley defines as simultaneous and radically transforming events in the Christian experience. It would seem here that Fletcher implies new birth to be a characteristic of the second justification, still a discrete moment, but available in all dispensations. Wesley does not go this far.

as such. The idea of “true religion” has specific content, informed by the Christian scriptures, and against which other ways of being religious are evaluated. So, Wesley asserts that “as there is one God, so there is one religion and one happiness for all men. God never intended there should be any more; and it is not possible there should.”<sup>35</sup>

**1. “True Religion.”** True religion, for Wesley, consists in a “heart right toward God and man,”<sup>36</sup> where a right heart is synonymous with “right tempers,”<sup>37</sup> or affections. Following William Law, Wesley speaks of true religion in terms of simplicity and purity such that the Christian life is shaped by the singular intention to serve God and neighbour, flowing from a heart ordered by holy affections, dispositionally and devotionally in tune with the divine will.<sup>38</sup> In short, true religion is synonymous with holiness of heart and life, defined by holy love, the inner power of religious life from which all outward forms naturally derive.<sup>39</sup> It can be summarised, therefore, as “loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves,”<sup>40</sup> which fulfils the law of Christ. True religion is “heart-religion,” a “religion of love,” which Wesley describes as “scriptural Christianity,” or possessing a “faith that worketh by love.”<sup>41</sup> For

<sup>35</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” para. 1.

<sup>36</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 7, “The Way to the Kingdom,” I.10.

<sup>37</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” para. 16.

<sup>38</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 125, “On a Single Eye,” para. 1; *WJW*, 9:13, *Letter to Bishop Lavington* (1 February 1750).

<sup>39</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 12:46f., *Letter to Miss Chapman* (29 March 1737); *WJW*, 12:68, *Letter to Mr. John Smith* (3 Jan. 1746): “true religion is eminently seated in the heart, renewed in the image of Him that created us”; *WJW*, 12:255, *Letter to Mr. Knox* (30 May 1765): “Do you now see that true religion is not a negative or an external thing; but the life of God in the soul of man; the image of God stamped upon the heart?”; Baker, *BCE*, Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” para. 27. Wesley describes “humble, gentle, patient love” as “the very essence of true religion.”

<sup>40</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” para. 16; Jackson, *WJW*, 8:11-12, *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*. See also *WJW*, 8:60, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion I*: “My notions are, True religion is loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves; and in that love abstaining from all evil, and doing all possible good to all men.”; *WJW*, 13:393, *Letter to Mr G. R.* (17 February 1761): “My fundamental notions are, that true religion is love, the love of God and our neighbour; the doing all things to the glory of God, and doing to all men as we would be done to.”

<sup>41</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 121, “The Ministerial Office,” para. 18; *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 112, “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel,” II.1, 4, 17.

Wesley, love is “the life, the soul, the spirit of religion,”<sup>42</sup> and it is also in this sense that he identifies true religion with the kingdom of God that lies within, having heaven in the heart.<sup>43</sup>

True religion, therefore, cannot be evaluated by the criteria of either right thinking or right doing, for the outward activities of both mind and life can belie the heart’s true inward condition. Thus, true religion can neither be reduced to *orthodoxy* (having the right system of beliefs or opinions), nor *morality* or *honesty* (the outward practice of justice, mercy and truth), nor *sincerity* (the inward experience or intentions which motivate the moral life), nor *formality* (the attending to all the outward observances of religious practice without the inner reality). It is the case that all these characteristics belong to true religion and are conducive to it, but, by themselves, still fall short of it.<sup>44</sup> True religion is “real” religion because it refers to the inward substantial reality of a transformed heart, which can give rise to or equally be detached from outward formal expressions of religious life.

In describing what he perceives to be “outside” or “external religion,” Wesley is criticising those ways of being religious which locate the essence of religion in either cerebral activity (“rational religion” and “orthodoxy”) or concrete practice (“formal religion”) rather than in the heart. From the perspective of true or real religion, Wesley can judge such ways as non-salvific (because not heart-transforming), or even “false” if confused with it. “We conclude . . . that true religion, in the very essence of it, is nothing short of holy tempers. Consequently all other religion, whatever name it bears, whether Pagan, Mahometan, Jewish, or Christian; and whether Popish or Protestant, Lutheran or Reformed; without these, is lighter than vanity itself.”<sup>45</sup>

Although Wesley typically makes true religion co-extensive with true Christianity, elsewhere he makes the possibility of holy love and the

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<sup>42</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 9:176, *A Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland*. See also Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 112, “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel,” II.2.

<sup>43</sup>See Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 7, “The Way to the Kingdom,” I.1; *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 108, “On Riches,” para. 4; *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 20, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” para. 1.

<sup>44</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 7, “The Way to the Kingdom,” I.4-6; *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” para. 15. See *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 37, “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” para. 1.

<sup>45</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 91, “On Charity,” III.12.

possession of right tempers into a more inclusive principle. So, for instance, he concedes that many “ancient heathens” were “taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion.”<sup>46</sup> He also describes “one who has no true religion at all” as “one who neither loves, nor fears, nor serves God.”<sup>47</sup> This could be taken positively to imply that those who either love, or fear, and serve God (which includes all those of faith in Wesley’s scheme) do indeed participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in true religion.

**2. “True Christianity” and the Nature of Salvation.** In order to understand the full spectrum of Wesley’s references to, and evaluations of, religion in general, it is necessary to clarify the way in which he deals with the diversity internal to Christianity itself (see table). Through the development of Wesley’s writings, it is possible to trace two distinct but related theological patterns of speech concerning people of faith under the Christian dispensation, each with its own constellation of ideas. On the one hand, we can identify a mode of discourse which weaves together the faith of a servant with the spirit of bondage, fearing God and working righteousness, having the form of godliness, and morality with a degree of sincerity. Wesley refers to such people in a number of different ways: as those in a legal state, who are Jews inwardly, or almost Christians. On the other hand, there is a mode of discourse which weaves together the faith of a child of God with the spirit of adoption (the witness of the Spirit and assurance), loving God and working righteousness, having the power of godliness, and holiness of heart and life with godly sincerity and simplicity. Wesley also refers to such people in a number of ways (frequently conjoined): those in an evangelical state, who are true, real, inward, scriptural or altogether Christians.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 106, “On Faith,” I.4.

<sup>47</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 13:215, *Second Letter to Rev. Mr. Clarke* (10 September 1756). Here Wesley is describing a “child of the devil” as an example of one who could still be orthodox (have all the right opinions) without having any true religion at all.

<sup>48</sup>For a very helpful and convincing discussion of “real Christianity” as a dominant motif in Wesley’s thought, see Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, 131f. Through a discussion on the nature of assurance, he helpfully shows how Wesley’s thinking develops over time from a strict identification of the faith of a child (and assurance) with justification to the possibility that one might be a child of God yet only possess the faith of a servant (lacking assurance), albeit an exceptional case.

## WESLEY'S DISPENSATIONAL MODES OF DISCOURSE

<i>Heathen Dispensation</i> Including Mahometans	<i>Christian Dispensation</i>	
	<b>Legal Religion</b> Almost Christianity Being Jewish Inwardly	<b>True Religion</b> Real Christianity
<b>Heathen Morality</b>	<b>Form of Godliness</b> Common Morality and Orthodoxy	<b>Form and Power of Godliness</b> Holy Tempers
<b>Heathen Sincerity</b>	<b>Common Sincerity</b>	<b>Godly Sincerity and Simplicity</b>
<b>Faith of a Heathen/ Servant</b> Fearing God and Working Righteousness	<b>Faith of Servant</b> Fearing God and Working Righteousness	<b>Faith of a Son/Child</b> Loving God and Working Righteousness
<b>Saving</b> Being Acceptable to God	<b>Minimally Saving</b> The Lower Way	<b>Fully Saving</b> The More Excellent Way
<b>Rule of Conscience</b>	<b>Rule of Scripture</b> Emphasis on Law	<b>Rule of Scripture</b> Emphasis on both Law and Grace

As we have seen, however, Wesley allows that the faith of a servant can be minimally saving, insofar as those who thus fear God and work righteousness are in a state of acceptance, leading to final eschatological salvation. To attain this state, however, is to go no further than those under the Jewish dispensation. Rather, salvation is properly and fully defined in the Christian dispensation when the language and experience of legal religion is replaced by that of true religion: from almost Christianity to real scriptural Christianity, from mere acceptance to the spirit of adoption, from the faith of a servant to the faith of a child, from fear to love, from bondage to liberty, from the form of religion to the power of religion, and from morality to holiness. These distinctions also reflect

Wesley's frequent evaluation of true inward religion as the "more *excellent* way," although not the *only* way to be a Christian.<sup>49</sup>

It is for this reason that Wesley's concern for the post-mortem destiny of human souls took a secondary place to his emphasis on the life-transforming present experience of God's grace.<sup>50</sup> In *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, Wesley asks:

What is salvation? The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. . . . It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death. . . . It is not something at a distance: It is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of.<sup>51</sup>

We should note that Wesley's language of divine acceptance, in its minimally saving sense, is also about present experience and not deferred to an eschatological future. This broader understanding of salvation caused him effectively to relocate the primary category of salvation from the

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<sup>49</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 3:8, *Journal* (26 June 1760): ". . . two such families I have seldom seen. They had feared God for many years, and served him in the best manner they knew. Nothing was wanting but that they should hear the "more excellent way," which they then embraced with all their heart"; *WJW*, 3:101, *Journal* (20 September 1760): ". . . I found some who had been long labouring in the fire, and toiling to work themselves into holiness. To show them a more excellent way, I preached on Rom. x. 6, 7, 8. They found this was the very thing they wanted. . . ." See also Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 89, "The More Excellent Way," paras. 5-8. Wesley is clear in this much later sermon (c.1787) that the two orders of Christian are both justified through Christ (para. 6). The "lower" way is, however, indistinguishable from the honest heathen (see para. 2), and implicitly denotes those with the faith of a servant: innocence of life and conforming to worldly customs, but with a conscience void of offence (para. 5). This mature position would affirm but extend Collins' conclusion that Wesley allowed for there to be children of God (i.e., justified) but who only possess the faith of a servant. Insofar as Wesley here identifies this category with the lower order of nominal Christians, however, it actually becomes more predominant than exceptional.

<sup>50</sup>For many, as it was in Wesley's day, great emphasis is placed on the eschatological dimension of salvation, being concerned with the fate of the individual after death. In the theology of religions, this has translated into questions about the fate of the unevangelized. See, for example, W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>51</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," I.1.

Reformer's emphasis on justification, in its eschatological form, to sanctification as the present transformation of hearts and lives.

By salvation I mean, not barely, according to the vulgar notion, deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin . . . the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, authentic Christian salvation, the more excellent way, is about the pursuit of holiness before it is about the going to heaven, and all religion under the Christian dispensation must be evaluated against this truth.

The point is that, while the way of legal religion may be more or less acceptable to God and minimally saving, it avails nothing toward genuine evangelical salvation. There is no direct causal connection between the faith of a servant and that of a child, between the fear and the love of God, or between right living and holiness of heart. A wholly new, although not discontinuous response of faith is required to move from the legal to the evangelical state.

**3. "Heathen Morality."** Interpreting Wesley's evaluation of religious life is complicated by the fact that ideas such as conscience, morality, and sincerity retain subtle variations of meaning with respect to salvation, both within (as we have seen) and across the different dispensations of grace.

Wesley defines "heathen morality" or "heathen honesty" as a commonly perceived rule of life and possibility of virtue open to all people of conscience, through the initiative of prevenient grace. This level of morality, or virtue, consists in the understanding that

[one] ought not to be unjust; not to take away their neighbour's goods . . . not to oppress the poor . . . not to cheat . . . , "regard was to be paid to the truth, as well as to justice . . . , " and "a sort of love and assistance which they expected from one another . . . the feeding the hungry . . . the clothing the naked. . . the giving to any that needed, such things as they did not need themselves.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 8:137, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion II*, I.3.

<sup>53</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 2, "The Almost Christian," para. 3.

Inseparably connected with this is the principle of sincerity, “a real, inward principle of religion, from whence these outward actions flow,” without which there can be no heathen morality.<sup>54</sup> This is to say that sincerity denotes a responsiveness to the inner promptings of grace, or the function of conscience as it informs one’s willing and doing. Thus, we find sincerity defined as “a constant disposition to use all the grace given,” and as such, it is a necessary condition for acceptance by God (along with faith), for those under every dispensation. Sincere obedience can be salvific insofar as it is motivated by a disposition of faith and fear for Jews (including Christians in the legal state, with the faith of a servant), or faith and love for true Christians (in the evangelical state, with the faith of a child).<sup>55</sup>

As such, Wesley consistently speaks of heathen morality in a positive rather than a pejorative sense when referring to those under the heathen dispensation. For those under the Christian dispensation, however, Wesley applies the idea of heathen morality in two distinct but related ways. First, it is used positively as a standard against which the practice of *nominal* Christians frequently fall short and can be criticised. Second, it is used negatively to identify the practice of *formal* Christianity as it falls short of true religion and is, therefore, not properly saving in the Christian dispensation.

Wesley also makes a distinction between the degree of sincerity which gives rise to heathen morality and the “simplicity and *godly* sincerity” of Christian virtue.<sup>56</sup> True Christianity both includes and surpasses common sincerity and morality in its singleness of intention (the purity and simplicity of holy affections) and execution (the sincerity of holy living).<sup>57</sup> It is important to bear in mind, however, that Wesley did not intend such usage either to disparage heathen morality or to evaluate the saving potential of such morality in the heathen dispensation.

<sup>54</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 2, “The Almost Christian,” para. 9.

<sup>55</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 8:287-9, *Some Late Conversations III*.

<sup>56</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” para. 11f.

<sup>57</sup>Here we may note another level of discourse concerning the connection between the will and the affections. Sincerity is concerned with the will, and simplicity with the affections, such that the former is that which executes or realises the latter. They are inseparably connected (to the extent that Wesley can conflate them in common usage), but belong to two distinct patterns of speech in Wesley’s writing. It is possible to have sincerity (the capacity to exercise the will) without purity and simplicity (holy affections), as one can have the form without the power of religion. Such is the honest heathen or the legal Christian.

**4. Rules for Judgement.** The *role of conscience* is common to people of all dispensations: “a faculty or power, implanted by God in every soul that comes into the world, of perceiving what is right or wrong in his own heart or life, in his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions.”<sup>58</sup> The *rule of conscience*, however, is determined by each particular dispensation of grace. Based on Romans 2:15, Wesley claims that the rule of the heathen is “the law written in their hearts . . . by the finger of God.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, he is referring to the activity of prevenient grace, as the perceptible convictions and promptings of the Spirit toward a moral and virtuous life. The rule of Christian conscience, however, goes further insofar as it is guided and directed by the moral law, expressed through the commandments, which is the will of God revealed in the whole of Scripture.

It is not the case, however, that Wesley thought there to be one rule for the heathen and another for the Christian. Rather, he says that those who have no written law, show “the work of the law”—the substance of it, though not the letter—“written in their hearts,” by the same hand which wrote the commandments on the tables of stone: “Their conscience also bearing them witness, whether they act suitably thereto or not.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, the moral law which is revealed through scripture, is the same rule which the Spirit writes on the hearts and governs the consciences of all people. This means that, although one cannot judge the heathen according to particular scriptural requirements, the lives of those in good conscience should nevertheless embody the moral law to a greater or lesser extent.

Wesley continues to apply his different modes of discourse to the question of final salvation. Thus, he asserts that

. . . all morality, all the justice, mercy, and truth which can possibly exist without Christianity, profiteth nothing at all; is of no value in the sight of God, to those that are under the Christian dispensation. Let it be observed, I purposely add, to those that are under the Christian dispensation; because I have no authority from the word of God “to judge those that are without;” nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to

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<sup>58</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” para. 5.

<sup>59</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” para. 6.  
See also *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 30, “Sermon on the Mount, X,” para. 22.

<sup>60</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” para. 1.

sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation.<sup>61</sup>

Immediately following this, and in the spirit of his criticisms against confusing true religion with orthodoxy, Wesley severely criticised those who denied salvation to others because of differences in matters of belief or opinion:

I believe that the merciful God regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas. I believe he respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of his Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused. Without holiness, I own, no man shall see the Lord; but I dare not add, or clear ideas.<sup>62</sup>

Although the context here is the Christian dispensation, he clearly rejects matters of the head (which belong to the externals of religion only) in favor of heart and life as decisive for divine judgment and final salvation. It would be reasonable to conclude that this would apply as a more general principle of judgment.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 130, "On Living Without God," para. 14. It should be noted that Wesley is referring to true Christianity here. I have argued that Wesley did not believe that Christians in the legal state will be damned, who live moral lives according to the scriptures, through the fear of God and the faith of a servant. The point is that they have gone barely further than plain heathen morality or, at best, remaining a Jew inwardly through obedience to the law found in the scriptures. See also, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 127, "On the Wedding Garment," para. 17. Here Wesley explains that the fulfilling of all heathen morality avails nothing toward new life in Christ and the renewal of the soul in the image of God, which is the condition for final salvation. He again indicates, however, that this is "according to the Christian institution, whatever be the case of the heathen world."

<sup>62</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 130, "On Living Without God," para. 15. See also *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 45, "The New Birth," III, 2; *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 58, "On Predestination," para. 11.

<sup>63</sup>In his *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist*, I.2, Wesley claims that "orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed any part at all" (Jackson, *WJW*, 8:249). For Wesley, "orthodoxy" was about the upholding of particular opinions or beliefs about religious truth, and he repeatedly criticises those who claim the epitome of faith and religion to rest in adherence to such dogmatic positions. It would appear that Wesley

Wesley does suggest, however, that the most appropriate attitude to adopt regarding the possibility of final salvation for the heathen is one of both affirmation (that God is at work) and agnosticism (that God judges what God does, and the human response):

How it will please God, the Judge of all, to deal with *them*, we may leave to God himself. But this we know, that he is not the God of the Christians only, but the God of the heathens also; that he is “rich in mercy to all that call upon him,” “according to the light they have”; and that “in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him.”<sup>64</sup>

**5. Degrees of Glory!** The problem with Wesley’s more open and inclusive view of salvation is that it would appear to mitigate against evangelism and spiritual nurture, as the invitation to join the more excellent way of true Christianity. Wesley realised this difficulty and offers a solution in keeping with his overall position: there will be degrees of glory in heaven consistent with the prior quality of one’s religious life on earth.

In the first place, all people who qualify for glory will be cleansed of sin, albeit a relative perfection.

Therefore, whatever degrees of holiness they did, or did not, attain, in the preceding parts of life, neither Jews nor Heathens, any more than Christians, ever did, or ever will, enter into the New Jerusalem, unless they are cleansed from all sin before they enter into eternity.<sup>65</sup>

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considered religious plurality to be a necessary consequence of both our imperfect human understanding and the incalculable nature of God’s providential dealings with the world. Although he ascribes a secondary place to religious opinions in particular, he was not given to an uncritical acceptance of belief systems in general. Rather, he was a seeker after the truth and had some very hard words to say to the Latitudinarians of his time. Though none of us has a God’s eye view in these matters, not all opinions are to be equally valued, and judgements have to be made. Belief structures condition the nature and extent of our responsiveness to God and neighbor, and must be taken with utmost seriousness. Wesley says that “right tempers cannot subsist without right opinion: The love of God, for instance, cannot subsist without a right opinion of him,” although the reverse is not true. So, Wesley points out that there is no necessary connection between right thinking and right tempers: religious opinions can be more or less helpful for, but no guarantee of, genuine religious faith, and must be judged on that basis.

<sup>64</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 91, “On Charity,” I, 3.

<sup>65</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 12:228, *Letter to Miss H.*

Second, “the increase of that reward in heaven,” Wesley affirms, “will be in proportion to our holiness on earth.”<sup>66</sup> Third, although those who fail to take the more excellent way will inherit eternal life, “they will not have so high a place in heaven as they would have had if they had chosen the better part. . . . Certainly there will be no sorrow in heaven; there all tears will be wiped from our eyes; but if it were possible grief could enter there, we should grieve at that irreparable loss. Irreparable then, but not now.”<sup>67</sup> In heaven, the happiness of all will be complete, but relatively so, nonetheless.

### The Universality and Particularity of Christ

Although Wesley and Fletcher uphold the possibility of final salvation outside Christianity, it is never without Christ. They are careful to emphasise that this possibility is only through the universal operation of prevenient grace, which is given a deeply Christological grounding. This pattern of theologising reflects the problem of universality and particularity in Christian theology: that the scope of God’s presence and activity extends throughout the world to all human beings, but that the possibility of salvation cannot be understood without reference to the person of Christ.<sup>68</sup>

So, for instance, Wesley insists that Cornelius’ fear of God and his works of righteousness were acceptable only “through Christ, though he knows him not.”<sup>69</sup> Nor were his “good works” “done without the grace of Christ.”<sup>70</sup> Although Wesley does not explain these points further, he almost certainly had in mind the enabling work of prevenient grace. Both Wesley and Fletcher make a number of important connections between prevenient grace and the saving work of Christ.

<sup>66</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 47, “Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations,” para. 2.

<sup>67</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 89, “The More Excellent Way,” para. 8. See also Jackson, *WJW*, 13:430, *Thoughts on the Writings of Baron Swedenborg*, para. 11: “Every one has a place in heaven, not according to his ideas, but according to his works”; *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 73, “Of Hell,” II.3.

<sup>68</sup>The so-called “scandal of particularity” is characteristic Judeo-Christian salvation history such that all God’s covenanting initiatives are made with the whole world, but through particular individuals (and peoples), i.e., through Noah, Abraham/Moses (Israel), and Christ (the church).

<sup>69</sup>Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament*, Acts 10:35.

<sup>70</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 8:283, *Some Late Conversations – II*.

**1. Christ the Light of the World.** To speak of prevenient grace in terms of spiritual illumination is to make a direct connection with the idea of Christ as the light of the world. Wesley tells us that prevenient grace is

all that light wherewith the *Son of God* “enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world;” showing every man “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God;”—all the convictions which *his Spirit*, from time to time, works in every child of man.<sup>71</sup>

This universal connection between light and grace is also patterned by the language of conscience. In his sermon “On Conscience,” Wesley reaffirms that conscience cannot be reduced to nature but is the illuminating light of Christ, and the work of his Spirit:

. . . it is not nature, but the *Son of God*, that is “the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world.” So that we may say to every human creature, “He,” not nature, “hath showed thee, O man, what is good.” And it is *his Spirit* who giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given.<sup>72</sup>

**2. The Merits of Christ’s Death.** Wesley teaches us that the light of prevenient grace is a universal benefit of Christ’s meritorious death on the cross. So,

God out of his infinite love hath so loved the world that he gave his only Son, to the end that whosoever believeth on him might have everlasting life. And he enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world, as he tasted death for every man. The benefit of the death of Christ is not only extended to such as have the distinct knowledge of his death and sufferings, but even unto those who are inevitably excluded from this knowledge. Even these may be partakers of the benefit of his death,

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<sup>71</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” I.1 (Italics mine). See also *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege of Those Born of God,” III.3; *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” II.1; *BCE*, vol. 4, Sermon 119, “Walking by Sight, Walking by Faith,” para. 9.

<sup>72</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 105, “On Conscience,” I.5 (Italics mine).

though ignorant of the history, if they suffer his grace to take place in their hearts, *so as of wicked men to become holy*.<sup>73</sup>

If Wesley is using the idea of holiness consistently, as a matter of right tempers or affections, then here we have another instance in which he implies that those outside the Christian dispensation may participate in the experience of true religion. Fletcher puts it this way:

Out of Christ's fullness all have received grace," a little leaven of saving power . . . the true light which enlightens not only every man that comes into the Church, but every man that cometh into the world,—without excepting those who are yet in darkness. "For the light shineth in the darkness, even when the darkness comprehends it not."<sup>74</sup>

There are obvious difficulties in grounding the universal availability of prevenient grace in the atonement, not least in explaining the possibility of salvation for pre-Messianic peoples. We do, however, find Wesley occasionally drawing upon the Revelation theme of Christ as the "Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world,"<sup>75</sup> which might suggest that he considered the significance of the atonement to have some trans-historical significance.

**3. The Spirit of Christ.** Wesley tells us that "Christ does not give light to the soul separate from, but in and with, himself . . . [which is] true of all men, in whatever state of grace they are."<sup>76</sup> In the above references to prevenient grace, light and conscience, we see a constant connection made between the *Son of God* and *his Spirit* at work in the human heart. This is typical of the way that Wesley identifies the work of grace and the presence of the Spirit as the universal possibility for right living: "there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. . . . So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Jackson, *WJW*, 10:179, *A Letter to a Person Lately Joined with the Quakers*. Emphasis is mine. Here Wesley claims that in this point "there is no difference between Quakerism and Christianity."

<sup>74</sup>Fletcher, "Third Check," 79.

<sup>75</sup>See Revelation 5:12 and 13:8 (KJV). See also, Fletcher, "Third Check," 78.

<sup>76</sup>Letter to Mr. Joseph Benson, 12:413.

<sup>77</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," III.4.

These thoughts are, as we might expect, not unambiguous in Wesley! He never does refer to the universal Spirit of prevenient grace as the “Spirit of Christ” *per se*, apparently reserving the possession of this as the criterion of a “real Christian.”<sup>78</sup> Once again, however, there are two modes of discourse concerning the identification of the Spirit with Christ, both universal and particular. On the one hand, it is clear, as we have amply seen, that Wesley identifies prevenient grace with the guiding presence of the Spirit, which is the Spirit of the Son, a universal fruit of Christ’s atoning death. On the other hand, it is the “Spirit of Christ” imparted in the Christian life which, when received in its fullness, causes Christ to “dwell” or “live” in us, to become “formed” and “revealed” in us (as we are renewed in his image and likeness), and conveying to us “the life and power of his resurrection.” The idea of spiritual illumination, working in and through conscience, both connects and distinguishes these modes of discourse. The first is minimally illuminating, universal, irresistibly given, and convicts to illicit godly living. The second is fully illuminating, particular, conditionally received, and empowers to nurture holiness. Wesley does affirm, however, that “all power to think, speak, or act aright, is in and from the Spirit of Christ; and all merit is (not in man, how high soever in grace), but merely in the blood of Christ.”<sup>79</sup> Wherever there are right tempers, or the holiness of heart, the Spirit of Christ is at work.

### **Towards a Wesleyan Theology of Religions**

In conclusion, I want to identify some principles arising from the foregoing analysis which could inform the construction of a contempo-

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<sup>78</sup>Wesley rejected as false the universalism of William Law who claimed that “every man has the Spirit of God. The Spirit of Christ is in every soul.” This must be understood, however, in the context of Law’s mystical theology which sought holiness as an inward journey of becoming what one already is in Christ. Wesley believed this to be counter-productive of true religion: holiness is not about becoming what one *already is* (or realising what one already has), but receiving the life-transforming Spirit that enables one to become all that one *should be*. See also *BCE*, vol. 3, Sermon 89, “The More Excellent Way,” para. 2; and Charles Wesley’s thoughts in *BCE*, vol. 1, Sermon 3, “Awake Thou that Sleepest,” III.7. Thus, he claims that “he is a Christian who hath received the Spirit of Christ. He is not a Christian who hath not received him” (III.6).

<sup>79</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 53, “On the Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield,” III.2. Here Wesley outlines a key area of agreement between their respective theological positions.

rary Wesleyan theology of religions. It is my intention to outline some trajectories that hold together, as Wesley sought to do, both the universality and the particularity of God's saving work in Christ. I will, on the one hand, affirm other ways of being religious as potentially salvific and, on the other hand, ground that affirmation Christologically.

**1. Reading True Religion Broadly.** Neither Wesley nor Fletcher discussed the saving potential of other ways of being religious in terms of their own beliefs and practices. This is not surprising given that they had little experience of non-Christian peoples, and did not have access to the wealth of understanding made available to us through the study of religions. So, in the light of contemporary biblical studies and deepening interreligious understanding, we would be right to call into question, for example, the way that Wesley reduces the faith of Jews and all non-Christians to that of a servant, being in a relationship of fear rather than the love of God. Indeed, it could be argued that in doing so, like Luther before him, Wesley reads back into the scriptures and the Jewish faith his own pre-Aldersgate experience. It can also be argued, however, that such eisegesis, together with an underlying theological optimism of divine providence and grace, combined to make him open to the broadest possibility of salvation according to the only categories of religious experience he had available.

Today we are able to see that many of the world's religious traditions (including Judaism, Islam and Hinduism) would uphold the love of God and neighbor as a central religious principle. It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that we might extend Wesley's hints about the possibility of true religion among non-Christians, such that the idea of sanctification (as the pursuit of holiness and the definition of salvation proper) can become the primary category for both including and evaluating the quality of all religious life. In other words, the distinction between "external" religion and true religion does not distinguish non-Christian from Christian religion *per se*, but applies to both, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>This raises again the doctrinal question of new birth, and leads to two possible approaches. On the one hand, one could claim that the reality and experience of new birth is available to non-Christians, in their own contexts. On the other hand, one could claim that new birth is not a necessary condition for sanctification as such. This latter view might reserve the experience of new birth as an empowering Christian privilege, a uniquely transforming experience of Christ's presence and power for holiness that belongs to the particularities of the Christian dispensation only.

We could, therefore, take Wesley's definition of true religion—a matter of heart and life which goes deeper than the particularities of orthodoxy and opinion—as open to instantiation by other ways of being religious, despite their different beliefs and practices. Love, then, is the highest and most inclusive criterion of true religion, and we may say that *truly saving religion consists in the transformation of hearts and lives, and can properly be defined as “faith active in love,” whatever the species of faith.*

**2. Reading the World Providentially.** With Wesley, we can speak of the one covenant of grace, with many providential dispensations, as a way of denoting God's presence and activity among different peoples and in different ways to achieve the divine plan of salvation. For both Wesley and Fletcher, however, this is true not only historically (*across time*) but concurrently (*at all times*): the unfolding of God's purpose through Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus is not to be interpreted as a narrowing of soteriological *scope*, but a broadening and deepening of soteriological *possibility* for the whole creation through the increasing particularity of the divine initiative with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Such a stance entails an emphasis on creation and covenant that engenders an openness to the saving presence of the Spirit dispensed among non-Christian peoples. It is in this sense that other ways of being religious can be seen as having providential roles in God's plan of salvation for the world. In the sermon “On Divine Providence,” Wesley affirms the idea that God's providential love and care “includes the whole race of mankind, all the descendants of Adam, all the human creatures that are dispersed over the face of the earth.”<sup>81</sup> It is God who enables all, in their own contexts, to be faithful in the pursuit of holiness, whatever the species of faith and whatever the form of holy living. Saving faith can be interpreted as a responsive awakening of the heart through the operation of prevenient grace. Although this will be manifest in patterns of life consistent with the moral law revealed in the Christian scriptures, it is finally God who will judge what God does.

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<sup>81</sup>Baker, *BCE*, vol. 2, Sermon 67, “On Divine Providence,” para. 16. Here Wesley utilizes the idea of a “three-fold circle” of divine providence, the outer circle encompassing all humankind, the intermediate circle including all professing Christians, and the innermost circle extending only to “real Christians.”

*Reading the world providentially means affirming: (1) the saving presence and activity of God outside the Christian tradition; (2) that a saving response to God's grace can take different historically particular forms; (3) that different ways of being religious can act as means of grace through encouraging responsible human activity in the pursuit of holy living; (4) that those who respond in this way are accepted by God; and (5) that such acceptance is based on the response of faith to the work of grace manifest in the transformation of heart and life.*

**3. Reading Human Beings Graciously.** For Wesley and his interpreter-successors, the idea of providence as the universal presence and activity of the Spirit in the world grounds the idea of grace as the universal saving presence of the Spirit in human life. As we have seen, Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace serves as a vital corrective to the radical pessimism of total depravity by softening the dualism between nature and grace so prevalent in Western theology. One might be tempted to deny that the doctrine of total depravity has any real significance in Wesley's anthropology apart from acting as a limiting concept for articulating the awful power of sin and the triumph of God's universal grace. Rather, we are encouraged to view the grace of divine presence as a defining characteristic of what it means to be human.

Wherever there is moral truth and right action, there is grace at work. Wherever there is love for God and neighbor, there is grace at work. *Reading human beings graciously means affirming that all people are graced by the saving presence of the Spirit and capable of participating in God's providential purposes for the world.*

**4. Reading Salvation Christologically.** It is only through the particularity of Christ, however, that we can affirm this universal possibility of salvation, and the particularity of other ways of being religious as means of grace. Human beings are oriented to the God of Jesus Christ through the Spirit of Christ which acts preveniently through conscience to inform the religious life of all people. The locus of salvation, therefore, is not to be found in the religious beliefs and practices of any tradition (including Christianity), any more than the essence of true religion is a matter of orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Rather, salvation proper is located in the transformation of hearts and lives by the Spirit of Christ, and any way of being religious that promotes this could be considered a means of grace, and salvific in that sense.

It is somewhat disappointing that Wesley does not explicitly discuss the connection between Christ as the eternal *logos*, or Word of God, and his favourite Johannine themes of universal light and life. I would argue, however, that the logic of Wesley's theology naturally leads us to an inclusivist *logos*-Spirit Christology.<sup>82</sup> The primary significance of such a Christology would lie in the connection between Word and Spirit for the transformation of human lives. So, we could say that the Spirit of Christ strives preveniently with humankind to accomplish the eternal *logos*, which is the pattern of human flourishing embodied by and perfectly revealed in the historical Jesus. Any way of being religious, therefore, can only be affirmed as salvific insofar as it promotes patterns of life which are Jesus shaped. This is simply to say that, insofar as salvation is associated with sanctification, the only criterion for holiness of heart and life that has been revealed to us is the person of Jesus, who was the *logos* incarnate.<sup>83</sup> *Reading salvation Christologically means that, insofar as any way of being religious can represent a species of true religion, then we might say it is the Spirit of Christ who enables Hindus to become Christ-like Hindus, Buddhists to become Christ-like Buddhists, and Muslims to become Christ-like Muslims.*

**5. Reading Mission Dialogically.** The long quotation with which we started, from Wesley's *A Caution Against Bigotry*, is actually a missiological statement. When it comes to casting out devils, it is the responsibility of Christians to discern the "finger of God," or the enabling presence of the Spirit at work in and through the lives of Christians and non-Christians alike. Whenever people are engaged in the business of overcoming and rooting out evil in the world, they are about God's work.

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<sup>82</sup>This is an idea which extends back as far as Justyn Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theophilus of Antioch, and Athenagorus. It has been retrieved and developed by contemporary theologians like D. M. Baillie in *God was in Christ* (Faber, 1955), N. Pittenger in *The Word Incarnate* (Nisbet, 1959) and *Christology Reconsidered* (SCM Press, 1970); and A. T. Hanson in *Grace and Truth* (SPCK, 1975) and *The Image of the Invisible God* (SCM Press, 1982). See also Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship* (London: Epworth Press, 1986), 98ff.

<sup>83</sup>Unlike some of the authors above, however, we cannot say that the *logos* could be manifest in other ways, i.e., other historically particular forms. What would this mean? How would we know? It is only the revelation of true religion in the life and death of Jesus Christ that enables us to affirm the embodiment of the *logos*, wherever it is found.

It is not enough simply to discern it, however, but to defend, encourage, and enlarge their mission, for they are sharing in God's mission of healing and salvation.

Providence and grace weave together to provide a basis for the common pursuit of holiness, social caring, and the struggle for justice. Christians are beholden, therefore, to enter into interreligious dialogue and cooperation, for to do so means responding to what God is doing in and through others. *Reading mission dialogically means taking it as an immediate consequence of God's prevenient grace that other ways of being religious have providential roles in God's mission strategy for the world.* Such a stance does not, however, detract from the task of evangelism, that is, inviting all people to embark on the more excellent way and to become followers of Jesus Christ. If salvation is Jesus shaped, and human flourishing defined by Christ-likeness, then it is also appropriate to say that fullness of salvation can only be found through faith in Christ. Interreligious dialogue should also become a medium of authentic witness, presenting others with the opportunity to respond to the light of the gospel, to become followers of Jesus Christ, and to receive the Spirit of adoption. It is in this context that God's providence and grace become a preparation for the proclamation of the gospel, keeping open the possibility that all people can be drawn from the outer limits of grace, to the fullness of grace in Christ. *It is also the prevenient purpose of the Spirit of Christ to direct all people to the person of Christ, and it is our responsibility as Christians to enable that to happen.*

**6. Reading Heaven Pluralistically.** "Heaven," as the post-mortem state of final salvation, does not have to be construed monolithically. Wesley's logic of connecting the nature of one's religious life with one's heavenly experience helps to complete the picture and rise to the challenge of taking seriously the particular ways and goals of other religions. While I cannot imagine the experience of heaven being anything other than Trinitarian, I can yet imagine that there might be possibilities of heavenly experience lying in continuity with other ways of being religious—the holiness attained by Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in this life will translate into particular kinds and degrees of glory in the next.

In conclusion, we can find in Wesley's theology patterns of thought which clearly, although incipiently, lead us to an inclusivist approach to the theology of religions. At one level, this will mean facing the criticism

of all inclusivist options, that of interpreting other religions through Christian categories and, therefore, denying their own ultimate claims and metaphysical grounds.<sup>84</sup> This is certainly unavoidable, to a greater or lesser extent, for any theologian seeking to reconcile the particularity of truth revealed *through* Jesus Christ with the universal possibility of salvation *in* Jesus Christ. What I have sought to argue here, however, is that salvation understood as the pursuit of holiness can, in fact, serve as a meta-narrative to inscribe (rather than exclude) other ways of being religious, acceptable to God as means of grace with their own particular goals. And this is a possibility which extends from the here to the hereafter.

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<sup>84</sup>The three-fold paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in the theology of religions has received serious criticism for misconstruing the true nature of other religions through attempting to reinterpret them in terms of Christian soteriological categories. In part this has meant judging other ways of being religious as though they were aiming at the Christian goal of salvation. The new challenge, then, is to find new approaches to relating other ways of being religious into a Christian theological scheme which can keep means and ends connected. Joseph DiNoia, in *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1992), speaks of the providential diversity of religions in God's plan of salvation—all the ways of being religious are ultimately unified in a developed doctrine of purgatory. Mark Helm, in *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), also rises to this challenge by positing the possibility of inscribing the experience of other religious goals in a final eschatological sense, with a sophisticated formulation of the Trinity and divine plenitude.

# **PERSONAL AND SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE: KINDRED SPIRITS IN POLANYIAN AND WESLEYAN EPISTEMOLOGY**

by

**W. Stephen Gunter**

The legacy of modernism has left us with a widespread inability to believe the truthfulness of the Christian message, especially affirmations like the Pauline assertion “. . . if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14). The unbelief and disbelief attendant to such an assertion is related to many things in contemporary society, but no single thing is more pervasive in its destructive legacy than modernism’s propensity to cling to the implications and assumptions of the “canons of historical reason,” even when they are no longer intellectually tenable. In the emerging stages of the “Age of Reason” (Enlightenment), John Wesley worked with an epistemology which had the capacity to transcend the hegemony of rationalism; and in the early decades of our recent emergence from modern to postmodern, Michael Polanyi has done something similar, in his case opening the doors to a “postobjectivist” epistemology.

Wesley’s perspective has been described as knowledge through the “spiritual senses,” and Polanyi’s self-chosen nomenclature is “personal knowledge.” We will make no claims here for continuity between the two epistemologies, but we will explore how the founder of Methodism and the physicist are kindred spirits in epistemology, even though separated by nearly two hundred years. Both found a way to transcend the pervasive rationalism that characterized the intellectual world into which they were born and in which they did their work.

## The Age of Reason

Aware that the Age of Reason spans more than the eighteenth century because of its roots in the previous century, especially in England, we focus on the specific strands of thought in England that shaped the intellectual world into which John Wesley was born, educated and ministered. For this we must go back at least to 1660.<sup>1</sup> It is accurate to say that for virtually all Christian believers there was no discontinuity between revelation and faith: faith in revelation was compatible with confidence in reason. Keeping in mind that England had just emerged from the extremes of the Cromwellian era, we should not be surprised that the comprehensive appeal to reason was only strengthened by the force of the reaction against the fanaticism (read “enthusiasm,” “indwelt and inspired by God in an unmediated manner”) of the radical Puritans. What England needed was the critical, elaborate, closely reasoned statements of the faith, like those of Bishop John Pearson’s *Exposition of the Creed*, 1659. Wesley began requiring his preachers to read this book as early as 1749. About it he would write in a May 11, 1764, letter to C. Glascott of Jesus College, Oxford: “In order to be acquainted well with the doctrines of Christianity, you need but one book (besides the Bible)—Bishop Pearson on the Creed.”

Cambridge Platonists like William Stillingfleet, later bishop of Worcester, were convinced, and convinced many others, that the witness of reason was sufficient to prove even the efficiency of our moral freedom and our certainty of a future life. Revelation was accepted rather than disputed, but the usual practice was to construct a reasonable pattern of belief, and then prove that revelation corresponded to that construction. The Latitudinarian move, in the interest of clarity, was to remove profundity from theological assertion. The simplicity with which they defined the rules of reason, together with their interest in practical problems, persuaded them that essential beliefs were few and simple. A strong ethical emphasis was characteristic of all the Latitudinarians, and their consequent stress on moral duty led Anglicanism down the path of moralism, against which Wesley found it necessary to react.

John Locke towers over this period of intellectual history and his shadow stretches far into the eighteenth century. Along with Isaac New-

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<sup>1</sup>See Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648-1789* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), esp. 65-70, 157-73.

ton, Locke shaped a new frame of reference that affected religious thought profoundly. Sometimes he referred to theological matters in passing, but at other times he gave theology his concentrated attention; and whatever the span of attention or level of intensity, he never minimized the importance of *belief*. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), his argumentation moves progressively toward the singular conclusion that God exists, and that of this we can be sure: This is “the most obvious truth that reason discovers”; “its evidence. . . is equal to mathematical certainty.” In other words, belief is the consequence of rational proof. The Lockean assumption, and that of the entire age, is that reason could resolve all difficulties and banish all mysteries, for the evidence of reason runs through all things. It is not difficult to imagine how this conviction about pervasive reason combined with the simplicity and push for clarity among Cambridge Platonists and Latitudinarians to result in the deism that typifies John Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696).

When we enter the eighteenth century, the intellectual stream of the Latitudinarians is drawn along by Dr. Samuel Clarke’s Boyle Lectures, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705), convincing his contemporaries that his account of the created and moral order was itself a miracle of lucid and reasonable exposition. In a universe of order and beauty, humanity was freed from all dark, foreboding fears; if the galaxies of heaven were fashioned for our delight, how great must be our native dignity. Pope, with his genius for giving memorable form to popular convictions, perfectly expressed the outlook of his age:

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,  
The proper study of mankind is man.*<sup>2</sup>

John Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity* epitomizes the basic conviction of the age, and it is this conviction with regard to utter reasonableness that revealed the Achilles heel of the resultant deism reflected afresh in the work of Matthew Tindal. Tindal was a fellow of All Souls, Oxford, and his *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730) asserted that God’s work is perfect and that it perfectly reveals God. His logic was quite simple (as we would expect!): If creation needed to be supplemented in order to be understood, it would be imperfect; because it is perfect, nothing can be added to it without casting aspersions on God’s original handiwork or God’s intended purpose. There is a quiet assumption

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Cragg, 158.

here that represents the line of division between the deists and historic Christianity. Tindal, and deistic moralists in general who absolutely had no sense of history, oversimplified the problem of human development. They assumed in their perfectly created, rational world that human beings were perfectly capable of grasping this perfect religion of rationality. At the risk of our own oversimplification, we may assert that the split is seen in Toland's two-pronged assertion: Christianity contained nothing that was either above reason or contrary to it. The Christian apologists would concede the second part of this assertion, but not the first, for there were many things that one would never know unless God chose to reveal them to us. Prone to agree that even these revealed truths, in the final analysis, were perfectly congruent with reason if one pursued them patiently and faithfully, our limitations (human, sinful, prideful, and otherwise) might blind us to them were it not for God's graciousness to us.

One of Wesley's remonstrations against deistic assumptions is perhaps a proper transition into our brief overview of his epistemology. In his sermon, "The Circumcision of the Heart," (1733) we read:

It is to be wished that they [the deists] were better acquainted with this [Christian] faith who employ much of their time and pains in laying another foundation, in grounding religion on "the eternal fitness of things," on the "intrinsic excellence of virtue," and the beauty of actions flowing from it—on the "reasons," as they term them, of good and evil, and the relations of beings to each other. Either these accounts of the grounds of Christian duty coincide with the scriptural or not. If they do, why are well-meaning men perplexed, and drawn from the weightier matters of the law [Mosaic] by a cloud of terms whereby the easiest truths are explained unto obscurity? If they are not, then it behooves them to consider who is the author of this new doctrine, whether he is likely to be "an angel from heaven" who "preaches another gospel" than that of Christ Jesus—though if he were, God, not we, hath pronounced his sentence: "Let him be accursed!" [II.1.17-31.]

### **Wesley's Three-fold, Functional Definition of Reason**

Within the assumptions of deism we have seen how reason not only defined but confined knowledge. In Wesley's epistemology these assumptions are completely overturned. Reason was limited not only by sin but by its own very nature. Reason is a tool, not a source, and this tool is used

to process information that originates in experience, both personal and communal.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, reason is much like a computer, processing that which is provided for it. This, however, does not mean that Wesley had a low view of reason. He insisted throughout his life that religion and reason go “hand in hand,”<sup>4</sup> and much in the spirit of his age, he insisted continually that there is no necessary inconsistency between reason and faith. He even went so far as to assert: “I would as soon put out my eyes to secure my faith, as lay aside my reason.”<sup>5</sup> Wesley wrote more about the importance of reason for Christian faith than any other factor besides Scripture, and sounding very much like John Locke he could write: “Passion and prejudice govern the world. . . . It is our part, by religion and reason joined, to counteract them all we can.”<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps not possible for us to ascertain the level of influence Samuel or Susannah Wesley had on him at this point, but Samuel’s recognition that their “Jack” was very taken by reason is reflected in the sentiment expressed to her: “I think our Jack would not attend to the most pressing necessities of nature unless he could give a reason for it.”<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that this definition of reason will not facilitate our discussion, so it is needful that we look at the range of definitions that are operative for the adult John Wesley. The most common definition is exhibited

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<sup>3</sup>The best concise survey of Wesley’s use of reason is by Rebekah Miles, “The Instrumental Role of Reason,” in Stephen Gunter, et.al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 77-106. The best full-length study of Wesley’s understanding and use of reason is Rex D. Matthews’ “‘Religion and Reason Joined’: A Study in the Theology of John Wesley” (Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1986). See also Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 26-47; Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 169-200; Lawrence W. Wood, “Wesley’s Epistemology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (1975), 10:48-59; Richard E. Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1984); and Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 65-80.

<sup>4</sup>See the Letter to Dr. Rutherford, March 28, 1768, §III.4, *Works*, 9:382.

<sup>5</sup>“A Dialogue between An Antinomian and His Friend,” 1745, Jackson, 10:263.

<sup>6</sup>Letter to Joseph Benson, October 5, 1770, Telford, 5:203.

<sup>7</sup>According to Richard Heitzenrater, the first appearance of this quotation was in Adam Clarke’s *Memoirs of the Wesley Family*, 513. Richard Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley: John Wesley as Seen by Contemporaries and Biographers*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 177.

in an exchange that Wesley had with his mother for and against cutting his hair. Her “reason” for insisting on his cutting his hair was that “short hair was healthy”; but Wesley countered with a “reason” of his own for avoiding the barber, expense. In both cases “reason” may be defined as a justification for actions.<sup>8</sup>

We have already noted that Wesley rejected the widely held notion of reason being a source of knowledge, and the basic philosophical definition for which he opted was one that was also current in the discussions of his day—reason as tool or capacity for understanding. This definition was common among the British empiricists, especially at Oxford, and they understood themselves to be of the intellectual lineage of Aristotle in this regard. Following this line of reasoning, Wesley asserted, “All knowledge which we naturally have is originally derived from our senses, “even that which seems “so plain and obvious that we can very hardly avoid knowing [it] as soon as we come to the use of our understanding; yet the knowledge even of [this] is not innate, but derived from some of our senses.”<sup>9</sup>

Does this mean that Wesley is a comprehensively strict empiricist in his epistemology? The answer is “No.” Although he rejects the Platonic concept of innate knowledge, Wesley might be described as an empiricist with a “Platonic twist.” Adhering closely to the Aristotelian model, reason is functionally understood to “exert itself in three ways: by simple apprehension, by judgment, and by discourse.”<sup>10</sup> At the level of simple apprehension reason is taking in the information presented. It is, in Wesley’s words, the act of “barely conceiving a thing in the mind, the first and most simple act of understanding.”<sup>11</sup> One exercises this type of reasoning without giving it much particular or special effort; it is the way we are aware of what is going on around us.

The second function of reason, judgment, has more specificity. In the function of judgment, reason begins consciously to utilize the sensory impressions gained in the awareness or simple apprehension level. He

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<sup>8</sup>Rex Matthews lists dozens of examples of Wesley’s common use of reason as argument or motive. Matthews, 126-28.

<sup>9</sup>“On the Discoveries of Faith,” §1, *Works*, 4:29. See also “Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith,” §7, *Works*, 4:51.

<sup>10</sup>“The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” §I.2, *Works*, 2:590. See also *A Compendium of Logic*, Jackson, 14:161.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

says that we are “determining that the things before conceived either agree with or differ from each other.”<sup>12</sup> At this level our reasoning capacity enables us to differentiate between shades of similarity among sense impressions and grades of difference among divergences.

The third phase of reasoning is discourse. At this stage the mind moves beyond recognizing similarities and differences to actively working with the information. This is the “motion of the progress of the mind from one judgment to another.”<sup>13</sup> We usually describe this as analytical or critical reason. For example, relative strengths and weaknesses of a collective set of reasons for acting or believing a certain way are evaluated and reconfigured in order to make a stronger case. We may also extrapolate from these in order to imagine alternatives.

Wesley learned this functional epistemology from the Aristotelians at Oxford, who were in debate with the Cambridge Platonists (parents of Latitudinarianism), and he got it particularly from the logician Henry Aldrich, whose work Wesley had translated and from which he taught his classes on logic.<sup>14</sup> It is important for us to notice how Wesley plays out this tension between the Oxford Aristotelian and the Cambridge Platonists. For reasons related to his doctrine of sin, but also on philosophical grounds, Wesley agrees with the empiricists against the idealists by rejecting the notion that any knowledge of God is innately stamped on the soul of a human being. This knowledge also is the result of experience. Wesley was fond of quoting, *Nihil est in intellectus quod not fuit prius in sensu*—*There is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses*.

The Platonists were not arguing that human reason manufactured knowledge from templates stamped into the brain, but rather that human reason is itself a part of our divine identity; it is our participation in God’s own rationality. While some have argued that Wesley was enamoured with this notion, my interpretation is that he finally settles with reasonable consistency in the camp of the empiricists.<sup>15</sup> Does this mean that he

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* See also “Remarks on Mr. Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*,” Jackson, 13:455.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>See *A Compendium of Logic*, Jackson, 14:161-89. The functional definitions of reason are straight from Wesley’s translation of Aldrich.

<sup>15</sup>This argument for Wesley as an empiricist is best seen in the work of Matthews, Maddox, Brantley, and Wood. The other side of the argument, Wesley’s Platonism, is found in Albert Outler, *Works*, 1:146n54, 276n46, 433n7, 711n122 and 2:192n29, 571n7; John C. English, “The Cambridge Platonists in

believed and taught that our knowledge of God is derived solely from the five physical senses? The answer is “No,” and it is here that we encounter Wesley’s empiricism with a “Platonic twist.”

### The Spiritual Senses: Beyond Reason But Not Unreasonable

The senses by which we gain experiential knowledge of God are what Wesley referred to as our “spiritual senses.” Through these avenues we gain access to a transcendent or spiritual realm, a realm not readily available through the five strictly physical senses. Here Wesley is moving into a realm of distinctive Christian teaching, but it is also one that was fraught with enthusiasm and religious fanaticism.<sup>16</sup> For Wesley the spiritual senses are the gracious work of God through the Holy Spirit. All humans, created in the image of God, have these “eyes,” but not all eyes are opened, and we cannot open them on our own. The good preacher that he was, Wesley helps us get his point by the use of an illustration. Imagine a toad trapped in the trunk of a tree in which all light has been shut out. There is complete darkness, so the toad cannot see. Deprived of light, there is no sensory awareness through this avenue of the senses, hence there is no possibility of reflection or contemplation. Nothing has been seen on which to reflect. To those whose spiritual senses are opened by the Holy Spirit, an entirely new dimension of reality is opened:

But the moment the Spirit of the Almighty strikes the heart of him that was till then without God in the world, it breaks the hardness of his heart, and creates all things new. . . . By the same gracious stroke, he that before had ears, but heard not, is now made capable of hearing. He hears. . . the voice of him that is the “resurrection and the life.” At the same time, he receives other spiritual senses capable of discerning spiritual good and evil. He is enabled to taste, as well as to see, how gracious the Lord is.<sup>17</sup>

John Wesley’s Christian Library,” *Proceedings* 37 (1970):101-04; Roderick T. Leupp, “‘The Art of God’: Light and Darkness in the Thought of John Wesley” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1985), 197-98, 224-29; and Mitsuo Shimizu, “Epistemology in the Thought of John Wesley” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1980), 29n1, 111-92, 219-24. For a discussion of these two conflicting interpretations of Wesley, see Matthews, chapter four and Thorsen, chapter six.

<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of Wesley as an “improper enthusiast,” see pp. 118-37 of my *Limits of Love Divine*.

<sup>17</sup>“On Living Without God,” §§9-11, *Works*, 4:172-73.

By making this kind of Platonic twist in which the senses are redefined beyond the merely physical, humans are enabled by God to experience the divine realm. Albeit in a considerably other form, Wesley was still an empiricist, insisting on reason's dependence on experience. On the other hand, he was also something of a Platonist, insisting that humans could have direct knowledge of the spiritual realm. Of course, these types of claims about knowledge derived from the spiritual senses opened the door to the danger of "enthusiasm," so Wesley consistently required that such claims must be tested by Scripture and the other authorities, Wesley's *analogia fidei*. Wesley was always cautious about exaggerated claims for personal inspiration lest he be guilty of "enthusiasm properly so-called." Although it is not a very helpful phrase by itself, it is not inaccurate to refer to this as an early Methodist version of "transcendental empiricism."<sup>18</sup>

This is the path that John Wesley took to bridge the chasm between the Oxford empiricists and the Cambridge Platonists, and it is the means whereby he overcame the deistic rationalism of his century. He did so without rejecting reason; in fact, he embraced it fully. He embraced a full-fledged doctrine of the Holy Spirit without becoming an enthusiast. And he did both of these without becoming unreasonable. What Wesley did in the face of the triumph of reason in his century is also incumbent on us to attempt at the end of the twentieth century as we try to overcome the hegemony of technological and scientific reasoning, for they have by definition also limited the acceptable realm of reality available to "all reasonable people."

### **The Objectivication of Reason in the Modern Era<sup>19</sup>**

No claim is made to any levels of continuity between Wesley and Polanyi, epistemologically or otherwise. The most that I assert is that they are kindred spirits in that both found a way to move beyond the rationalistic hegemony that characterized the intellectual world in which each worked. Whereas the rationalism with which Wesley had to contend was that of the Latitudinarians and the resultant deism which had decided, on the basis of clarity and simplicity, what constituted a perfectly rational,

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<sup>18</sup>George C. Cell, *Rediscovery of Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), 84-86, 168-94. See Matthews, 308-09 and Thorsen, 183-84 and 292n65.

<sup>19</sup>The material in this and the following section is condensed from my forthcoming *Resurrection Knowledge* (Abingdon Press: June, 1999).

natural, and religious order, for Polanyi there was a world of “scientific knowledge” characterized by an objectivication which had decided in an *a priori* fashion what could and could not be true, typically on the basis of a very narrowly defined concept of empiricism. With regard to religious assumptions, historicism was the reigning paradigm for one hundred years (and for some still is!). With regard to a wider range of epistemological issues, the desire for objective knowledge was degraded into a narrow objectivism, or objectification of knowledge. If the subject of our knowing cannot be reduced to an object, then it cannot properly said to be apprehended and known. Just as Wesley insisted that the deists had it quite wrong with regard to what Christians could and could not know, Michael Polanyi (not excluding frames of reference that are Christian, but not confining his intentions to them either) has opened the door to conversations that are not hedged in by objectivism.

Parker Palmer has correctly observed: “Objectivism begins by assuming a sharp distinction between the knower and the objects to be known. These objects exist ‘out there,’ apart from and independent of the knower. They wait, passive and inert, for us to know them. We, the knowers, are the active agents. We move into the field of objects equipped with tools that allow us to grasp them. Then we attempt to observe and dissect the objects by means of empirical measurement and logical analysis.”<sup>20</sup> It is not Palmer’s intention to engage historicism in its theological manifestation, but he has described for us the reigning frame of reference for the last 100 years with regard to distinctive Christian assumptions about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Witness the Jesus Seminar’s voting by colored marbles to determine exactly what Jesus did or did not say. The cool detachment reflected in this voting process reduces truth and knowledge to a form of spectator sport.

The agenda for objectivism is to eliminate all elements of subjectivity, all biases and preconceptions, so that our knowledge can become purely empirical. For the sake of objectivity, our inner realities are factored out of the knowledge equation. This is why, even today, the professor is active and the student is passive in many university classrooms. The

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<sup>20</sup>Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 27. Of the works in print, Palmer’s work is one of the most sustained pedagogical critiques of Enlightenment objectivism which offers a viable alternative, although his suggestions track differently than what I am suggesting.

teacher is qualified to represent the facts because he or she has overcome subjective bias through long years of training. In Palmer's words, "The students have not yet achieved this state of grace; they are still under the influence of emotions, prejudices, and whims."<sup>21</sup> The professor's role is to teach the students the facts; the student's role is to learn the facts: "I tell. You write. You rehearse these facts, at mid-term and on the final exam."

Anything that can be counted as true must conform to this paradigm of a narrowly defined factuality, capable of isolation and verification by empirical, rational, and logical method. Should you bring something forward that does not conform, this, by definition, cannot possibly be true. We gain mastery (objective knowledge) over whatever is brought to the table by submitting it to our hermeneutic of suspicion and doubt: *It can be judged to be true if . . . but it cannot be true unless. . .* In so doing we have limited *a priori* what can and what cannot be true.

Peter Berger has suggested that we may move forward epistemologically if we will allow the application of what we know as the "sociology of knowledge." The fundamental axiom at work in this sociology is this: you must assume something is true in order to know whether anything at all is true. You may, in fact, assume that several things are true even if they seem contradictory. The goal of this sociology of knowledge is to obtain some level of coherence. In his *Rumor of Angels* Berger criticized the manner in which objectivist thinking had sought to invalidate the reality of a religious view of the world. He used the sociology of knowledge to "relativize the relativizers." Subsequently, in *The Heretical Imperative*, Berger continued his assault on modernity, spelling out in some detail how the sociology of knowledge allows three avenues of response to modernism: deduction, reduction, and induction. We always have choices. Indeed, says Berger: "One of the elements of modern consciousness that is very hard to 'think away' is . . . the multiplication of options."<sup>22</sup>

Put differently, post-modern consciousness requires a movement from prescribed possibilities to multiple options. To decide means to reflect. The post-modern individual must stop and pause where pre-moderns could act with cool certainty. We live in a world of institutionalized

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<sup>21</sup>Palmer, 35.

<sup>22</sup>Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 11.

pluralism. In Berger's words: "The typical situation in which the individual lived in a traditional society was one where there were highly reliable plausibility structures. Conversely, modern societies are characterized by unstable, incohesive, unreliable plausibility structures. In the modern situation, certainty is hard to come by."<sup>23</sup>

The intellectual constructs through which we can strive for this elusive certainty are three in number.<sup>24</sup> In the face of post-modern secularity and pluralism, deduction is the *a priori* assertion of traditional religious authority as our guide. The deductive option has the cognitive advantage of once more providing religious reflection with objective criteria of validity. The major disadvantage is the difficulty of sustaining the subjective plausibility of such a procedure in our context. This is the option utilized by those who proudly wave the flag of Fundamentalism.

Our second option is reduction, reinterpreting the tradition in terms of our post-modern assumptions. There are, of course, degrees of doing this, but the end result is typically the same. The reductive option is marked by something more radical than the employment of this or that modern intellectual tool, such as historical-critical exegesis. It has most often resulted in an exchange of authorities—the authority of modern thought or post-modern consciousness is substituted for the authority of tradition. The *Deus dixit* ["God says"] of old is replaced by an equally insistent *Homo modernus dixit* ["The modern person says"]. In other words, modern consciousness and its alleged categories become the criteria of validity for religious reflection. These criteria are also given an objective status, insofar as those who take this option tend to have very definite ideas as to what is and what is not "permissible" for us to affirm as truth. Taking this option opens up a cognitive program by which affirmations derived from the tradition are systematically translated into terms "permissible" within the framework of modernity. We hear and see only what is believable. The trade-off for this comfortable believability is that the traditions, with all their religious contents, tend to disappear or dissolve in the process of absorption into our modern (or emerging post-modern) consciousness. The attendant result of this option is the dead-end of a totally secularized view of reality. This reduction is not viable for our historic faith communities, the church. We must live with the *plurality* of

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 60-65.

our world, but we do not have to succumb to a comprehensive *pluralism* that is characterized by a-religious or anti-religious and thoroughly relativized categories.

This brings us to our third epistemological possibility: Induction. This requires that we embrace the plurality of our world and turn to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations—one's own experience, to whatever extent that is possible, and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions, such as the church. This range may be of varying breadth, limited minimally to one's own tradition, or expanded maximally to include the fullest available record of human religious history. Groups of individuals or one person may choose to limit the range for reasons related to the interplay of the wide and diverse possibilities, but this does not alter the fundamental assumption: a deliberately empirical attitude, a weighing and assessing frame of mind—not necessarily cool and dispassionate, but unwilling to impose closure on the quest for religious truth by invoking an outside authority, either modern or pre-modern. The advantage of this option is its open-mindedness and the freshness that usually comes from a nonauthoritarian approach to questions of truth. The disadvantage, of course, is that open-mindedness tends to be linked to open-endedness, and this frustrates our religious hunger for certainty.

It is important to note here the caveat that I have included (contra Berger) that a group or individual may decide that certain religious explorations are beyond the pale. While for some this avoidance may be the result of their desire for some level of certainty, for others it may be motivations of coherence. These two are not the same, but they are clearly related. We cannot hold indefinitely to self-contradictions and retain coherence. While dialectic is unavoidable, inherent contradiction is not viable. *Openness is our attitude; personal and community experience (past and present) is our primary venue; and a coherent view of reality is our goal.* Knowledge gained in this way is not cool and dispassionate, but highly personal and potentially transformative.

### **Writings of Michael Polanyi**

One of the more sophisticated avenues for claiming truth along these lines, avoiding objectification but retaining the personal dimension cherished in story and narrative epistemologies, is to be found in the writings

of Michael Polanyi.<sup>25</sup> What Polanyi calls “tacit knowledge” is a “personal knowledge” by which we *know* more than can be objectified. In the Enlightenment epistemologies, as we have seen, it was not allowed that one could know any more than what could be objectified. One might *believe* more than what could be objectified, but only objectified truth was *knowledge*. In Polanyi’s thought this self-imposed limitation is transcended. The transcending is accomplished by a “scientist” doing epistemology in a “scientific” manner. What more could one ask!

Polanyi’s thought is heuristic, inclined toward the discovery of truth in its rich and varied textures. This, however, does not mean that objectivity gives way to rampant subjectivity. One of the more important, yet more misunderstood concepts in Polanyi’s thought is his proposal of an alternative to the ideal of objective scientific knowledge, what we are calling objectification. Polanyi deeply believes in objectivity, but of a different kind and on a different basis from what is widely understood.<sup>26</sup> I call this an objectivity beyond objectification. He describes for us the essential nature of the scientific outlook that he is trying to overcome: “The declared aim of modern science is to establish a strictly detached, objective knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> From the beginning he asserts: “I start by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment. In the exact sciences, this false ideal is perhaps harmless, for it is in fact disregarded there by most scientists. But we shall see that it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science.”<sup>28</sup> We recall the manner in which objectification, following Plato’s dualism, has held theology captive for almost three hundred years.

Richard Rorty has incisively criticized the reigning epistemology of the Enlightenment derived from Plato, rooted as it is in his conception of true and necessary knowledge as a kind of mental vision: “There was, we moderns may say with the ingratitude of hindsight, no particular reason

<sup>25</sup>The best introduction to Polanyi is still Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Also, “Upon First Sitting Down to Read *Personal Knowledge* . . .” in *Intellect and Hope*, eds. Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968), 3-18, gives an excellent account of the difficulties and unique demands upon the reader of Polanyi’s thought.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), esp. ch. 1.

<sup>27</sup>Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 91.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

why this ocular metaphor seized the imagination of the founders of Western thought. But it did. . . . The notion of ‘contemplation,’ of knowledge of universal concepts or truths . . . makes the Eye of the Mind the inescapable model for the better sort of knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> Rorty’s own view is that the ocular metaphor has led philosophy, and I would add theology, particularly since Descartes, into a blind alley, and that we should instead take a pragmatic approach to knowledge. This move is indispensable to the post-modern era, but it seems to me that Michael Polanyi has a more comprehensive epistemological move in view. Gunton observes:

Polanyi’s objections to the old Platonic metaphor are part intellectual (it distorts) and part moral (it alienates). In particular, by viewing the mind as external to the world—contemplating it from without, as one might view a landscape from an aircraft—it also sees it as impersonal and with pretensions to omniscience. The “critical” ideology resulting from the picture makes the mind claim too much for some forms of knowledge—those it can, supposedly, *contemplate* in a totally objective way: truths of reason and basic sense experience—and too little for everything else, including matters of morality, politics and theology.<sup>30</sup>

Due to limited purpose and scope, we can only touch on one central value and supposition in Polanyi’s epistemology—its heuristic character. In the old scientific model, discovery and progress were alleged to come by way of cool detachment. When Polanyi rejects this, he also demonstrates that its very projection was, in fact, a delusion. No one really does research by adhering to a philosophy of science characterized by impersonal detachment. If we did, then discovery would be accidental. A discovery may come as a surprise accompanied by “Eureka!,” but in reality the researcher enters the routine of established procedures, following a promising problem, data, or hunch. The level of subjectivity inherent in this decision is unavoidable. The very nature of discovery is marked by a personal dimension that is the Achilles heel of the objective ideal of “scientific” knowledge at the assumptive level. For the creative imagination that leads to discovery is no more impersonal than the person making the discovery.

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<sup>29</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: University Press, 1980), 38ff.

<sup>30</sup>Colin Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 144.

What is the nature of creative imagination that produces scientific discoveries?<sup>31</sup> Polanyi found his clue in Gestalt psychology, but he went a step further. Gestalt teaches that our knowledge is the integration of certain pieces in our perception that we put together to form a whole. Whereas the psychologists chose the mechanistic point as their place to stop, regarding perception to be an internal equilibration of external stimuli, Polanyi went a step further. He added that the seeing of a pattern is the outcome of an *intentional* effort of the person to ascertain order in reality. Put another way, a micro-insight was given a macro-application.

The implications of this insight were far-reaching. It meant that, not only was the act of discovery dependent upon the personal powers of thought, but it overthrew three centuries of epistemology that had built upon a structure of knowledge which insisted that personal and subjective levels of participation must be eliminated. The assumption that knowledge could not be personal, that it must be impersonal and objective, is declared invalid. The most basic assumptions of the reigning epistemologies were challenged by an altogether contrary notion: *our knowing is an integration of bodily and intuitive clues that we indwell in order to understand*. The cool, dispassionate and impersonal researcher is not only called into question; it is implied that such a person never existed.

Polanyi went about making his case in the most *personal* way possible. He began to collect cases in which the most traditional scientific rules were flouted. He became, as he describes himself, “a scandal-monger,” showing that it was not to the advantage of science to follow its dogma of impersonal, objective knowledge. One of his most striking cases was the story of Einstein’s “discovery” of the theory of relativity.<sup>32</sup> According to most physics textbooks, Einstein was led to his theory by the failure of the famous Michelson and Morley experiment of 1887, an experiment which expected to find that a light signal sent out from a given point would be affected by the motion of the earth. The experiment, however, showed no discrepancy regardless of the direction of the measurement. Working from the objective ideal of knowledge, which holds that science works from observable facts, textbooks said that Einstein set out to find a new conception of space and time to explain the Michelson and Morley experiment.

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<sup>31</sup>Cf. Michael Polanyi, “The Creative Imagination,” *Chemical and Engineering News*, 44 (April, 1966), 85-93.

<sup>32</sup>*Personal Knowledge*, 9-11.

Actually, Einstein himself indicated in his autobiography that the new theory was primarily a work of his imagination. Incredible as it may sound, he had begun to ponder intuitively the problem of relativity when a schoolboy of only sixteen years. Polanyi wrote to Einstein, and he confirmed in a personal letter to Polanyi that it was indeed an intuitive path that led to the discovery of relativity. When Polanyi published this account in *Personal Knowledge* in 1958, the scientific dogma about Einstein did not go away. In 1963 a prominent philosopher of science said that Polanyi's account was pure invention and that Polanyi's description of Einstein's discovery "was like Schiller's story that his poetic inspiration came to him by smelling rotten apples."<sup>33</sup> Not until 1969, when Gerald Holton confirmed Polanyi's account with evidence based on Einstein's personal papers, did the scientific community concede the priority for Einstein of intuition over scientific objectivity as the place where the discovery began. The most coherent view of reality available to us today began intuitively in the mind of a precocious boy of sixteen!

The importance of a particular discovery is, of course, surpassed by the nature of making discoveries. Following through the nature of discovery, we are led to a total rethinking of the general idea of knowledge itself. Discovery is the validating marker, but the nature of the discovery process leads to a truer understanding of knowledge and of ourselves as persons. Gelwick has asserted that inherent in the structures of Polanyi's heuristic epistemology are three assumptions. Though distilled from Polanyi's thought twenty years ago, they remain relevant at this juncture in our society:

First and foremost is the assumption that we are living in a crisis of civilized culture. It is a crisis that has been developing for at least three centuries, probably one that recurs in every major cultural epoch as each civilization has to decide to renew itself and live or to decay and die. [Polanyi's cultural reference is the "West" in general, but it certainly fits the North American context of the last one hundred years.] It is a crisis of the unifying beliefs and traditions that tie a society together and guide its functional progress.

A second assumption arises out of the nature of our cultural crisis, namely, the need for a basis of belief upon which

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. Michael Polanyi, "Genius in Science," *Encounter*, 38 (January, 1972), 46.

we can act. We are in a crisis of belief about belief. Belief itself is discredited by the philosophies and outlooks that guide our present affairs. The impacts of ethical relativism and of scientific materialism have led to doubting any convictions that cannot be readily proved. There is a widespread lack of self-confidence in countering the eroding trends of nihilism. Uncertainty besets the believer in truth and good as ideals for moral conduct because they are lofty, vague, and difficult to define. Against the more obvious evidence of relativism and laboratory tests, the burden of proof appears unbearable. . . . When the major symbols of meaning today tell us that we are fated to absurdity, we do not attempt to change the situation. We try to live heroically while the world collapses around us. We need to know if there is a rational and credible basis on which we can believe in ideals and goals that are less tangible and incapable of conclusive scientific, objectified proof.

The third assumption is that there is a need for grounds for hope that are consonant with a scientific and rational understanding of the world, but not confined to objectification. Generally, modern science has given us the best understanding of the operation and potentialities of nature. What is needed is not a revolt against science, technology, or rationality, but a new vision of science in which human life and its bond with the created order can provide for us a creative home. Since the world views built upon science are largely responsible for our self-alienation and loss of confidence, it is acutely important that we have a picture in which we can be at one with both a scientific understanding of reality and the highest aspirations and beliefs of humanity.<sup>34</sup>

Polanyi's theory of knowledge and discovery is a fertile field for addressing these issues in our emerging post-modern era. Polanyi fundamentally subverts the distinction between contingent and necessary knowledge, asserting that all human knowledge is contingent and unavoidably rooted in the "knower." He would say to us first, the "knower" *indwells* that reality which waits to be discovered. This is a highly personal understanding that requires the participation of the individual. Detachment is by definition impossible. That which awaits discovery is both "out there" and "inside me" at the same time, or better, "I am

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<sup>34</sup>Gelwick, pp. xii-xv.

in it.” Polanyi says that when we are *indwelling* reality we have a *tacit knowledge* of that reality. Imagination and intuition are parts of this, but they are not all there is. In our exploring that which we indwell, we are already in the process of *personal knowing*. As we explore the reality, the tacit knowledge increases. At times the increase is exponential, because what we are learning is not mere fact, but rather a knowledge of the structure of reality. In Polanyi’s words, I aim for a perspective “in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might *conceivably* [italics added] be false.”<sup>35</sup> In this synergy of discovery and knowing, the whole is always more than the sum of its parts; but we do not have to have all the parts in order to perceive the whole. An actual reality can be affirmed and *known* even if we do not have all the pieces. A pastiche, increasing in clarity, is adequate for our goal, namely, to discover a picture of reality that provides for us a coherent view of life.

## Conclusion

While we have claimed no continuity or dependence between Wesley and Polanyi, it would seem that there are similarities beyond their being kindred spirits; or perhaps it is more accurate to say that there are at least three points by which we might lay claim to their being kindred spirits. First, both developed an epistemology by which rationalism’s self-imposed limitations on reality were broken. Secondly, both men set out the parameters of an open, and therefore heuristic epistemology. And thirdly, both developed a concept of knowledge that is intensely personal, and therefore potentially transformative. When two people can find this much on which their intentionalities agree, they are, for sure, kindred spirits.

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<sup>35</sup>*Personal Knowledge*, 214.

# **THEOLOGY AND FILM IN POSTMODERN CULTURE: A DIALOGUE WITH *FORREST GUMP AND PULP FICTION***

by

**Bryan Stone**

Among the most important of the many contributions that a Wesleyan theological perspective is likely to make to contemporary religious reflection is its stalwart advocacy for and optimism about the possibilities of God's grace in transforming human life, both personally and socially. Proclaiming, modeling, and serving as an agent of this transformation, however, is increasingly problematic today, given contemporary attitudes (more or less "postmodern") toward history and transcendence, self and personality, and sin and evil. If Wesleyans are to be able to talk meaningfully and truthfully about the transforming power of grace today, we need to understand our culture and find appropriate categories and vehicles for expressing the reality of God's gracious and sanctifying presence in the world and in human life.

I propose to examine two recent popular films, *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction*, for clues to understanding prevailing postmodern cultural patterns. The two films are as different as day and night, but each film in its own way can be viewed as an important index of contemporary values and concerns. Both films raise and illuminate questions about the postmodern condition in such a way as to be of considerable use for reflection on the role of religion in current culture. Additionally, each of these films communicates or presupposes what can reasonably be called "faith claims" about the reality of sin and evil, the experience of grace, and the

possibility of transformation. It may be possible, therefore, to view these films as potential dialogue partners with a Wesleyan theology that has much at stake in these claims and whose task it is to ask about their meaning and truth.

### **Forrest Gump and Pulp Fiction**

At the 1994 Academy Awards, although a standard five films were nominated for Best Picture, two films clearly stood apart from the pack as primary contenders: *Forrest Gump*, directed by Richard Zemeckis, and *Pulp Fiction*, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. *Forrest Gump* was an enormous box office success—number one for that year and, in fact, one of the highest grossing films ever released. *Pulp Fiction* was also well received at theatres, ranking tenth in domestic box office sales for that year. Though *Forrest Gump* went away with the Oscar, it did not make a sweep and, clearly, *Pulp Fiction* was the choice of most professional film critics. Not surprisingly, Tarantino won the award for Best Original Screenplay.

*Forrest Gump* is the charming story of the title character (played by Tom Hanks), a simple-minded southern man who reflects on his eventful life with all its struggles and triumphs while sitting at a bus stop. With an IQ of 75, Forrest has managed to move from wearing leg braces to setting football rushing records at the University of Alabama. He has won medals for his service in Vietnam (specifically for taking shrapnel in the buttocks), met three U. S. Presidents, achieved world-wide acclaim as a ping-pong player, and accidentally triggered the entire Watergate scandal by calling security one night concerned about some men who “must be lookin’ for a fuse box or somethin’” and whose flashlights are keeping him awake in the Watergate Hotel. When Forrest was young and in leg braces he taught Elvis to dance; he was present at George Wallace’s standoff with the National Guard at the integration of the University of Alabama, and he was the impetus behind such national trends during the 1970s as jogging, the “smiley face,” and a popular bumper sticker that shall go unnamed. Forrest stumbles into a shrimp empire and also has the good fortune to have had his money invested early on in Apple computers.

Forrest’s extraordinary story is intertwined throughout the film with almost every major post-World War II event, personality, and crisis. The film features a remarkable soundtrack and high-tech cinematography that digitally inserts Tom Hanks into actual historical news footage. But,

while violence, turmoil, greed, racism, and disease swirl all around him, Forrest remains relatively untouched by staying loyal to God, his mama (Sally Fields), and his childhood sweetheart, Jenny (Robin Wright). It is Forrest's relationship to Jenny, above all, that provides the vital emotional thread that binds the story together and gives to the film its sentimental quality—a quality that was apparently attractive to hundreds of thousands of today's movie goers.

*Pulp Fiction*, on the other hand, is a film that has no protagonist and, instead, virtually revels in the violence, crime, and sleaze of underground Los Angeles. The film is an interweaving of three stories told non-chronologically and is virtually impossible to summarize neatly or briefly. The film opens in a coffee shop where an adoring couple, "Honey Bunny" and "Pumpkin," reflect on their career of sticking up liquor stores and decide to rob the very restaurant where they are sitting. As they pull out their pistols and jump onto the tables shouting obscenities, the opening credits begin to roll and the film then shifts to the first of its stories.

John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson are two gangsters on their way to a routine hit for their boss, Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). The two men talk casually on their way to work about such topics as the European name for quarter-pounders (because of the metric system) and the sensuality of foot massages. They arrive at their destination, kill two college-age men who have double-crossed Marcellus, and recover a mysterious briefcase that belongs to him. Later, Vincent (Travolta) has been "ordered" by Marcellus, who is away on business, to provide a night on the town for his wife, Mia, played by Uma Thurman. On his way to pick up Mia, Vincent stops by his friendly neighborhood drug pusher's house to score some heroin and shoot up to take the edge off of his assignment for the evening. Vincent and Mia go out to eat at Jack Rabbit Slim's, an elaborate set created by Tarantino with vintage 1950s movie memorabilia, convertibles, and servers dressed up as movie stars from that era. In keeping with the spirit of *Pulp Fiction*, the entire scene contains reference after reference to American pop culture and virtually oozes nostalgia. Even Travolta's character is inescapably loaded with the baggage of his previous work in *Saturday Night Fever*, despite the fact that he has gotten heavier and older. In fact, this not-so-subtle reference is deliberate Tarantino style; he even has Travolta dance a twist with Mia that is a deliberate send-up for fans of Travolta and *Saturday Night Fever*. After dinner, while Vincent is in the bathroom, Mia discovers his stash of heroine in his over-

coat and, thinking it to be cocaine, snorts it and overdoses. Scared for his life and for hers, Vincent rushes her back to his pusher's house and she is revived when Vincent works up the courage to plunge a huge needle filled with adrenaline through her breastplate.

The second story features Bruce Willis as a boxer named Butch who has been paid off by Marcellus to take a fall in an upcoming fight. He double-crosses Marcellus and is now on the run. Butch's lover forgets his prized gold watch and so Butch must return to his apartment to retrieve the watch. There he kills Vincent who is waiting for him. He then literally runs into Marcellus as he is fleeing the scene. Butch and Marcellus fight, shoot, and stumble through the streets until they end up in a pawnshop with two men who tie them up and begin plans to rape them, beginning with Marcellus. Somehow Butch escapes, but returns to rescue Marcellus and, in turn, finds himself pardoned by Marcellus.

In the final story we return to the first story. Vincent and Jules have just killed the two men only to discover that a third man has been hiding in the bathroom. He emerges unloading a fusillade of bullets at close range at Vincent and Jules. Miraculously, none of the bullets hits them and they, of course, kill him. The dialogue then turns to a theological debate as to whether this event was in fact divine intervention or just luck. Jules, who likes to quote a passage from Ezekiel just before he kills people, experiences the event as a miracle and decides to give up his life of crime. As they continue their theological debate in the car with Marvin, their young informant in the back seat, Vincent accidentally shoots Marvin's head off, creating a bloody mess. They manage to get the car off the road and into the garage of a nearby friend, who insists that they clean up the mess quickly before his wife gets home. One of Marcellus' associates, "the Wolf" (played by Harvey Keitel), is called in and he directs the cleanup with precision and efficiency over a cup of coffee.

In the final scene, Jules and Vincent are now sitting in a coffee shop, further debating the miraculous nature of their earlier experience that day. Vincent can be present again, though he was killed earlier in the film because the scenes are in no chronological order. In a "moment of clarity," Jules is overpowered by the fact that "God got involved." Again, he vows to give up killing. Unfortunately, this coffee shop is the same one that "Honey Bunny" and "Pumpkin" have decided to rob and we are back at the beginning of the film. When the two robbers attempt to take Marcellus' briefcase from Jules, however, he turns the tables on them and now

has them at gunpoint. Rather than kill them, however, he reinterprets the Ezekiel passage and spares their lives. He even allows them to leave with his cash-filled wallet along with the other wallets they have collected. Jules has been transformed.

Each of the three stories of *Pulp Fiction*, then, features some form of redemption. Jules spares the lives of “Honey Bunny” and “Pumpkin.” Indeed, he considers himself to have purchased their lives. Butch, even when he has an opportunity to escape, returns to rescue his would-be killer, Marcellus, from the homosexual rapists. And, finally, Mia is resurrected after a drug overdose.

### Elements of the “Postmodern” in Contemporary Film

As different as these two films are, each in its own way demonstrates several trends, or what might be called “traces,”<sup>1</sup> in contemporary culture that can reasonably be described as “postmodern.” That does not mean, however, that film necessarily lends itself easily to any neat categorization as either “modern” or “postmodern.” On the one hand, the cinema is clearly *not* a postmodern phenomenon. Film has its origins in a distinctively modern worldview—a worldview dominated by a sense of scientific and technological mastery over the forces of nature and an Enlightenment confidence in human progress and reason. If we further factor in the fact that film as a cultural medium has, from its very beginnings, been tied to the ambitions of modern capitalism, we can readily see how closely wedded film has been and continues to be to a modernist mindset.

On the other hand, film can be described as “the preeminently postmodern medium” (De Bleeckere: 99). In a culture where language is problematic and where image and style are primary, film is uniquely suited for the communication and formation of cultural values that were once formed by other institutions and media. In any case, whether *Pulp Fiction* or *Forrest Gump* may reasonably be called “postmodern” is not the primary focus of this essay. Indeed, though *Pulp Fiction* especially has been branded by a number of film critics as definitively postmodern, the question of labeling any film or genre of films as postmodern remains problematic. Nonetheless, I think we can specify a few of the traces of postmodern culture that at least surface, if not shape the two films under consideration. I will attempt to outline some of these traces in two broad

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. De Bleeckere.

categories: “Transcendence and the Subversion of Meta-Narratives” and “Self, Evil, and Transformation.”

### **Transcendence and the Subversion of Meta-Narratives**

A first characteristic of postmodern culture that can be found reflected in a number of contemporary films is a general skepticism about modern (Enlightenment) values such as rationality, truth, and progress as well as the possibility of any kind of universal, neutral, or objective knowledge. This skepticism is reflected especially in the abandonment of master or meta-narratives that pretend to explain or comprehend the whole of things. Instead, we find an emphasis on fragmented or multiple narratives and story lines, “the thoroughgoing relativizing of the Pravda-concept or a general rejection of any ideological figure of truth that is written with a capital letter” (De Bleekere: 98). For this reason, postmodern culture is generally sensitive to maintaining a diversity of viewpoints, behaviors, and cultural expressions without seeking their unification or integration.

The implications of this abandonment or subversion of meta-narratives are never more apparent than in postmodern approaches to history. While the modern sense of history tended to be triumphalistic, with a heavy sense of progress and achievement, the postmodern outlook tends to be nostalgic but uneasy about identifying patterns of progress in history. A postmodern viewpoint instead sees history as in flux, as open rather than closed, as an endless succession of “nows.” According to Brenda K. Marshall:

Postmodernism is about how we are defined within specific historical, social, and cultural matrices. It’s about race, class gender, erotic identity and practice, nationality, age, and ethnicity. It’s about power and powerlessness, and about empowerment. It’s about threads we trace, and trace, and trace. But not to a conclusion. To increase knowledge, yes. But never to innocent knowledge. To better understanding, yes. But never to pure insight. Postmodernism is about history. But not the kind of “History” that lets us think we can know the past. History in the postmodern moment becomes histories and questions. It asks: Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose? Postmodernism is about histories not told, retold, untold. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated. It’s about the refusal to

see history as linear, as leading straight up to today in some recognizable pattern—all set for us to make sense of. . . . The postmodern moment is not something that is to be defined chronologically; rather, it is a rupture in our consciousness (4-5).

In many ways, the character of Forrest Gump might seem like the poster-child for this postmodern worldview. Forrest is unable to recognize or provide any sort of transcendent meaning to life or history. His friend, Bubba, who lays dying in his arms after being shot in Vietnam, asks Forrest, "Why did this happen?" A modernist response might be to have Gump express some profound truth about the meaning of life and of Bubba's death in the whole scheme of things. Forrest's answer, on the contrary, is the simple but true, "You got shot." Over and over again, Gump cannot see the big picture or put the pieces together. When Forrest goes out for a run one day, he inadvertently ends up starting the jogging phenomenon of the 1970s and gains a cult following. As reporters run up alongside him, they ask, "Why are you running? Are you doing this for world peace? Are you doing this for the homeless? Are you running for women's rights? Or for the environment? For animal rights?" Forrest's response is only, "I just felt like running." After running for 3 years, 2 months, 14 days, and 16 hours, Forrest finally stops running in the middle of an Arizona desert. A hush falls over the crowd of followers, anticipating his words of wisdom. "Quiet, he's gonna say something," says one of them. Forrest offers only the following sage remarks: "I'm pretty tired. I think I'll go home now."

Forrest's outlook on life constantly subverts any kind of master narrative that would explain the *real* meaning of historical events. Indeed, it is for this very reason that many reviewers have criticized the film because it trivializes, for example, the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights movement. Forrest reduces the historical significance of events by narrating only their immediate and local impact and is apparently unable to pull together their broader meaning. Instead his summary of events is typically the simple phrase, "That's all I have to say about that." In this fashion, Forrest Gump is representative of a postmodern trace in contemporary film that recovers and recuperates the past not by attempting to lay out the purpose of history, but by participation in the particular through deliberate borrowing, nostalgia, or simulation. History, as seen through the eyes of Forrest Gump, is little more than a series of audio-visual postcards from

the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Indeed, one could even infer from the film that in order to understand world history for the last fifty years, one need only buy the soundtrack.

What we find in *Forrest Gump* is one postmodern version of abandoning meta-narratives, but a version that plays on a naïve, quasi-innocent attempt to disavow the evil or the meaning of events unfolding around Forrest—a kind of nostalgia for a pre-fall situation that disavows knowledge of good and evil. About the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, for example, we get no Oliver Stone conspiracy theories from Forrest. Instead, his only reaction is, “Must be hard being brothers.” In reflecting back upon the fact that his friend Jenny never wanted to go home, Forrest is too simple even to recognize sexual abuse for what it is. Instead, his recollection of her father is that “He was a very loving man. He was always kissing and touching Jenny and her sisters.” For Forrest Gump, ignorance is clearly moral bliss. As Thomas Leitch puts it, “We should all be so lucky, the movie suggests, for it trades at once. . . on our ability to see in ways Forrest can’t why his story is touching, and our disavowal of the realization that without his anti-intellectual simplicity, his resistance to knowing certain kinds of things about the world, he and his story wouldn’t be touching at all” (2).

While *Forrest Gump*’s outlook as a film character might be said to express some of the primary features of a postmodern outlook, the style and structure of the film itself is rather straightforward and rarely deviates from standard film plots that narrate a character’s journey through various crises and resolutions. *Pulp Fiction*, on the other hand, is shaped in almost every way by a postmodern perspective and style, especially in the very structure of the film itself—its narrative, staging, cinematography, and editing. The film makes use of a variety of cinematic genres, especially the kind of crime fiction and film *noir* of the 1930s and 1940s, but pushes genre to its limits by fragmenting the plot and infusing the script with dozens and dozens of references to pop culture of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In fact, almost any given scene contains a cliché borrowed from some aspect of pop culture, from *The Godfather* to the *Road Runner*, from *Kiss Me Deadly* to *Kung Fu*, from *Deliverance* to *Douglas Sirk*. As with *Forrest Gump*, the soundtrack of *Pulp Fiction* is deliberately nostalgic and essential to the network of signifiers, references, and clichés that structures the film itself. The entire film is a pastiche of intertextual references to the work of some of the greatest and most artistic directors, writers, and

actors.<sup>2</sup> As Peter Travers says of director Quentin Tarantino, “He revels in pop culture, especially that of the ’70s, and he’s no snob. The French New Wave or blaxploitation. *The Wild Bunch* or *The Brady Bunch*—it’s all grist.” (80). For that reason, so much in Tarantino’s movies depends on the extent to which the audience has previously absorbed popular culture—its songs, movies, television shows, and commercials.

What we find in films like *Pulp Fiction* and, to a certain extent, *Forrest Gump*, instead of meaning systems and master-narratives is music and image. In other words, the aesthetic is the postmodern vehicle for meaning. Substance is replaced by signifiers and these signifiers stand primarily in relationship to other signifiers rather than in relation to actual real objects, resulting in a valuation of diversity over unity, heterogeneity over purity, and pop culture over high art. Postmodernism, then, is a reaction against the elitism of modernism. When there is no single privileged perspective under the guise of neutral and objective reason and when all perspectives become valid, popular culture is as valid as high art. Indeed, one of the consistent qualities of films that tend to be labeled “postmodern” today is their appeal to both popular and professional constituencies alike (Collins: 136).

Any attempt to pull together the meaning of a film like *Pulp Fiction*, therefore, is bound to be met with disappointment. Tarantino certainly does not see himself as any kind of “messenger”—to the frustration, it should be added, of numerous critics and viewers.<sup>3</sup> In *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino dispenses with any overarching theme or conflict that requires resolution. Instead he links together three very different stories in a manner not unlike Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts*, but with a non-linear chronological structure that even has John Travolta’s character, Vincent, present in the film’s ending even though he has actually been killed by the middle of the film.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For example: Robert Altman, Jean-Luc Godard, Alfred Hitchcock, J. D. Salinger, Joel Silver, Robert Wise, and Jim McBride.

<sup>3</sup>This is even more the case with his previous film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992).

<sup>4</sup>Sarah Kerr has identified twelve main episodes or action-sequences that comprise the three stories of *Pulp Fiction* and then shown how they would actually line up if placed in “real time.” The result is a jumbled narrative structure that proceeds in this order: 4, 2, 6, 1, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 2, 3, and back to 4 again. As Kerr notes, this fragmented structure allows Tarantino “to show his characters are helplessly interconnected and helplessly isolated at the same time, and it keeps him from speculating on their motives in crude psychological terms” (22).

The fact that both *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction* challenge the ascendancy of any kind of metanarrative or overarching explanation of things does not mean, however, that no room is left for the transcendent. In *Pulp Fiction*, for example, all three of the stories in the film feature a dramatic redemption that is nothing short of gracious. Vincent and Jules are miraculously saved from death. Mia is resurrected by a shot of adrenaline. Butch is saved not only from sadistic torture, but also from his debt to Marcellus. In fact, it is impossible not to notice that, as Butch flees the scene on Zed the rapist's motorcycle, the word "Grace" is painted on the gas tank. Butch is literally "saved by grace."

Of course, that does not mean that grace can be irrefutably comprehended or identified in a postmodern outlook. As Forrest Gump knows, "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get." In the end, Forrest is still left wondering if we're all put here for a purpose or if we're just floating around on the wind. So also, Vincent does not see what Jules sees as a miracle. He says to Jules, "The miracle *you* witnessed. *I* witnessed a freak occurrence." But perhaps the modern mistake has been to think that God's presence is guaranteed when meaning is guaranteed. The postmodern vision allows that the truth of transcendence is in the questions it raises for our existence rather than in the answers it provides. Perhaps God is present not so much in providing "meaning" and "understanding," but in providing love, acceptance, and transformation.

Just because postmodern culture has little or no interest in laying hold of universal or objective meaning and truth does not mean that the presence of the numinous is thereby excluded and all forms of transcendence have been banished. What is banished is any understanding of grace that is tied to institutional channels that can be neatly maintained and controlled by an ecclesiastical or cultural elite. What is excluded is the modernist path of comprehending transcendence, especially where that comprehension bases its claim on a privileged appeal to authority. It is possible to think of postmodernism as not at all excluding transcendence, but rather as making room for transcendence in surprising and creative ways. For a postmodern understanding, grace is real, but de-centered. Grace *embraces us* from the margins of human culture rather than being *embraced by us* at the elite centers of culture. Perhaps we may even agree with Forrest Gump who, reflecting on his experience of Vietnam, says: "Sometimes I couldn't tell where heaven stopped and earth began."

The inability to locate the transcendent is not an affirmation of its absence.

### **Self, Evil, and Transformation**

Closely related to the postmodern skepticism about achieving an all-embracing grasp of objective, universal truth is a similar skepticism about the possibility of identifying a unified, coherent self. The postmodern understanding of the self parallels its general understanding of the universe as less of a machine and more of a system so that the emphasis falls on interrelationships rather than on understanding the parts in relationship to the whole, as with the modern project. For this reason, *alienation of the subject* in modern film is replaced by *fragmentation of the subject* in postmodern film. Rather than appealing to some universal essence to the self, postmodern thought places emphasis on how we are defined and constructed as selves within our particular historical, cultural, and social matrices. Thus, to understand “self,” one must take into account one’s race, gender, nationality, class, sexuality, and situation in various power dynamics.

If postmodern culture thereby shifts the accent from the universal to the particular and from the general to the local, we should not be surprised that this results in a blurring of the line between good and evil as absolute, universal, moral categories. That is not to say that postmodern films never express an underlying truth. The emphasis, however, is on the way the characters come to construct that truth.

This cultural shift in what it means to be a self can often yield surprising, even unsettling moral visions in postmodern film. Both *Pulp Fiction* and *Forrest Gump*, for example, feature violent and stormy situations through which their main characters must walk. In *Pulp Fiction*, violence, drugs, and vulgarity are more than merely passing phenomena. They are roughly equivalent to the air the characters breathe. *Forrest Gump*, on the other hand, has its title character walk relatively unscathed through some of the most turbulent periods of recent world history. The characters around him suffer, become embittered, and experience abuse and exploitation, but Forrest’s serene composure accepts what comes his way. He is a “Zen-like exemplar of go-with-the-flow spiritual acceptance” (Giunti: 548) without ideology or ambition. The chaos around him is reduced to heartwarming vignettes that only confirm and never tarnish his high moral character. On the face of things, then, *Forrest Gump* might

seem to be the epitome of simple, uncomplicated goodness while *Pulp Fiction* is a nightmarish two-hour wild ride through hell. But in a post-modern universe, things are never so simple.

While it is true that *Pulp Fiction* is structured by an almost frenzied attempt to implicate its characters in every evil, violent, and chaotic aspect of contemporary culture, “beneath the film’s veneer of lawlessness, violence, and casual cruelty is a deeply moral story, a story the film enacts three times, once in each of its separate stories” (Leitch: 3). How does Tarantino accomplish this? How can such an immoral setting of chaos and violence serve as the location for the inbreaking of grace and transformation?

One of Tarantino’s favorite devices in *Pulp Fiction* is to create a dissonance in the viewer by offering us unrestrained crosscurrents of dialogue and action. He is always taking us in two directions at once. We see a tender and affectionate couple in a coffee shop who are actually two desperate, armed, and dangerous robbers. The two men in tee shirts and shorts are actually contract killers. In *Pulp Fiction*, we are always caught in the crosscurrent between what is being said and what is being done. So, for example, while Jules and Vincent engage in a debate about the morality of giving another man’s wife a foot massage, they are preparing to enter a room and execute two men with .45 automatics. In another scene, Vincent is shooting up on heroine at his pusher’s house while launching into a diatribe about the depravity of the anonymous person who recently “keyed” his Chevy Malibu. His pusher agrees: “They should be . . . killed. No trial, no jury, straight to execution. You don’t [mess] with another man’s vehicle. You don’t do it. It’s just against the rules.” Indeed, almost all these gangsters talk about throughout the film is moral codes of conduct ranging from whether hash is legal to whether a restaurant ought to charge five dollars for a milkshake. Vincent, invited into Mia’s place after dinner, looks at himself in the bathroom mirror: “. . . it’s a moral test of yourself; whether or not you can maintain loyalty.” Tarantino, it seems, will not allow us think about morality without being firmly grounded in a completely immoral world and, at the same time, will not submerge us in evil and violence without providing some glimmer of hope and redemption.

In the spirit of postmodernity, *Pulp Fiction* never really provides answers to moral questions, but through the skillful use of plot and dialogue, Tarantino humanizes the criminals and redeems their violent cliché. *Pulp Fiction* demonstrates that the mere appearance of violence in

film is not necessarily a moral negative. As Sarah Kerr reminds us, “violence can be used to frighten, to titillate, to provoke pity or outrage; its mere appearance has no fixed moral shading” (23). In fact, one could even say that Tarantino is mocking violence while redeeming it. As Tarantino says: “So you’ve got these movie guys, they look like genre characters but they’re talking about things that genre characters don’t normally talk about. They have a heartbeat, there’s a human pulse to them” (Smith: 34). Tarantino puts an absurd twist on macho violence and standard heroic plot devices. He “refuses to patronize, glamorize or judge his band of outsiders. Instead, he lets us see the glimmers of humanity that emerge when they drop their masks of control” (Travers: 80). The ultimate moral victory gained by Tarantino is the redemption of violence by the three resurrections in the story. Indeed, even the death of John Travolta’s character, Vincent, can be redeemed by his reappearance at the end of the film through Tarantino’s non-linear plot structure.

On the other hand, *Forrest Gump* never allows its central character to be faced with any sort of moral dilemma. It would be incorrect to say that Forrest never experiences heartache or pain, but it is primarily those around him who struggle with evil and pay dearly for it. So, for example, Lt. Dan loses his legs and Bubba dies, but Forrest gets the Congressional Medal of Honor. The women in the film are especially singled out in this respect. The film makes Forrest’s mom sleep with the school board superintendent so that Forrest can get an education. Beloved Jenny is not only the victim of sexual abuse, but she is also made to experience retribution for her promiscuity by later contracting AIDS. Forrest, on the other hand, gets rich off of shrimp at the expense of all the other shrimp boat captains in Bayou La Batre, Louisiana, who lose their boats in a massive storm caused by none other than God. Apparently, this is the story of Job—only in reverse! (Westphal: 9). All around Forrest, history is falling apart at its seams, but Forrest always picks up and moves on.

Thomas Leitch has compared the triumph of *Forrest Gump* over *Pulp Fiction* at the Academy Awards to the triumph of Leo McCarey’s *Going My Way* over Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* in 1944. *Forrest Gump*, says Leitch, is similar to *Going My Way*, starring Bing Crosby, in which “goodness triumphed over evil by dint of charm, perseverance, and the sturdy failure to acknowledge the very possibility of the hero’s implication in evil, or indeed in the existence of serious or intransigent evil as such” (2). As Leitch says: “It might be tempting to conclude that the

Oscar triumph of *Going My Way*, like that of *Forrest Gump*, proves that Americans' hearts, then and now, are most likely captured by positive role-models and visions of uncomplicated goodness" (2). The reality is, however, that both films caught the imagination and hearts of American filmgoers. The victory of *Forrest Gump* may indicate only that the Hollywood film establishment endorses the *Forrest Gump* vision of American culture over the dark and more sensationally violent vision of Tarantino. Perhaps it is truer to say that "each film functioned as the other's mirror-image, each one attracting the audience the other excluded—or, for all we know, attracting different desires within each moviegoer: most obviously, belief and skepticism about the American dream" (2).

In the world of *Forrest Gump*, ignorance is innocence. In *Pulp Fiction*, on the other hand, no one is innocent. To be a self at all is to be implicated in a world of violence. If the moral vision we discover in *Forrest Gump* is naïve, then perhaps the moral vision of *Pulp Fiction* can be branded as cynical. Ironically, however, it is in *Pulp Fiction* rather than *Forrest Gump* that redemption is possible and the transcendent gift can be experienced. There can be no redemption where the self is not truly a part of the world, however evil that world is, for there can be no awakening to who we truly are and to our own complicity with evil as simply "the way humans do business."

At the end of *Pulp Fiction*, after his miraculous experience and with his gun pointed at "Pumpkin," Jules wrestles with the Ezekiel<sup>5</sup> passage he is fond of quoting:

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides with the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who in the name of charity and good will shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. . . .

As Jules now gives thought to the meaning of the passage, he considers the possibility that he himself is the righteous man, Pumpkin is the evil man, and Jules' pistol is the shepherd. Or perhaps Pumpkin is the righteous man and Jules is the shepherd and it's the world that's evil. But, as Jules points out, though he'd like that, it's just not the truth. Jules has begun the process of self-discovery through moral conversion. What he

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<sup>5</sup>Very little of the quotation is actually from Ezekiel. It is an amalgamation of Ezekiel 25:17, other scriptures, and Jules' own rhetoric.

now knows is that Pumpkin is the weak and Jules is “the tyranny of evil men.” But, as Jules says, “I’m tryin’ real hard to be the shepherd.”

Perhaps those critics are right who attribute the success of *Forrest Gump* to a yearning in audiences for a return to honesty, kindness, and simple moral goodness. But can there really be any moral victory without struggle and decision? When Forrest, for example, steps in to pick up the book for the young African-American girl who is being integrated into the University of Alabama, he may be demonstrating kindness, but certainly not courage. In the end, Forrest’s explicitly non-ideological view of history is really not all that subversive—and actually quite conservative. It might be nice to pass through life ignorant of racism, sexism, war, poverty and abuse—to be blind to race, color, and gender, judging people and events on only their individual and local impact. Ideological ignorance on screen may be bliss, but it is hardly neutral and far from innocent.

## Conclusion

The changing patterns of postmodern culture are patterns dominated by images (despite the fact that the focus of most academic discussions of postmodernism are still consumed by discussions of language and written texts). Film is indisputably situated in the middle of these changing patterns (De Bleeckere: 95) and has become a primary cultural medium for the expression and reception of values, hopes, fears, and faith. Religion is no longer the center of our culture and, in fact, as film has become increasingly popular, religion has retreated from public to private space (Miles: 3). In a post-Christian culture, the loss of religious hegemony has a double consequence. On the one hand, religious faith is often marginalized, misunderstood, and trivialized. It no longer is given the kind of respect or authoritative place in culture it once was given. On the other hand, spirituality persists in every corner of our culture along with the invincible presence of miracle and mystery.

If we wish to point our culture toward a Christian vision of redemption and beauty, we will have to succeed at reading the “signs of the times” by learning to exegete the religious dimensions of our culture, however marginalized they may be. Both *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction* illustrate the challenges and opportunities of a postmodern situation for doing just this—especially insofar as they offer contrasting expressions of the human encounter with transcendence and evil and the experience of redemption and conversion.

Both films subvert a religious master narrative that could pretend to easily identify God's gracious activity in the world or give history an objective, universal meaning. God's presence is real in both films, but remains a mystery nonetheless. Both films make room for the transcendent in fresh and creative ways, albeit from the margins of culture and human experience. So also, both films assume the systemic and historical nature of sin and evil, but while *Forrest Gump*'s central character is cushioned and isolated from the world and from evil, the characters in *Pulp Fiction* live with evil as the way humans do business. In the end, *Forrest Gump* sentimentalizes sin, death, and evil by making us all feel better about ourselves as we pay the heavy price of disavowing the violence and chaos with which he comes into contact. Ultimately, however, that price is too high and the film is unable to provide a compelling moral or redemptive vision. Forrest has no courage because he needs no courage. Although he is a symbol of moral purity and innocence, it is impossible for him to be an authentic human person. Simplicity in the form of historical ignorance and innocence carries a price. It costs Forrest nothing, but those around him pay dearly. Surprisingly, it is in the violent and vulgar *Pulp Fiction* rather than in the sentimental *Forrest Gump* that the possibility of a redemptive encounter with the numinous and of authentic redemption becomes possible. But then, perhaps God is full of surprises.

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# **THE LOSS OF METANARRATIVE: RESOURCES FOR FORMULATING A WESLEYAN RESPONSE**

by

**Ron Creaseman**

The important project of locating areas of sympathy between postmodernism and Wesleyan theology will eventually run up against points of irreconcilable difference. These conflicts will in turn raise a twofold problem for Wesleyan theologians. How do we respond to areas of incompatibility in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to the postmodern context, while at the same time keeping faith with our distinctive Wesleyan heritage? Both considerations are crucial, for to fail in the first case would diminish our relevance, while to fail in the second would compromise our particular identity.

The postmodern rejection of transcendence is one such irreducible source of conflict. After considering this theme in the work of two prominent postmodern writers (Jean-Francois Lyotard and Richard Rorty), I will investigate how John Wesley might guide our critique of this position. I suggest that in his own theological polemic Wesley provides a method that remains viable even in the context of postmodernity. Finally, I present two secular critics (one of Lyotard, the other of Rorty) whose work parallels Wesley's strategies. These secular critics provide a valuable resource for Wesleyans wishing to respond to the postmodern loss of transcendence in ways that resonate with the legacy of their founder.

Certainly an aspect of postmodernism with considerable ramifications for theology is its rejection of ultimate or even objective reality.

Hillary Putman has effectively argued against the Enlightenment pretense of attaining “God’s-eye point of view.” We can never isolate ourselves from our backgrounds and personal interests to achieve a completely impartial and adequate perspective.<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty goes further and rejects not only the idea of truth as accurate correspondence to an objective state of affairs, but even the belief that any form of reality exists beyond human convention.<sup>2</sup> Prior to both these writers, Jean-Francois Lyotard called for incredulity towards all metanarrative, a term he employed to denote any grand or overarching scheme which would integrate and subordinate other social or intellectual systems.<sup>3</sup> I have selected Rorty’s and Lyotard’s main works for further consideration because they provide good case studies of how the loss of transcendence finds differing expression in postmodern thought. Due to the stronger argumentation of Rorty’s work, I will give it slightly greater consideration.

### **Lyotard’s Incredulity Toward Metanarrative**

In his groundbreaking work, Jean-Francois Lyotard responded to the request of the president of the Quebec Counsel of Universities for a “report on knowledge.” This slender volume, *The Postmodern Condition*, argues that scientific knowledge during the modern era was busy freeing itself from the restrictive influence of religion and superstition. Yet, even in that task, science still legitimated itself by invoking some form of metanarrative, either the myth of human emancipation through acquisition of knowledge (French Revolution) or the mythical increase of knowledge itself and its speculative unity (Hegelian tradition). Moreover, knowledge has been suppressed whenever it is governed by metanarratives, for all such narratives entail stultifying rules and compliance to prescribed norms of inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Lyotard contends that the time for all appeal to metanarrative has come to an end now that we have entered the “postmodern condition.” Hence, his now famous line, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>5</sup> In place of

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<sup>1</sup>Hillary Putman, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 49-50.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington, *et al.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>Lyotard, 61.

<sup>5</sup>Lyotard, xxiv.

metanarratives and their regulation of knowledge, Lyotard extols “parology,” a deliberate disregard for norms and conventions, resulting in almost illogical and even contradictory thinking. Parology is born of dissonance, not consensus and is the sole source of true innovation. In light of the necessity of parology, any attempt to bring diverse language games to consensus is misguided because it invokes the metanarrative of “humanity as a collective (universal) subject” and fails to recognize the unyielding heteromorphous nature of diverse language games.<sup>6</sup>

Lyotard closes the appendix to the English translation of his book with an attempt to recruit the reader to his declared war on metanarrative. In a moving description of the oppressive effects of modernity, he warns of the seductive power of faith in reality.

Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality, but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games . . . only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one. . . . We can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is, Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.<sup>7</sup>

In this manifesto, Lyotard concludes by equating metanarrative with notions of unified reality *as well as* the attendant goal of achieving consensus between divergent disciplines and cultures. His verdict is that all grand schemes of meaning are not only mistaken, they are pernicious and must be unconditionally opposed in order to liberate us from their terrorizing oppression.

### **Rorty’s Behavioral Epistemology**

Richard Rorty sets out in his major work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, to demolish philosophy’s obsession with the metaphor of the

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<sup>6</sup>Lyotard, 65-66.

<sup>7</sup>Lyotard, 81-82.

mind as an accurate representation (mirror) of objective reality.<sup>8</sup> Fully convinced that all knowledge comes through the senses and is then interpreted in the mind by use of social constructs, Rorty concludes that it is impossible to “penetrate the veil of appearances to glimpse things as they are in themselves.”<sup>9</sup> Not only does Rorty repudiate the idea that the mind can perceive the world’s intrinsic nature, he denies that the physical world has an inner nature, denying human nature as well. While not as problematic as a belief in God, the belief that the physical world and humans possess an inner nature presupposes that they are the result of some form of intelligence, a conviction which turns that “nature” into a quasi-divinity. Rorty wants to eliminate such concepts altogether.<sup>10</sup>

Rorty claims that the time has come for us to become thoroughgoing pragmatists and abandon the correspondence theory of truth altogether (i.e., that an assertion is true insofar as it accurately corresponds to objective reality). Notions such as truth and goodness are, in Rorty’s opinion, primitive concepts that elude precise definition and thus have little practical usefulness.<sup>11</sup> A more workable solution would be to understand truth as those propositions which members of a particular society find no valid reasons to contest, or in Rorty’s oft-repeated words, “what our peers will let us get away with.”<sup>12</sup> In the second half of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty develops his own proposal for a postmodern theory of rationality, which he defines as “epistemological behaviorism.”

If assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express, then there is no

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<sup>8</sup>Rorty’s project resulted from his attempt to combine Wilfrid Sellars’ “attack on the Myth of the Given” and Willard Quine’s “skeptical approach to the language-fact distinction” (*Mirror*, xiii).

<sup>9</sup>For more on this aspect of Rorty’s thought, see his “Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, ethnocentrism, and liberalism,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-9. In contrast, Hegel thought that while things exist only by virtue of their relation to others, they nonetheless exist objectively.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Rorty, “Contingency of Language,” *London Review of Books*, 8, (17 April 1986), 6. Cited by Tom Sorell, “The World from its Own Point of View,” in *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 12.

<sup>11</sup>“On Religion—A Discussion with Richard Rorty, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff,” interview article by Stephen Louthan, *Christian Scholars Review*, 26.2 (Dec. 1996), 177-183.

<sup>12</sup>Rorty, *Mirror*, 176.

point in attempting to isolate privileged [i.e., truthful] representations. Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call “epistemological behaviorism” . . . which requires no idealist metaphysical underpinnings.<sup>13</sup>

Rorty here drives a wedge between the real and the ideal, rejecting the attempt to found truth on ontological foundations, and abandoning the idea of truth as “contact with reality.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, he urges us to follow Dewey’s pragmatism, and content ourselves with the notion of truth as “what is good for us to believe” or “what you can defend against all comers.”<sup>15</sup>

In Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism, truth is totally constituted by social norms. “Nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.”<sup>16</sup> Rorty supports his position by arguing that traditional epistemology has been mistaken in its “attempt to see the patterns of justification within normal discourse as *more* than just such patterns, to see them as hooked on to something which demands moral commitment—Reality, Truth, Objectivity, Reason.”<sup>17</sup> He further claims that the transcendent qualities now ascribed to truth were in fact artificially attached to the idea by Greek philosophers, who dramatically altered the “homely and shopworn” ways we use truth in everyday life.

Both Lyotard and Rorty, then, exemplify the postmodern rejection of transcendence, whether expressed in Lyotard’s rejection of metanarrative

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<sup>13</sup>Rorty, *Mirror*, 174. For more on epistemological behaviorism, see chap. 4, sections 2-5.

<sup>14</sup>In light of Rorty’s confessed dependence on Quine, it is significant to note Quine’s radical denial of objective reality. He compares the myth of Homer’s gods with the myth of the existence of physical objects, claiming that they “differ only in degree and not in kind, [although] the myth of physical objects has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience” (Quine 1953, 44. quoted by Richard Lints, “The Post-positivist Choice,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 61.4, Winter 1993, 663).

<sup>15</sup>Rorty, *Mirror*, 176, 308.

<sup>16</sup>Rorty, *Mirror*, 178.

<sup>17</sup>Rorty, *Mirror*, 385.

or in Rorty's denial of objective reality.<sup>18</sup> Though these prominent post-modern writers come from differing areas of specialization, each orients his thought around the alleged inadequacy and fallacy of appealing to transcendence as an organizing structure for knowledge. Furthermore, while both writers demonstrate keen insight into certain mistaken presumptions of modernity, both also proceed from these valid criticisms to the invalid conclusion that transcendence must be repudiated *in toto*. In particular, Lyotard's incredulity toward all metanarrative would entail dismissing the Gospel's universal offer of redemption as merely one more terrorizing totality. Rather than seeking the realization of the reign of God on earth, Lyotard would have us pursue and revel in the Babel-like anarchy that he terms "paralogy." Rorty, who is even more extreme in his repudiation of transcendence, explicitly calls for complete abandonment of faith of every sort, urging us to divest ourselves of the worship of anything.<sup>19</sup>

### Wesley's Method As Guide

Certainly, although the relationship between these positions is complex, both lie in opposition to the Christian doctrines of God, creation, and soteriology. As such, these two versions of postmodernism's denial of transcendent truth and rejection of all metanarrative are inimical to the Wesleyan tradition. Indeed, it is fascinating that Wesley himself anticipated the connection between transcendent truth and the existence of God in his 1788 sermon "On Conscience," where he observed that notions of right and wrong are inextricably bound up with the idea of God.<sup>20</sup> For Wesleyan theologians, then, this aspect of postmodernism represents an unsustainable loss which must be countered. Moreover, as *Wesleyan* the-

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<sup>18</sup>It is noteworthy that both Lyotard and Rorty situate their proposals in direct opposition to that of Jurgen Habermas. Rorty specifically rejects the latter's view that critical inquiry is made possible by "inevitable subjective conditions." Rather, those conditions which regulate inquiry are no more than "just the facts about what a given society takes to be good ground for assertions of a certain sort." Rorty, *Mirror*, 385.

<sup>19</sup>Citing the steady decline of the objects to which humans pay homage (from God to sages to scientists), Rorty concludes, "with luck, this process will end by leaving us unable to *worship* anything." "De Man and the Cultural Left," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 132.

<sup>20</sup>"I doubt whether the very words, 'right and wrong' according to the Christian system do not imply in the very idea of them agreement and disagreement to the will of God." *Works*, (BCE) 3:485.

ologians, we seek to formulate our response in ways that resonate with the legacy of Wesley himself.

The difficulty arises precisely at this point of our task, for how can Wesley guide his followers in their endeavor to respond to postmodernism's denial of metanarrative and transcendent truth? Certainly Wesley's historical context prevented him from ever directly addressing these issues. Indeed, it is his dated Enlightenment context that postmodernism calls into question. However, the historical distance between Wesley's situation and ours may not render him so invalid a resource as might first appear. To put the matter differently, rather than offering *words* to be repeated, Wesley may offer us a *method* to be mined. If we look at the many and diverse controversies which Wesley engaged in, perhaps a distinctive strategy will emerge that can function as a helpful method in today's context.

A survey of Wesley's polemics reveals the prominence of two strategies in responding to his interlocutors. First, Wesley's training in Oxford logic stamped him with a keen eye for detecting contradictions and logical inconsistencies hidden in his antagonist's arguments. Second (and even more characteristically), Wesley was ever concerned with tracing the pragmatic consequences of his antagonist's positions (it is not without good reason that Wesley is perennially referred to as "the practical theologian"). These favored methods of Wesley may yet point the way for our present task.

Wesley's emphasis on logical reasoning, evident in both his sermons and theological appeals, no doubt stemmed from his training at Oxford, where he spent several years as Moderator of the disputations which Lincoln College held six times a week. Wesley claimed that through this experience he obtained "some degree of expertness in arguing; especially in discerning and pointing out well-covered fallacies."<sup>21</sup> Also, in his "An Address to the Clergy," Wesley reveals the importance he placed on critical reasoning by the priority he gave it in his enumeration of the attributes he felt necessary for a good minister of the Gospel. The first requirement he mentions is "a good apprehension, a sound judgment and a capacity of reasoning with some closeness."<sup>22</sup> Later on in the same work, he mentions

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<sup>21</sup>"Some Remarks on 'A Defense of the Preface to the Edinburgh Edition of *Aspasio Vindicated*.'" *Works* (Jackson), 10:353.

<sup>22</sup>*Works* (Jackson), 10: 481.

logic as a priority “necessary next, and in order to, the knowledge of the Scripture itself.”

While generally sympathetic with Locke’s *Essay on Human Reasoning*, Wesley took issue with the statement, “logic has much contributed to the obscurity of language.” Wesley corrected Locke for not distinguishing proper and improper uses of logic: “the true use of it [logic] is the noblest means under heaven to prevent or cure the obscurity of language.”<sup>23</sup> In Wesley’s opinion, the very essence of logic was consistency of reasoning, as is evident from his *Compendium on Logic*. After defining an axiom (“a proposition which needs not, and cannot, be proved”), Wesley comments regarding the law of noncontradiction: “Some affirm this to be the only axiom in the world: —A point not worth the disputing.”<sup>24</sup>

However, even more characteristic of Wesley’s polemics than his attention to logical consistency was his concern for the practical consequences of the issues he debated. In any and all issues under dispute, the primary matter for Wesley was the pragmatic one: Which position would serve to promote the Gospel and encourage holy living? Whether the debated issue was the Moravian doctrine of stillness, apocalyptic date-setting, or secession from the Church of England, Wesley relentlessly brought the discussion back to the crucial point, namely, the practical ramifications for his mission of spreading scriptural holiness across the land.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup>*Works* (Jackson), 13:462.

<sup>24</sup>*Works* (Jackson), 14:179.

<sup>25</sup>While both of these strategies (logic and pragmatism) pervade the entire corpus of Wesley’s polemics, they notably formed the structure of his most protracted theological debate: his campaign against predestination. The pivotal point in Wesley’s argument against Predestination was his analysis that the doctrine of eternal election necessarily entailed eternal reprobation—by reason of *logical consistency*. For this cause, his lengthy tract *Predestination Calmly Considered*, refused to consider Calvinism in any other light than *double predestination*.

Yet underlying his insistence on the logical inconsistency of holding divine election while denying divine reprobation was Wesley’s even greater priority: pragmatism. Time and again, Wesley framed the debate in terms of the practical effects of his opponents’ position—How would a sinner be affected by predestination? He repeatedly appealed to practical application: “Let us suppose a particular instance. Here is a man who is reprobated from all eternity. . . .” Wesley’s long and drawn-out attack on predestination was chiefly fueled by his conviction that it sapped the vital motives for repentance and holy living. See *Predestination Calmly Considered*, in Outler’s *John Wesley*, 430-70.

Thus Wesley's own polemics exhibit two techniques which his followers might employ in countering postmodernism's denial of transcendence. However, before going further, it would be well to consider the appropriateness of their use in the postmodern context. Does not the postmodern critique of modernity also undermine Wesley's polemic methods due to his lack of contemporary sensitivities?

As an initial response, it seems that Wesley's pragmatic approach remains valid for critiquing Rorty's rejection of transcendent truth, since *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is manifestly dependent upon Dewey's philosophical pragmatism. In fact, Rorty specifically cites Dewey when advocating the replacement of truth as "contact with reality" with truth as "what it is good for us to believe."<sup>26</sup> It is indeed striking that when Wesley opposed Calvinism by asking the question, "What difference will this belief have on the way people live?" he nearly approximated Rorty's pragmatic approach to truth.<sup>27</sup>

It could be objected, however, that Wesley's pragmatism differs significantly from Rorty's in that Wesley began from a clearly defined ultimate goal, or *telos*—the recreation of the divine image in human beings—whereas Rorty disavows any such context of transcending objective. However, hidden within Rorty's utilitarian project there does lie a definition of human flourishing which functions as a sort of ultimate "goal" for all linguistic communities, namely, "the attainment of an appropriate mixture of unforced agreement with tolerant disagreement."<sup>28</sup> To bring Wesley's favored method of practical scrutiny against Rorty, then, is akin to critiquing epistemological behaviorism on its own terms.

Wesley's other polemic strategy, the test of logical consistency, poses more of a problem in justifying its use against the postmodern denial of transcendence. Indeed, one characteristic of postmodern writers that frequently frustrates their critics is their apparent disregard for the charge of inconsistency. For instance, combining what is apparently disparate in ways that are unconventional (even contradictory) is part of the paralogy that Lyotard champions. Furthermore, Wesley's use of logic was rooted in Enlightenment Foundationalism, and if postmodern thinkers are united in

<sup>26</sup>Rorty, *Mirror*, 176.

<sup>27</sup>Rorty defines pragmatism as single-minded attention to the question "What difference will this belief make to our conduct?" ("Introduction," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2).

<sup>28</sup>Rorty, "Science as Solidarity," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, 41.

anything, it is the rejection of Foundationalism.<sup>29</sup> However, the test of logical consistency remains valid in the postmodern context for two reasons. First, granting the effectiveness of Willard Quine and others who expose certain errors of Foundationalism, their arguments are not directed against logic and consistent reasoning *per se*, but against the Cartesian Project: establishing indubitable basic premises upon which logically entailed successive reasoning could arrive at irrefutable proof. Not the validity of consistent reasoning but the presumption of undeniable foundations is what Quine and others have successfully called into question.

Secondly, and notwithstanding the apparent indifference of postmodern writers to charges of inconsistency, the indictment of self-contradiction retains full polemic significance because it remains intrinsic to understanding that valid reasoning may not be both self-contradictory and rational. Ironically, postmoderns violate their own standard of heightened historical consciousness when they attribute the fundamentals of human logic to the Enlightenment era. The requirement of logical consistency is not some residual Cartesian baggage which can be jettisoned upon the demise of Foundationalism. Rather, it is an essential aspect of human rationality itself, occupying a central role in adjudicating argumentation throughout the history of Western thought. The burden of not contradicting one's own line of reasoning must be fully borne, even by postmodernists, if their thinking is to have a lasting impact on human rationality.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the day, when the contextualized accounts of epistemology are presented with their thick ethnographic reports of how human understanding is embedded in particular linguistic games, a common feature to all *intelligible* communities will emerge: non-contradiction.

Perhaps a final comment is in order in addressing the objection raised by some that the postmodern context invalidates Christian apologetics in general. It is claimed that not only have we moved beyond the apologetic

<sup>29</sup>The centrality of nonfoundationalism to Postmodernism is argued by van Huyssteen and J. Wentzel who virtually equate the two (*Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Wesley's own commitment to Foundationalism is evident in his advice that all discourse follow as far as possible the method of mathematical reasoning, building upon that which is granted or indisputable to conclusive proof (*Compendium of Logic*, Works [Jackson], 14:183).

<sup>30</sup>One wonders if failure to attend to this salient point will cause much of the more radical postmodernist thought to suffer the same early demise as philosophical positivism, which had the fatal flaw of self-contradiction in that it was not able to verify its own demand for verification!

presumption that knowledge can be so easily transferred from one linguistically defined community to another, but we have come to recognize the impropriety of even attempting to do so. This conclusion rests on the conviction that in light of Postmodernism's sensitivity to the ways human rationality is deeply embedded in linguistic contextuality, and in light of the demise of Foundationalism, evangelical argumentation has been rendered invalid because of its disregard of incommensurability, if not immoral for its disregard of diversity. While this line of reasoning is vulnerable from various approaches, I would like to draw on the work of Cambridge anthropologist Ernest Gellner, who challenges this extreme cultural relativism on the basis of postmodernism's naive anthropological idealism.<sup>31</sup>

Gellner attacks the notion of cultural incommensurability by pointing to the stark reality of modern cultural imbalance. The earth we now inhabit is profoundly marked by the concentration of power and wealth in first-world nations, *and* by the efforts of third-world nations to employ modern technology. If all cultures can claim equally valid and incommensurate construals of human knowledge, then why has Western technology so affected the globe, touching each of its individual cultures? Note this:

One particular style of knowledge has proved so overwhelmingly powerful, economically, militarily, administratively, that all societies have had to make their peace with it and adopt it. . . . The major fact about the world as it is now constituted is that it is going through a crucial and fundamental transition, as a result of a profound and not properly understood asymmetry between one distinct cultural style and all others.<sup>32</sup>

In light of this, the claim that knowledge can no longer be placed beyond culture (Geertz) appears spurious. Not only has one form of knowledge demonstrated transcultural superiority and adaptability, but most (if not all) of the supposedly incommensurate and linguistically defined worlds posited by postmodern relativism appear surprisingly able to appropriate goods of an alien culture (Western technology). Thus the argument mentioned above against the legitimacy of engaging in postmodern apologetics ignores a fundamental reality of the postmodern world we inhabit.

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<sup>31</sup>Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 49-61.

<sup>32</sup>Gellner, 60-61.

I now present two secular analysts of postmodern thought who very ably employ Wesley's polemic method in their own critiques of the postmodern rejection of transcendence. Though these thinkers are secular, their writings offer valuable resources to draw on by those of us wishing to follow Wesley's method as we theologically engage the postmodern context. Steven Connor insightfully reveals the logical inconsistency in Lyotard's polemic against all metanarratives, pointing to the recurring inability of Lyotard to disentangle himself from that which he seeks to protest.<sup>33</sup> Thomas McCarthy, on the other hand, has profoundly critiqued the thought of Richard Rorty by arguing that Rorty's behavioral epistemology can in fact be used as evidence *for* (not against) the existence of transcendent truth.<sup>34</sup> McCarthy points out the many ways that social practice is essentially undergirded by context-transcending notions of truth and reality.

### Connor's Critique of Lyotard

Steven Connor, professor of English at London University, surveys postmodern theory, art, music, literature and media, concluding that postmodernism is significantly flawed by its inability to escape self-incrimination. "What is striking is precisely the degree of consensus in postmodernism that there is no longer any possibility of consensus, the authoritative announcements of the disappearance of final authority."<sup>35</sup> The second edition of Connor's *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, devotes considerable attention to Lyotard's work, where his final assessment of Lyotard parallels his charge against postmodernism at large: logical inconsistency.

Connor identifies several ways in which Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* violates its own position. Noting the now well-worn objection that Lyotard's "war on totality" functions as yet one more totalizing narrative, Connor probes deeper and argues "Lyotard's model is doubly totalizing for it depends not only upon a vision of the total collapse of metanarrative, everywhere and for always, but also upon an unshakable belief in the absolute dominion of metanarrative before the arrival of the postmodern condition."<sup>36</sup> Connor further argues that Lyotard's "war" also eliminates

<sup>33</sup>Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (London: Blackwell, 1997).

<sup>34</sup>Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>35</sup>Connor, 9.

<sup>36</sup>Connor, 31.

the basis for preserving the individual minor cultures Lyotard seeks to protect, for no such rule of preservation could be formulated or observed without becoming totalizing. Finally, the English translation of Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne*, includes an appendix which is heavily *prescriptive* in tone and mood while the main text purports to be merely a *descriptive* "report on knowledge." In fact, the appendix violates the principle of the body of the text by arguing for what *ought* to be our response to the postmodern condition (we should enlist in Lyotard's war on totality), when the main text claims that the postmodern condition signifies the permanent estrangement of the *is* from the *ought*.<sup>37</sup>

While Connor's critique of Lyotard focuses on logical inconsistency, he also highlights the weakness of *The Postmodern Condition* from a pragmatic approach. In a move similar to Gellner's anthropological critique, Connor notes how Lyotard's statement, "invention is always born of dissension," conflicts with the *collaborative* achievements of science in the modern era.<sup>38</sup> Connor reasons that for Lyotard to claim "conflict is a necessary guarantee of diversity and that dissension necessarily breeds innovation" is to ignore the evidence of recent history.<sup>39</sup> Connor also criticizes the practicality of Lyotard's idealism when the latter claims "postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."<sup>40</sup> If we are to disavow any effort at consensus and instead revel in the absolute incompatibility of different cultures or language games, one wonders how such incompatibility will succeed in eliminating conflict of interest.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, if "our contemporary world is witnessing a continuation of the wholesale culturecide that Lyotard abhors, then this may be the fault, not so much of tyrannous totality, as the failure to construct systems of relations which guarantee the freedom of minority groups and cultures."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Connor, 41.

<sup>38</sup>The Lyotard quote is from *Postmodern Condition*, xxv.

<sup>39</sup>Connor, 34.

<sup>40</sup>Lyotard, xxv.

<sup>41</sup>Connor, 29.

<sup>42</sup>Connor, 29. To critique Lyotard's chiefly theoretical work on a pragmatic basis is not at all unfair, for pragmatism figures prominently in Lyotard's own proposal. He claims that in the postmodern context, the legitimizing standard for research ought no longer to be the appeal to metanarratives of either human emancipation or the increase in knowledge, but to the criterion of economic viability. No longer is the question "is it true," but "what use is it?" or better, "is it salable" (*Postmodern Condition*, 51).

## McCarthy's Critique of Rorty

Thomas McCarthy begins his *Ideals and Illusions* by acknowledging modernity's lack of regard for the embeddedness of human reason. McCarthy by no means advocates a return to the Enlightenment pretense of obtaining God's-eye point of view, for he agrees with many of the post-Kantian historical and social sensitivities which expose "the impurity of 'pure reason'."<sup>43</sup> However, McCarthy finds Rorty guilty of the opposite extreme. Rorty has responded to the errors in Enlightenment rationality by espousing the simple antithesis of that view. A more appropriate response is suggested by McCarthy: rather than discarding all notions of transcendence (a move he refers to as "throwing out the baby with the bath water"), why not acknowledge the mediated and culturally conditioned nature of reason, while at the same time recognizing its *transcendent* elements? McCarthy argues that these context transcending elements of truth are in fact "intrinsic to social practice."<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, McCarthy's primary move is to critique Rorty on his own grounds of radical pragmatism. Following Habermas, McCarthy seeks to "relocate the tension between the real and the ideal *within* the domain of social practice by showing how communication is organized around idealizing, context-transcending presuppositions."<sup>45</sup> McCarthy identifies three ways the notion of transcendence profoundly undergirds social practice: [1] the accountability of subjects; [2] the presumption of an objective world; and [3] the notion of transcendent truth. These aspects of society not only argue against Rorty's denial of objective reality, but "are so deeply embedded in our form of life as to make doing without them unimaginable, and undesirable."<sup>46</sup>

The accountability of subjects entails that social actors are independent agents exercising critical judgment. In contrast, McCarthy sees Rorty's epistemological behaviorism as a return to post-World War II Parsonian social theory which construed social actors as chiefly unreflective adherents to cultural conventions and norms. This model was "rendered implausible beyond repair" by the work of sociologists like Goffman and Garfinkel who demonstrated that the social actor was much more than a

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<sup>43</sup>McCarthy, 11.

<sup>44</sup>McCarthy, 34.

<sup>45</sup>McCarthy, 27.

<sup>46</sup>McCarthy, 2.

“judgmental dope, acting in compliance with pre-established and legitimate alternatives of action.”<sup>47</sup>

In particular, Garfinkel’s studies point out the way individuals combine their indoctrination into the complex web of cultural expectancies with a personal analysis of how those norms can be manipulated to achieve desired results. Certainly, we do know and follow the rules, yet we constantly judge whether conformity or stretching the rules will best serve our own ends. For example, should I make this person feel at ease, keep him wondering, or put him on the defensive? It is only because we presume that we are all such competent and independent actors that we hold each other accountable for our social behavior. Moreover, “it is of fundamental significance for the structure of human relations that we normally deal with one another as if this were the case.”<sup>48</sup> This fact of social practice counts against Rorty’s picture of society, one which McCarthy identifies as a “picture of social practice without a subject, where the determining factors are language, tradition, society, rules, criteria norms and the like.”<sup>49</sup>

Another fact which essentially undergirds social practice is the presumption of an objective world. McCarthy posits this fact as one more pragmatic evidence against Rorty’s denial of transcendent reality. This time drawing on the work of Melvin Pollner, McCarthy observes how “the maintenance of an intersubjectively available, objective world is normatively required by the network of expectations structuring everyday interaction.”<sup>50</sup> Pollner’s study shows that the objectivity of the world is presumed in the way we attribute conflicts in experience and testimony to errors of perception, interpretation, or communication. Thus, when we are faced with resolving conflicts about what really is the case regarding a particular set of circumstances, we do so in ways that “leave the world’s

<sup>47</sup>McCarthy cites H. Garfinkel, “Studies in the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities,” in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), republished by Polity Press (Cambridge, 1984), 35-75.

<sup>48</sup>McCarthy, 30.

<sup>49</sup>McCarthy, 30-31. Rorty’s social determinism can be fully appreciated in his following claim, “Every speech, thought, theory, poem, composition and philosophy will turn out to be completely predictable in purely naturalistic terms. Some atoms-and-the-void account of micro-processes within individual human beings will permit the prediction of every sound or inscription which will ever be uttered. There are no ghosts.” *Mirror*, 387.

<sup>50</sup>McCarthy, 31.

objectivity intact.”<sup>51</sup> We do not assume that the quest for certainty is invalid, as Rorty would tell us, because of our inability to circumvent our mediated and culturally interpreted sensory experience. The conventional social practice of adjudicating discrepant reports directly contradicts Rorty’s claim that “if assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express, then there is no point in attempting to isolate *privileged* [i.e., truthful] representations.”<sup>52</sup>

Finally, a third inescapable component of social interaction is the notion of truth as transcendent reality. McCarthy argues that our everyday practice involves appealing to the notion of truth in more than just the “homely and shopworn” ways Rorty advocates. While Rorty is correct in claiming that “truth and knowledge can only be judged by the standards of the inquiries of our own day,” and further, “nothing counts as justification except by reference to what we already accept,” what Rorty ignores is the context-transcending, transcultural sense of truth which permeates social practice.<sup>53</sup> It is this component in our use of truth which McCarthy identifies as enabling us to say, with perfectly good sense, things like “We have good reason to believe that *p*, and we are all agreed that it is so, but of course we may be wrong; it may turn out to be false after all.”<sup>54</sup>

Without entering into debate over Rorty’s claim of Greek philosophy’s influence on the notion of truth, McCarthy contends that even the common sense notions of truth (to which Rorty wants to restrict us) are pregnant with transcendent connotations.

Whatever the sources, our ordinary, nonphilosophical truth talk and reality talk is shot through with just the sorts of idealizations that Rorty wants to purge. In everyday talk we normally mean by “true” nothing like “what our society lets us say” but rather something closer to “telling it like it is, like it really is.” And by “real” we normally mean nothing like “referred to in conformity with the norms of our culture” but rather something closer to “there anyway, whether we think so or not.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup>McCarthy, 32.

<sup>52</sup>Rorty, *Mirror*, 174.

<sup>53</sup>McCarthy, 15. The Rorty quotes come from *Mirror*, 178.

<sup>54</sup>McCarthy, 33.

<sup>55</sup>McCarthy, 16.

Thus McCarthy critiques Rorty's behaviorist epistemology by claiming it is a knife that cuts both ways. Even from a perspective of social practice, there exists significant tension between the contextualist anti-transcendence of Rorty and "the context-transcending notions of truth and reality" which undergird the possibility of meaningful social interactions.

This also points to the dilemma of Rorty's political vision. He rejects the notion of human nature while championing the ideals of justice which are derived from it. McCarthy charges Rorty with wanting to have it both ways: no real essence behind nature or humanity, yet universal respect for all persons and communities.<sup>56</sup> Steven Connor sees a marked similarity between Lyotard and Rorty at this point and claims "both are suspicious of the violent effects of totalizing thinking, both wish to promote diversity, but neither is willing to elaborate on the grounds which might guarantee such diversity on anything but an *ad hoc* basis."<sup>57</sup>

As Wesleyan theologians, we must face the challenge of finding fresh ways of articulating our faith within the context of postmodernism. This task will call for creative open-mindedness toward the valid insights of postmodernism regarding the failures of modernity. However, just as Christian faith has withstood the efforts of modernity to replace religion with secularity, so too it must resist the postmodern insistence on the end of all transcendence. I have pointed out two tactics of critique which Wesley favored in his own polemics, and I have argued that these methods (logic and pragmatism) retain their validity in the postmodern context. Finally, I have presented two secular critics who bring these methods to bear against the postmodern denial of transcendence. In light of the strength of their analyses and the correspondence between their methods and Wesley's, they represent a valuable resource for those wishing to respond as *Wesleyan* theologians to the unsustainable loss of metanarrative.

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<sup>56</sup>McCarthy, 21.

<sup>57</sup>Connor, 34.

# **TWO WOMEN SPEAKING “WOMAN”: THE STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM OF LUCE IRIGARAY AND PHOEBE PALMER**

by

**Diane Leclerc**

In order to become, it is essential to have a gender or an essence (consequently a sexuate essence) as horizon. Otherwise, becoming remains partial and subject to the subject. When we become parts or multiples without a future of our own this means simply that we are leaving it up to the other . . . to put us together. To become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being.—Luce Irigaray<sup>1</sup>

In an article first printed in 1960, Valerie Saiving asserted that, while “it would be ridiculous to deny that there is a structure of experience common to both men and women, so that we may legitimately speak of the ‘human situation’ without reference to sexual identity,” she goes on to ask rhetorically “whether we have described the human situation correctly by taking account of the experiences of both sexes.”<sup>2</sup> Saiving’s question helped ignite the fire of feminist theology for years to come. Her thesis—that theology has been dominated by men for centuries and thus repre-

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted without citation in Rosi Braidotti, “Of Bugs and Women: Irigaray and Deleuze on the Becoming-Woman,” in *Engaging Irigaray*, eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 111.

<sup>2</sup>Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Womenspirit Rising*, eds. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 27. Reprinted from *Journal of Religion* 40 [1960]: 100-112.

sents an incomplete if not inadequate perspective—has been embraced by most feminist theologians. They have challenged the “orthodox” paradigm. To speak as Saiving has of a “basic feminine character structure” is no longer “orthodox” among more recent feminist theorists. Indeed, such an “essentialist” construction has become a rather “heretical” view.

In sum, the debate over essentialism focuses on the fact that affirming a “natural” female essence potentially reinstates and reinforces the very abuses feminism intends to fight, and actually makes women collaborators of patriarchy. Thus there have been those determined to eradicate the evils of essentialism from feminist theory. For them any notion of an *ontological* foundation that affirms a “female” nature, and anyone who might hold to such a position, has been relegated to the realm of the contemptible.<sup>3</sup> The philosophical underpinnings of Saiving’s theory have been increasingly called into question over the course of the last thirty years. Even those who want to maintain the value of naming a female “essence” for the purpose of “suited the situation”<sup>4</sup> do so from a very different place. That different place is the place where difference, not

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<sup>3</sup>Teresa De Lauretis points out that there are others who believe that this debate, fought on such terms, has ceased to be productive. “Many have grown impatient with this word—essentialism—time and again repeated with its reductive ring, its self-righteous tone of superiority, its contempt for ‘them’—those guilty of it” (Teresa De Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle, or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain,” in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1. Naomi Schor furthers the description of the polarized nature of the debate: “What revisionism, not to say essentialism, was to Marxism-Leninism, essentialism is to feminism: the prime idiom of intellectual terrorism and the privileged instrument of political orthodoxy.... The word essentialism has been endowed within the context of feminism with the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion. Essentialism in modern-day feminism is anathema” (Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray,” in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994], 42).

<sup>4</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that “to an extent, we have to look at where the group—the person, the persons, or the movement—is situated when we make claims for or against essentialism. A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with Ellen Rooney, “In a Word. Interview,” in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 154.

essence, is the new and dominant charter.<sup>5</sup> Meta-narratives have been replaced by “microresistances.”<sup>6</sup> The category of “femaleness” has become tenuous. The “characteristic” distinctions between “men” and “women” are now seen as culturally constructed. Even the casual differentiation between sex (as a biological reality) and gender (as a social construct) is now being questioned by some theorists. Sex has itself been identified as a cultural construction.<sup>7</sup>

However, if gender can no longer be identified with certainty, if the differences and diversity among “women” are now the points of empha-

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<sup>5</sup>Deborah Rhode summarizes the debate on difference: “[F]eminists generally have taken two approaches, both of which remain critical in contemporary debates over difference. One strategy has been to deny the extent or essential nature of differences between men and women. A second approach has been to celebrate difference—to embrace characteristics historically associated with women and demand their equal social recognition. A third, more recent strategy attempts to dislodge difference—to challenge its centrality and its organizing premises and to recast the terms on which gender relations have traditionally been debated” (Deborah L. Rhode, “Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference,” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, ed. Deborah L. Rhode [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], 3).

<sup>6</sup>Regenia Gagnier says that in a postmodern scheme “microresistances” replace “identities” and are characterized by fluidity—the ability to mobilize and then disperse. See Regenia Gagnier, “Feminist Postmodernism: The End of Feminism or the Ends of Theory?” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, ed. Deborah L. Rhode (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 23.

<sup>7</sup>See Judith Butler’s advocacy of understanding gender as pure “performance” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Elsewhere she argues: “We may seek to return to matter as prior to discourse in order to ground our claims about sexual difference, only to discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put. Moreover, we may seek recourse to matter in order to ground or to verify a set of injuries or violations, only to find that matter itself is founded through a set of violations, ones that are unwittingly repeated in the contemporary invocation. Indeed, if it can be shown that in its constitutive history this ‘irreducible’ materiality is constructed through a problematic gendered matrix, then the discursive practice by which matter is rendered irreducible simultaneously ontologizes and fixes that gendered matrix in its place. . . . [A]gainst those who would claim that the body’s irreducible materiality is a necessary precondition for feminist practice, I suggest that prized materiality may well be constituted through an exclusion and degradation of the feminine that is profoundly problematic for feminism” (Judith Butler, “Bodies that Matter,” in *Engaging With Irigaray*, eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 143). For a historical overview of gender differentiation, see Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

sis, and if there is nothing that is “essentially” female, where, many are asking, is the commonality that once fueled the political fires of the feminist movement?<sup>8</sup> Does “feminism” itself stand at the cliff of a theoretical paradox that elicits political despondency? Is it at the brink of a linguistic non-existence? Can there *be* such a thing as a postmodern, poststructuralist, anti-essentialist feminism?<sup>9</sup> Feminism seems to be looking for a “courage to be” in the face of such anxiety over ontology.<sup>10</sup> The conundrum of the oxymoron “anti-essentialist feminism” has some advocating the “risk of essentialism” (that is, a “strategic” essentialism) as a workable solution and as a means of moderation and mediation in the whole debate. In the search for such a workable solution, the work of Luce Irigaray beckons. Irigaray represents a different approach to woman’s place as Other (than man) through her attempts to deconstruct misogynistic labeling and to open occasions for a very distinct signification as well as a different *reality* for women. Luce Irigaray’s “essentialism” strategically enables her to extricate woman from her placement as the “not-male,” and to give her another place in the world.

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<sup>8</sup>Gagnier reminds, “It cannot be overemphasized that . . . critiques of earlier feminist theorizing are rejecting precisely the stories of oppression that gave earlier feminism its discursive unity, the stories that provided slogans that incited action,” (Gagnier, 22-23). Karen Offen adds: “The fragmentation of identities [postmodernism] proposes, specifically the dissolution of the category women, threatens the historical feminist project” (Karen Offen, “Feminism and Sexual Difference in Historical Perspective,” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, ed. Deborah L. Rhode [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], 15).

<sup>9</sup>De Lauretis argues: “If ‘woman’ is a fiction . . . and if there are no women as such, then the very issue of women’s oppression would appear to be obsolete and feminism itself would have no reason to exist (which, it may be noted, is a corollary of poststructuralism and the stated position of those who call themselves ‘post-feminists’),” (De Lauretis, 10).

<sup>10</sup>Susan Bordo states: “Assessing where we are now, it seems to me that feminism stands less in danger of the totalizing tendencies of feminists than of an increasingly paralyzing anxiety over a fall (from what grace?) into ethnocentrism or ‘essentialism’” (Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* [Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1993], 225). It can be argued that the intensity of the anxiety over a lost identity is unfounded. Such anxiety fails to acknowledge the tenacity of a “mere” construction; anti-essentialism is unlikely to overthrow or undermine the agenda of feminism, even if feminism itself is seen as a construction.

## Luce Irigaray's Voice in the Matter

Luce Irigaray has purposely avoided much revelation about her personal life.<sup>11</sup> What is most known about Irigaray is her thought, which is thoroughly feminist. Her feminism arises from her artful mimicry of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.<sup>12</sup> Crucial to this present study is Irigaray's understanding of female subjectivity as an immanent, bodily, and vocal subjectivity. Beneath the layers of linguistic play, philosophical restructuring, and iconoclastic unveiling in Irigaray's oeuvre, one can begin to infer a process of subjectification for women that has both internal and social consequences. Particularly in her more recent works, Irigaray implies that hope in the future depends on humanity's (men *and* women's) willingness to strive for true subjectivity. Ironically, a recognition of *difference* between subjectivities is the very means of overcoming the linguistic and psychic patterns that maintain a destructive alienation. She warns: "It is vital that a culture of the sexual, as yet nonexistent, be elaborated, with each sex being respected."<sup>13</sup>

This acknowledgment of difference necessarily implies a kind of "essentialism" for Irigaray; however, this essentialism is anything but naive. Rather, it is an "essentialism which is not one."<sup>14</sup> This essentialism is required precisely because "female" is a gender "which is not one" (meaning, in a patriarchal system there is only one true gender: "male"); "female," then, is only defined as "not male" under a misogynistic linguistic economy.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when Irigaray "calls" women to "assume the

<sup>11</sup>According to Margaret Whitford, "this is not just a personal stance of suspicious defensiveness, but the well-founded realization that one way of neutralizing a woman thinker whose work is radically challenging is to 'reduce' her to her biography" (*Irigaray Reader*, 1).

<sup>12</sup>The publication of *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) led to her banishment from the Freudian school and provoked the fury of the Lacanians. She lost her teaching position at Vincennes as a result.

<sup>13</sup>Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous* (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>14</sup>See Schor, "This Essentialism," 40-62. Schor here plays off of Irigaray's most well-known designation of the female "gender" as "the sex which is not one."

<sup>15</sup>In the words of Judith Butler, "For Irigaray, that phallogocentric mode of signifying the female sex perpetually reproduces phantasms of its own self-amplification. Instead of a self-limiting linguistic gesture that grants alterity or difference to women, phallogocentricism offers a name to eclipse the feminine and takes its place" (Butler, 12-13).

role of women deliberately,”<sup>16</sup> she does so *not* because she believes in a predetermined and universal nature subsequently marked as female, but because she asserts that it is only when a woman ceases “to identify herself as a ‘masculine subject’ ”<sup>17</sup> that she can begin to “convert a form of subordination into an affirmation,”<sup>18</sup> and regain the “specificity of her relationship to the imaginary.”<sup>19</sup> And thus claiming an essential difference is the very means by which objectification is “thwarted.” By strategically affirming an “essential” difference, woman takes a “gender” as woman, and not just as the “not male,” and in doing so she becomes a subject.

This is crucial because “any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the ‘masculine,’ ”<sup>20</sup> according to Irigaray. When masculine rhetoric is directly and violently misogynistic, when it avows women’s essential emotional and intellectual incapacity, women are objectified to suit various male agendas. And yet (critical to the argument here), when women in leadership are praised in a religious context, they have often been perhaps even more objectified, for the praise is often for their approximation toward the masculine.

Women in other historical periods did attempt this type of approximation. Ascetic women of the fourth century, for example, became “male” as a means of attaining particular liberties uncommon for women in late antiquity.<sup>21</sup> A key aspect in this gender metamorphosis was the volitional (strategic) “denial” of the maternal body and maternal responsibilities. Similarly, many of John Wesley’s female correspondents *found* themselves (figuratively and literally) in (or through) a “single” situation; although an official vow of virginity was not required, Wesley’s advice was often quite forceful: God could be better served if a woman was not

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<sup>16</sup>Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans., Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.

<sup>17</sup>Irigaray, “Any Theory of the ‘Subject,’” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans., Gillian Gill (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 133.

<sup>18</sup>Irigaray, *This Sex*, 76.

<sup>19</sup>Irigaray, “Any Theory,” 133.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>See Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London: Routledge, 1995).

weighed down with domestic responsibility.<sup>22</sup> Many of Wesley's female intimates followed his counsel, and as a result they too "ascended" to traditionally male ministerial roles as "female brethren."<sup>23</sup>

However, in the case of Phoebe Palmer we see no such defeminizing maneuvers, no call for "women's equality"; such maneuvers are so absent, in fact, that contemporary interpreters have had difficulty deciding whether Palmer should be cast as a feminist or as a champion of Victorian ideals of feminine domesticity. Or to expose the real nature of the more abstract scholarly dilemma, can there be such a thing as a "fully" "feminine" "feminist"? I wish to assert that, if there has been such a woman, it was Phoebe Palmer. In other words, although Palmer's life does in fact evidence a rather extraordinary transcendence of nineteenth-century social roles, she was never attacked for assuming masculine identities and roles. In her writings and through her career, Palmer can be seen as a "strategic essentialist." This brings me, finally, to my thesis. I will explore Phoebe Palmer's "essentialism" through Luce Irigaray's paradigm of female speech and female subjectivity. In doing so, it will give an aspect of the holiness tradition (i.e., its strong affirmation of women) a quite relevant (and certainly not naive) stance in response to the postmodern world and its poststructuralist paradigm.

### Phoebe Palmer, Babies, and Bathwater

Forty years ago the need for scholarship on Phoebe Palmer became dramatically apparent. After decades of silence about a woman who was

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<sup>22</sup>To Elizabeth Richie (29 Nov. 1775), Wesley writes: "I am glad you were enabled to withstand that plausible temptation [marriage] which few young women have power to resist, particularly when you had to encounter the persuasion of those you esteemed and loved." And elsewhere (12 Feb. 1779): "Surely it is your wisdom to stand fast even in the outward liberty wherewith Christ has made you free. You are now happily disengaged from caring for the things of this world, and need only care for the things of the Lord." In a letter to Martha Chapman (3 Nov. 1784) Wesley repeats his theme again: "It is well for you that God did not suffer you to find rest in any creature. He had better things in store for you."

<sup>23</sup>Paul W. Chilcote, *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 103-109. Chilcote cites J. E. Hellier as reporting that several early Methodist women preachers formed a band and called themselves "female brethren" (J. E. Hellier, "The Mother Chapel of Leeds," *Methodist Recorder Winter Number* 35, Christmas 1894), 64).

among the most famous of her era,<sup>24</sup> John Peters, in 1956,<sup>25</sup> and Timothy Smith, in 1957,<sup>26</sup> attributed an entire movement to Palmer's leadership and initiated scholarly interest in her influence. In answer to the call put forth by Peters and Smith more such scholarship has in fact emerged, but slowly. It was thirty years later when full-length treatises of Palmer's life, work, and influence first appeared.<sup>27</sup> Numerous articles have also been published.

A review of such scholarship reveals that there are nearly as many interpretations of Palmer as interpreters. Although no longer neglected, she apparently remains a rather enigmatic figure. Details of her life and thought unquestionably position her as a figure within—indeed, at the very heart of—the nineteenth-century American Holiness Movement. What she is most known for, and what incites much scholarly consternation and debate, is her articulation of the doctrine of entire sanctification, and her supposed lack of fidelity to the theology of John Wesley. There is a wide discrepancy of analysis regarding the value of Palmer's version of the doctrine among holiness scholars. A second primary point of interpretive conflict about Phoebe Palmer (and one that has attracted scholars outside the

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<sup>24</sup>Thomas Oden writes: "Phoebe Palmer, after having been one of the most widely known women of her time in England and America, has remained virtually unknown during the past hundred years." Oden adds his interpretation of Palmer: "[Her] spirituality . . . is deeply rooted in classical Christianity, not on the fanatic, idiosyncratic fringe of centerless enthusiasm. She deserves to be counted among the most penetrating spiritual writers of the American tradition" (Thomas Oden, "Introduction," in *Phoebe Palmer, Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Oden [New York: Paulist Press, 1988], 2-3; 8).

<sup>25</sup>See John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Nashville: Pierce & Washabaugh, 1956). Perhaps one of the first to call Phoebe Palmer the "founder of the holiness movement" was M. L. Haney. See M. L. Haney, *The Inheritance Restored: or Plain Truths on Bible Holiness* (Chicago: Christian Witness Co., 1904), 215.

<sup>26</sup>See Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957). Smith's thesis is that the Holiness Movement preceded and anticipated the themes of the Social Gospel movement; Smith believes the Holiness Movement's social concern partly originated from Phoebe Palmer's Five Point Mission.

<sup>27</sup>See Harold Raser, *Phoebe Palmer: Her Life and Thought* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987); and Charles E. White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer As Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1986).

Holiness Movement) has to do with her place as a woman. Was Palmer the epitome of the “cult of true womanhood,”<sup>28</sup> or a premiere feminist?

On this point, Phoebe Palmer has been cited as a key contributor to the nineteenth-century debate concerning the role of women in the church. Donald Dayton, representative of those advocating her placement as a “feminist,” succinctly writes:

It was . . . the denominations produced by the mid-nineteenth century “holiness revival” that most consistently raised feminism to a central principle of church life. This movement largely emerged from the work of Phoebe Palmer.<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt that Palmer stands as an important figure in the development of a religious-feminist enthusiasm particularly evident in the nineteenth-century American Holiness Movement, an enthusiasm which only gained momentum toward the end of the nineteenth century. Palmer’s writings and her direct influence on others through her own traveling and preaching evidence an extraordinary power for a nineteenth-century woman. Anne Loveland writes:

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<sup>28</sup>This expression, which is synonymous with “the cult of domesticity,” is a commonly used phrase among scholars of the nineteenth-century. It represents the belief that women were “naturally” spiritual in both temperament and capacity for virtue. As a result of this natural spirituality, women were designated as the spiritual leaders of their homes and as those responsible to keep this private sphere safe from the external, “evil” world. For extensive elaboration, see Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>29</sup>Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 200. Also see Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton, and Donald W. Dayton, “Women in the Holiness Movement: Feminism in the Evangelical Tradition,” in *Women of Spirit*, eds. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 225-254. These authors here offer six factors that “account for the holiness movement’s consistent feminist thrust.”

Dale Simmons writes: “. . . by far the greatest [scholarly] interest in Palmer has focused on her incipient feminism. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the explosion of literature on Palmer in the 1970s and 1980s parallels the rise of the feminist movement itself. In this climate, Evangelicals in general have rightly enjoyed using the example of Palmer and others to remind the wider religious community that they were well ahead of the social curve on the issues of women’s rights” (Dale Simmons, “Phoebe Palmer—Enjoli Woman or Enigma? A Review of the Recent Scholarship on Phoebe Palmer,” *Wesleyan/Holiness Studies Center Bulletin* 4 [1996]: 1).

The experience of one woman, Phoebe Palmer, belied the confident statements of the “cult of true womanhood.” Instead of harmony, she discovered a conflict between the domestic and religious duties, and in the course of resolving the conflict she enlarged the boundaries of woman’s proper sphere. . . . [H]er prominence as an evangelist prevents her from being categorized as a “typical” woman.<sup>30</sup>

Palmer led the famous “Tuesday Meetings” which became gender “mixed” under her leadership;<sup>31</sup> she wrote dozens of books and tracts, making her a very public figure; she edited the most influential holiness magazine of the century;<sup>32</sup> she started an inner city mission and is said to have produced a theological imperative that subsequently made women’s charity work commonplace;<sup>33</sup> she was influential in Methodist higher education,<sup>34</sup> and she was a revivalist the caliber and popularity of Charles Finney himself. Twenty-five thousand were converted, and thousands upon thousands sanctified, under her evangelistic ministry.<sup>35</sup> In many

<sup>30</sup>Anne C. Loveland, “Domesticity and Religion in the Antebellum Period: The Career of Phoebe Palmer,” *The Historian* 39 (1977): 455.

<sup>31</sup>See George Hughes, *Fragrant Memories of The Tuesday Meeting and Guide to Holiness* (New York: Palmer & Hughes, 1886). Also see Peters, *Christian Perfection*, 109-110. It could be said that these Tuesday meetings are the birthplace of the American holiness movement. The main purpose of these meetings was to promote holiness by providing a place where testimonies to the experience of entire sanctification could be expressed, for the encouragement of both the “sanctified” and seekers after holiness. Many “famous” persons attained the experience in these meetings, including Thomas Upham, congregationalist minister and philosopher.

<sup>32</sup>The *Guide to Holiness* was under Palmer’s editorship from 1864-1874. During that time circulation reached 40,000.

<sup>33</sup>See Smith, *Revivalism*, 169-71.

<sup>34</sup>Thomas Oden asserts that “a separate monograph should be written on the ways in which Mrs. Palmer influenced higher education in America.” He offers a “preliminary inventory of major American universities and colleges whose early presidents or key leaders [or founders]. . . were significantly influenced, according to their own testimony, by her work.” Oden lists the following educational institutions: Drew University, University of Michigan, Northwestern University, Evanston College, Boston University, Syracuse University, Wesleyan University, University of Georgia, Oberlin College, Dickinson College, University of the Pacific, American University, DePauw University, Adrian College, Simpson College, and Hamline College. See Oden, “Introduction,” in Palmer, *Selected Writings*, 4.

<sup>35</sup>Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from the New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1987), 263. This was first stated in Palmer’s eulogy. See Richard Wheatley, *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Phoebe Palmer* (New York: W. C. Palmer, Publisher, 1881), 633.

respects, Phoebe Palmer was not the “typical” mid-nineteenth century woman; she was certainly not bound to the domestic sphere.

And yet despite this type of evidence, Palmer has also been interpreted as a spokeswoman for traditional Victorian values concerning the home, and as a clear supporter of this cult of true womanhood. Theodore Hovet asserts:

Palmer’s unique contribution to middle-class religious culture was to transfer the mystic concept of “the interior life” to the social structure. By sanctifying the domestic sphere, the Christian woman pushed the influence of “the world” out the domestic door and created a sacred sphere within society in which the spirit could unfold itself. . . . Consequently, the sanctified domestic sphere did not imprison the woman, but it protected her from the “unvarying whirl of the world,” to use Palmer’s phrase, and invested her with the sacred function of nurturer of the spirit.<sup>36</sup>

After a lengthy analysis of Palmer’s theology, Hovet concludes by stating: “To see the holiness movement and the teachings of Palmer as a force which helped women break out of the cult of domesticity, therefore, is to misinterpret the way in which many women in the holiness movement viewed their identity and their freedom.”<sup>37</sup>

It could be argued that almost any woman born in 1807 and living in upper-middle class Victorian America would be shaped by the ideals set forth in the cult of domesticity, by the belief that the home was a most sacred space which utterly depended on womanly virtues for its spiritual sustenance. Phoebe Palmer’s rhetoric often supports this ideal of women’s sphere. And yet, it is also somewhat “predictable” that the events of her life, and her reverence for early British Methodist women, led ultimately to rhetoric such as *The Promise of the Father* and to a conceptual enlargement of woman’s sphere to include the church and society. Palmer’s spiritual experiences

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<sup>36</sup>Theodore Hovet, “Phoebe Palmer’s ‘Altar Phraseology’ and the Spiritual Dimension of Woman’s Sphere,” *Journal of Religion* 63 (1983): 274.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 279.

occurred during the "Methodist Century"<sup>38</sup> and also during the "feminization of American culture"<sup>39</sup>—when revivalist spirituality was a dominant force in American society, and when women's spirituality symbolized America itself.<sup>40</sup> It is not surprising, then, that Phoebe Palmer's cultural and ecclesiastical situation would position her as both a traditionalist and an innovator, nor that such a situation would produce ambiguous rhetoric. In

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<sup>38</sup>See C. C. Goen, "The 'Methodist Age' in American Church History," *Religion in Life*, 34 (1965): 562-572; Winthrop Hudson, "The Methodist Age in America," *Methodist History* 12 (1974): 3-15. A. Gregory Schneider summarizes: "This new organization [the Methodist Episcopal Church] became a vessel that both contained and spread a major portion of the remarkable spiritual effervescence that flowed from what is called the Second Great Awakening in America. This Awakening marked the transition from the 'Puritan Age' to the 'Methodist Age' in American church history. There is a simple statistical reason for such a statement. In 1784 . . . the Methodists were a small and insignificant sect. By 1850 . . . there were more Methodists in America than any other kind of Protestants. There is also a more sophisticated reason for the statement. When historians speak of the nineteenth century as the Methodist Age in American religious history they refer to a popular religious style that characterizes Methodists but was not limited to them. Indeed, this style of religion penetrated virtually all of Protestant church life and virtually every region in America" (A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993], xx).

<sup>39</sup>See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1977), for elaboration of this thesis. Douglas' conclusions are extended by Schneider. He writes: "The idea of the family as belonging to a private sphere of affection and moral discipline that was to be set over against a public sphere of competition and self-interest became widespread. This private sphere, moreover, was the proper sphere of Woman, while the worldly sphere belonged to Man. Domesticity became a form of religion with its own sacred symbols and cultus. Womanhood came to be defined as 'naturally' religious. . . . [T]his domestic ideology was the principal way in which the emerging white middle class defined itself" (Schneider, xxii). Also see Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800-1890," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, eds. Mary Hartmann and Lois W. Banner (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 137-57.

<sup>40</sup>See Amanda Porterfield, "Phoebe Palmer," 1. Unpublished paper presented at the "Women in New Worlds Conference," Cincinnati, Ohio, February, 1980; presently held by the United Methodist Archives, Madison, NJ, and used with permission.

other words, Palmer's "ambivalence" arises in part from the chronological fact that she was a *mid*-nineteenth-century Methodist woman.<sup>41</sup>

Despite a wide difference of interpretation regarding Palmer's type of womanhood, there is consensus that her theology of entire sanctification influenced her theology of gender. Elsewhere I have given a detailed analysis of Palmer's holiness theology and have argued that her understanding of consecration (in the three-step formula known as the "altar covenant") is intricately tied to her own struggle with *idolatry*, and that this struggle led her to re-conceptualize domesticity as not only an expected duty for women, but also as a potential threat to their spirituality.<sup>42</sup> "Rather than reciting the traditional litany" of those things "that interfered with the spiritual life—selfishness, lack of faith, betrayals of the flesh—Palmer with striking frankness admitted that the primary obstacle to her spiritual growth had been 'a large house involving proportionate cares.'"<sup>43</sup> In other words, Palmer's understanding of sin was not based on an exaggerated sense of self, but on what I have come to call "relational idolatry."<sup>44</sup> It is crucial to note that, while Palmer's "experi-

<sup>41</sup>Stronger voices for suffrage and for the widespread ordination of women sound most loudly only after Palmer's death. Palmer's influence on these emerging voices is yet another question. On this issue, see Lucille Sider Dayton and Donald W. Dayton, "'Your Daughters Shall Prophesy': Feminism in the Holiness Movement," *Methodist History* 14 (1976): 67-92; Susie Stanley, "Empowered Foremothers: Wesleyan/Holiness Women Speak to Today's Christian Feminists," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 103-116; Susie Stanley, "'Tell Me the Old, Old Story': An Analysis of Autobiographies by Holiness Women," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 28 (1994), 7-22; Douglas M. Strong, "The Crusade for Women's Rights and the Formative Antecedents of the Holiness Movement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27 (1992), 132-160. Strong quite effectively argues that Palmer's branch of the Holiness Movement was not the branch that ultimately led to social activism for women's political rights.

<sup>42</sup>See Diane Leclerc, "Original Sin and Sexual Difference: A Feminist Historical Theology of a Patristic, Wesleyan, and Holiness Doctrine" (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1998).

<sup>43</sup>Hovet, 271.

<sup>44</sup>This is clearly seen in Palmer's record of her own sanctification experience: "On the morning of this day . . . my thought rested more especially upon the beloved one whom God had given to be the partner of my life. How truly a gift from God, and how essentially connected with my spiritual, as also my temporal happiness, is this one dear object! I exclaimed. Scarcely had these suggestions passed, when with keenness these inquiries were suggested: 'Have you not professedly given up all for Christ? If he who now so truly absorbs affections were required, would you not shrink from the demand?' I need not say that this one dear object, though often in name surrendered, was not in reality given up.

ence of sanctification involved a kind of liberation from earthly affections and domestic obligations,” such liberation “did not develop out a discontent with family ties.”<sup>45</sup> As Ann Loveland insightfully recognizes, Palmer “was only too willing to make family ties everything, even to the exclusion of religion.”<sup>46</sup> This conceptional framing of *sin* allowed her to shift her perception of domestic responsibilities. Margaret McFadden says:

In the “altar transaction,” a woman could lay all the details of house and children on the altar and thus be freed from . . . attachments and responsibilities. . . . Additionally, the altar phraseology encouraged the individual to become less emotionally dependent on husband and children, to become spiritually independent and to consecrate the domestic sphere to the inner life of heart holiness.<sup>47</sup>

Hovet recognizes that “the laying of all on the altar served a dual purpose. It not only freed her from attachments to the world in the conventional religious sense but it also provided a means of freeing her religious life from the chains of domestic responsibility.”<sup>48</sup>

Thus, it is possible to interpret Palmer as drastically shifting the meaning of the “home” in nineteenth-century religious life.<sup>49</sup> No longer is the home the means of personal piety; it has now become a potential spiritual hindrance. Yet, while the rhetoric of early asceticism and even of Wesley himself implies that “singleness of heart” requires a very practical

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My precious little ones, who God had taken to himself, were then brought to my recollection, as if to admonish me relative to making the sacrifice. I thought how fondly I had idolized them. He who said, ‘I the Lord your God am a jealous God,’ saw the idolatry of my heart, and took them to himself. The remembrance of how decidedly I had, by these repeated bereavements, been assured that He whose right it is to reign, would be the sole sovereign of my heart, assisted me in the resolve, that neither should this, the yet dearer object, be withheld.... In full view of the nature of the sacrifice, I said, ‘take life or friends away.’ I could just have readily have said, ‘take life,’ as I could have said ‘take friends’; for that which was just as dear, if not dearer than life, had been required. And when I said, ‘Take him who is the supreme object of my earthly affection,’ I, from that moment felt that I was fully set apart from God” (Palmer, *Selected Writings*, 114-15).

<sup>45</sup>Loveland, 460.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Margaret McFadden, “The Ironies of Pentecost: Phoebe Palmer, World Evangelism, and Female Networks,” *Methodist History* 31 (1993): 70.

<sup>48</sup>Hovet, 271.

<sup>49</sup>For an extensive study of the home as the primary religious symbol in American Methodism prior to 1830, see A. Gregory Schneider (cited above).

rejection of maternal responsibility, Palmer does not throw the babies out with the bathwater. She went on to have a very long marriage and three other children.<sup>50</sup> She quite strategically positions herself as a woman who embraced the maternal role—“she was not advocating a radical feminist position.”<sup>51</sup> Rather than taking the radical measure of leaving children and husband behind, a radical *internal* shift is instead required. Again, for quite strategic reasons, she “set her readers’ minds at ease . . . [and] assured them that ‘at this interesting point in her experience’ she did not intend to ‘neglect’ the members of her family, but had only ‘resolved that they should cease to be absorbing’—a disclaimer that reflected how aware she was of the domestic implications of her religious actions.”<sup>52</sup>

This “non-absorbed” posture could have perhaps been the end of Palmer’s story—to “return home” with a new *emotional*, spiritually based freedom. However, the implications of Palmer’s theology of gender, and her theology of maternity specifically, did not negate the subsequent requisites she demanded for any who would retain the sanctification experience. The last step in the altar covenant formula would write a new chapter in the history of Palmer’s life, and in the history of the Holiness Movement: women must speak in Palmer’s paradigm. They must speak in the public sphere even though such public female speech was deemed as undignified according to societal norms. Further, “The world,” therefore, although still portrayed as “sinful” in Palmer’s own thought, is no longer to be avoided through a retreat back into the safety of the domestic sphere; rather, society becomes for Palmer the most explicit place for *expressing* new-found freedom. As Palmer herself declares, “The idea that woman, with all her noble gifts and qualities, was formed mainly to minister to the sensuous nature of man, is wholly unworthy a place in the heart of a Christian.”<sup>53</sup> Women had a greater calling. That calling often included a call to preach.

Palmer’s work *The Promise of the Father* defends women in ministry, including preachers. And yet, she very strategically explains that she

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<sup>50</sup>The death of her first three children was key in bringing her to her experience of entire sanctification.

<sup>51</sup>Hovet, 271.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 271-72. The internally quoted material is from *The Way of Holiness*; Palmer refers to herself in the third person in this work.

<sup>53</sup>Phoebe Palmer, *The Promise of the Father* (New York: Walter C. Palmer, 1859. Reprint, Salem, OH: Schmull Publishers), 345.

is not advocating women's "preaching so-called." What Palmer meant by "preaching so-called," however, was the very technical, highly structured, theologically sophisticated *male* preaching of mid-century. She wanted nothing to do with this very precise type of preaching, by males or females. She never explicitly says so—again, perhaps strategically—but any other type of preaching by women she would and did affirm. In other words, it could be convincingly argued that Phoebe Palmer was savvy enough to know that she could accomplish much more by conscientiously avoiding any offence to the male economy. Rather, she seems to "play" her femininity to an advantage.

Such can be seen in a metaphor she heavily utilizes in *The Promise*. "Daughter prophetesses," or "prophesying daughters," obviously evokes the "proper" daughterly role of submission under a male authority. However, the function of prophesying overturns that very submission. The prophetess becomes the daughter of God (alone) who (alone) gives her the authority to speak. A woman's complete loyalty and entire devotion to God allows her to overstep (step over) traditional dependency on male authority figures. For Palmer, a woman does not need to "become male" in order to become a subject; rather, by maintaining an essential difference between genders, she pronounces (proclaims, speaks forth) the subjectivity of woman *as* woman, and overturns her place as inessential Other or as "the sex which is not one." The requisites of Phoebe Palmer's theology produced in many women "a space, a path, a river, a dance, a rhythm, a song"<sup>54</sup>—or a sermon. Such women "gave birth to themselves,"<sup>55</sup> *as women* without needing to reject giving birth to others.

## Conclusion

Phoebe Palmer offered women access into a specifically *female* subjectivity, while forging particular and novel liberties under the rubric of devotion to God. In other words, Palmer *re-gendered* the ascetic and Wesleyan theories of subjectivity—which affirmed the necessity of holy women becoming symbolic males—by actually occupying the traditionally female roles of wife and mother, and thus barring a sweeping rejection

<sup>54</sup>Luce Irigaray, "Gesture in Psychoanalysis," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 99.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.* The use of this Irigarayan quote in this context should not be construed as any type of Pelagianism when applied to holiness women of the nineteenth century.

tion of her own and others' maternal bodies. Palmer accepted the basic assumption of the cult of domesticity—that women had more “natural” access to spirituality and sanctity; yet, paradoxically, this enabled her to transcend (and subvert) such a traditional configuration, for while women were ‘naturally’ domestic, in Palmer’s estimation, they were also equally implicated in the experience of Pentecost, and thus equally responsible for Christian service outside “women’s sphere.” They were specifically responsible to speak. Especially in light of Joel’s injunction,<sup>56</sup> Palmer believed women to be prophesying daughters of God (not female sons). They were dignified by their calling, while simultaneously considered undignified in society for being speakers at all. Yet for women whose only “lord” was God alone, speech could be both female and dignified. In a diary entry only a year before she died, Palmer reflects:

Well do I, as a daughter of the Lord Almighty, remember the baptism of fire that fell upon me, over thirty years since. Not more assuringly, perhaps, did the tongues of fire fall in energizing, hallowing influences on the sons and daughters of the Almighty, when they ALL spake as the Spirit gave utterance, on the day of Pentecost, than I felt its consuming, hallowing, energizing influences fall on me, empowering me for holy activities and burning utterances.<sup>57</sup>

Palmer’s burning utterances changed history—not only the religious history of the nineteenth-century, but also the individual histories of women who walk in Palmer’s footsteps. She not only gave them an example. She gave women *as women* theologically based requisites that demanded that they refuse to keep silent in the churches, and in the world. In light of the fundamentalist backlash against feminism that runs rampant in Wesleyan-Holiness churches today, Palmer’s type of essentialism could be the most strategic and effective approach to subvert and overturn fundamentalism’s presuppositions regarding women’s place.

In sum, I am calling for a critical reclamation of Phoebe Palmer and of her theology of holiness as a process for offering persons, particularly women, theological and experiential space for embodied, active, speaking, *subjectivity*. While the “moral psychology” underlying her theology

<sup>56</sup>See Joel 2:28-29.

<sup>57</sup>Phoebe Palmer, *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Phoebe Palmer*, ed. Richard Wheatley (New York: W. C. Palmer, Publisher, 1876), 83.

remains inextricably tied to the philosophical structures of the nineteenth century, and while the limits of the cult of domesticity which influenced her have long been broken, I suggest that the implications of her theology have the potential to continue to open spaces for female subjectivity. Likewise, while the requisites she demanded for any who would seek and retain the experience of entire sanctification are tied to a specific historical context, and while these same requisites are obviously limited to a very narrow theological heritage, the “liberation” they instituted (i.e., the freedom to take personal possession of, and responsibility for, one’s own spirituality and related praxis) remains theologically and experientially relevant for “holiness women” today.

Despite any of my suggestions as to the significance of Palmer’s contribution, a stark reality prevails: holiness scholars today count Palmer as the great perverter of their sacred doctrine. While some have nodded in her direction for her contribution to the “women in ministry” question, her theology is uniformly rejected. She is the greatest Other in the history of the holiness movement—a theologian “who is not one.” She, quite ironically and tragically, has been silenced. And yet, because of her pronouncements regarding women preachers, holiness women are still speaking. It is my hope that through a reclamation, not only of these ministerial pronouncements, but also of her very theology, and through a similar type of strategic essentialism in the face of a rather overwhelming opponent, holiness women will not see before them the hard road they have always tread, but a more hopeful future.

# **COMMUNITY IN CONVERSATION: MULTIPLE READINGS OF SCRIPTURE AND A WESLEYAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH**

by

**Richard P. Thompson**

In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, one scene focuses on an English class at Welton Academy, a class that was beginning the study of poetry. The teacher, John Keating (played by Robin Williams), asks a student to read part of the introduction to his textbook, written by J. Evans Pritchard. The student begins to read the opening of that introduction, which suggests that poetry is appreciated and understood if the students evaluate the artistry and importance of the poetic works before them. The teacher so vehemently rejects this mechanical approach to the study of poetry that he instructs the students to “rip” out the entire introduction from their books. “Be gone, J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D.!” His reason? Poetry is not about learning rhyme and meter. One may ask: “How, then, *should* one study poetry?” The teacher’s response points the students in a different direction: “The poem goes on, and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?”

The open-endedness of this approach to the study of poetry that this scene presents is similar to certain postmodern approaches to Scripture, but differs greatly from traditional approaches to biblical study. Most of us, in our educational pursuits, were instructed that, if we used the appropriate exegetical picks and shovels and mining pans, we could eventually find in the biblical text the hidden, exegetical gold nugget—the meaning

of that text—that could somehow be transferred to our contemporary life situations. We rightly noted that the text itself was written in a different time and place, to a different audience, and by an author who had far different ideas than we have. But in our noble attempts to mine truth and meaning from those texts, we seldom thought about examining the role of the ones whose hands and faces and clothes were caked with the soil of those broken texts. In our pursuit of the text's one and only meaning, we did not consider (or were unwilling to admit) that we ourselves determined in varying degrees what we would and would not find. We failed to realize that our decisions to dig with those exegetical picks and shovels and even bulldozers in the search for hidden treasure often destroyed a biblical-textual landscape that itself was valuable and full of life in its wholeness and beauty. Could it be that, in some sense, beauty *is* in the eye of the beholder? What postmodernism has shown us is that our attempts to find, *even in the biblical text*, objective meaning apart from ourselves yield results that inevitably have our fingerprints all over them. In other words, the notion that a biblical text has only one possible objective meaning is, from a postmodern perspective, flawed since the interpreter has shaped and contributed to every step of the pursuit.<sup>1</sup>

This postmodern challenge need not be seen as a negation of the Bible and its role within the church.<sup>2</sup> Positive change often occurs when challenges are most threatening. And it may well be that postmodernism has given us just that kind of challenge, thereby forcing us to reassess our readings of Scripture and our hermeneutical processes. I proposed recently that literary-critical approaches to Scripture, particularly those approaches that account for the roles of *both* the text *and* the reader (i.e., approaches which one may characterize as postmodern ones), may assist us in the Wesleyan tradition as we come to these texts *as* Scripture.<sup>3</sup> I suggested that such approaches are compatible with John Wesley's concerns for reading the Bible—that is, the divine-human soteriological encounter

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 215.

<sup>2</sup>See Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 61, who suggests that this postmodern challenge "should not disable us, but it should make us humble."

<sup>3</sup>Richard P. Thompson, "Inspired Imagination: John Wesley's Concept of Inspiration and Literary-Critical Approaches to Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34 (Spring 1999): 151-76.

of the prayerful reader with a text that itself is the product of a divine-human encounter between God and the author. I also contended that: (1) the biblical texts alone *cannot* control such encounters or readings since those texts were not and are not containers of or vehicles for meaning, and (2) the reader still must account for the textual elements and clues (including historical matters) in a way that brings consistency to that reading—textual features which limit a reader’s subjective contributions. Thus, constraining a biblical text to one reading or interpretation may not only squelch the possibilities inherent in the reading process, but may also silence the Spirit and snatch the life out of Scripture.

Thus, I propose here to explore further the possibility of multiple readings of Scripture within the context of churches in the Wesleyan tradition. What is modestly offered for consideration is the hypothesis that the possibility of multiple readings of Scripture creates, not a climate of uncontrollable subjectivism (i.e., everyone has a personal reading or interpretation), but a potential reemergence of Scripture as the *living* Word for the church. In a beginning step toward fulfilling this stated proposal, what follows is in two basic parts. First, the possibility of multiple readings of Scripture is explored more directly. Second, the church is considered from a Wesleyan perspective as the context (1) in which these multiple readings of Scripture occur, (2) where such readings are discussed and amended, and (3) from which these readings evoke corporate responses of faithful, holy living.

### Multiple Readings of Scripture

As has been mentioned above, postmodernism has lent its hand to biblical studies by its recognition that one’s attempt to understand or interpret a given scriptural text *always* involves the contributions of the reader.<sup>4</sup> That is, as Rudolf Bultmann argued over forty years ago in his classic essay, exegesis without presuppositions is *not* possible.<sup>5</sup> While historical criticism has successfully identified the historical condition of the biblical text, such approaches have generally failed to recognize the his-

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<sup>4</sup>“Reader” in this paper refers to the one who encounters the text in the reading process. This term will be used synonymously with “interpreter” since both designations refer to persons seeking to interpret the given text.

<sup>5</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 145-53.

torical condition of the interpreter.<sup>6</sup> The biblical critic has given concentrated attention to the language and historicity of the text, but typically has given little attention to the immediate world from which interpretive and exegetical decisions are made. But is it possible to understand the biblical text in the way that historical criticism has led us to believe? Do not historical-critical approaches to the biblical texts have their own pre-suppositions?<sup>7</sup> And is it possible for one to focus objectively only on “what the text meant”?<sup>8</sup>

The task of reading and interpreting Scripture cannot focus merely on the biblical text. As attractive as a text-centered approach may sound, the reader takes an active role in the reading and interpretation of a given text.<sup>9</sup> The text, to be sure, directs the reader in making certain connections and judgments during the process.<sup>10</sup> For instance, a narrative text offers to the reader an imaginary world that is presented creatively so that the reader may imagine that world as though being a part of it. It is not enough to say that something happened. Rather, the text presents events and characters in certain ways so that the reader’s attention is directed potentially to something of importance within the narrative.<sup>11</sup> Such textual elements and descriptions naturally have certain expectations of the reader embedded within the text—expectations that may not be familiar

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 11.

<sup>7</sup>See Carl Braaten, “Jesus and the Church: An Essay on Ecclesial Hermeneutics,” *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 64-65.

<sup>8</sup>See Krister Stendahl, “Contemporary Biblical Theology,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols., ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:418-32.

<sup>9</sup>See Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 19: “Texts exist in the world, and we exist in the world. Interpreters who talk about reading texts from the perspective of a text’s own internal mirrors actually bring their own view of social reality to the language in the text.”

<sup>10</sup>Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 274, 288. Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 112.

<sup>11</sup>Although the text may attract the attention of the reader with certain descriptions, wording, clues, etc., it cannot ensure that the reader sees what that text emphasizes. E.g., you can use your hands to move another person’s head to see something in the sky, but that does not mean the other person will see what you are trying to point out.

to the reader but for which that person must account. Nonetheless, the reader does not have a passive role in reading and interpreting Scripture, but contributes to the process by (1) making judgments along the way, (2) building consistency with what *is* and *is not* stated,<sup>12</sup> and (3) revising such conclusions as necessary after subsequently encountering new textual elements in the progressive reading through the text. Such interpretive activities, whether conscious or not, bring the biblical text to life, and the text remains lifeless and meaningless without them. Thus, as Wolfgang Iser suggests, the convergence of the text and reader “brings the literary work into existence.”<sup>13</sup> Meaning, then, is not found within the text itself but in this convergence, in which the imaginative activity of the reader seeks to create coherence while reading progressively through the imaginatively-composed biblical text.<sup>14</sup>

What must be stressed here is that neither the biblical text nor the reader controls this reading and interpretive process. On the one hand, the text guides, invites, and coaxes the reader along with a variety of literary elements.<sup>15</sup> The reader must account for the text and its elements *as written* (including historical matters), but there is no assurance that a reader will make all the necessary connections or recognize the significance of every part. On the other hand, no text provides *all* the clues and information necessary to build a consistent reading anyway, and these textual indeterminacies stimulate the reader’s imaginative activity in building a consistent reading.<sup>16</sup> Since both the text and the reader contribute to the text’s reading, one must attribute variations in reading to the readers themselves.

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<sup>12</sup>Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 163-231; and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 235-37.

<sup>13</sup>Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 275.

<sup>14</sup>See Thompson, “Inspired Imagination,” 167-68.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Stephen B. Moore, “Deconstructive Criticism: The Gospel of the Mark,” in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 93: “The critic, while appearing to comprehend a literary text from a position outside or above it, is in fact being comprehended, being grasped, by the text. He or she is unwittingly acting out an interpretive role that the text has scripted, even dramatized, in advance. He or she is being enveloped in the folds of the texts even while attempting to sew it up” (author’s emphasis).

<sup>16</sup>Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 163-231.

The work in philosophical hermeneutics by such persons as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests that the reader's understanding, including both conscious and sub-conscious decisions before and during the reading process (or any attempt to understand anything), contributes to the reader's interpretation.<sup>17</sup> In other words, no one can understand anything except in some relation to one's world.<sup>18</sup> Although one may rightly argue that the biblical text—a composed document—and its world do not change (since that world has died long ago), the worlds of the readers are still very much alive. With that aliveness comes also the constant change and variety of human existence that influence the reader's decisions throughout the reading process.<sup>19</sup> Thus, different readers may read the same text differently as they encounter that same text from different worlds (different experiences, different life situations, different relationships, different social status, etc.).<sup>20</sup>

Let us examine one possibility. The Lukan literary context of the parable of the so-called prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) implies that at least three groups of people were listening to this story: Jesus' disciples, the Pharisees and scribes, and the tax collectors and sinners.<sup>21</sup> Traditional parable studies have stressed that a parable has only one meaning. If that is so, then what is the *one* meaning of this familiar parable? Or, let us ask a different question: What would Jesus' audience, made up of these three groups of people, or the Lukan implied audience have heard? The literary context suggests that Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees and scribes who

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<sup>17</sup>Among other things, Heidegger speaks of understanding in relation to "Being-in-the-world" (see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [New York: Harper and Row, 1962], 78-224). Gadamer, of course, speaks of the "fusion" of two horizons ("the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point")—the present (i.e., the interpreter) and the past (i.e., the text). See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 302-7.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 24-27.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 213.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 24-27, who contends that the likely diversity among the Lukan implied audience suggests that different groups within that audience would have heard the Lukan gospel differently.

<sup>21</sup>Although the Lukan author does not mention the disciples in the immediate literary context prior to Luke 15 (12:22-53 is the last mention of them), the abrupt transition from the parable to the next scene ("Now Jesus said to his disciples," 16:1) implies that the disciples were also listening.

were grumbling about Jesus' associations with "sinners" (15:2). Thus, the primary audience in that setting (and perhaps others within the Lukan implied audience) probably would have identified with the older son and would have imaginatively seen images of a son who was outside his father's house but who was also invited to join the celebration inside that house.<sup>22</sup> However, the tax collectors and sinners who undoubtedly were listening (and undoubtedly some within the Lukan implied audience) would have heard something much different. These persons probably would have identified with the younger son and would have wanted to celebrate with him because of his father's love and offer of restoration. In other words, the different hearers potentially would have had different responses to the open-endedness of the parable. Similar dynamics occur in the reading process. Although readers may encounter the same biblical text and seek to build consistency with the same set of literary elements, differences among those readers of Scripture do contribute to their respective readings and open the possibility for different readings.

The potential for multiple readings of Scripture, however, is even greater when such readings truly reflect to some degree the convergence between the worlds of the text and of different readers. The reading or interpretation of a given biblical text cannot be confined to the gathering of factual information or to the mere recitation of words, verses, and ideas. Wolfhart Pannenberg states: "An external assimilating of Christian language to the thoughts and manner of speaking of the biblical writings is always an infallible sign that theology has sidestepped its own present problems, and thus has failed to accomplish what Paul or John . . . each accomplished for his own time."<sup>23</sup> Anthony Thiselton suggests that in Pannenberg's thought a more adequate understanding of the biblical text is apparent when the interpreter "seriously engages with the problems and thought-forms" of the interpreter's own time.<sup>24</sup>

Such ideas about one's reading of the biblical text emphasize that the reading process is more than merely figuring out objectively "what the

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<sup>22</sup>Note the open-endedness of the parable that leaves the story's completion to the hearers/readers.

<sup>23</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, 3 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1970-73), 1:9.

<sup>24</sup>Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 99.

text meant.” When a person reads the biblical texts as Scripture,<sup>25</sup> the reader’s imagination is stimulated to begin to think about what the text means within the reader’s circumstances. On the one hand, that reader comes to the text with a different set of circumstances than what the text’s implied audience would have had. On the other hand, that same reader also encounters the text with a different set of circumstances than other readers of the same text.<sup>26</sup> Meaning, then, is no longer something to be identified in the past or extracted mechanically from the text, but is inseparable from the experience—the creative event—of the convergence between that text and the reader.

### The Church in Conversation

For some, the suggestion that multiple readings of Scripture are not only possible but inevitable evokes confusion, fear, or even outrage. Confusion may be a response because it appears that no criteria exist for evaluating one’s reading of Scripture. Fear may be a response because it appears that persons are given license to read almost anything out of the text that they desire.<sup>27</sup> Outrage may even be a response because it appears that the reader, rather than the Holy Spirit, decides ultimately what God is saying through the biblical text. And these “readings” of this suggestion raise important issues that one must address.

The proposal here is that the role of the church may be *the* critical component that has, to this point, not been considered. If we take seriously the Wesleyan idea that Scripture is, for the church, both the foundation for Christian teachings and living and a “means of sanctifying grace,”<sup>28</sup> then the church and *its* encounters with Scripture must take an active role in this reading process. As George Lindbeck bluntly states, “. . .

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<sup>25</sup>Cf. Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 20-21.

<sup>26</sup>E.g., the narrative text invites the reader into that “narrative world,” but in no way does the reader leave the present world completely behind when traveling into the text’s “foreign” world. The reader’s participation in the narrative world, therefore, occurs to the extent that it can be related to that reader’s present world.

<sup>27</sup>This common criticism against many forms of literary-critical or reader-response approaches to the Bible, however, is not valid for those approaches that affirm the role of *both* the reader *and* the text.

<sup>28</sup>This expression is borrowed from Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 210-12.

[T]he Bible exists for the sake of the church.”<sup>29</sup> Such an assertion does not imply, of course, that Scripture should not be read personally, but questions and misgivings about the possibility of multiple readings of Scripture may find helpful answers and consolation in the corporate dimension of that reading process.<sup>30</sup>

The corporate dimension that the church offers to the reading process relates to the social nature of knowledge itself. One’s perception of reality is the product of social objectivation that creates order of human experiences and encounters with other persons and puts objects or entities in their places within one’s everyday life. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that the reality of everyday life is only possible because of the objectivations which fill that life.<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger describes the “everydayness” of one’s existence in terms of “Being-with others.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, one may only speak of a personal or individual reading of the biblical text in a qualified way, since no reading is truly void of these social contributions.<sup>33</sup> The horizon, to use Gadamer’s term, from which one reads the text overlaps with but is not identical to others’ horizons. Persons live in the “same” world and in different worlds at the same time, encountering the same situations and events, but looking at that “same” world from different vantage points that others may expand and influence.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>George A. Lindbeck, “Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment,” *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (Spring 1996): 150. Cf. Robert W. Wall, “The Future of Wesleyan Biblical Studies,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33 (Fall 1998): 101-4, who notes problems in transferring biblical interpretation from the ecclesial to the academic setting.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 75; and Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 17.

<sup>31</sup>Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 35.

<sup>32</sup>Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149-68.

<sup>33</sup>See Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), who argues that *everything* the reader sees in the text is due to that reader’s “interpretive community.”

<sup>34</sup>E.g., while I am writing this section, my wife is preparing to meet her father for the first time. We are looking at the same situation, but it is impossible for me to understand fully what she sees. Nonetheless, both of our understandings of family are being stretched in this exciting/confusing/anxious time.

The inevitability of multiple readings of Scripture, then, arises from the natural diversity of persons who constitute the church. A Wesleyan understanding of the church affirms this diversity. With the Apostle Paul and John Wesley, the church is seen to be “the body of Christ” in which the many members, though different, contribute and are equally important (1 Cor. 12).<sup>35</sup> The focus of the church, from a Wesleyan perspective, is on its soteriological *being*, not on what one often associates with the church (e.g., institutional matters). While persons from different but overlapping worlds constitute the church, what unites them is the grace of God, who continues to reveal himself to them and who empowers them to cherish the variety among them.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the church reads Scripture together because, in its encounter with these texts, God reveals the divine Self and salvific purposes for humanity.<sup>37</sup> These revealing encounters in which God speaks occur when those persons of the church hear Scripture and listen together, prayerfully expecting the Spirit to help them to understand, *in their worlds*. This revelation of God, through the biblical texts that are products of the Spirit’s inspiring activity, is not locked within the past encounter between God and the respective text’s human author. Rather, God also reveals the divine Self to those of the present church who listen together for God’s word in their various worlds and, more specifically, their common world.

What should be apparent here is that a tension still exists between the *multiple readings of Scripture* that will naturally occur within the church and the *revelation of God* to the church through those readings. Does this suggestion mean that all these readings are valid? Are we still left with each person having, to some extent, a personal reading? Does God reveal himself even in *misreadings*?<sup>38</sup> All these questions must be answered negatively, if one understands the church as the context (religious and social) in which Christians gather collectively to worship, to hear the story of God, and to participate in that story. If one’s world—

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<sup>35</sup>Cf. John Wesley, “Of the Church,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958-59), 6:392-401, esp. 399.

<sup>36</sup>See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*.

<sup>37</sup>See John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 794. Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 31.

<sup>38</sup>See Mark Allan Powell, “Expected and Unexpected Readings of Matthew,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 48 (Fall 1993): 31-51, for a description of misreadings.

including situations, persons, etc.—also includes the community of believers, then that group of believing persons, with all that one experiences and encounters with them, potentially shapes and influences all of that one's life: perspective and outlook on life, understanding of God, and even what one sees when reading Scripture. This influence by others, however, is not merely something that the community imposes on the individual. Rather, part of the communal dynamic of the church is the mutual influence that occurs *among* persons, not *to* them, as the community converses about what they hear God saying through Scripture.

Our identification with the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition *itself* reflects some of this corporate dynamic within the church. The claim to be Wesleyan means, among other things, that there is a focus on the grace of God that enables the Christian to live faithfully in love for God and others. To be Wesleyan means that special emphasis is given to the sanctifying grace of God and the holy life as an enabled response to that grace. To be Wesleyan means that there is an identification with the universal church and Christian teachings throughout the centuries.<sup>39</sup> Although John Wesley undoubtedly understood Scripture to be the foundation for Christian teaching and practice, it is equally clear that he recognized the influence that other factors had on the reading of those sacred texts, namely reason, tradition, and experience.<sup>40</sup> The importance of tradition does not mean, of course, that tradition enslaves the reader of Scripture and thereby limits that reader's discoveries to what is already believed or affirmed. The restriction of one's reading merely to what tradition affirms would ignore other possibilities for reading the biblical text that may challenge or clarify such affirmations and would potentially destroy the life of both the tra-

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Robert W. Wall, "Toward a Wesleyan Hermeneutic of Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30 (Fall 1995): 55: ". . . [W]hile Scripture's message for the whole church will surely be distorted without its Wesleyan message, so also will its message be distorted if understood only in Wesleyan terms. The mutual criticism that engages and learns from other interpretive traditions and from the full witness of Scripture only deepens the significance of each part which makes up the whole church and its biblical canon."

<sup>40</sup>Wesley, "On Faith (Hebrews 11:6)," in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker, 35 vols. (projected) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984ff.), 3:496. Hereinafter this work is abbreviated as *Works* (Bicentennial). See Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 71; and Timothy L. Smith, "John Wesley and the Wholeness of Scripture," *Interpretation* 39 (July 1985): 248.

dition and Scripture.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, as Michael Lodahl states, “The traditions that surround and nurture us provide the ‘lens’ through which we read, understand, and apply the Bible.”<sup>42</sup> The relation between tradition and an encounter with God through Scripture, then, has two dimensions. On the one hand, that encounter is shaped by a tradition that has *itself* been shaped by earlier encounters with Scripture. On the other hand, each encounter with Scripture also shapes that tradition by what is revealed about God.<sup>43</sup> To read Scripture in the context of the church, then, is to recognize both the contributions of and contributions to the tradition by such readings.<sup>44</sup> To read Scripture in the context of a church in the Wesleyan tradition is to hear, to converse, and also to tell the story of God in a way that affirms the gracious activity of a holy God who calls the church to holy living.

One must inquire, however, about who is part of this conversation with the community of believers. That is to ask, who is invited to the table to converse about what the biblical texts seem to say? Should only the scholars be invited, whose education and critical study provide them with needed abilities for clarifying what are and are not appropriate readings of Scripture in our tradition?<sup>45</sup> Or, should only denominational leaders and officials be invited, whose oversight provides a larger perspective of the impact of the gospel? Or, should only the pastors be invited, whose role as spiritual shepherds corresponds more closely with the Wesleyan focus on the soteriological or spiritual function of Scripture? Or, should only

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<sup>41</sup>Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 66. See Johnson, *Living Jesus*, 25: “. . . [T]he willingness to learn Jesus in the context of tradition demands a combination of loyalty and criticism, and either without the other becomes distorted. Loyalty is ideally the premise for true criticism, just as critical awareness is a necessary component of loyalty. Without critical awareness, tradition can become idolatrous, replacing the living Jesus with established formulas about Jesus or ossified interpretations of him.... But if loyalty without criticism becomes lifeless, so also can criticism without loyalty become mere carping and complaining.”

<sup>42</sup>Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God: Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1994), 25.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 26.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Wall, “The Future of Wesleyan Biblical Studies,” 112-14.

<sup>45</sup>See Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 43-44, who stress the importance of scholars to the church.

the laypersons be invited, who alone live in “the real world”?<sup>46</sup> Of course, the answer is not confined to one group; one must include all.<sup>47</sup> The different skills, the different vantage points, the different eyes and ears—all must be included as the community of faith converses, not only about what these different ones see and hear individually, but also about what they see and hear *together* that is truly gospel for their given time, culture, and setting.<sup>48</sup> The conversation around the table does not seek to define what is the *only* correct meaning or what we must do to remain faithful to our Wesleyan tradition. Such a perspective reflects the same problems that postmodernism has revealed. Both this dialogue and corporate discernment compensate for possible excesses in subjective interpretations.<sup>49</sup> Maybe a better perspective is one that sees the grace of God sacramentally and continually inviting us all to *God’s* table again—where we break and share the *Word* together, and where we converse about what we see and hear when God offers us God’s *living Word*.<sup>50</sup>

If the church perceives its readings of Scripture as sacramental events or as means of sanctifying grace, then in the Wesleyan tradition one must also assert that these readings (and interpretations) remain incomplete without faithful responses through holy living. If the encounter between Scripture and the church is ultimately an encounter in which God reveals the divine Self, then such an experience is *not* the goal of reading Scripture. If the church’s goal for reading and interpreting the biblical texts is merely to “learn more of God’s word,” then one could argue that this goal is inadequate since our readings should include not only an interrogation of the text but the text’s interrogation of its readers. Having all the facts right—historically, theologically, and biblically—is not enough. Stanley Hauerwas states: “[I]f we pay attention to the narrative and self-involving character of the Gospels, as the early disciples did, there is no way to speak of Jesus’ story without its forming our own. The story it forms creates a community which corresponds to the form of his

<sup>46</sup>See George A. Lindbeck, “Scripture, Consensus, and Community,” *This World* 23 (Fall 1988): 16, who warns that the scholarly elite now hold the Bible captive and make it inaccessible to “ordinary folk.”

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Lindbeck, “Scripture, Consensus, and Community,” 23.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Johnson, *Living Jesus*, 78.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Johnson, *Living Jesus*, 196-97.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. John P. Burgess, “Scripture as Sacramental Word: Rediscovering Scripture’s Compelling Power,” *Interpretation* 52 (Oct. 1998): 386-87.

life.”<sup>51</sup> Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones even suggest: “Unless Christians embody their interpretation of Scripture (thus producing a certain character), their interpretation is in vain.”<sup>52</sup> Michael Lodahl writes that an appeal to Scripture (more specifically, the story of Jesus) provides answers to these questions: “What kinds of actions and attitudes most clearly and decisively characterize the committed Christian life in this world? What sort of life helps us best understand the nature of the relationship between God and human beings, and what it is that God desires and requires?”<sup>53</sup> John Wesley would have agreed in principle with these statements since he correlated the use of Scripture with holy living.<sup>54</sup> If, in our reading of Scripture, we have heard the voice of God, can life go on as before? Or is the experience enough?

### More Than the Written Texts

The difficulty in appropriating historical-critical methods within the ecclesial context as the *primary* means by which to do biblical exegesis is that these so-called objective methods bracket faith (and therefore faithful living) matters from the discussion. Historical investigation may provide data concerning the world in which and to which a particular biblical text was written, but such studies cannot bridge the obvious gap between the past and present.<sup>55</sup> The controversies surrounding the “Jesus Seminar” of the Society of Biblical Literature reflect similar difficulties for the church because, although the seminar operates *outside* the ecclesial context, the Jesus of the New Testament is separated from the risen Christ of the church.<sup>56</sup> The common assumption is that historical information will help the interpreter understand the text or understand what *really* happened or what Jesus *really* said. The problem with a reliance on such methods alone is that the biblical texts become objects of study and scrutiny rather than

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<sup>51</sup>Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 51.

<sup>52</sup>Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 85.

<sup>53</sup>Lodahl, *The Story of God*, 199.

<sup>54</sup>See, e.g., Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” in *Works* (Bicentennial), 1:388.

<sup>55</sup>See Lindbeck, “Scripture, Consensus, and Community,” 13, 16.

<sup>56</sup>See, e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), and *Living Jesus*; and Braaten, “Jesus and the Church,” 59-71.

texts that the readers bring to life.<sup>57</sup> Robert Wall provocatively states: “It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the gaps in a more precise historical understanding about the world behind the biblical text, which are then filled by competent historical critics, typically contribute little that is essential to Scripture’s performance as the Word of God.”<sup>58</sup> Wall concludes: “*If the aim of biblical interpretation is theological understanding and not historical reconstruction . . . the test of sound interpretation is whether it makes the biblical text come alive with meaning that makes sense of and empowers a life for God today.*”<sup>59</sup> Perhaps one criterion needed for evaluating the church’s various readings of Scripture should focus on this matter of faithful or holy living. Maybe George Lindbeck provides a good beginning definition of that criterion: “[W]hen other criteria are not decisive, the interpretation which seems most likely in these particular circumstances to serve the upbuilding of the community of faith in its God-willed witness to the world is the one to be preferred.”<sup>60</sup> If Scripture no longer comes alive in the church (i.e., in holy living), have those texts lost their revelatory character? Is there some correlation between the *Word* that comes alive within us and the *living Word* (i.e., the risen Lord)?

In the movie *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, a high school orchestra director, Glenn Holland who is played by Richard Dreyfuss, is confronted by Gertrude Lange, a clarinet player whose frustrations have carried her to that moment of resignation and defeat. Mr. Holland asks her a simple question about playing the clarinet: “Is it any fun?” “I wanted it to be,” is her quiet admission, to which Mr. Holland responds surprisingly, “Do you know what we have been doing wrong, Miss Lange? We’ve been playing the notes on the page.” Gertrude asks: “Well, what else is there to play?” Mr. Holland replies: “There’s a lot more to music than notes on the page. . . . Playing music is not about notes on a page. I could teach you notes on a page.” In other words, music comes not from the penned notes, but from the song that the musician brings to life.

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<sup>57</sup>Cf. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 52: “A truthful telling of the story cannot be guaranteed by historical investigation, but by being the kind of people who can bear the burden of that story with joy.”

<sup>58</sup>Wall, “The Future of Wesleyan Biblical Studies,” 105.

<sup>59</sup>Wall, “The Future of Wesleyan Biblical Studies,” 105 (author’s emphasis).

<sup>60</sup>Lindbeck, “Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment,” 155.

Whatever else one may say about the reading of Scripture, it is more than just reading or mastering words or sentences on a written page, ideas, historical data, or artistic beauty. Interpreting or understanding the Bible cannot and does not occur by ravaging the text before us—by trying to find meaning contained or buried somewhere in that text. Postmodernism has helped us recognize that *nothing*, including matters of faith, can be mastered as objective entities. We really cannot understand the biblical texts or find meaning in them apart from ourselves and our reading community of faith. Unless our readings of Scripture allow those texts to come alive in responses of faithful and holy living that truly reflect the convergence between those texts and us, the Bible loses its character as holy Scripture.<sup>61</sup> Could it be that Bible reading has become boring and lifeless for so many believers because we have been looking for meaning in the wrong places (e.g., in the text)? Could it be that beauty really *is* in the eyes of the beholders—that meaning *really is* in the lives of the ones who are confronted together with the written story of God's grace?

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<sup>61</sup>Cf. Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 20.

# **A POSTMODERN WESLEYAN PHILOSOPHY AND DAVID RAY GRIFFIN'S POSTMODERN VISION**

by

**Thomas J. Oord**

I endeavor to accomplish two tasks in this essay. The first involves introducing the creative and complex postmodernism of David Ray Griffin, focusing on two notions he believes are crucial in his postmodern vision. The second task involves suggesting two insights that could serve as keys for constructing a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy. These insights reveal a significant overlap between core notions in Griffin's constructive postmodernism and pertinent issues in Wesleyan philosophical theology. It is my conviction that the two insights can serve as faithful guides for Christians in general and Wesleyans in particular as they traverse the unpredictable postmodern terrain.

## **Postmodernism According to David Ray Griffin**

With the variety of postmodernisms espoused or referred to in recent times, a short excursus into what David Griffin means by postmodernism seems necessary. Postmodernism, according to Griffin, refers to a diffuse sentiment—that humanity can and must go beyond the “modern”—rather than to any common set of doctrines (F vii-viii). In philosophical and theological circles, there are at least two different positions labeled “post-modern” and each seeks to transcend the modern worldview that developed out of seventeenth-century Galilean-Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian science (F viii). However, the manner in which diverse postmodernisms

seek to transcend modernity varies. Griffin refers to the postmodernism inspired variously by pragmatism, physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida and many other recent French thinkers as “deconstructive” or “eliminative” postmodernism. This postmodernism, according to Griffin, “overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview” (F viii). Deconstructive postmodernism

. . . deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence. While motivated in some cases by the ethical concern to forestall totalitarian systems, this type of postmodern thought issues in relativism, even nihilism. It could be called *ultramodernism*, in that its eliminations result from carrying modern premises to their logical conclusions (F viii).

To say it another way, deconstructive postmodernists deconstruct various notions, such as rationality, empirical givenness, and truth as correspondence, without which a worldview is impossible (F 4). The attempt by deconstructive postmodernists to undermine horror-producing worldviews is admirable and even necessary. This strategy, however, involves eliminating the presuppositions of worldview as such (V 52). Therefore, the deconstructionist approach is both inconsistent and counterproductive. It is inconsistent because freedom, purposive agency, realism, truth, and the distinction between better and worse are presupposed in the very attempt to eliminate them. It is counterproductive because freedom for good cannot be promoted by it (V 52).

The type of postmodernism Griffin suggests can, by contrast, be called “constructive” or “revisionary” postmodernism. “It seeks to overcome the modern worldview,” he says, “through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts” (F viii). It is equally concerned with constructing a new worldview involving postmodern persons and a postmodern society with a postmodern spirituality. Griffin explains:

Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, mechanization, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism. [This] constructive postmodern thought provides support for the ecology, peace, feminist, and other emancipatory movements of our time, while stressing that the inclusive emancipation must be from modernity itself. The term *postmodern*, however,

by contrast with *premodern*, emphasizes that the modern world has produced unparalleled advances that must not be lost in a general revulsion against its negative features (F ix).

This postmodernism, therefore, involves a creative synthesis of modern and premodern truths and values. It differs significantly from deconstructive postmodernism in its insistence upon “the necessity and possibility of constructing a new cosmology that might become the worldview of future generations,” says Griffin (F 1).

Griffin’s proposal does *not* hold to “the naively utopian belief that the success of this movement would bring about lasting peace, harmony, and happiness, in which all spiritual problems, social conflicts, ecological destruction, and hard choices would vanish” (F x). There is truth in the testimony of the world’s religions that a deep evil is present within the human heart that no new worldview will suddenly eliminate (F x). However, Griffin says, we should not reconcile ourselves “to the present order, as if this order were thereby uniquely legitimated” (F x). “The human proclivity to evil in general, and to conflictual competition and ecological destruction in particular, can be either greatly exacerbated or greatly mitigated by a world order and its view” (F x). While modernity exacerbated it, a reconstructive postmodernism may envision, without being naively utopian, a far better world order than the one we now have. See Appendix.

### **Key Philosophical Notions in Griffin’s Constructive Postmodernism**

While David Griffin believes a constructive postmodernism builds upon the thought of several recent philosophers, he admits that his own postmodern agenda takes its primary orientation from Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophy and only slightly less from Charles Hartshorne’s (F 2). From this perspective, says Griffin, “the two fundamental flaws in modern philosophy have been an ontology based on a materialistic doctrine of nature and an epistemology based on a sensationalist doctrine of perception” (F 3). He explains:

The sensationalist doctrine of perception said not only that all knowledge is grounded on perception (with which constructive postmodernists agree), but also that perception is to be equated with sense-perception (with which they do not agree). The materialistic doctrine of nature—whether part of a materialistic ontology of reality in general or of a dualism between “mind” and “nature”—said that the ultimate units of nature

are, in Whitehead's words, "vacuous actualities." That is, they are actualities (*contra* Bishop Berkeley), but they are completely devoid of experience (F 3).

An exposition of Griffin's argument against the sensationalist doctrine of perception and his alternative proposal—a doctrine of sensory and nonsensory perception—serves as the subject for the first section of this segment on the philosophical basis of Griffin's constructive postmodernism. Because Griffin's argument against the materialistic doctrine of nature does not play a major role in my later proposals for a Wesleyan postmodern philosophy, I do not examine it in detail. The second section of this segment involves a discussion of what Griffin calls "hard-core commonsense notions" as a response to foundationalism and relativism.

### **Beyond a Doctrine of Sensationalist Perception to a Doctrine of Sensory and Nonsensory Perception**

The epistemological side of Griffin's constructive postmodernism involves the idea that sensory perception is not our only means of perceiving the world. In fact, it is not even our *primary* means of perception, Griffin claims, because sensory perception is derived from nonsensory modes of perception (F 14). The key epistemological revision for overcoming deconstructive postmodernism's epistemological chasm—a chasm whose depths have spawned numerous philosophical and theological inadequacies—involves a postmodern affirmation of nonsensory perception.

The recent obituaries for constructive epistemology written by deconstructive postmodernists have resulted primarily from what Whitehead called "the tacit identification of perception with sense-perception."<sup>1</sup> Modern philosophy's doctrine of perception was based upon two premises: (1) the only possible source of information about the world beyond our own experience is sensory perception, and (2) sensory perception gives us nothing but sense-data. Griffin notes that, given these premises, it is hard to see how one could escape solipsism (F 17). For instance, David Hume had said that we must be content with solipsism based upon a radical bifurcation between theory and practice so that in practice we assume that a real world exists, while in theory we realize that there is no justification for this belief.

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1968; New York: Macmillan, 1933), 231.

The equating of perception with sensory perception has led to the shallowness of modern philosophy of religion. If perceptual experience is equated with sensory perception—thereby denying non-sensory perception—we have no perceptual experience of causation, the actual world, or the past. There can be no religious experience, in the sense of a direct awareness of God. There can be no perceptual experience of normative ideals, whether moral, aesthetic, or cognitive, and, therefore, what remains is a multiplicity of perspectives, none of which is more normative than the others (V 32; EPT 14).

The idea that sense-data are *constructed* by the perceiver, not passively received, has been, according to Griffin, “a central plank in the extreme antifoundationalism that is central to deconstructive postmodern philosophy” (F 19). He responds to this idea by noting that, on the one hand, if *nothing* is given in perception, then all our beliefs about the world are arbitrary, and the very idea that there is a reality beyond ourselves to which our ideas could somehow correspond is groundless. Extreme antifoundationalism leads to extreme relativism. On the other hand, various foundationalists have insisted that the outer world is *directly* given in *sensory* perception. Contemporary philosophers and theologians, says Griffin, seem to be at an impasse:

On the one hand, there are good reasons to believe, from what we all presuppose in practice (that a real world exists, that its reality is given to us in perception, and that our ideas are true to the extent that they correspond to this world), that perception must include an element that is given. On the other hand, there are good reasons to believe that sense-data are constructed by the perceiver (F 20).

The way beyond this impasse is to see that sensory perception is not our primary mode of perceiving the world; nonsensory perception is more basic. In this nonsensory mode, we directly (ap)prehend “other actual things as actual and causally efficacious for us,” says Griffin (F 20). But the way we apprehend other actual things plays a role in our perception. On this basis, we see that there is a constructed character of sense-data without concluding that nothing is given to perceptual experience as such. One can agree “with the direct realists,” says Griffin, “who have insisted that, in perception, we *directly apprehend other actual things* beyond our own experience, while agreeing with phenomenologists that *sensory perception, in providing us with sense-data, does not give us this direct*

*apprehension*" (F 20). The alternative position is open to constructive postmodernists by "either saying that sensory perception is based upon a more primitive mode of perception in which that direct perception occurs, or by saying that sensory perception is a mixed mode of perception comprised of two pure modes, one of which provides (constructed) sense-data and the other of which provides causally efficacious actualities" (F 20). Griffin's position, then, "comes out about half-way between modern phenomenalism and the sensory realism of pre-Humean philosophy" (PPR 491).

Following the basic thrust of Whitehead, Griffin argues that we get direct apprehension of the world in three ways. First, we directly apprehend particular parts of our own bodies as causally efficacious for our sensory perceptions. The most direct perception of one's body is not one's perception of sensory organs, but one's perception, albeit unconscious, of the brain. "We know from physiology," says Griffin,

that our sensory perceptions depend directly upon the brain. Sensory perceptions can be induced, for example, by direct stimulation of certain parts of the brain. By combining what we know from immediate experience with what we know from science, accordingly, we must conclude that it is primarily by means of a nonsensory perception of the brain, with which the mind is contiguous, that we perceive the causal efficacy of various parts of the body for our experience (PPR 74).

Furthermore, the direct apprehension of our own bodies can serve, by analogy, to ground our talk about actualities beyond our bodily members. In other words, one can know the actuality of the world beyond one's body by analogy. The second way we apprehend the world occurs by prehending our own bodies because, when we do so, "we indirectly apprehend the actualities beyond our bodies *insofar as those actualities beyond our bodies are present within actualities comprising our bodies*" (F 22). This panexperientialist hypothesis involves the belief that each actual entity is an experience that prehends, thereby including into itself aspects of prior actualities. For instance, visual images are present in the eyes by way of the eye's apprehension of them. The brain apprehends the images present in the eyes; the mind apprehends the brain. The third way we get direct apprehension of the world is through direct prehension of actualities beyond one's own body. Although this type of direct prehension of remote actualities is negligible in the conscious experience of most people

most of the time, Griffin's study in the field of parapsychology has lead him to believe that authentic instances do occur.

Perhaps the main explanation of our awareness of nonsensory perception lies within the type of perception we call "memory," but what might be better called, says Griffin, "past-self-perception" (PPR 75). Through memory, we directlyprehend our own past experiences. It is our prehension of the immediate past (one second ago, for instance) that best illustrates our non-sensory perception that the past influences the present. Philosophers in the past have generally failed to think of memory as a type of perception because they assumed that the human mind is a single, enduring substance. A view which more adequately accounts for the diverse activity of the mind, however, is one which views the enduring mind as a serially ordered society of distinct occasions of experience. Memory is the enduring mind's perception of prior moments of experiences as antecedent objects (PPR 494-95). The vision in our "mind's eye," then, is not immediately derived from our sensory organs.

If direct, albeit often unconscious and non-sensory, apprehension of that which is both inside and outside one's body occurs, we have reason to believe that our notions of truth, beauty, and goodness are rooted in our prehension of a realm of values beyond ourselves. Thus, complete relativism is denied (PT 139). Such direct, albeit nonsensory perception also allows one to claim the possibility that one can directly perceive the God often described in religious traditions as a Spirit undetectable to sensory perception. Griffin claims that perception of the divine occurs in this way and his notion will be explored further in my discussion of a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy.

### **Foundationalism, Relativism, and Hard-Core Commonsense Notions**

Contemporary philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular wrestles with the epistemological implications of either affirming or denying what has come to be called "foundationalism." On the one hand, it seems that denying the possibility of securing philosophical foundations leads, inevitably, to an affirmation of extreme relativism. On the other hand, it seems that insisting that philosophical foundations can be secured leads, inevitably, to dogmatism and unjustified certainty.

Where does Griffin's constructive postmodern philosophy fit? It is neither a form of foundationalism nor is it radically antifoundationalist (F 23). By "foundationalism," Griffin means the claim that "philosophers

can and should base their philosophical position as a whole on a foundation whose certain truth can be established prior to the construction of the rest of the edifice" (F 24).<sup>2</sup> He rejects this claim because philosophers begin philosophizing with "a mind already chock full of beliefs of every type, and these cannot be laid aside when one becomes philosophical" (F 24). Instead of attempting to secure the certainties of foundationalism, Griffin employs the method of the provisional or working hypothesis.

While, on the one hand, Griffin rejects the claim that philosophy can begin with certainties, he does not agree, on the other hand, with those he calls "extreme antifoundationalists." He does not agree with extreme antifoundationalism because it commonly rejects three other notions Griffin accepts: (1) a "given" element of perception, (2) truth as correspondence of idea to referent, and (3) any class of privileged, universal beliefs that can serve as a criterion for evaluating less privileged beliefs (F 25). The first notion was discussed above and the argument was made that, *contra* extreme antifoundationalism, the real world *is* given to perception—although this does not mean that our perception of the world is infallible. The second notion that extreme antifoundationalists reject—truth as correspondence of idea to referent—is embattled partly because its detractors generally take it to involve things that its defenders do not. Griffin explains:

When a defender of truth as correspondence endorses some particular assertion as true, detractors of the idea of correspondence sometimes assume the defender to mean that the statement provides the whole truth about the thing in question. The detractors rightly point out that there is an indefinite number of finite perspectives from which a thing can be viewed . . . and that none of these perspectives is privileged. To take a particular assertion as *the* truth is said to rule out other equally valid perspectives. But to believe that a certain assertion about something is true does not entail that it is *the* truth (in the sense of the whole truth), or even the most important truth,

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<sup>2</sup>A more complete definition of foundationalism is given by Griffin: "Foundationalism is the epistemological view (1) that a system of beliefs is distinguishable into basic and nonbasic beliefs, (2) that basic beliefs one knows immediately to be true, (3) that in a rational system basic beliefs form the starting points, from which all nonbasic beliefs must be derived, and (4) that the relation between basic and nonbasic beliefs is an entirely one-way relation, with basic beliefs supporting, without in any way being supported by, nonbasic beliefs" (PPR 478).

about it. Every true assertion about something abstracts tremendously from the full truth about it. The full truth about something would consist of all the true propositions that apply to it; this full truth . . . is only knowable to omniscience (F 26).

In addition, deconstructionists have typically argued that all truths are local, because the criteria for truth, being culturally conditioned or even self-created, are completely relative. The irony of this position is that it takes the form, paradoxically, of an argument stating that all truths are *not* local (EPT 20). In other words, ultramodernists inconsistently claim that it is universally true that all truths are particular.

The third notion that extreme antifoundationalists reject, but Griffin accepts, is the notion that some beliefs can be privileged. According to Griffin, those beliefs that we inevitably presuppose in practice, even if we deny them verbally, should be privileged above others. Whitehead formulated this principle as “the metaphysical rule of evidence: that we must bow to those presumptions, which, in spite of criticism, we still employ for the regulation of our lives.”<sup>3</sup> This points to a bottom layer of experience that is common to all humanity (F 27). “These beliefs,” explains Griffin, “are not privileged in the sense of being infallible and thus beyond the possible need for reformulation; they are privileged within the entire set of fallible beliefs in the sense that they cannot be simply rejected” (F 28). They serve to point constructive postmodernists to a way between foundationalism and an extreme antifoundationalism that leads to relativism (with “relativism” defined as the “denial that there is *any basis* for holding that one system of beliefs corresponds to reality better than do any others” [F 28]). The universal presuppositions of practice function not so much as a foundation for building but more as a compass for a voyage, alerting us when we have gotten off course (U 21). Their use is primarily negative: “No proposition that contradicts one of these commonsense beliefs should be accepted,” argues Griffin (PPR 480). It should further be noted that to acknowledge that some notions are privileged, because they reveal what all people practice, does mean that one must be opposed to healthy pluralism and respect for the “other” (F 28). The notion that there is a set of presuppositions that are inevitably presupposed in everyone’s practice “does not, by any means, imply that any extant belief-system adequately reflects all of those universal presuppositions,” says Griffin (F 29).

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<sup>3</sup>Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 223.

Because this notion—that we should privilege those beliefs that we all inevitably presuppose in practice—will be drawn upon in the following section, I will explain it in greater detail here. Griffin calls these beliefs “hard-core commonsense notions” and distinguishes them from “soft-core commonsense notions.” “We can be confident that particular ideas belong to our set of hard-core commonsense beliefs,” he says, “insofar as we see that they are inevitably presupposed by all human beings, regardless of cultural-linguistic shaping” (PPR 477).

Science has widely come to be understood as a systematic assault on common sense (U 15). For instance, at one time it was common sense that the world was flat; science showed this common sense notion, which Griffin would label as “soft-core,” to be false. For most of our civilization’s history, it has been “just common sense” that women are incapable of complex intellectual activity. This soft-core commonsense notion has also been shown to be false.

The conviction that obvious criteria exist upon which to base philosophical inquiry lies at the root of the tradition associated with Thomas Reid. This tradition is often called “Scottish Commonsense Philosophy.” Reid’s notion of commonsense beliefs is similar in some ways to Griffin’s. Reid’s commonsense beliefs differ, however, in that many of his beliefs are *not* truly common or universal and *could* be denied in practice. This difference, then, is a difference in kind, not degree (PPR 39). The difference is especially seen in commonsense notions supposed by Scottish Commonsense philosophers following Reid. When science falsified many of these soft-core beliefs, it was assumed by many that those commonsense notions Griffin has come to label “hard-core” were false as well. But, if any theory, including a scientific one, is to correspond with the obvious, empirical facts of experience, it must account for those beliefs that all people do presuppose in their practice (U 19). In other words, hard-core commonsense notions cannot be finally falsified if they are presupposed in everyone’s practice.

The commonsense notions of Griffin and Reid also differ in the reason each gives for their existence. Reid supposes them to be supernaturally implanted. This meant that when some of Reid’s commonsense notions were found not to be so common, atheism’s flame was believed to be further fueled. In contrast to Reid, Griffin contends that hard-core commonsense notions are derived from the necessary structures of experience (EPT 17). This does not mean that Griffin denies that God is present

in the necessary structures of experience (in fact, he insists that God is a necessary part of the necessary structures); it only denies that Griffin requires a particular, divine *modus operandi* to account for these universal presuppositions of practice.

Griffin acknowledges that, in this relativistic age, many philosophers will tend to be suspicious of, if not reject out of hand, the idea that there are *any* notions or presuppositions that are universal (U 20). However, insofar as claims for such notions survive all attempts to refute them, they should be taken as the ultimate criteria for judging a theory's adequacy. "If we cannot help presupposing these notions in practice," he argues, "we are guilty of self-contradiction if our theory denies these notions. And the first rule of reason, including scientific reason, should be that two mutually contradictory propositions cannot both be true" (U 21). In other words, "any scientific, philosophical, or theological theory is irrational . . . to the extent that it contradicts whatever notions we inevitably presuppose in practice" (PPR 36).<sup>4</sup>

Having set the stage for the importance of Griffin's hard-core commonsense notions for postmodernism, it is time to offer some examples of them. The following list includes notions that we all inevitably presuppose in practice, even if some persons deny them verbally.<sup>5</sup>

1. Although some may deny it verbally, the way we all live our lives reveals that we presuppose the reality of an external world. In other words, other things exist beyond our present experience. Even Hume pointed out that, although he was a solipsist in theory, he could not be one in practice because he acted as if other things existed outside his own experience. To say it in a way that is particularly relevant today, we all reveal, by our acts, our knowledge that a real world exists beyond our system of linguistic signs (V 39). Remembering the import of this notion may help both professionals and laypeople alike to avoid making the mistake of referring to knowledge of reality as the complete construction of the mind. It might help us avoid making statements such as this one by

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<sup>4</sup>The refutation of the thesis that any commonsense notion is "hard-core" is done by showing one instance to its contrary (William James's "white crow"). Griffin contends that "the proper approach is simply to find someone who can indeed live consistently without presupposing the notion in question. Insofar as no such person can be located, there is good reason to suppose the notion to be indeed universally presupposed" (PPR 40).

<sup>5</sup>The first six listed here are given, along with others, in Griffin's *Unsnarling the World-Knot*, 34-41. The seventh is the subject of said book.

Walter Truett Anderson: "We all have a lot of work to do to . . . create the emergent fiction that is the world we live in."<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier, however, this notion does not imply that the external world exists *just as* it appears to us.

2. Actual things influence other things, i.e., causation involves real influence (efficient causation). "Contrary to Hume's contention that the data of our experience arise from 'unknown causes,' " says Griffin, "we are directly aware that our experience *here-now* is drawing on data from actualities *there-then*" (PPR 493). This does not require, however, the belief that we are totally determined by the past. It requires neither that one can know *all* prior things that influence the present nor that one knows even what the most dominant influences upon the present may be. To illustrate the hard-core commonsense notion that causation is inevitably presupposed even when one verbally denies it, Griffin says that "if I try to convince some colleagues that there is no such thing as causal influence, I prove by my very attempt to cause them to change their minds that I know otherwise" (PPR 39).

(3) Another of our hard-core commonsense notions involves our presupposition that time is real. In contrast to George Santayana's argument that our knowledge is limited to solipsism of the present moment, our actions reveal that we all believe in the reality of a completed past and possible future. This fact points to the reality of nonsensory perception: although we perceive ourselves as having an immediate past, the immediate sense data given our five senses give no information as to it. Because Santayana and others supposed knowledge to be limited to the perception of data through the senses alone, their theories, like those of other modernists and ultramodernists, left them no way to account for the reality of their own experiences of time. After all, as Griffin says in arguing against this, "if we have no knowledge that there has been a past and that there will be a future . . . we have no knowledge of time" (PPR 43).

(4) We all suppose in our practice the reality of conscious experience. This does not mean that all actualities are conscious nor even that

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<sup>6</sup>Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 269. The above quote is not meant to imply that Anderson's book is without value.

all humans are conscious.<sup>7</sup> It only means that those who are conscious cannot consistently deny in their practice that they are not so, even if they do so verbally. Descartes was right about the fact that conscious experience cannot be consistently doubted (U 34).

(5) We all suppose freedom, in the sense of self-determination, which involves a decision among *genuine* alternatives, so that it is true that the agent could have done otherwise. We all reveal by our acts our knowledge that we are partially free to shape ourselves and the world around us (V 39). We know of freedom, which involves the choice among alternative possibilities, by immediately enjoying it and by remembering our prior free acts (PPR 471). This point is ignored or verbally refuted by many modern and ultramodern philosophers and theologians.

(6) There is the hard-core commonsense notion that, perhaps, strikes at the heart of modern and ultramodern relativism. It is the universal awareness of the norms: truth, goodness, and beauty. All people show in their practice, even if they deny it verbally, that they believe that there are better or worse courses of action to be taken because of these norms. Griffin's claims in this regard are especially worth noting:

In practice we all presuppose awareness of logical norms, and, more generally, we presuppose that there is such a thing as truth and that knowing or telling the truth is inherently good (which is not inconsistent with believing that its inherent value may be overridden by other considerations, such as kindness or, less happily, self-interest). We also have presuppositions involving the other two members of the traditional axiological trinity: goodness and beauty. That is, we all presuppose in practice that some modes of behavior and intended outcomes are inherently better than others and that some states of affairs, whether internal or external, are more beautiful, pleasing, fitting, tasteful, or what have you, than others. We may differ in our judgements and even our criteria; but *that* a distinction between better and worse exists we all presuppose (U 40-41).

Griffin sometimes also describes this commonsense notion as the "principle of rightness" (PPR 500).

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<sup>7</sup>Griffin argues that the vast majority of individuals on our planet are not conscious because the vast majority are not even animals, let alone humans. Furthermore, it may be that some humans are not conscious (due to illness, retardation, or injury, for instance). What is denied here is that those who are conscious cannot consistently deny, in their practice, that fact.

(7) All persons express in practice their belief that their own minds exert causal influence upon their bodies, even when they may verbally deny that the mind influences the body. It is futile to deny the efficacy of conscious influence upon bodily members, whether this denial comes when speaking or writing, because our actions presuppose this influence (U 37). As Whitehead said wryly, "Scientists animated by the purpose of proving they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study."<sup>8</sup> The reality of mental causation is beginning to be expressed by those whose deep interest is in the relationship between the mind and body (e.g., Jaegwon Kim).

(8) Another of our hard-core commonsense notions is our shared belief in the reality of genuine evil that is brought about by the realization of less than optimal possibilities. By "genuine evil" Griffin means evil that would retain its evilness when viewed from an all-inclusive perspective because it does not ultimately serve to make the world a better place. "To believe in genuine evil," explains Griffin, "is to believe that some things happen that, all things considered, should not have happened: the world would have been better if some alternative possibility had happened instead" (ER 3). We regard an event as genuinely evil when we compare what *is* with what *ought* to have been (PPR 470).

(9) Perhaps among the most surprising commonsense notions Griffin lists as being "hard-core" is the notion that all persons, by their actions, presuppose that a Holy Reality exists, even if they verbally deny such an Existent. Griffin argues that "religion has been so pervasive in human culture because all people share, at the depths of their experience, an awareness of the existence of a Holy Reality" (PPR 501). He affirms this partly because of his conviction that we all directly prehend this Holy Reality, albeit often unconsciously (a person can have experiences of God without consciously knowing so because, by hypothesis, most of our experience is pre-conscious). The fact that all presuppose this belief in practice accounts for why religion is not disappearing in the light of modern criticisms and substitutes (PPR 99). The existence of religion, says Griffin,

. . . is rooted in the twofold fact that (1) all people at all times feel, albeit usually only at an unconscious level, the existence of a Holy Actuality, which accounts for what is sometimes

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<sup>8</sup>Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Boston: Beacon, 1958; Princeton Univ. Press, 1929), 16.

called “the religious dimension of experience,” and that (2) in some people, at some times, this direct prehension sometimes rises to the level of conscious awareness, producing what is sometimes called an “experience of the Holy” or a “mystical experience” (PPR 100).

The awareness of a Holy Reality is sufficiently ambiguous, however, to allow for a multiplicity of understandings of its nature. “Although our immediate experience of the Divine Holiness provides the basic reason for believing in God,” says Griffin,

. . . this reason must be supplemented by a cumulative case for the existence of God, and our inherited concepts of the nature of God must be evaluated for their self-consistency and their adequacy in the face of all the relevant evidence, such as the evil and evolutionary nature of our world as well as its order and beauty (PPR 502).

This hard-core commonsense notion plays a role in the first element of my postmodern Wesleyan philosophy proposal (see below).

Some of the previous nine commonsense notions may seem more obviously “hard-core” than others. However, even if one does not immediately see how one or more of these beliefs are hard-core commonsense notions, those notions that *are* recognizably “hard-core” are sufficient enough to demonstrate that the extreme relativism of deconstructive postmodernisms is an unacceptable philosophical tenet. In other words, if one admits that even a few of these notions are universally presupposed in practice, this gives sufficient reason to dismiss as inadequate an ultramodern philosophy contending that “all things are relative,” when “relative” is defined as the denial that there is any basis for holding that one system of beliefs corresponds to reality better than others.

Having explored a few key philosophical elements of David Ray Griffin’s constructive postmodern vision, we are now prepared to address what this vision may have to offer a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy.

### **Toward a Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy**

So, what does all this have to do with a Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy? I propose that various elements in Griffin’s constructive postmodern vision should be utilized by Wesleyans who aspire to offer a postmodern philosophical alternative to modernism and deconstructive postmodernisms. Griffin’s constructive vision can be more easily appro-

priated by postmodern Wesleyans than by those in other religious and nonreligious traditions because it is congenial to many distinctives and theological implications in classic Wesleyan thought. My discussion now centers around what I believe are two issues central to a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy. The first concerns one's apprehension of prevenient grace through nonsensory perception, and the second concerns the relationship between theory and practice as it relates to deconstructive postmodernism's tendency toward extreme relativism and the Reformed tradition's tendency toward one form of foundationalism.

### **Prevenient Grace and Nonsensory Perception of God in Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy**

The first issue can be put in question form: How can Wesleyans account philosophically for their distinctive claim that God's prevenient, gracious activity necessarily affects all humans (and, perhaps, all creatures) if such affection requires that one perceive it? How can Wesleyans account for this if God, as an invisible Spirit, is unavailable for apprehension through sensory perception?

John Wesley's answers to these questions were framed in response to prominent philosophers of his day: John Locke and David Hume. The thought of these two, but especially Hume, provides much of the basis for the dilemmas besetting modern and deconstructive postmodern epistemologies. Although Wesley has little in common with Hume, he self-consciously sided with Locke<sup>9</sup> (and Aristotelian philos-

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<sup>9</sup>Some who have explored deeply the connections between Locke's and Wesley's epistemologies include Richard E. Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984); Frederick Dreyer, "Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley," *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 12-30; Clifford J. Hindley, "The Philosophy of Enthusiasm: A Study in the Origins of 'Experimental Theology,'" *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 182 (1957): 99-109, 199-210; Rex D. Matthews, "'Reason and Religion Joined': A Study in the Theology of John Wesley" (Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1986); Yoshio Noro, "Wesley's Theological Epistemology," *Iliff Review* 28 (1971): 59-76; Mitsuo Shimizu, "Epistemology in the Thought of John Wesley" (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1980); Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990); Laurence W. Wood, "Wesley's Epistemology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 10 (1975): 48-59. It is generally agreed that Wesley was profoundly influenced by Lockean empiricism through Peter Browne's *Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Knowledge* (London: William Innys, 1728).

ophy)<sup>10</sup> who famously expresses the empiricist denial of innate ideas. Wesley several times quotes the empiricist slogan “nothing is in the mind that is not first in the senses.”<sup>11</sup> He argues that “our senses are the only source of those ideas, upon which all our knowledge is founded. Without ideas of some sort or other we could have no knowledge, and without our senses we could have no ideas.”<sup>12</sup>

Wesley’s strong empiricism leads Randy L. Maddox to conclude that “Wesley believed that all human knowledge of God is derived from experience: (1) our experience of God’s restored initial revelation in nature, (2) our experience of God’s definitive revelation recorded in Scripture, and (3) our experience of God’s direct address to our spiritual senses” (numbers added).<sup>13</sup>

The knowledge of God available in (1) the revelation of nature is indirect because such knowledge is secured through inference from the created order. Wesley is far from alone in arguing for this type of knowledge. In fact, many of his contemporaries, including the deists he opposed, joined him in acknowledging this manner of obtaining knowledge of God. Inferential knowledge is based upon a different kind of perception than direct experience of God suggested in ways (2) and (3). This difference pertains to the mode of perception involved. Knowledge of God through inference is available through (natural) sensory perception and, because the invisible God is not *directly* available in this way, inferential knowledge of God is indirect.

The final two avenues for gaining knowledge of God—(2) our personal experience and (3) our experience of Scripture—were more important for Wesley and more important for my present purpose. As Maddox says, “it was to the latter two that Wesley typically turned for the ‘con-

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<sup>10</sup>That Wesley was influenced in this matter by his study of Aristotelean philosophy is an argument championed by Matthews, “Reason and Religion Joined,” 260-280.

<sup>11</sup>Wesley mentions this in his sermons “On the Discoveries of Faith” (*Works* 4:49); in “Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith” (*Works* 4:51); and in *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* (*Works* 11:56).

<sup>12</sup>Wesley, *A Survey of Wisdom of God in the Creation, Or, A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, third American edition, revised and enlarged (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1823), 2:431.

<sup>13</sup>Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 48. Thorsen comments similarly: “In substantial agreement with the British empirical thinking prevalent in his own day, Wesley believed that there is an experiential dimension to all knowledge, both natural and supernatural” (*The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 83).

tent' of our knowledge of God."<sup>14</sup> These two are related to one another in that both are predicated on the notion that humans *directly* perceive God. This means that God's direct address to each person (sometimes called the "internal witness of the Spirit")<sup>15</sup> is of the same kind as God's direct address to the writers of Scripture.<sup>16</sup> According to Wesley, this direct knowledge of God comes through a special kind of perception, "spiritual" sensation.

Wesley postulated that God has given humans a spiritual sense so that they may perceive spiritual realities not available for apprehension through (natural) sensory perception.<sup>17</sup> Through our spiritual senses, we can have direct knowledge of God.<sup>18</sup> In *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley explains this perceptual faculty:

Seeing our ideas are not innate, but must all originally come from our senses, it is certainly necessary that you have senses capable of discerning objects of this kind—not only those which are called "natural senses," which in this respect profit nothing, as being altogether incapable of discerning objects of a spiritual kind, but *spiritual* senses, exercised to discern spiritual good and evil. It is necessary that you have the *hearing* ear, and the *seeing* eye, emphatically so called; that you have a new class of senses opened in your soul, not depending on organs of flesh and blood to be "the *evidence* of things unseen" as your bodily senses are of visible things, to be the avenues of the invisible world, to discern spiritual objects, and

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 48-49. See also 31.

<sup>15</sup>The notion of direct perception of God is important for Wesley's distinctive notion that one can be assured being children of God through the internal witness of the Spirit. See Matthews, "Religion and Reason Joined," ch. 5.

<sup>16</sup>See *NT Notes*, 2 Tim. 3:16. Donald Thorsen notes that the apprehension of the Spirit is a means whereby the believer can be assured of the truth of biblical revelation as well (Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* [Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1990], 132-33).

<sup>17</sup>Maddox, 27. See Wesley's sermons "The New Birth" and "On Living Without God."

<sup>18</sup>Or, in the words of Donald A. D. Thorsen, the felt experience of God "originated in the 'direct testimony of the Spirit,' for which Wesley primarily argued from 'the plain meaning of the text' of Scripture and from Christian experience" (Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 186). The phrases Thorsen quotes from Wesley are found in "The Witness of the Spirit, II" (1767, sermon 11), *Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 1:288-98.

to furnish you with ideas of what the outward “eye hath not seen, neither the ear heard.”<sup>19</sup>

The claim that humans possess spiritual senses was not original with Wesley. As Rex Matthews has noted, the idea of “spiritual senses” has a long and extensive history in Christian theology.<sup>20</sup> Wesley’s positing of a spiritual sense, as Frederick Dreyer points out, was a peculiarly eighteenth-century solution to the epistemological problem.<sup>21</sup> The postulation of spiritual senses is a response to the dominant Lockean empiricism of Wesley’s day. Locke’s empirical philosophy limited perception to the acquisition of data through the (natural) senses alone.<sup>22</sup> Wesley’s epistemological scheme, then, enabled him to account for the notion denied by Locke: creatures can commune directly with God.

The hypothesis that humans possess spiritual senses raises a key question expressed well by Matthews: Does Wesley regard the spiritual senses “as an *addition* to the natural senses (implying a metaphysical and epistemological dualism), or as an *enhancement* of the capacity of the natural senses?”<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to answer this question precisely because, on the one hand, Wesley sometimes speaks as if these spiritual senses are common to all humans as a natural part of what it means to be human.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Wesley sometimes speaks as though a person is incapable of perceiving spiritual data until God has implanted the capacity to perceive this data.<sup>25</sup> This diversity leads Mitsuo Shimizu to argue that

<sup>19</sup>Wesley, *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, 32, *Works* 11:56-57.

<sup>20</sup>Matthews, “Religion and Reason Joined,” 234. See also Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 27-28, 262-63.

<sup>21</sup>Dreyer, “Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley,” 26.

<sup>22</sup>Matthews, “Religion and Reason Joined,” 186; Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism*, 29.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>24</sup>Because of this, George Croft Cell describes Wesley’s religious epistemology as “transcendental empiricism” (*Rediscovery of Wesley* [New York: Henry Holt, 1935], 93), and Albert C. Outler calls it “transempirical intuition” (*Works* [Bicentennial ed.], 3:361, n1).

<sup>25</sup>Although Wesley sometimes argues for the implantation of spiritual senses, he rejects the notion that God has implanted innate ideas of Godself in humans (see “The Imperfection of Human Knowledge” [1784, sermon 69] *Works* [Bicentennial ed.], 2:571). This demonstrates his rejection of a contemporary Reformed epistemology which appeals to Calvin’s notion that God has implanted in all persons a certain understanding of Godself so that they might know that there is a God and that God is the Creator. Two Reformed epistemologists who espouse this latter notion are Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga.

Wesley was both a metaphysical and ontological dualist,<sup>26</sup> while leading Richard Brantley to argue the contrary.<sup>27</sup> Matthews concludes:

It must be acknowledged that Wesley himself uses an inconsistent and sometimes confusing mixture of language about the “spiritual senses,” sometimes speaking of their “opening” or “enlightening” (as if they were already present but simply “latent in human nature—the “liberationist” theme), and sometimes speaking of the “natural man” as “receiving” them (implying that they do not in fact exist in human nature prior to the prevenient action of the Holy Spirit in creating them—the “transformationist” theme).<sup>28</sup>

The natural/supernatural scheme underlying this issue is addressed by Wesley in other contexts. For instance, he says of one’s conscience that “in one sense it may be termed natural, because it is found in all men; yet, properly speaking, it is not natural, but a supernatural gift from God, above all his natural endowments.”<sup>29</sup> Regarding prevenient grace, he says famously:

For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, preventing grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. . . . So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Shimizu, “Epistemology in the Thought of John Wesley,” 171.

<sup>27</sup>Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism*, 99.

<sup>28</sup>Matthews, “Reason and Religion Joined,” 306. Thorsen argues similarly (*The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, 193).

<sup>29</sup>“On Conscience,” vol. 1.6, *Works*, VII, 187-88.

<sup>30</sup>Sermon # 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” 6: 512. In his letter to Mr. John Mason, Wesley writes of the relationship between prevenient grace and the “natural” person: “One of Mr. Fletcher’s Checks considers at large the Calvinistic supposition, ‘that a natural man is as dead as a stone’; and shows the utter falseness and absurdity of it; seeing no man living is without some preventing grace; and every degree of grace is a degree of life” (“Letters to Mr. John Mason,” Nov. 21, 1776, 12: 453).

Despite the confusion of his language regarding the natural and supernatural, one thing seems clear: Wesley remained an empiricist in that he argued that knowledge is gained through perception. Because natural sense perception cannot provide the necessary data for apprehension of the divine, however, Wesley adopted the notion that persons possess unique faculties by which to perceive directly the spiritual activity of God.<sup>31</sup>

It is my belief that a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy should accept neither the metaphysical and epistemological dualisms implied in the notion that God implants supernatural senses alongside natural ones, nor the notion that humans “naturally” possess spiritual senses that need only to be enhanced by a movement of God. However, Wesley’s basic empiricist notion, that knowledge of God—like all other knowledge—comes through perception, *should* be accepted. What seems to be required is a Wesleyan empiricism that accounts for direct perception of God. Such an empiricism must also be postmodern in the sense that it must not fall victim to the incoherence of modern and ultramodern epistemologies which limit the acquisition of knowledge to *sense* perception alone.

Enter the constructive postmodern epistemology of David Ray Griffin outlined earlier. Griffin agrees with Wesley and other empiricists that knowledge is gained only through perception. He agrees with Wesley that humans have direct knowledge of God through perception, as well. Both Griffin and Wesley could be labeled “theistic empiricists” in that both are adamant not only that God exists, but also that direct perception of God is possible. Both agree that this direct perception of God is unavailable through natural sensory perception. Because of this, both reject the epistemological claim of Locke, Hume, and other modern and deconstructive postmodernists that *all* knowledge is garnered through *natural sensory perception alone*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>I have used the notion that God is Spirit (analogous to the human soul or mind) as a crucial element for an adequate theodicy. See my articles “Divine Power and Love: An Evangelical Process Proposal,” *Koinonia: The Princeton Theological Seminary Graduate Forum* X.1 (Spring 1998), and “Michael Fortier, the Oklahoma City Bombing, and God,” in *Creative Transformation*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 14-16.

<sup>32</sup>Process thought in general, and Griffin’s constructive postmodernism in particular, can agree with the Wesleyan notion that God is the initiator of relationship through prevenient grace (see John B. Cobb, Jr, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], ch. 2).

Where Wesley and Griffin differ is in accounting for how direct perception of God is obtained. Wesley is obliged to postulate a sense faculty that pertains to “spiritual” data. Griffin, however, argues that humans, in fact all creatures, perceive God through natural *nonsensory* perception. Perception of God, according to Griffin, “requires no implanted *Sensus Divinitatis*, in fact no special religious sense of any sort, given the recognition of a nonsensory mode of perception” (PPR 501).<sup>33</sup> Genuine experiences of God, says Griffin, require “no special religious sense, *a priori* or otherwise, no supernatural intervention into the normal causal processes involved in human experience, and no special pleading in terms of the beliefs and practices of a particular religious community” (PPR 98).

Process (and Wesleyan) theologian John B. Cobb, Jr., explains this well: “If God is present and working in us, as Wesley (and also process philosophy) affirms, there is nonsensory perception of God all the time. . . . Instead of speaking of new spiritual senses, we can think of nonsensuous experience of the divine presence in our lives and awareness of its salvific effects.”<sup>34</sup> Although modern philosophers, due to their sensationalist proclivities, tend to assume that nonsensory perception must be supernatural, Griffin’s constructive postmodernism offers an account that is naturalistic and theistic. This hypothesis finds evidence for its plausibility in the way we live our lives, i.e., in experience, because we all possess knowledge that is unavailable to sensory perception.

For instance, when Randy Maddox summarizes Wesleyan theology by saying that “one of Wesley’s fundamental convictions was that authentic Christian life flows out of love, and that genuine human love can only exist in *response* to an awareness of God’s pardoning love to us” (*Responsible Grace*, 32). Griffin and process theists can agree wholeheartedly. In process terms, this refers to God’s activity of providing an initial aim (comprised of various possibilities which can be instantiated) to each actuality prior to each moment of that actuality’s experience. Process thought differs from Pelagianism in that it affirms that God’s graceful action to establish a richer relationship always occurs prior to a creature’s action, thereby making the action of creatures a response to God. It differs from the thought of most in the Reformed tradition, however, in insisting that this response is uncoerced, i.e., resistible.

<sup>33</sup>John Cobb argues, regarding Wesley’s notion of “spiritual senses,” that “few today will find it convincing. It affirms a radical difference between the bases of natural and of spiritual knowledge that does not fit our experience. We can hardly avoid being skeptical of the existence of this second set of senses” (*Grace and Responsibility*, 72).

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

The hypothesis that we all perceive God directly through nonsensory perception provides an additional basis for Griffin's call for a collapse of the classic natural and supernatural dualism. In its place, he suggests a naturalistic theism or theistic naturalism. General precedence for such a collapse can be found in Wesley's own writings noted above as well as in the thought of early Greek theologians and in the continuing Eastern Orthodox tradition. It can be found in the writings of contemporary Wesleyans as well. For instance, H. Ray Dunning contends that "the distinctiveness of the Wesleyan view is that nature is so graced that the natural man is but a logical abstraction. The grace extends to the whole of human existence."<sup>35</sup> Mildred Bangs Wynkoop and John E. Culp also push for a type of collapse.<sup>36</sup>

It is my argument, then, that Wesleyans endeavoring to propose a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy are wise to adopt Griffin's hypothesis that direct knowledge of God is available through nonsensory perception. This hypothesis is postmodern in that it overcomes the difficulties inherent in modernity's (and deconstructive postmodernity's) reduction of perception to sensory perception alone. It is Wesleyan in that it corresponds with (1) Wesley's empiricist philosophy, (2) insistence upon direct perception of God, and (3) recognition that direct perception of God is unavailable through the natural senses. Its further benefit is in overcoming the potential spiritual/natural dualism that Wesley's language sometimes supports. The hypothesis that God can be perceived through nonsensory apprehension allows Wesleyans a realistic and nondualistic basis upon which to articulate their convictions regarding the efficacy of prevenient grace in our postmodern world.

### **Theory and Practice and Hard-Core Commonsense in Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy**

A second aspect of Griffin's constructive postmodernism that is useful for postmodern Wesleyan philosophy is the argument that hard-core

<sup>35</sup>H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1988), 159. See also 432.

<sup>36</sup>See Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972), 213-221; and John E. Culp, "Supernatural and Sanctification: Comparison of Roman Catholic and Wesleyan Views," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* vol. 31, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 147-166. See also, from a Wesleyan-Process perspective, Cobb's *Grace and Responsibility* and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki's "Coming Home: Wesley, Whitehead, and Women," *The Drew Gateway* 57, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 31-43.

commonsense notions provide a way between relativism and foundationalism. Because I believe the benefits of this powerful tool for Wesleyans are fairly obvious, my discussion of it will be brief.

Although the use of hard-core commonsense notions is available to those constructing philosophical schemes beyond those concerned with a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy, I believe the concern that underlies them finds a happy home in Wesleyanism. They do not fit so happily in other traditions. For instance, Reformed theologians often opt for a form of foundationalism.<sup>37</sup> This foundationalism is based on what they con-

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<sup>37</sup>Alvin Plantinga contrasts his Reformed epistemology with what he calls “classical” foundationalism. Classical foundationalism, according to him, should be identified with the modern epistemological practice of evidentialism (he defines “evidentialism” as the theory that a belief requires inferential evidence). Classical foundationalists, according to him, build their epistemological structures from propositions that are either (1) self-evident, in the sense of tautologous, or (2) incorrigible, because limited to one’s immediate experience (“It seems that I see a dog”). With regard to the question of God, classical foundationalists cannot affirm God’s existence as either self-evident or incorrigible. Therefore, the existence and activity of God, in a classical foundationalist’s scheme, is not a foundational knowledge claim because one’s belief in God must be *inferred* from propositions that one can truly know. Plantinga rejects this form of foundationalism because he contends that knowledge of God is more basic than knowledge gained by inference.

Plantinga and Reformed epistemologists *do*, however, affirm another form of foundationalism. This form of foundationalism takes a belief as the foundation stone without any need of justification. As Plantinga says, it is in his epistemic rights “in *starting with* belief in God, accepting it as basic, and in taking it as a premise for arguing to other conclusions” (*Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Wolterstorff [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983], 371). Instead of one’s philosophical scheme being a working hypothesis in need of periodic adjustment, Reformed epistemologists regard this basic belief as above the requirement of plausibility. See also footnote 25 above.

Griffin would, in one sense, agree with Reformed epistemologists that belief in God is basic because, as mentioned earlier, he lists the notion that a Holy Reality exists as a hard-core commonsense notion. Griffin differs from Reformed epistemologists, however, in conceiving how it is that this belief is basic and of what the content of this belief consists. The basic belief, for Plantinga, is “God as conceived in traditional Christianity, Judaism, and Islam: an almighty, all-knowing, wholly good and loving person who has created the world and presently upholds it in being” (“Reformed Epistemology” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L Quinn and Charles Taliaferro [Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997], 383. In contrast, Griffin does not claim that all persons presuppose in their practice that the attributes and activity of a Holy Reality are precisely the attributes and activities Plantinga lists. In other words, the Holy Reality that we all in our practice presuppose to exist may or may not be almighty, the Creator, or Sustainer. As Griffin says, “the truth of [this particular] belief in the God of

sider to be “basic beliefs” that are uncritically assumed as *properly* basic. They often regard a particular belief about God as entirely removed from criticisms grounded upon “natural” experience, and may even argue that beliefs should be plausible. For this reason, natural theology,<sup>38</sup> in the sense that theology is formulated upon knowledge gained through (natural) perception, is rejected.<sup>39</sup> Although some may reference Griffin’s hard-core commonsense notions, the Reformed dependence on classic supernaturalistic epistemology is of a different kind.<sup>40</sup>

Hard-core commonsense notions also do not fit well, as we have seen, in deconstructive postmodernisms. Most espousing this form of postmodernism tend toward relativism and often attempt (unsuccessfully) to operate without any “center” or “meta-narrative.” A major reason why hard-core commonsense notions are conducive to postmodern Wesleyan philosophy is that many of them have been already espoused by the Wesleys and Wesleyans in discussions with those of other theological and

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traditional theism, unlike the truth of our hard-core commonsense beliefs, is *not* evident to perception and (therefore) not universally presupposed in practice” (PPR 498). What is needed for constructing an adequate doctrine of God, in addition to one’s nonsensory perception of the divine, is inferential evidence to shape the contours of said doctrine. “Although our immediate experience of the Divine Holiness provides the basic reason for believing in God, this reason must be supplemented by a cumulative case for the existence of God, and our inherited concepts of the nature of God must be evaluated for their self-consistency and their adequacy in the face of all the relevant evidence, such as the evil and evolutionary nature of our world as well as its order and beauty” (PPR 502).

Griffin also disagrees with Reformed epistemologists on how it is that one knows God. Plantinga contends that God has created us so that, in the right circumstances, we acquire belief in God. Wolterstorff, following Calvin, claims that God implanted in humans the disposition for belief in God. Griffin, by contrast, argues that nonsensory perception of God is a natural part of what it means to be. Therefore, one’s verbal expressions of belief in God do not arise out of implantation or “the right circumstances,” but out of one’s experience of God at the nonsensory level. However, these verbal expressions may or may not correspond correctly with the actual nature and capacities of God.

<sup>38</sup>For a concise argument for “the possibility and purpose” of a Wesleyan natural theology, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 34-35.

<sup>39</sup>On the Reformed tradition’s rejection of natural theology, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Reformed Tradition” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 165-170.

<sup>40</sup>An example of a Reformed theologian who explicitly embraces Griffin’s hard-core commonsense notions, despite also embracing classic supernaturalism, is Millard J. Erickson (*Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998], 150).

philosophical traditions. For instance, the notions of freedom, time, genuine evil, conscious experience, an external world, a Holy Reality, and the awareness of norms have all played a significant role in Wesleyan attempts to reveal how their thought differs from the thought of others.

Wesleyans have often embraced the commonsense style of argumentation developed by Thomas Reid. James E. Hamilton argues that “there was in Wesley and other early Methodists a commonsense approach to theological matters with bore an affinity to Reid’s philosophical method.”<sup>41</sup> Hamilton’s tracing of common sense philosophy’s extensive influence upon Methodist scholars underscores his point.<sup>42</sup> Of course, a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy’s appeal to Griffin’s work, as opposed to some of Reid’s and the more popular references to commonsense philosophy, is an appeal to those notions that are truly hard-core commonsense notions. Despite this difference, the fact is that commonsense philosophy has often been embraced by Wesleyans.

Hard-core commonsense notions also find a happy home in Wesleyanism because of this tradition’s long-time emphasis on the integral relationship between theory and practice. Wesleyans have often attempted to, as Charles Wesley said, “unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety.”<sup>43</sup> John Wesley’s “practical theology” serves as a grand illustration of his own desire to unite theory and practice when offering an adequate Christian theology. In addition, his use of the phrase “common sense” sometimes points to his disdain for theories or thought that violate the ways of practice.<sup>44</sup> Where Griffin’s commonsense notions help in this regard, however, is to differentiate the disdain that arises from theories that violate personal taste or social conventionality from disdain for theories that violate the inevitable presuppositions of practice. A postmodern

<sup>41</sup>James E. Hamilton, “Epistemology and Theology in American Methodism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 10 (1975), 72.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, all. See also Hamilton’s “Academic Orthodoxy and the Arminianizing of American Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 9 (1974), and Leland H. Scott, “Methodist Theology in America in the Nineteenth Century,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale, 1954.

<sup>43</sup>Charles Wesley, “A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People Called Methodists, 1780,” Hymn 461, 1.5, *Works* (Oxford ed.), 7:644.

<sup>44</sup>Illustrations of this are numerous. See, for instance, “On God’s Vineyard,” “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” “The Doctrine of Original Sin—Essay I,” and “A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Rutherford.”

Wesleyan philosophy can use hard-core commonsense notions to point out the inadequacy of opposing schemes that violate the integral relationship between theory and practice while also using these notions as a guide when proposing theological and philosophical innovations in the Wesleyan spirit.

## Conclusion

I have argued that two key elements in David Ray Griffin's constructive postmodern proposal should be appropriated by those who wish to offer a postmodern Wesleyan philosophy. First, postmodern Wesleyans should embrace Griffin's empiricist contention that creatures have direct knowledge of God because they apprehend God through nonsensory perception. The affirmation of nonsensory perception not only allows postmodern Wesleyans the opportunity to hurdle the chasms of modern and deconstructive postmodern epistemologies, it also offers them a non-dualistic way to account for creaturely apprehension of God's prevenient grace. Second, postmodern Wesleyans should embrace Griffin's hard-core commonsense notions as arguments against relativism and foundationalism. The general intent of the Wesleys and Wesleyans to unite theory and practice corresponds to Griffin's intent in calling upon all to acknowledge the implications of hard-core commonsense notions when constructing an adequate theory about reality.

## APPENDIX

Modernism	Ultra-Modernism	Griffin's Postmodernism
<b>God:</b> Supernaturalistic or Deistic	<b>God:</b> None, Cipher, Unknown, De-onto-theology	<b>God:</b> Naturalistic Theism De-"classic into"-theology
<b>God:</b> Essentially Independent		<b>God:</b> Essentially related
<b>Epistemology:</b> Limited to Knowledge gained from the five senses	<b>Epistemology:</b> Either solipsistic because knowledge comes through sense perception or confined to language game rules	<b>Epistemology:</b> Knowledge gained through sensory and non-sensory experience
<b>Nature:</b> Materialism. Actualities are vacuous, devoid of experience	<b>Nature:</b> Mechanism/Materialism	<b>Nature:</b> Panexperientialism, Intrinsic value of nonhumans

<b>Self:</b> Individualistic	<b>Self:</b> No self or solipsistic	<b>Self:</b> Individual-in-Community
<b>Anthropocentric</b>	<b>Anti-centric</b>	<b>Aesthetic-centric</b>
<b>Patriarchal</b>	<b>Anti-totalitarian</b>	<b>Common Good</b>
<b>Determinism</b>	<b>Purposeless/Determinism</b>	<b>Purposive organicism/</b> Limited freedom
<b>Values:</b> Consumer-driven	<b>Values:</b> Extreme Relativism	<b>Values:</b> Derived from God and actualized in various actualities
<b>Rational or Revelational Foundationalism</b>	<b>Extreme anti-foundationalism,</b> self or community constructs meaning	<b>Hard-core Commonsense</b> <b>Notion:</b> Notions practiced universally, even if denied verbally, provide a basis for realism
<b>Truth:</b> one-to-one correspondence	<b>Truth:</b> Ultimately perspectival. No correspondence between perceiver and perceived.	<b>Truth:</b> God's necessary omniscience of the satisfaction of all actualities
<b>Uniformity</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>Unity-in-Difference</b>
<b>Utopian.</b> Progress inevitable	<b>Pessimism.</b> Ultimate irony.	<b>Realism.</b> Pro or regress possible
<b>Mind-Body</b> Ontological dualism	<b>Mind-Body</b> Materialistic monism	<b>Mind-Body</b> Mind ontologically the same as the brain and body, but numerically distinct
<b>Religious Truth</b> Guaranteed by supernatural authority	<b>Religious Truth</b> Denied insofar as it is based on divine reality. If affirmed, it is most often based on oneself or claims held by one's particular community	<b>Religious Truth</b> "Obtained naturally because essentially related

**KEY TO THE ABBREVIATED CITINGS OF  
DAVID RAY GRIFFIN'S WORKS**

**EPT.** "The Enlightenment and Process Theology." Unpublished manuscript presented at The Enlightenment in Evangelical and Process Perspectives Conference. Claremont, Calif.: March 1997.

**F.** *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Pierce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne* (with John B. Cobb, Jr., Marcus Ford, Pete A. Y. Gunter, and Peter Ochs). Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1993.

**GRP.** *God, Religion, and the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology*. Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989.

**PPR.** *A Process Philosophy of Religion*. Forthcoming.

**PPS.** *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1997.

**PT.** "Process Theology," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997.

**RS.** *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals* (edited and wrote two chapters). Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1988.

**SI.** *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art* (edited and wrote a chapter). Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1990.

**SS.** *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (edited and wrote a chapter). Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1988.

**U.** *Unsnarling the World-Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-Body Problem*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

**V.** *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (ed. with William A. Beardslee and Joe Holland and wrote two chapters). Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1989.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Kenneth O. Brown, *Inskip, McDonald, Fowler: "Wholly and Forever Thine:" Early Leadership in the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness*, with a Foreword by William Kostlevy (Hazleton, PA: Holiness Archives, 1999). 288 pps. ISBN: 0-9663403-1-0.

Reviewed by David Bundy, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana.

This volume is an important contribution toward the chronicling of the history of the Methodist branch of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition during the period 1868-1942. It tells the story of that group, primarily members of the Methodist Episcopal Church who were in the orbit of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition prior to World War II. While some of that history has been told for the nineteenth-century portion of the period by scholars such as Vinson Synan, Charles Jones, Melvin Dieter, Timothy Smith, and Donald Dayton, all of the earlier authors wrote with an eye to the emergence of Pentecostalism. In Synan's book, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement* (2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), for example, the volume moves quite carefully from the Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century to the Pentecostal Movement to the Charismatic Movement.

One of my students, after reading Synan's volume, wrote in a review, "It is sad that the Holiness Movement ended so abruptly in 1906." Efforts were made to reassure the student that Holiness denominations are currently alive and functioning! However, there was little to connect that reader with what happened between 1906 and the current tradition splintered into small denominations, each with its own peculiar history, and for the most part unaware of the existence of the others. With the publication of Brown's book, there is now a source that tells part of the history of the

Holiness Movement during the first half of the twentieth century outside the Holiness denominations. Appropriately, Brown does not present his work as a history of the Wesleyan/Holiness traditions during the period. It is a carefully defined study of the National Camp Meeting Association.

The first chapter, "The Nineteenth Century Holiness Revival" (pps. 65-156) describes the evolution of the tradition from the works of Charles Grandison Finney and Phoebe Palmer in the 1830s to the 1860s and the beginnings of the National Camp-Meeting Association. The ambiguous relationship of the (primarily) Methodist Episcopal clergy and lay persons with the majority of the Methodist Episcopal Church hierarchy is explored. Quite rightly, Brown sees the center of the controversy to be the independence of the National Association from the church and the lack mechanisms available to the Bishops for control. This arrangement worked reasonably well, as long as there were bishops who identified with and provided moral if not juridical leadership in the Association. However, as the ethos of the Methodist Episcopal Church turned against social, moral, and religious activism at the end of the nineteenth century, episcopal participation in the association declined and eventually ceased. As that process was occurring, Holiness adherents and clergy were being forced from the church or leaving in protest of the trends. These went through a process of forming strategic alliances, regional associations, and then denominations. The leaders of the denominations worked to focus the flow of the resources of denominational members to the denominations, leading to decline of non-denominational organizations. Holiness adherents within the Methodist Episcopal Church were generally silenced, and would not find ways to express their concerns, except through mission, until the development of the language of generic Evangelicalism after World War II.

During all of this turmoil, three leaders worked to provide national coherence and cohesiveness: John Inskip (1816-1884), William McDonald (1820-1901), and Charles J. Fowler (1845-1919). These three men served as Presidents of the National Camp Meeting Association from its founding through its first fifty-two years. Brown provides assiduously documented biographies of each of these men. Attention is also given to their wives who were, especially in the case of Martha Inskip, full partners in the enterprise. Brown also gives attention to publication activities, focusing on the periodicals, which more than any other factor provided both organization and a teaching magisterium for the adherents.

Not everyone could attend the national meetings. Participation was restricted to those with the means to attend; more could subscribe, receive the postcards of their more wealthy friends and read the sermons in the magazines. Perhaps in another edition, the class issues related to the leadership and participation in the Association should be explored if there is data to make an argument. Certainly research in both Illinois (Carl Oblinger) and New York (Johnson) suggests that the masses of Holiness adherents were less than well-to-do.

This issue of the class definition of the National Association is important. The forty-seven pages of National Association ephemera published, most of it for the first time, enhances the volume. There are photographic postcards, photographs, and maps of encampments. These show serious numbers of well-dressed, healthy, cultured people, making more pressing the class issues involved. It is clearly recreation and self-indulgence in a Holiness resort context! The cottages owned by many of the families were clearly more luxurious than the average American house of the period. Certainly the majority of Holiness adherents could not afford to travel or to live so luxuriously while being instructed by the stentorian evangelists. There was apparently no more identification with the “masses” by the National Association than there was in the Methodist Episcopal Church establishment during the same period. This class differentiation would eventually, as Charles Jones suggests in *Perfectionist Persuasion* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1974), have major implications when Pentecostal theology was developed in much less wealthy circles.

The biggest frustration for the scholar is that the index to this volume is so meager (281-288). Some access is provided to the main late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century figures, but the index does not give adequate access to the copious documentation. It is hoped that a significantly expanded index will be part of a second edition. There is at present no other volume that gives access to this aspect of Wesleyan/Holiness history. Brown has provided an important book.

Thomas A. Fudge, *Daniel Warner and the Paradox of Religious Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin A. Mellen Press, 1998. xiv + 383 pages. ISBN 0-7734-8249-0.

Reviewed by Merle D. Strege, Chair, Department of Religious Studies, Anderson University, Anderson, Indiana.

Nearly a decade after Nathan Hatch published his insightful study of democratic influences in popular American denominations, Thomas Fudge has extended that discussion in this fine examination of a paradox that he has discovered within some of the people's churches of the nineteenth century. The paradox is this: often themselves dissenters from earlier religious traditions, the leaders of these popular-based and democratically inclined denominations themselves rarely tolerated dissent within their groups. Although the title of his book might suggest otherwise, Fudge does not give us a biography but a case study in this paradox as it was displayed in the career of the late-nineteenth-century leader of the Church of God (Anderson) movement, Daniel Sidney Warner (1842-1895).

After his conversion Warner became an evangelist and home missionary of the Churches of God of North America founded by John Winebrenner. Through the influence of his second wife, Sarah Keller Warner, and her family, Warner came into close contact with the Holiness Movement in the late 1870s. The Kellers were key figures in the work of the Ohio Holiness Alliance in and around their home in Upper Sandusky. Although initially cool toward the doctrine of entire sanctification, Warner eventually claimed this experience, for which cause and other infractions of church polity he lost his ministerial license. He then moved to Indiana where in time he separated from the Indiana State Holiness Association and the Northern Indiana Eldership of the Churches of God, a splinter group off the main Winebrennerian body. In these events the Church of God (Anderson) was born. At the same time, Warner became editor of a holiness paper, the *Gospel Trumpet*, and *de facto* leader of the new group. Not insignificant to Fudge's argument is his conclusion that Sarah Warner also was recognized as a leader, although not of the same stature as her husband.

Warner's early career resembles those of other leaders of nineteenth-century popular religious movements. He possessed no special credentials or status to qualify him as a leader of the Church of God. Rather, along

lines that Hatch describes for early nineteenth-century figures such as Peter Cartwright and Alexander Campbell, Warner rose to leadership within a decidedly populist and democratically inclined group of dissenters. However, in the early 1880s Warner found himself embroiled in a struggle for ownership of the *Gospel Trumpet*, a struggle in which he was opposed by his own wife. Out of this conflict came the Warners' subsequent estrangement and divorce, and later the "official" and unfavorable characterizations by Daniel Warner of Sarah Keller Warner, characterizations on which Fudge focuses his attention.

In Fudge's view, Warner, the man who rose to prominence in an atmosphere of democratic dissent, squelched that dissent when it opposed him over the question of his leadership. This is the paradox of such leadership: democratic dissenters later refuse to tolerate dissent. In confirmation of his observations of this paradox, Fudge closely examines the details and aftermath of the dispute between Daniel Warner on one side and Sarah Warner and R. S. Stockwell on the other. Stockwell was a rising evangelist in the fledgling Church of God movement. Fudge helps his readers understand the dynamics of the shift of Daniel Warner from dissenter to dissent suppressor. In the process, those unacquainted with Warner and the Church of God (Anderson) learn about some of the details and the context of this important holiness movement, while those familiar with the movement's history benefit from a fresh perspective on events and personalities in a critical period of the movement's formative history.

Fudge's research is impressive and his judgments balanced and fair. In producing this study he has not only opened up aspects of the history of Daniel Warner and the early Church of God movement, but also extended an important discussion in American religious historiography in very helpful ways.

George R. Knight *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1993). 381 pp. ISBN: O-8163-1176-5.

Reviewed by Woodrow W. Whidden, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

George R. Knight is the most prolific historical and theological writer in contemporary Adventist scholarship. Knight is gifted with an engaging, semi-popular style that always features solid, scholarly, historical research and a Wesleyan-Arminian soteriological perspective. *Millennial Fever* is his first serious historical monograph to address a subject that transcends more parochial Adventist historical concerns. The best of Knight's previous publications have dealt with soteriological issues, usually in the setting of Adventist insider debates. These have included biographies of important personalities, Christology, the atonement, the relationship of justification and sanctification, and related issues.

*Millennial Fever* evidences not only a thorough acquaintance with the older historiography of Millerite studies (Clara Endicott Sears, F. D. Nichol, L. E. Froom), and the unpublished research of David Arthur and Everett Dick, but also the more recent flurry of excellent scholarly works on Millerism and millennial movements in the nineteenth century (Michael Barkun, Ruth Alden Doan, David L. Rowe, Clyde E. Hewitt, and a symposium volume on Millerism edited by Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler). Knight has supplemented these various strands of Millerite scholarship with a deep immersion in the primary documents of the movement and its splintering, then gathering aftermath.

For those who are relative newcomers to nineteenth-century American millennial studies in general and Millerism in particular, Knight's *Millennial Fever* will provide a solid, readable, and fascinating introduction to these subjects. After reading Knight, the reader will be well prepared to tackle the older and then the more recent Millerite historiography. Knight, however, is not content with a mere introductory overview of the subject and its historiography: he is also intent on extending and enriching the previous historiography and exploring the complex reasons for Millerism's surprising success.

The book unfolds into three well-defined sections. Part 1 deals with the major personalities and ideas that shaped the movement. Part 2 examines the issues and events of the climactic years 1843/44. Part 3 grapples

with the complicated aftermath of the “second great disappointment” of the “Midnight Cry” which climaxed on October 22, 1844.

Knight certainly ponders and assesses the various sociological, cultural, economic, and religious forces that helped shape the fortunes of Millerism. But he is not content with these more external factors. He forthrightly suggests that the success of the movement arose out of the “deep certainty” of the Millerites, “based upon concentrated study of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, that Christ was coming soon.” Such convictions about imminence produced an “impelling conviction of personal responsibility to warn the world of that good yet fearful news.” In short, the Millerites were mission driven because “they saw themselves as a prophetic people with a message that the world desperately needed to hear” (pp. 9, 10). Knight’s thesis goes on to suggest that, without such a “prophetic certainty and its accompanying sense of urgent responsibility, millennial movements begin to atrophy” (p. 10).

While *Millennial Fever* will be of interest to not only the general reader of American history, millennial themes specialists, and Adventist audiences, it will also be of special interest to Wesleyan readers. Of the four leading personalities of the Millerite movement (aside from Miller and Himes), Josiah Litch was Methodist and the Presbyterian Charles Fitch was deeply tinged with Oberlin Holiness teachings and maintained close ties with Phoebe and Walter Palmer. Though the percentages defy precision, evidence clearly suggests that the most numerous of both the lay and clergy participants in the movement were Methodist/Wesleyans.

While the consuming interest of the Millerites was the literal, cataclysmic, pre-millennial second coming of Christ, the holiness emphases of many Wesleyan participants could not be repressed totally by apocalypticism. But Oberlin and Wesleyan/Holiness aside, holiness emphases seem to be almost inherent in such a movement. If Jesus is coming very soon, one had better be prepared for the celestial banquet by being fully robed in garments of Christ’s holiness! The issue, however, gets even dicier. Not only in the latter stages of the movement, but also the splintering aftermath featured some notable perfectionistic fanaticism. Suffice it to say, there is certainly enough holiness phenomena present to attract the attention of Wesleyan scholarship.

The holiness component of both Millerism and its main offspring, Seventh-day Adventism, presents an excellent opportunity for a renewed pondering of what should be the proper relationship between sanctifica-

tionist emphases and millennialist impulses. Can a movement that is holiness in orientation maintain its motivation for mission without a strong apocalyptic consciousness or some sort of strong sense of eschatological imminence? What is a movement to do to justify its existence if its central rationale for existence seems to be co-opted by other larger and more aggressive contemporary movements? Can an inclusive, mildly ecumenical stance maintain the sense of mission for one-issue movements? Or does there need to be some strong sense of uniqueness to drive the mission with conquering certainty?

One last issue that Knight invites reflection on is the question of the proper relationship between the head and the heart. Miller and the majority of the Millerites were quite cool-headed and rational in their approach to Bible study and Christian duty. The movement, however, certainly had its warmer elements which tended to enthusiastic excess. Yet there were transitional, mediating personalities such as Charles Fitch. Here was an earnest holiness devotee who fervently believed that the Lord was coming soon and yet had a persona that never seemed to fall into the abyss of fanaticism. What about the head and the heart in the post-modernity phase of the Holiness and Adventist movements? Is there any middle ground left? Maybe the Holiness preacher Fitch provides some role-modeling for both movements.

If these issues intrigue you, there is plenty of grist in Knight's apocalyptic mill to keep you occupied.

Jürgen Tilbusek, *Ein Glaube, viele Kirchen: Die christlichen Religionsgemeinschaften—Wer sie sind und was sie glauben* (2nd ed, Giessen, Basel: Brunnen, 1996). 619 pps. ISBN: 3-7655-1593-0. DM 49.80.

Reviewed by David Bundy, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana.

The status of religious traditions in a culture is perhaps never more clear than in the handbooks that catalogue religious traditions within that culture. The volume by Tilbusek entitled “One Faith, Many Churches” is revolutionary in German religious culture. It is published by an Evangelical publishing house that has long been a part of the German Evangelical establishment. That German Evangelical tradition has for generations attacked Holiness and Pentecostal churches. It marks perhaps a major new step in an evolution toward tolerance of these two traditions within German culture. The Holiness Movement had been influential in Germany before the arrival of Robert Pearsall Smith in 1875, as had Methodism and the Evangelical Association and United Brethren churches. However, because of the conflict over “perfectionism” and the furor caused by press reports about the beginnings of Pentecostalism in Germany, both traditions were forced to the Christian margins and labeled “enthusiasts” and “demonic” by Evangelical Lutheran theologians and ecclesiastical pronouncements.

On the margins they were catalogued with the other undesirable “sects” in the standard handbooks of heresies and socially deviant groups. This mindset was encouraged by the historic link between church and state in Germany, long complicated by a strong Catholic presence and the many small but vocal minority “free-churches.” The “free-churches” were efficiently documented in the handbooks. The most popular “sect” book in Germany was that of Kurt Hutten, *Seher, Grübler, Enthusiasten: Sekten und Religiöse Sondergemeinschaften der Gegenwart* (8th edition, Stuttgart: Quell-Verlag, 1962). All of the contributions were not so inflammatory in perspective or title, but were still clearly disapproving. For example, the officially sponsored volume edited by Horst Reller, *Handbuch Religiöse Gemeinschaften: Freikirchen, Sondergemeinden, Sekten, Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften, Neureligionen* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1978) was carefully descriptive, with a minimum of rhetorical flourishes, and made every effort to be fair within the established parameters. It was a definite improvement on earlier volumes. The volume had a pastoral purpose in that it was an effort to supply parish pastors with

information with which to counsel parishioners tempted to join these groups. It was clear that these were to be considered deviant religious expressions. Methodists, Hare Krishna, Rosacrucians, Pentecostals, Holiness churches, Transcendental meditation, Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other groups were differentiated as to their historical relationships to the German state church.

The work of Oswald Eggenberger, *Die Kirchen, Sondergruppen und religiösen Vereinigungen* (4th edition, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986; 1st ed. 1969) reflected the same judgements, even in the title. After discussing the Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran Churches, the remaining groups were organized in order of increasing offensiveness, beginning with the Baptist traditions (Mennonites, Baptists, Darbyites), followed by churches descended from Pietism (Methodism, Holiness Churches), Pentecostalism, "end-time communities" (i.e., Adventists), the Catholic-Apostolic Church, Mormons, concluding with a chapter on "New Age" movements.

A most significant difference was seen in the *Evangelisches Gemeinde Lexikon* edited by Erich Geldbach, Helmut Burkhardt, and Kurt Heimbucher (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1978). This volume was devoted to those groups present in Germany whose histories could be traced in some way back to Pietism. This brought Holiness and Pentecostal traditions into the volume in articles that have not been surpassed in German reference materials. While they did not receive attention in proportion to their numbers, the coverage was phenomenological and accurate. It was, however, intended to be sold in those contexts and so there were economic as well as historiographical reasons why such a perspective was adopted.

It is against this background that the work of Tibusek must be understood. The majority of the Christian Churches in Germany are included as part of the "one faith" (alas, the old paradigm still keeps some out!). While the author follows the traditional sequencing and classification of churches, the perspective is quite different. It is both an ecumenical gesture and a warning against a "false and simplistic unity" (p. 9). The differences between the churches are made clear, as well as the points of agreement.

Each section presents the history, beliefs, liturgical traditions, major personalities, and social perspectives of the individual churches. The chapters are each meticulously documented from sources produced by the denominations themselves, with occasional references to secondary literature. While one could sometimes quibble about the sources chosen to rep-

resent a tradition, one cannot argue that the tradition has been misrepresented. Because about sixty denominations and perspectives are discussed, the presentations are indeed brief. The Holiness churches discussed include the Salvation Army, the Church of God (Anderson), the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Church of the Nazarene, the Evangelical Brotherhood, and the Union of Free Mission Communities. The Methodist Church is given significant attention (pps. 220-230). Other groups might have been included.

The Pentecostal churches are discussed in three groups. First, the “newer Charismatic churches” are discussed: Die Gemeinde der Christen ‘Ecclesia,’ Anskar Kirche International, Calvary Chapel, Freikirchliches Evangelisches Gemeindegewerk, and Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Second, the older Pentecostal groups, after a general article (pps. 411-422), are described: Christlicher Gemeinschaftsverband Mühlheim/Ruhr, Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden; Bund Pfingstlicher Freikirchen (Schweiz), Apostolische Kirche/Urchristliche Mission and the Gemeinden Gottes [Church of God (Cleveland)]. Third, another chapter deals briefly with the “Word and Faith Movements” represented by connections to the American Healing evangelists and the Korean church of Paul Cho (pps. 442-450). Dozens of organizations and smaller denominations are not mentioned. This is not a criticism, for these groups are generally small, scattered, and diverse, with complicated histories and relationships. None of these articles take into account the influence of the Holiness and Pentecostal Movements on the other churches of Germany, especially through literature, some in original German and other items translated from English and circulated by independent religious and large commercial publishers. But again, providing documentation for that influence would require a major research project and is beyond the scope of this volume.

This volume is an important witness to the changing religious climate in Germany and may bode well for global relationships. It is also an important reference source. The book provides an important cataloguing and documentation of Holiness and Pentecostal churches. A more complete cataloguing and analysis of the two religious movements in Germany awaits. Recent Pentecostal efforts have been limited to what one might call the “mainline” classical American-related churches and the Mulheimbewegung in the Lutheran Church. However, as Tibusek begins to do, a more inclusive project is needed for both the Holiness and Pentecostal Churches in Germany.

**Defining Wesleyan/Holiness Identity:  
The Historiographical, Theological, and Missiological  
Challenges Posed by Indigenous Traditions:  
The Case of Japan**

A review essay by David Bundy, in appreciation for the publication of  
Mark R. Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan:  
A Study of Indigenous Movements*  
(Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998).

Access to the history of the Wesleyan/Holiness traditions in Japan, Korea, China, and Europe are, for most European and American scholars of this global religious tradition, hampered by a number of factors. Some problems are the diversity of mission organizations, access to sources in Japanese, and the lack of documentation. The other problems have to do with how the Wesleyan/Holiness movements are conceived by scholars. It is clear that most theories of Wesleyan/Holiness identity are put to severe test by the presence indigenous Wesleyan/Holiness churches in areas as culturally diverse and historically complex as Japan, Brazil, India, Korea, Germany, Denmark and Sweden.

The challenge is not only historiographical, however, but also theological and missiological. The carefully defined case study of Japan presented by Mark Mullins (1998) demonstrates the problems and the promise of efforts to define the Wesleyan/Holiness movements in such a way that the definitions take into account the larger reality of the traditions. The same type of analysis, with different but equally unsettling results, could be undertaken in many other areas of the world. It also provides an example of the challenges presented to the North American version of the traditions.

Wesleyan/Holiness and Pentecostal ideas have been and are being spread in Japan by several distinct branches of this tradition. The first and most obvious sources are the missionaries with Wesleyan/Holiness commitments who went out under the various Methodist churches, missionaries related to the Wesleyan/Holiness daughter churches of American Methodism, the Salvation Army (from 1895) and the Seventh-Day Adventists (from 1896). The Methodist Episcopal and Wesleyan Methodist (British) Churches were early arrivals in Japan, as well as in other areas of

the world.<sup>1</sup> There were also missionaries promoting ideas of Keswick holiness within the context of the “mainline” U.S.A. and British mission agencies, especially the missions of the Presbyterian and Anglican Churches (primarily after 1900), both from North America and from Europe.

Other Wesleyan/Holiness believers served as missionaries under the aegis of independent Wesleyan/Holiness missions, such as the Japan Evangelistic Bands founded by Barclay F. Buxton and A. Paget Wilkes,<sup>2</sup> OMS,<sup>3</sup> and the Swedish Holiness Movement Mission. From the beginnings of the Pentecostal revivals, missionaries from all over the world have been carrying the Pentecostal vision of Christianity to Japan, as well as other areas of the world. Among these were Pentecostal missionaries with Wesleyan/Holiness roots and beliefs from the U.S.A., Britain, Australia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, India, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> It is often difficult to determine the influence of any one facet of this cornucopia of mission efforts in Japan, but it is known that books by Salvation Army leader Gunpei Yamamuro were selling over one million copies before World War II.<sup>5</sup> Several of the earliest

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<sup>1</sup>A *Biographical Dictionary of Methodist Missionaries in Japan: 1873-1993* [in English and Japanese] ed. John W. Krummel (n.p.: Kyo Bun Kwan, 1996). This work limits itself to missionaries of groups associated with the World Methodist Council. Therefore it documents Free Methodists and Wesleyans, but not the Salvation Army, World Gospel Mission, Oriental Missionary Society (OMS), the Church of the Nazarene, and others.

<sup>2</sup>See Eric Gosden, *Take Fire! James Cuthbertson of Japan*, intro. Paul S. Rees (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1960), and A. N. P. Wilkes, *His Glorious Power; or, the Story of the Japan Evangelistic Band* (London: Japan Evangelistic Band, 1933).

<sup>3</sup>Robert D. Wood, *In These Immortal Hands: The Story of the Oriental Missionary Society. The First Fifty Years* (Greenwood: OMS International, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>For a partial accounting of the Wesleyan/Holiness and Wesleyan/Pentecostal presence in Japan, see *Encyclopedia of World Christianity*, ed. David Barrett, et. al. (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982). The situation has become even more complex since 1980 with the arrival of many more missionaries from Europe, Latin America, and Asia. Space does not allow reference to the histories and biographies relevant to this history. Older materials may be found in C. E. Jones, *A Guide for the Study of the Holiness Movement* (ATLA Bibliography Series 1; Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1974).

<sup>5</sup>On this remarkable theologian, see R. David Rightmire, *Salvationist Samurai: Gunpei Yamamuro and the Rise of the Salvation Army in Japan* (Pietist and Wesleyan Studies 8; Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1997).

ordained women in Japan were also Wesleyan/Holiness and served as leaders in the Japan Evangelical Mission, Holiness Church, and the Japan Gospel Mission from the mid-1930's.<sup>6</sup>

A serious problem confronting European and North American scholars is that mission agencies and institutions related to those agencies rarely collected non-English publications and printed matter related to the traditions. As well, once these are identified and collected, there are few with the linguistic and cultural skills to read and analyze the sources. Now, Wesleyan/Holiness historians, theologians, and mission theorists have available the remarkable study of the indigenous Wesleyan/Holiness and Pentecostal traditions in Japan. With the publication of Mark Mullins's book, the study of the Wesleyan/Holiness and Pentecostal traditions in Japan has been made even more complicated, and much easier. It is easier because Mullins has provided careful bibliographic and prosopographical information about indigenous churches in Japan. It has become harder, for it is clear that all of the meta-theory hereto proposed for what it means and has meant for groups to be defined as Wesleyan/Holiness and Pentecostal churches has become less clear. The meaning of Wesleyan/Holiness and Pentecostal in Japan cannot be limited to the foreign mission dependent and/or the foreign mission founded institutions. The story must include the indigenous movements as well.

Mullins analyzed thirteen indigenous churches. These indigenous groups were formed with a deeply and firmly held Wesleyan/Holiness and/or Pentecostal theology and spirituality, but with careful attention to Japanese cultural structures. They have always been completely independent of foreign mission organizations. They have Japanese founders and have not solicited or received funds from foreign mission organizations. Some are more Wesleyan/Holiness than Pentecostal. These include, in order of foundation: (1) The Way (1907); (2) Christ Heart Church (1927); (3) Glorious Gospel Christian Church (1936); (4) The Holy Ecclesia of Jesus (1946); and, (5) Sanctifying Christ Church (1948). These are Wes-

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<sup>6</sup>Fukada Yoshi was ordained by Aida Kisuke in 1934 by the Japan Gospel Mission after graduation from the Kyurei Gaikuin (Bible School). The Salvation Army contributed the largest number of women of any denomination to the United Church of Christ of Japan. On these issues, see *Grace Abounding: A History of the Ordination of Women in Japan*, ed. Kikuko Yamamoto, English editor Barbara Dunn Mensendiek (n.p.: Society of Women Clergy for Theological Studies in Japan, 1999). There is a brief biography of Fukada Yoshi (105-1993), pp. 48-49.

leyan/Holiness in theology and praxis, incorporating continuing revelation and “baptism of the Holy Spirit” with strong traditions of healing and exorcism.

The others are more Pentecostal, but with apparent Holiness influences. These incorporate biblical concepts of “speaking in tongues,” continuing revelation, and Spirit baptism, together with healing and exorcism. These are: (1) Living Christ One Ear of Wheat Church (1939); (2) Christian Canaan Church (1940); (3) Japan Ecclesia of Christ (1940); (4) The Spirit of Jesus Church (1941); (5) Original Gospel [also known as the Tabernacle Church (1948)]; (6) Life Giving Christ (1966); and, (7) Okinawa Christian Gospel Church (1977).<sup>7</sup> The Nonchurch Movement (1901) has a more traditional Christian theological framework, but still deserves more study on these questions.

Of particular importance is Mullins’s chapter entitled “Japanese Christians and the World of the Dead.”<sup>8</sup> Relations with the dead are of paramount importance throughout the world. Mullins relates the traditional Japanese patterns and rituals for dealing with this relationship and suggests how this aspect of Japanese culture has posed difficult problems for the Japanese Christian churches, most of which owe their existence and theologies to formulations developed in non-Japanese cultures. He then describes and analyzes the ways in which each of the indigenous churches resolves the problem. All of these churches share an adaptation of traditional Japanese relationships with the dead. The rites and ideas work themselves out in different ways in the different groups, but all are significantly different from what one would find among the missionary-founded Japanese churches. While there is significant variety in the approaches, each has worked to find ways to be truly Christian and truly Japanese. Most traditional Wesleyan/Holiness and Pentecostal theologians will find this chapter to be the most challenging.

Many (as has this observer) have understood indigenenity to be essential to the healthy growth of a church within a culture. The data presented by Mullins in his chapter “Comparative Patterns of Growth and Decline,” in which he traces the developments of the thirteen indigenous churches from their foundations to the present, suggests that “indigeneity” is a much more complex factor than has been generally recognized. The

<sup>7</sup>For a summary of the theological structures, see Mullins, 48.

<sup>8</sup>Mullins, 129-155.

indigenous denominations have remained small, largely because of issues of leadership, financial resources, and vision.<sup>9</sup>

Mullins has also identified the bibliography produced by each group and presented a short history of each church.<sup>10</sup> His study opens new vistas for understanding the intercultural transmission of ideas in general and of the Wesleyan/Holiness movements in particular. The problems (ecclesiological, historical, and theological) posed by the phenomenological analysis of the Wesleyan/Holiness and Pentecostal traditions in Japan are not unlike those posed in other areas. For example, there are Wesleyan/Holiness, Keswick Holiness, and traditional Pentecostal aspects to the development of the African Initiated Churches. There are indigenous Swedish, Indian, Sri Lankan, German, British, and Korean traditions that deserve careful study. Among them are churches like the “Hope of Bangkok” church in Thailand,<sup>11</sup> the Pentecostal churches of Chile and Norway<sup>12</sup> and the “Church of the Universal Reign of God” in Brazil,<sup>13</sup> all of which are active missionary churches. In North America, most of the African-American churches, especially the “sanctified” churches, including the so-called “Oneness” Pentecostal traditions in the USA and other countries, present challenges to the traditional approaches to Wesleyan/ Holiness historiography.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Mullins, 156-182.

<sup>10</sup>Mullins, 201-216.

<sup>11</sup>On the Thai churches, see Robert Nishimoto, *The History of Pentecostalism in Thailand, 1946-1996* [in Thai] (Mae Hongson: Create Printing Group, 1996). These grew out of a Holiness revival in Asia led by John Sung. On Sung, see Leslie T. Lyall, *Flame for God: John Sung and the Revival in the Far East* (London: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1954). This analysis of Sung masks as much as possible the Wesleyan/Holiness connections and theology of Sung, but the chronology appended reveals much if the people and places mentioned are examined carefully.

<sup>12</sup>David Bundy, “Unintended Consequences: The Methodist Episcopal Mission Board and the Beginnings of Pentecostalism in Norway and Chile,” *Missiology* 27(1999), 211-229.

<sup>13</sup>Anders Ruuth, *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus: Gudsrikets Universella Kyrka—en brasiliansk kyrkobilidning* (Bibliotheca Theologiae Practicae, Kyrkovetenskapliga studier, 54; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995).

<sup>14</sup>David Bundy, “Documenting ‘Oneness’ Pentecostalism: A Case Study in the Ethical Dilemmas Posed by the Creation of Documentation,” *Summary of Proceedings. Fifty-third Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association* (Evanston: American Theological Library Association, 1999), 155-175.

These examples merely reinforce the importance of Mullins's book that provides a detailed case study of the complexity of Wesleyan/Holiness traditions around the world. Both for the specific analysis of Japan and the contribution to larger historiographical and theological concerns, Mullins has authored a very important book.





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