JOHN WESLEY’S thought on racial matters developed because the question of slavery became an issue in the eighteenth century. His theology and his ethics knew no distinctions. Early in his career Wesley began to have troubles because of his (then) advanced views on slavery,1 though his most bitter attacks on slavery came much later in his life. Slavery, said Wesley, “imports an obligation of perpetual service, an obligation which only the consent of the master can dissolve.” 2 He noted that in some countries it was almost impossible to free slaves and that the Negro was provided, in practice, virtually no protection. Wesley took a fairly active3 part in the abolition movement which was beginning in England in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In many ways Wesley sought to publicize the evils of slavery, but his most successful publication

1 In 1740 an affidavit was published by one Captain Williams libelling Wesley concerning his life in Georgia. Williams was a Georgia planter who resented Wesley’s attitude on slavery. John Wesley, The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M., John Telford, editor (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), vol. i (to James Hutton, April, 1740), p. 342. These volumes are hereinafter referred to as Letters. Wesley’s later interest in the problem of slavery apparently stemmed, in part, from a book he read in 1772, “by an honest Quaker [probably Anthony Benezet], on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave Trade.” The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley, A. M., in The Works of John Wesley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d. [photo offset reproduction from the authorized edition published by the Wesleyan Conference Office in London, England, 1872]), vol. iii, p. 453 (Feb., 1772). These volumes are hereinafter referred to as Works, prefaced by appropriate citations (Journal, Thoughts upon Slavery, etc.). See also, John S. Simon, John Wesley: The Master Builder (London: The Epworth Press, 1927), p. 304, for a brief discussion of this passage. Simon also notes that it was in “1772 that Lord Mansfield, in the Somersett case, decided ‘that whenever and wherever a slave set foot in English soil he was from that moment free.’ . . . In spite of the judgment [sic], the selling of slaves continued in Bristol until 1792.”

2 Thoughts upon Slavery, Works, vol. xi, pp. 59-60.

3 This is contrary to the statement of Kathleen Walker MacArthur, The Economic Ethics of John Wesley (New York: Abingdon Press, 1936), p. 116, but the fact that Wesley wrote a major tract against slavery, preached against it a number of times, and lobbied members of Parliament in favor of abolition as well as giving support to organizations such as the Abolition Committee, indicates a high level of activity in the cause of freeing the slaves.
on this problem was a pamphlet entitled, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774). During the early stages of the Abolition Committee, Wesley was in contact with Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. On their behalf, Wesley offered to print an enlarged edition of *Thoughts upon Slavery* and to do all he could to promote the Abolition Committee. At this time he advocated the "truly Christian design, to procure, if possible, an Act of Parliament for the abolition of slavery in our Plantations."

In October, 1787, Wesley cautioned Granville Sharp concerning the opposition which the abolition movement faced. In a letter to Sharp he pointed out that the antagonism came from men "who are not encumbered with either honour, conscience, or humanity, and will rush on . . . through every possible means, to secure their great goddess, Interest." Wesley went on, "They will spare not money to carry their cause; and this has the weight of a thousand arguments with the generality of men." Finally he noted that even though the opposition was unscrupulous, it was incumbent upon the Abolition Committee to use, itself, only honorable means." Wesley, in writing to Sharp, promised every assistance and pointed out that strong opposition would be encountered.

Wesley's concept of racial equality was translated into practice in the Methodist Societies. The Societies, both in England and elsewhere, were racially integrated. In fact, Wesley recorded that as early as 1780 a Negro woman was a member of one of the Select Societies, including the British and Foreign Bible Society and wrote on New Testament scholarship. Chamber's Biographical Dictionary, p. 1168.


Ibid. (to Samuel Hoare, August 18, 1787), pp. 275-276.

Ibid. (to Granville Sharp, October 11, 1787), p. 17.

In another letter Wesley commented on Sharp's work by saying that the slave-merchants and slave-holders would raise vehement opposition, "and they are mighty men. But our comfort is, He that dwelleth on high is mightier." Letters, vol. viii (to Thomas Funnell, November 24, 1787), p. 23. Wesley also demanded that his preachers spoke out against slavery. Ibid. (to Henry Moore, March 14, 1790), p. 207. See also the discussion in Maldwyn Edwards, *John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Epworth Press, 1955, third edition), p. 179.
cieties and that she had made a particularly valuable contribution to the organization. As early as 1736 (while in Georgia) Wesley had noted that he was pleased to see several Negroes in church and then added, "O God, where are thy tender mercies? Are they not over all thy works? When shall the Sun of righteousness arise on these outcasts of men, with healing in his wings?" A year later, also in Georgia, Wesley counseled a young Negro by telling him that God created all men, Negro and white, together to "live with himself above the sky . . . No one will beat or hurt you there." This obviously was not the kind of approach that would be approved by the slaveholding classes. Other references indicate that Wesley took Negroes into his societies throughout his life.

Wesley's anti-slavery stand had a twofold significance: "It gave the prestige of a famous name to the movement, and it brought over to its side the host of people who looked upon Wesley as their example and their guide." In America, too, among the Methodists, Wesley's anti-slavery attitudes were adopted, at least for a time. In 1780 the American Conference had considered the problem of slavery and concluded that slavery was inhuman and anti-Christian and that those members of the society (including preachers, if any) who did not manumit their slaves would be expelled. At the organizing conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (the so-called Christmas Conference, 1784), the question was again brought up and it was agreed that every member must emancipate his slaves over a given period of time, that a register of such manumissions should be kept in each circuit, that those not manumitting their slaves should be excluded from the Church, and that persons not complying with these regulations should be denied admission to membership in the Church. Moreover, buyers and sellers of slaves were to be expelled.

It should be noted that this enactment by the Conference demon-

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11 The Select Societies were those societies made up of people whom Wesley thought had achieved a very high state of sanctification. They acted as advisory councils to Wesley and he placed a great deal of trust in their deliberations.


14 Ibid., p. 48 (April, 1737).

15 See, for example, Journal, Works, vol. ii, p. 433 (Jan., 1758); and vol. iv, p. 327 (March, 1786).

16 Edwards, p. 115.


18 Ibid., p. 242. It should be noted that these regulations were soon relaxed, due in part to United States slave laws and to opposition on the part of Methodists in the South. The tension became so great that in 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church divided into separate Northern and Southern branches and remained apart until reunification in 1939.
strates two things: 1) a belief in the use of ecclesiastical legislation to remedy social problems; and 2) a form of gradual change. The first point is representative of Wesley's thought, but the second is not. Wesley thought that change could and should come quickly as God worked in man and as man responded to God. Thus, according to his view, social change could be rapid. Various practical problems intruded, however, and the result was that the state had to effect change and maintain order as alternatives to the immediate conversion of most people.

As Maldwyn Edwards notes, it is no simple matter to estimate the work Wesley did on behalf of the slaves, "but it is still harder to measure his influence. If one gives the credit of abolition to the Evangelicals, then one makes Wesley father of the whole movement." Finally, it can perhaps be suggested that the "man who regarded the world as his parish was not likely to distinguish between his parishioners." 20

Wesley's arguments for the essential equality of all men were made in three different ways: 1) theologically; 2) ethically; and 3) anthropologically.

The theology which Wesley propounded was "democratic in its implications." There was, in Wesleyan theology, a democracy of evil, a democracy of grace, and a democracy of freedom. In his sermons to the people of England, in the fields, and in his writings, Wesley declared "plainly, the Scriptures had concluded them all under sin;—high and low, rich and poor, one with another." He went on to assert the universal attributes of God's grace. If by nature, all men were equally damned, by God's grace all men had an equal opportunity to be saved. In his sermons he proclaimed that God's redemptive act had been meant for all classes of people: "I preached at Bolton, and felt an uncommon degree of the presence of God, among an handful of poor, despised people. O how precious, is the least of these in His sight, who bought them with his own blood!" In order to be saved, however, it was necessary for all men to be able to respond freely to God's gift. In the doctrine of prevenient grace Wesley found the concept which he thought accounted for the possibility of all men responding freely to God. Freedom and conscience for man, then, arose out of God's prevenient grace. Therefore, while all men were depraved, God willed that all men should have the possibility of being saved, and this, further-

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10 Edwards, p. 121.
18 Ibid., p. 179.
21 Ibid., p. 179.
24 Journal, Works, vol. ii, p. 256 (April 18, 1752). See also, vol. i, p. 186 (April 14, 1739): "I preached at the poor house; three or four hundred were within, and more than twice that number without: To whom I explained those comfortable words, 'When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both!' "
more, provided the spark of freedom necessary for man to choose willfully either salvation or damnation. Thus, the “Christian experience was possible to all men. Wesley declared that it came not through birth nor culture nor intellect, but through a change of heart.”

The other theoretical ground for Wesley’s concept of equality was his social ethic and, particularly, his concept of Christian love. Wesley’s social ethics have often been misstated and this has arisen out of a superficial analysis of precisely what his social ethics were. He began by saying that God knows no particular providence (for one geographical section, or class, or race). He was fond of quoting from Prior’s Solomon (ii, 242), the following line: “Love, like death, makes all distinctions void.” For Wesley, no higher view of equality could conceivably be taken, for this was the sum total of all ethical standards. Religion, for Wesley, could be set forth in two principles: 1) “None go to heaven without holiness of heart and life”; and 2) “whoever follows after this (whatever his opinions be) is my ‘brother and sister and mother.’” The theological and

25 Edwards, p. 179. On this note, see also the comments of John M. Todd, John Wesley and the Catholic Church (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), pp. 103-104; and Thomas Walter Herbert, John Wesley as Editor and Author (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 103: “But so far as the work he himself initiated was concerned, Wesley concentrated [by and large] his efforts upon something more fundamental than reform legislation and, in his opinion, anterior to it. He tried, with some success, so to condition the conscience of Englishmen that laws calculated to enforce the human ethic of Jesus as he understood it, would find the people ready and eager with their support.” The import of Wesley’s egalitarian spirit is characterized in a favorite sermon topic of his: “I preached on those words in the Second Lesson. ‘There is neither Greek nor Jew, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free! But Christ is all and in all.’” Journal, Works, vol. iv, p. 212 (July, 1781). Wesley’s democratic spirit appeared early and is indicated in his relation to Whitefield at Oxford. Whitefield was a servitor at Pembroke College working his way through. Wesley came from more favored circumstances, but never was there the “slightest consciousness of social superiority.” See Francis J. McConnell, John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1939), pp. 36, 37.

26 See, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1957, first published, 1929), pp. 65-66. Very often an incorrect view is supported by reference to the “General Rules of the United Societies,” Works, vol. iii (first published, May, 1743), pp. 269-271. These rules do, in fact, deal only with individual behavior, but it must be stressed that these were not interpreted by Wesley to be a general ethical statement, but merely the disciplinary rules for the people called Methodist. There is no general philosophical statement concerning a general ethical position in this document. It was, rather, a statement of how Methodists should behave if they wished to remain in connection with Wesley. Thus, it is not proper to use this document as a statement of Wesley’s more general ethical and moral views.

27 Works, vol. vi, p. 325 (Sermon lxvii).


29 Ibid., vol. vi (to Samuel Sparrow, Dec., 1773), p. 61. Outside the Christian Revelation there was, for Wesley, an equality of evil, inside, and equality of love, the mind that was in Christ: “We went on, through a most dreary country,
The ethical foundations of Wesley’s view of equality were part of Methodism’s contribution to democracy, “this assumption of the worth of anybody’s soul.”

Both the theological and ethical elements of Wesley’s doctrine of equality as it applied to race are summed up in a charge he made to those engaged in the slave trade: “The blood of thy brother [the Negro]” (for, whether thou wilt believe it or no, such he is in the sight of Him that made him) ‘crieth against thee from the earth; from the ship, and from the waters.’” As for the liberty which Wesley thought due every man, he wrote:

Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsions. Be gentle toward all men; and see that you invariably do unto every one as you would he should do unto you.

Theologically all men were sinful, regardless of class or race. God willed that all should be saved and gave to all men the possibility of salvation as well as providing the spark of free-will necessary for man to choose God or evil; and ethically, based primarily on the love concept in Christianity, there were, for Wesley, no valid distinctions to be made between the races, insofar as human value or basic human nature was concerned. Furthermore, the conclusions reached by Wesley, based upon anthropological evidence, were that the “inhabitants of Africa, where they have equal motives and equal means of improvement, are not inferior to the inhabitants of Europe; to some of them they are greatly superior.”

The anthropological (or semi-anthropological) character of Wesley’s thought concerning the Negro is to be found in his Thoughts upon Slavery. The anthropological section of this pamphlet is divided into three parts: 1) the Negro in Africa; 2) the Negro on the voyage to the slave holding areas (principally America); and 3) the character of American slavery. Wesley’s description of the life of the Negro in Africa is, perhaps, overdrawn, but it should not be labelled “idyllic,” as Edwards would put it. Edwards, in fact, implies that Wesley was imbibing the spirit of the eighteenth century and seeking to describe the “noble savage.” Wesley does, in fact, give the impression that he thinks of the Negroes as mild, in-

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30 McConnell, p. 41.
31 "Thoughts upon Slavery, Works, vol. xi, p. 78.
32 Ibid., p. 79.
33 Ibid., p. 74.
34 Edwards, p. 116; see also, pp. 102-103.

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to Galway; where, at the late survey, there were twenty thousand Papists, and five hundred Protestants. But which of them are Christians, have the mind that was in Christ, and walk as he walked? And without this, how little does it avail, whether they are called Protestants or Papists!” Journal, Works, vol. iii, p. 493 (May 13, 1773).
telligent, human beings, with wise, though sometimes primitive systems of government. Wesley says:

Upon the whole, therefore, the Negroes [in Africa] . . . considering the few advantages they have for improving their understanding; [are] as industrious . . . [as] any other natives of so warm a climate; as fair, just, and honest in all their dealings, unless white men have taught them to be otherwise; . . . than any of our forefathers were. Our forefathers! Where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of Europe, a nation generally practising the justice, mercy, and truth, which are found among these poor Africans? 38

The last sentence in the quotation above is the important one for interpreting Wesley’s appraisal of the level of culture and morality achieved by African Negroes. It should be recognized, first, that Wesley was writing, not for the “Enlightenment,” but for the purpose of converting men in the slave trade, and in order to strengthen opposition to the slave trade. Here Wesley is trying to show that the Negroes in Africa are physically, mentally, and morally no worse than Europeans. Second, Wesley wrote this “description” against the background of his doctrine concerning the nature of man. Thus, while believing that African Negroes were no worse than Europeans, he thought that they participated in all the infirmities which were “natural” to human beings, e.g., original sin. In his description of the Negro in Africa, Wesley tries to refute, at least implicitly, the argument that Europeans were doing the Negroes a favor by introducing them to civilization through slavery.

The next question Wesley faced was how the potential slaves were procured. He said that while some were taken by fraud, most of them were captured by force. At first the “Christians, landing upon their coasts, seized as many as they found . . . and transported them to America.” 36 When this method proved inadequate, the Europeans induced the Africans to make war upon each other, and then sell their prisoners as slaves. The white man “first taught them drunkenness and avarice, and then hired them to sell one another.” 37 Once they were procured, it was necessary to transport the slaves to America. One-third of them died on the ships before reaching the New World. 38 The “seasoning” of the slaves was one of the harshest periods for them. This took place at some island mid-way on the voyage where a physician examined the slaves. They were then branded and crowded back into inadequate ships. 39 When the Negroes arrived in America they were “again exposed naked to the eyes of all that flock together, and the examination of their purchasers.” 40 From that time onward they were treated worse than cattle, overworked, separated from their family and friends, given

36 Thoughts upon Slavery, p. 64-65. 37 Ibid., p. 65. 38 Ibid., pp. 65-66. 39 Ibid., p. 67. 40 Ibid., pp. 67-68.
inadequate shelter, clothing and food, and were overseen by men, who, "if they think them dilatory, or think anything not so well done as it should be, whip them most unmercifully, so that you may see their bodies long after wealed [sic] and scarred usually from the shoulders to the waist." 41 Wesley quoted another writer to the effect that the punishment inflicted on the Negroes was cruel and inhuman:

"... For rebellion," (that is, asserting their native liberty, which they have as much right to as to the air they breathe,) "they fasten them down to the ground with crooked sticks on every limb, and then applying fire, by degrees, to the feet and hands, they burn them gradually upward to the head." 42

Wesley at one time wrote to the editors of the Monthly Review enclosing two particularly bloodthirsty advertisements from American papers concerning runaway slaves, offering more money for the severed head of the dead slave than for a live one returned. 43 Finally, after presenting all of this as a description of the Negro under slavery, Wesley asked, "Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures [human beings] in the visible world should live such a life as this?" 44

If all this goes on, Wesley rhetorically asks, is there not some legal remedy? He then suggests a few specimens of laws which purport to protect the slave. In Virginia (here he quotes a Virginia statute), no slave can be set free on any pretext, with the exception of very meritorious service, and even then it must be allowed by the Governor and Council. Further, in the event that anyone freed his slaves, there was a provision which made it possible to resell them back into slavery. 45 If they could not be freed, at least they might be protected from cruelty. No, answered Wesley, for the law also takes care of this. In Jamaica, for example, any slave that continued an absence from his master for more than twelve months was declared rebellious, and fifty pounds was allowed to anyone who killed or captured a rebellious slave. Virginia law was similar: any runaway slave could be killed by anyone by such means as might be available. 46 Other laws, Wesley continued, went even beyond this. In Barbados, if any Negro, being punished by his master lost life or limb, the master was not liable at all. On the other hand, if the master was guilty of wantonness or cruel intention, he was

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., p. 68.
44 Thoughts upon Slavery, p. 68.
45 Ibid., pp. 68-69. See also, for this Virginia law, William Waller Hening (compiler), The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619, vol. iv (Richmond: W. W. Hening, 1819-23), p. 132.
46 Thoughts upon Slavery, p. 69. Also, Statutes at Large, vol. iii, pp. 460-461.
fined fifteen pounds. Wesley pointed out that this was hardly a punishment.

In the light of all the foregoing, Wesley maintained it was improper to blame the Negro for any possible bestiality he might possess under slavery. Certainly the Negroes were no worse in their own country than Europeans were in theirs. Wesley concluded that their "stupidity [ignorance, bestiality, etc.], therefore, in our plantations is not natural; otherwise than it is the natural effect of their condition. Consequently, it is not their fault, but yours [people engaged in the slave trade and anyone upholding it]: You must answer for it, before God and man." 47 Indeed, if the Negroes as slaves were either stubborn or wicked, Wesley wrote, "It may be so: But do not these, as well as the other [stupidity], lie at your door? Are not stubbornness, cunning, pilfering, and diverse other vices the natural, necessary fruits of slavery?" 48 Wesley noted that slave holders had made and kept the Negroes "stupid and wicked, by cutting them off from all opportunities of improving either in knowledge or virtue: And now you assign their want of wisdom and goodness as the reason for using them worse than brute beasts!" 49 Thus, said Wesley, if the Negroes in America were, in any way inferior to the whites, it was due entirely to the negative socialization process through which they have been made to pass.

Is it possible to defend slavery? Wesley answers negatively. The great defense, he suggests, is that slavery is authorized by law. Law, said Wesley, cannot make evil good, and "notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still." 50 Thus, he declares that the fact that the law allows slavery does not make it right nor does it make it either just or merciful. In this instance Wesley certainly did not hold that the powers that be were ordained of God. Slavery, Wesley thought, could be defended neither on the grounds of Christianity nor on the principles of natural justice. Following Blackstone he made three points: 1) that slaves procured as prisoners of war does not make slavery justifiable because war itself is only justifiable for defense, and any prisoner may be constrained from pressing the war, but not sold into slavery; 2) an individual may not sell himself into slavery, for, while he may sell his labor, he cannot sell either his life or liberty; and 3) since neither of the above can justify slavery, slavery by birth cannot be justified, for there is no justifiable way to procure slaves in the first place. "It is clear," said Wesley, "that all slavery is as irreconcilable to justice as to mercy." 51 To the argument that slavery was "civiliz-

47 Thoughts upon Slavery, p. 74.
48 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., p. 70.
51 Ibid., pp. 70-71. For a survey of the legal problems involved in slavery, including Blackstone's interpretations, see J. C. Hurd, Law of Freedom and Bondage in America (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1858-62), vol i, pp. 178-194. For a
How might the problem of slavery, and more generally, the whole problem of inequality be treated? While it is apparent from earlier discussions that Wesley was not opposed to legislative remedies, he felt, by and large, that these would be impossible (or at least unlikely) to get through Parliament (which was, in fact, the case during Wesley's lifetime). Therefore, while there were exceptions, Wesley sought to use the method that had been so successful for him: conversion. In much of his polemical writing, and certainly in his sermons on slavery, Wesley tried, among other things, to convert those engaged in the whole business of slavery from what he considered a life of sin, to Christianity. To the Captains of slave ships he said, "Regard not money!... Whatever you lose, lose not your soul: Nothing can countervail that loss. Immediately quit the horrid trade: At events, be an honest man."

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To slave merchants he addressed the following questions: "Has gold entirely blinded your eyes, and stupified your heart? Can you see, can you feel, no harm therein? Is it doing as you would be done to?" The slaveholders Wesley tried to convince of their sins: "Now, it is your money that pays the merchant, and through him the captain and the African butchers. You therefore are guilty, yea, principally guilty, of all these frauds, robberies, and murders."

Wesley ended the *Thoughts upon Slavery* by calling upon God to enter the historical process and to help those under the yoke of slavery to secure their freedom. The last letter which Wesley wrote before he died was to Wilberforce, who was then trying to gain passage of an anti-slave bill in Parliament. Wilberforce was himself one of the outstanding laymen of the Evangelical Revival. Again, in this letter, Wesley coupled the whole problem of social reform to his theology and suggested the dynamic part he thought God plays in human history:

Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? . . . Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American Slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

Summing up, it can be said that Wesley developed a theologically based concept of equality, fortified by his social ethic which was itself derived from his theology. If Wesley's views on the class structure and women were analyzed along with this discussion of race, the radical nature of his concept of equality would be even more apparent. It is also easy to understand why his detractors called him a revolutionary in his own time. His position on the problem of race was not calculated to leave the Establishment at ease. Wesley's views of sin, grace, freedom, and ethics, fundamentally Christian in nature, compelled him to draw the conclusions on race which are found in his writings and which are set forth in this article. Once he reached such conclusions, Wesley felt that it was his duty as a Christian to try to ameliorate prevailing conditions. Thus he applied himself to the practical task of ridding the world of the social evils of race and class prejudice through education, legislation, and conversion. Men and nations have not yet solved the race problem. But it may be said that John Wesley in developing his understanding of Christian equality made a definite contribution to the theory of racial equality.

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68 Ibid., pp. 77.
69 Ibid., p. 78.
69 Ibid., p. 78.