JOHN WESLEY AS THEOLOGIAN--THEN AND NOW

by Albert C. Outler

It is small wonder that when, in 1777, an obscure Irishman named James Kershaw took to prophesying "that all the Methodists are to go over to America in the belly of a whale," John Wesley promptly pronounced him "stark, staring mad." 1 But even the daft Kershaw would not have been far off the mark if only he could have foreseen how, in due course, swarms of American Methodists would be transported to England, not in the belly of a whale but in a modern equivalent--the intercontinental jet. Thus it is that we are here tonight, a small but eager swarm, gathered with English and Irish and European Methodists--and other Christians--on a very special occasion: the first regional conference (of this particular sort) of the World Methodist Historical Society. We are happy to be here, we are thankful for the vision and thoughtfulness of the planning and labor that has made our meeting possible and we are grateful, as ever, for the unfailing hospitality of our English hosts. We are also joined in the earnest hope that this conference is a favorable omen for an expanded program and outreach of the Society in its concern to strengthen and support the enterprise of serious historical inquiry amongst Methodist people in general and their scholars in particular. For my own part, I count it an honor--and a very real personal pleasure--to have a share in the occasion and to have this assignment from the Program Committee to offer you a summary of some of my own probings into Wesley's theological formation and to assess his theological contributions--then and now.

One begins, of course, with one's general attitude toward Wesley and the question as to what sort of demands he makes upon his interpreters and assessors. Here, one of the first great lessons I have learned from him is that, just as he himself "dared call no man Rabbi," 2 neither does he demand any such thing of us, in anything resembling an uncritical acceptance of all his views and attitudes, on the grounds of his ex officio authority as

1 See his letters to Christopher Hopper, Feb. 1, 1777, Joseph Benson, Feb. 15, 1777, and Thomas Wride, July 8, 1785, in Letters (Telford), VI, 252, 254; VII, 279.
our father in the faith. His own life-long endeavor was not to find some master to follow, but rather to keep learning, from many masters, where the line should fall between the basic core of essential Christian belief and that wide spectrum of allowable (and arguable) opinions purporting to interpret that basic core. Mutatis mutandis, we may ourselves feel free to follow his example in this and to seek for a defensible boundary between Wesley's "opinions," about which we, and others, may confidently "think and let think,"3 and those truly basic insights of his which remain as options and resources for us and others in our struggling for a truly contemporary and ecumenical theology for ourselves. Something like this, I suggest, is both our opportunity and obligation—even if we must also expect a lively disagreement among us, and between us and the non-Methodists, as to what is "core" and what is "opinion," and why.

The longer I have lived and worked with him, the easier I feel in this freedom to follow his own eclectic principle—and all the more as I see the great closed systems of Christian doctrine that have competed in the past now in one degree of disintegration or another. Thus, even if ever there was good warrant for the hero-cult in which Wesley was the cult-hero, that warrant need bind us no longer. In my own case it has happened that, with no weakening of my loyalty to his best insights, I feel no need to defend such particular failings (in my eyes) as his peculiar triumphalisms and rationalizations regarding the Methodist movement,4 his debater's way of ignoring the best intentions of his critics, his petulance in "delivering his soul" when frustrated. Even when we do actually imitate him in such lapses, we have no right of appeal to his example as an excuse.

Or again, one may take him, as I have, as a major theological mentor and guide, and still feel free to dissent from or to qualify some of his substantive theo-

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logical views. For example, there is his biblical literalism and scattershot exegesis, which belong to his time but not to ours—and we may dissent here without rejecting his valid stress upon the primacy of Scripture as the source of the Christian revelation. Again, there is his Christology (which strikes me as inadequate) and his theory of the Atonement (which strikes me as blinkered). It seems to me that such opinions might very well be "updated" without weakening his vital emphasis upon a Christocentric soteriology as "core." A different perspective than his is now possible on such matters as his Tory politics and his proto-Marxist denunciations of surplus accumulation,\(^5\) not to speak of his anti-Roman and anti-Semitic prejudices (which he shared with "all right-thinking Englishmen" of his day). Without understanding all these (and much else, of course) there is no historical understanding of Wesley. But they no longer confront us with decisions that need be based on the question of loyalty or disloyalty.

Obviously, the main reason why we need not defend him in such matters is that his abiding significance rests elsewhere, on secure foundations that seem to me, at least, to support the judgment to which I have come (after a very different initial thesis): viz. that Wesley is the major Anglican theologian in the entire 18th century and also one of our major resources for 20th century theology. A dozen years of probing his mind and his sources have convinced me that his theological importance—then and now—turns around on at least three crucial foci.

First, he was a clear-headed synthesizer of a rich, multifaceted tradition—that very rare sort of eclectic who actually understood the options he had to choose between. Second, he was an effective communicator whom the common people heard gladly and responded to with fervor and effect. Third, under the desperate pressures of his age, he discovered a way of "third-alternative theologizing" that amounts to a special method all its own. It is this particular method that I have come to regard as crucial for any really fruitful interpretation of Wesley as theologian. This particular mind-set took shape in Epworth and Charterhouse, but it acquired its distinctive character at Oxford—where he received a very solid education despite all the university's shortcomings,

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about which he was so vocal. At Oxford, he soaked up the good essence of classical culture as well as the traditions of central Anglicanism. All his life thereafter, Wesley would go on dropping Greek and Latin tags as casually as breathing and would go on spending out of the theological capital bequeathed him from his Anglican heritage (including the Anglican Puritans!). It was at Oxford that his native love of learning became a lifelong habit—together with a passion for sharing his learning that never slackened. He professed to be homo unius libri—and we must understand his intention here. But the phrase itself is wildly misleading. The fact is that he read omnivorously and turned all of it to use in any project that came to hand. Most popularizers depend on garbled gleanings from a limited repertory of secondary sources. Wesley was a popularizer whose explorations of the primary source-material pass easy belief. Other evangelists could match him at Scripture proof-texting, but none was as deeply concerned as he with the interactions between theology and contemporary culture—and with the theological formation of his people. There were not many vital issues stirring the world of his day that he ignored or about which he had no confident opinion. With Ray, Huygens, Buddeus, Hervey and others, he surveyed "the wisdom of God in creation" as a curious exercise in "natural theology." In these explorations he was unaccountably impressed by the weird notions of John Hutchinson and not so strangely repelled

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7 He was a shameless borrower, he had a genius for abridgment, and the range of his sources is incredible. For example, the evangelist who denounced the English theatre as "sapping the foundation of all religion" (letter to the Mayor and Corporation of Bristol, Dec. 20, 1764, in Letters, IV, 279) had already read and stored up a strange repertory of Restoration dramas. One instance may serve for half a dozen: in 1726 or 1727 he had read Thomas Otway's The Orphan; Or, the Unhappy Marriage. In 1759 he quotes from it, to rather good effect but without acknowledgment, in his sermon on "Original Sin"!

8 Cf. his Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy. Five Volumes; third edition, enlarged (1777).
by the theories of Sir Isaac Newton. He cites "the common supposition as to the plurality of worlds" as casually as one of us might nowadays mention the DNA genetic code. All of which is to say that he was an evangelist-with-a-difference: a scholar of sorts who found his way into the hearts of the masses without con-decision, and yet also without dampening his own un-flagging intellectual curiosity.

There was no single tradition that he found acceptable, no particular theological "school" that he ever cared to join. This meant groping his own way through the blood-and-ink stained tangles of two centuries of controversy that most of us have forgotten, or never knew. This background is his constant—and generally unconscious—frame of reference. Most of his crucial theological statements are mere iceberg tips of submerged hulks of congealed conflict. All the decisive presuppositions in his mind are products of this turbulent past—which is one reason why he is so easily misinterpreted when read in terms of the later developments of Wesleyan theology.

The oldest and most tortured of these inherited struggles was political: the desperate issue as to the true locus of legitimate power in the civil state, in the economic community and in the church. This contest had convulsed England since before the Reformation and it helps explain Wesley's deep, instinctive fear of popular sovereignty. A life-long Tory (who nevertheless denied divine right absolutism), he had to live and work, for four decades, under a "Whig supremacy" that he abhorred. Thus it was easy for him to reject politics

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9 Cf. his skepticism about Newton in the Survey, ibid., IV, 44, 46, and III, 328. By Volume V, 237, however, he had decided that "Dr. Rogers has overturned the very foundation of this fashionable hypothesis [of Newton's]!" See John Rogers (M.D.), A Dissertation on the Knowledge of the Ancients, in Astronomy and Optical Instruments; on the Physical Causes of the Earth's Diurnal and Annual Motions; on the Distances of the Planets from the Sun, and its Magnitude. London, 1755.


as a direct means to any of his own distinctive ends (moral or ecclesial). He was, at heart, an a-political creature, subservient to neither the church nor the state, and yet not concerned to subvert them, either. This gave him more freedom than most of his contemporaries from political distractions in the exercise of his evangelistic mission.

It was a time when the mind and soul of the nation were being severely shaken by the bold challenges of a new secularism and the faltering defenses of the old traditions. It was an age of conflict: between an old idealism and a new empiricism, the residues of Christian "Platonism" (Cudworth, Norris) and an emergent naturalism (Newton, Locke). Instinctively, Wesley rejected these polarizations and conceived of a third alternative of his own—in which he rejected the notion of innate ideas, thus opting for empiricism as a theory for our knowledge of finites ("nature"), even as he also insisted on direct intuition in our "knowledge" of infinites ("God and the things of God"). This is a project worth much more probing than we have time for here, because it has something rather special to say to us now, when the old incantations about the omnicompetence of science have begun to lose their magic spell.12

On yet another front, Wesley was caught between the devotees of "tradition" versus the partisans of "modernity. The traditionalists looked back to an idyllic past from which the current world had visibly declined. The modernists took hope from the knowledge-explosion of the 17th and 18th centuries and its promises of progress.13

12 See, for example, "The Princeton Galaxy" in Intellectual Digest, Vol. III, No. 10 (June, 1973), pp. 25-32. This disenchantment with the omnicompetence of science and technology is the common theme in books as diverse as Carlos Castaneda's Journey to Ixtlan (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), Theodore Roszak's Where the Wasteland Ends (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1972) and William Burrough's Exterminator (New York City, 1973) --and in much of the ecology mystique, generally. What religion stands to gain from it all is still uncertain but that a new kind of epistemology is in the making is clear enough—and Wesley's possible contribution to the process may be worth more than has yet been realized.

13 See, e.g., George Hakewill, An Apologie of the power and Providence of God in the Government of the World...1627, and Joseph Glanvill, Plus Ultra: or the Progress and Advancement of Knowledge Since the Days of Aristotle...London, 1668.
Wesley was a conservative at heart and yet also open to the future. Thus he found it possible to welcome all valid "progress," provided always that men acknowledge the overarching order of Divine Providence as its source and boundary.\(^\text{14}\)

Wesley's England was a wretched contrast between the newly rich and the newly poor, with the growing miseries of the urban ghettos added onto the ancient inequities of the feudal past. And yet this same Hanoverian England was, overall, more prosperous than any preceding century--and much more stable politically. Halevy's famous thesis is, therefore, a compound error. In the first place, it ignores the fact that England had already had its real revolution (viz., the transfer of civil power from Crown to Parliament in the successive revolutions of 1688-89 and 1714). In the second place, Halevy--and Thompson!--presuppose that the discontents of the '80s and '90s could ever have been mobilized into successful rebellion, and this seems to me absurd. But, most of all, this notion of Wesley as a savior of the standing order presupposes his own fervent commitment to that order--and this, too, is absurd. Wesley was opposed to "rebellion," in any and all its forms. He did denounce "Wilkes and Liberty"; he did condemn the American patriots and the French Jacobins; and he did speak well of "King and country"--all out of his lasting horror of anarchy based on his memories of the Civil War and the Commonwealth. At the same time, he was also a vigorous, constant critic of the status quo, and even more: an active agent of social change. I could not name another Englishman of his century (not Paine, nor Price nor Cobbett) who so heartily identified himself with the English poor or whose identification was more heartily accepted by them.\(^\text{15}\). His sympathies were all on their side; and no one before Marx spoke more unsparingly of the social evils of surplus accumulation.

I would suggest, therefore, that Wesley was also a revolutionary-with-a-difference, just as we have noted

\(^{14}\) Cf. "Of Former Times" (1787).

in his role as evangelist. The effect of his movement was to provide a new experience for thousands of faceless men and women—experiences of worth before God, of new dignity and status in intensive small groups, together with unaccustomed leadership roles, etc. This helped to create a new kind of political creature, not to be found in France before or after their Revolution: a sizable group that was immune to revolt and yet vigorously committed to humane causes both at home and abroad. John Wilkes had finally drawn his sword to defend the Bank of England from the mob he had earlier helped to raise. Wesley would have stood down the same mob on principle, but he could scarcely have cared less for the Bank of England as such.

On the doctrinal side, English Christianity had suffered a protracted and agonizing polarization between the self-styled Puritans and those they had managed to mislabel as "Arminian." This struggle had raged, off and on, from the days of William Whitaker and Peter Baro, the "Lambeth Articles" (1595) and the Hampton Court Conference (1604). It swirled around a cluster of irreconcilable claims as to the terms of a man's justification.

16 For an interesting, albeit somewhat superficial, exploration of this development, see Bernard Semmel, The Methodist Revolution (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973). For a distempered contention that Methodism helped prevent the revolution England should have had, see E. P. Thompson, op. cit., passim.

17 By the last decade of the sixteenth century, the Puritans felt strong enough to try for a decisive commitment of the Church of England to an explicitly Calvinist standard of doctrine. In 1595, Whitaker prepared nine "articles," ad mentem Calvini, which were approved by Archbishop Whitgift and others in a conference at Lambeth Palace in November of 1595 (cf. Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, Vol. III, pp. 523-24). These "Lambeth Articles" affirm double predestination and reprobation (with "a certain number of the predestinate which cannot be augmented or diminished"), irresistible grace, perseverance, etc. Queen Elizabeth declined to approve them (as having been produced without royal permission) and at the Hampton Court Conference (1604), they were rejected once again by James I (influenced by his new Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft). This was an omen of a protracted struggle that would run for a full century, enlisting most Anglican theologians on one side or the other.
before God and the human role in the mysteries of our salvation. In its longer background were the old, per-
during traditions of English nominalism and Erasmian Christianity. But there were fresher, and still bitter
memories, on both sides: the Laudian repressions, the
anarchies of the Commonwealth,18 the brutalities of the
Restoration, the decline of "Old Dissent" and the rise of
latitudinarianism. The "Arminians"19 saw anti-
nomianism as the normal consequence of the Calvinist
syndrome of "election," "irresistible grace," and "final perseverance."20 For the Puritans, on the other hand,
the great enemy was *synergism*, in any form.21

Wesley had grown up with a gospel of moral recti-
tude and then had been converted (in 1725) to the "holy

The important point here is that Anglican anti-Calvinism

clearly antedates the influence of Arminius and the Synod
of Dort (cf. Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch
Reformation* [New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971],
pp. 207-10). Indeed, Arminius was more influenced by
Peter Baro (cf. Bangs, p. 208) than the other way round.
Later, there were avowed disciples of Arminius in England
(cf. Owen Chadwick, "Arminians in England," in Religion
in Life, Vol. 29, No. 4 [Autumn, 1960], pp. 548-55), but
the label "Arminianism" as a blanket term for Anglican
synergism was a victory for the Puritan propaganda and
has caused endless confusion ever since. Its roots are
catholic whereas Arminius' reaction to Dutch hyper-Ca-

vinism was scarcely affected by the concurrent conflicts
in the Roman Catholic Church over grace and free-will.

Of the crucial names in that struggle (Balus, Lessius,
Bañes, Molina and Bellarmine) only Bellarmine appears in
Bangs' Index (pp. 369-76) but with no suggestion that
Arminius had actually read him. In England, however,
Bellarmine was widely read and every Anglican apologist
worth his salt had to have a go at him.

18 Cf. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside

Down* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), chs. 6-10.

19 Called, instead, "the old English Protestants"

by Peter Heylyn in his *Historia Quinquarticularis* (London,
1681), Part III, xxii, 631.

20 In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first

citations of "antinomianism" coincide with this period.

21 Cf. Richard Hill, *Logica Wesleiensis: or, the

Farrago Double-Distilled...* (1773), and Augustus Toplady,
*An Old Fox Tarr'd and Feather'd: By an Hanoverian...

(2d ed.; 1775).
living" tradition of Jeremy Taylor, William Law, Thomas à Kempis, and the Eastern fathers (Macarius, Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem Syrus, et al.). His landmark statement of this tradition may be seen in the sermon on "The Circumcision of the Heart" (1732-33). Then, in 1738, under the guidance of Peter Böhler and others, he was converted yet once again—this time to the "grand article of justification by faith alone." This provided a new foundation for his preaching and for the evangelical theology of his first four volumes of Sermons on Several Occasions (1746-1760). The foundation, that is, not the whole of his Christian understanding. Among the generality of "Evangelicals," the true doctrine of justification presupposed "election," "irresistible grace" and "perseverance" as premises—but there was never a moment in Wesley's life when he was even partially persuaded on any one of these points. His main agreements with the Calvinists were on the primacy of Scripture and "original sin"; thus far he would go, and no further. Thus, he was forced here again to seek a third alternative, at the cost of being misunderstood and denounced by evangelicals and latitudinarians, on opposite sides.22 Instead, he reached back to the nominalists' distinction between God's sovereignty in creation (potentia absoluta) and God's accommodations to human freedom (potentia ordinata).23 He reached back still further, to the medieval tradition of in se est,24 and then tried to fuse the Protestant article on justification by faith (imputed righteousness) with the Catholic insistence on the impartation of actual righteousness in


the process of Christian maturation (from regeneration to sanctification).

One of the shibboleths in the controversy was the phrase, "the imputation of Christ's righteousness." This harked back to Trent's scholastic distinctions as to the four "causes" of justification and to Bellarmine's defense of Trent in his De Justificatione. All Protestants denounced Bellarmine pro forma, but the Puritans went much further, drawing a sharp line between the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinful man as the "formal" cause of his justification and any other way of speaking of it—for example, as "meritorious cause."

This was not merely a quibble, either. At stake were radically different notions of the inward springs of the Christian life, its psychological motivations and ethical goals. The imputationists denounced those who stressed "holy living" as advocates of works-righteousness (and, therefore, as "papists"). In turn, they were accused of "antinomianism."

The result was a protracted, excited debate that had pitted really great theologians like Davenant and Downham against Jeremy Taylor and William Beveridge, men like Richard Baxter against men like John Bunyan—with dozens in the supporting casts on either side. Then comes Wesley, who is finally forced to a decision of his own. His report of this decision and how he came by it (in his Journal for November 12, 1738) is

25 Schaff, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 94-95: "Of this Justification the causes are these: the final cause indeed is the glory of God and of Jesus Christ, and the life everlasting; while the efficient cause is a merciful God who washes and sanctifies gratuitously, signing, and anointing with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance; but the meritorious cause is his most beloved only-begotten, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, when we were enemies...merited justification for us by his most holy Passion...and made satisfaction for us unto God the Father; the instrumental cause is the sacrament of baptism,...lastly, the sole formal cause is the justice of God, not that whereby he himself is just, but that whereby he maketh us just, whereby we...are renewed in the spirit of our mind, and we are not only reputed, but are truly called, and are just, receiving justice within us, each one according to his own measure, which the Holy Ghost distributes to every one as he wills, and according to each one's proper disposition and co-operation."

so casual as to be actually misleading:

In the following week [after a theological crisis precipitated by his discovery of Jonathan Edwards' Faithful Narrative...], I began more narrowly to inquire what the doctrine of the Church of England is concerning the much-controverted point of justification by faith; and the sum of what I found in the Homilies, I extracted and printed for the use of others.27

What you would never guess from this entry is that there was no consensus as to "the doctrine of the Church of England" on justification, and never had been. Something else not often enough noticed here is that it was neither Böhler, nor Aldersgate, nor Hernnhut that settled the question for Wesley, but rather his own Homilies and the Articles!

We can, therefore, take three of Wesley's sermons--"The Circumcision of the Heart" (1732-33), "Justification by Faith" (1746) and "The Lord Our Righteousness" (1765) --as landmarks in a progression of thought toward a doctrine that (1) redefined repentance as self-knowledge (of our radical need of divine grace) and, therefore, not a meritorious work; that (2) denied all human merit, and affirmed Christ's atoning death as the meritorious (not formal) cause of our justification; that (3) distinguished between voluntary sins ("sin properly so-called") and our involuntary shortfallings ("wandering thoughts," "sin in believers," etc.); and then, that (4) stressed "holiness of heart and life" as the agenda and goal of the Christian life. This allowed him to speak of justification as pardon and yet also of "real and relative" changes in the believer's heart and life.28Justification is God's work for us (for Christ's sake); sanctification is God's work in us (through the Holy Spirit). In justification we "gain God's favour"; and yet we must seek also to "retain it," through obedience

Wesley claimed, in all sincerity, that he differed not a hair's breadth from Calvin on justification—and on this score, he was right, in a way. But he also taught, as essential, a doctrine of Christian perfection that scandalized the Calvinists—as well as the moralists, for different reasons! His crucial text here was Galatians 5:6 ("the faith that works by love"—i.e. fides formata!) and his two key notions were God's unmerited mercy in our justification and man's active participation in "working out our salvation." He died without ever understanding why the other evangelicals held him at arm's length despite his pathetic pleas for alliance with all evangelicals. And yet it was precisely Wesley's attempt to integrate the Protestant theologia crucis with the catholic theologia gloriae that gives his doctrine of the Christian life its special richness.

This constant emphasis on the mysterious interaction of God and man in man's salvation shows up in Wesley's unwearyed repetition of one aphorism after another about faith and its fruits. He was a eudaemonist: it was self-evident to him that all our truly human aspirations are oriented toward happiness. But man's hunger for happiness can be sated only by holiness; thus, one of Wesley's favorite pairings in "happy and holy." When, however, he comes to specify the essence of holiness, it is so simple that it seems downright simplistic, until you see

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29 Cf. his open letter "To Several Preachers and Friends," July 10, 1771 (Letters, V, 263-67), and also the letter to Adam Clarke, Nov. 26, 1790 (Letters, VIII, 249).
30 Cf. his letter to John Newton, May 14, 1765 (Letters, IV, 298).
32 Cf. his claims in "The Lord Our Righteousness," II.6-20.
33 "The best end which any creature can pursue is happiness in God," in "The Righteousness of Faith," II.9; see also "The Unity of the Divine Being," PP9, 10.
him working it out across the range of its combinations. Holiness is the love of God and of man—the perfect love of God and of our neighbor reigning over all other loves and interests. And it comes down, finally, to this—"that we love God because he first loved us"—and in the power of his love, we can learn to love our neighbors, grace-fully.

Is this a doctrinal hodgepodge or actually a higher synthesis—this blending of a Protestant doctrine of justification (minus "election," "irresistible grace" and "perseverance"!?) and a catholic doctrine of sanctification (minus the apparatus of priestcraft!?)—this wedding of the theologies of the Cross and of glory? Seen one way, this is a question to leave to the historical theologians (let them read Downham and Sherlock on this point, if they've nothing more urgent to do!). But it also may very well be that the theological enterprise in our time has come back round to a point where these questions about "justification" and "sanctification" are newly relevant and urgent (how are we to interpret man's need for reconciliation and wholeness—and God's provisions for them?). And if this be so, then Wesley's "third-alternative" way has more bearing on our problems than most of our other options.

Ours, they tell us, is a world come of age (which, of course, was David Hume's point, two centuries before Dietrich Bonhoeffer). And we can see for ourselves that it is a world coming apart at the seams. Just as obviously, the confidence that Rousseau and Feuerbach and Teilhard have encouraged us to cling to—as to what the human potential and prospects really are—has come to be newly doubtful. Their utopian visions, and ours, have turned out to be tragically illusory. They (and we?) reckoned without the reality of a radical human flaw—partly because we were able to deny the older myths of "the Fall" and "original sin," partly because technology has promised us so much and has also delivered so much.

35 Out of more than two dozen similar statements, cf. Works, VIII, 4, 474; "The Important Question," III.2; "Of Former Times," PP11, 22; and his letter to Mary Bishop, February 4, 1776 (Letters, VI, 205-06).

36 Cf. the Preface to A Christian Library, P7, Vol. I, p. viii (Works, XIV, 222). See also, "The Unity of the Divine Being," Pl6: "In two words, true religion is gratitude and benevolence: gratitude to our Creator and supreme Benefactor, and benevolence to our fellow-creatures
And yet it becomes plainer by the day that, in the face of the rising tides of anomie and antinomianism throughout Western society and all its cultural spin-offs, none of the older traditions—neither the liberal nor the fundamentalist traditions—can any longer suffice, and not even the newer excitements of pentecostalism, either. The hungers of the human heart still cry out for something like Wesley's gospel of God's unmerited love and the Christian disciplines of love and joy!

Everywhere there is a fresh hunger for living faith (in something or other), for spiritual excitement in place of conventional religion. A stifling disenchantment spreads across the world—and with it, a welcome for almost anything that promises truly enhanced meanings for human life. This is what the drug scene is all about; this is what the counter-culture and the encounter-culture have been trying to tell us. For the generality of nominal Christians—and also the vaster masses of human-kind—Christianity is either Dullsville or just another "interest-group." Wesley's particular methods of generating excitement might not work today—although Professor Oden has pointed out some striking parallels between Wesley's "societies" and modern therapy groups. And yet Wesley's concern for heart religion, his emphasis upon worship as a vivid sense of God's awe-full presence and strengthening love, his stress on small-group mutuality, his splendid indifference to pomp and circumstance—all these still resonate in our hearts today. Wesley would have fewer misgivings than most of us about unconventional happenings in church or out. What would appall him is the flatness of what passes, for so many, as "church work."

On yet another frontier the liberal tradition is faltering for its basic confidence in human perfectibility and the rule of reason is being sharply challenged by such men as Roszak, Castaneda and Perelman. The old Cartesian prescription for "clear and distinct ideas" is more and more boldly challenged. Perelman's The New

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38 Cf. "Thoughts Upon Methodism," in Works, XIII, 258: "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should exist only as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power."
Rhetoric 39 may serve as a sign-event for this new mentality—with its thesis that humanly significant truth simply does not come in closed systems but rather in bursts of insights and through the alchemies of persuasion. But Wesley was never content with the linear visions of Newton and Locke, and he may still have something to teach us about the language of feeling in the processes of personal transformations and self-realization.40

Our age, like Wesley's, is fascinated by fresh visions of a new humanity. It is now a blasphemy to deny that men, women or youth—of whatever sort or condition—are all equal in their human dignity and rights and this is so despite the blasphemers that remain amongst us. We have finally seen the secular vision of the gospels according to Marx and to Freud: a human community liberated by human effort from injustice and illusion. Wesley would have rejected these secularisms out of hand and would have insisted—as many of us have ceased to do—that human blindness to the human flaw can only lead a self-deceived humanity to an uncomprehended doom. This means, however, that his "good news" in this new scene might also be newly relevant: the Scripture's revelation of God's unmerited grace through Christ's redemptive love in the sacral community of the Holy Spirit, the gospel of God's righteous rule in human hearts as our only hopeful alternative to catastrophe.

But any such renewal of our awareness of the human predicament raises yet another major current issue—one that slices across the boundaries of denominational theology. If man's plight, at bottom, is radical and utterly serious, then what are the conceivable terms of any authentic reconciliation between God and man? The stark antitheses of the Reformation on this point are no longer live options—if only because their forensic presuppositions no longer fit the human condition as we know it now. Still more recent stereotypes (19th century liberalism, "neo-orthodoxy," "existentialism," etc.) are also disintegrating before our eyes. And now that the Roman Catholics have joined us in the ecumenical forum, we have to deal once more with the ghosts of Bellarmine.

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40 Cf. his letter to Samuel Furley, May 21, 1762 (Letters IV, 181): "...in spite of all my logic, I cannot so prove any one point in the whole compass of philosophy or divinity as not to leave room for strong objections."
and Newman, and this is altogether fitting. The old chasms between Protestants and Catholics may not have been bridged but they do not follow the same old fault lines as before. The old "either/or"s"--between the Protestant emphasis upon God's sheer gratuity in our justification or the catholic insistence on actual righteousness in our "sanctification"\[^{41}\]--call for new "both/ands." The Protestant fear of moralism, in an increasingly a-moral society, is increasingly unrealistic. The catholic dread of antinomianism is still warranted, but its traditional safeguards were never less effectual.

To much of this, Wesley seems to have little to say, directly. And yet, on the central issue--of divine grace and human consciousness--his basic insights are still as pertinent as any I know, in the whole history of Christian thought or in the new frontiers of psychotherapy. Behind all his dated (and disposable) "opinions" lies a total view of the Christian life, comprehensive and realistic: of God above all else and all else in God; of the human plight running deeper than any human cure for it (hence the need for a "new creature in Christ"); of Christ's love as God's love, redeeming our true humanity; of the Holy Spirit as God's inspiriting presence in all "expanded consciousness" (a synonym for "religious experience"?). Besides, Wesley had a remarkably practical rule for judging extraordinary gifts of the Spirit (ecstasies, miracles, etc.).\[^{42}\] It strikes me as still applicable, even in these days of new charisms and claims. No profession of an "extraordinary gift" ("tongues" or whatever) is to be rejected out of hand, as if we knew what the Spirit should or should not do. He was a cool hand himself, but Wesley had no disdain, on principle, for ecstasies and mind-blowings. What he did insist on was that such gifts are never ends in themselves, that all of them must always be normed (and judged) by the Spirit's "ordinary" gifts ("love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc., etc.").\[^{43}\] Like faith, all spiritual gifts are in order to love, which is the measure of all that is claimed to be from God, since God is love.

\[^{41}\] Cf. Lumen Gentium, ch. V.

\[^{42}\] Cf. I Cor. 12:28b--and see his letter to Dr. Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester, Nov. 26, 1762 (Letters, IV, 340), for Wesley's "list" of them: (1) exorcism; (2) glossalalia; (3) handling serpents; (4) immunity to poisons; (5) spiritual healing; (6) discernment of spirits, etc.

\[^{43}\] Cf. Gal. 5:22: "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance...."
We've time for only one more point, out of a dozen that might be made. It concerns Wesley as "communicator." The fact is undeniable. He did get through to the unlikeliest audiences—this mincing don who quoted Jesus and Horace to Kingswood miners, touching off hysterics and yet also changed lives in a ratio that seems nearly random. This reality still leaves me bemused, after all my years with him. The other day, though, one of my "media" friends was commenting on the notorious failures of preachers in their use of the obvious potentialities of "electronic mass communication." His thesis was that the days of extended verbal utterance are long gone. Nowadays, said he, everybody has "spots" before their eyes: "radio" spots, TV "spots," "short inputs"—in news briefs and advertisements. The result is that most of us are already so overloaded with disparate and discordant "information" that what we need most of all, is less new "input" and more new perspectives.

All our homiletical traditions, however, are oriented the other way round. They assume that our audiences come equipped with basic Christian perspectives and that what they need most is focus and motivation. "New formulations for the old truths": this was the slogan in my seminary days. But, clearly, this is a condition contrary to fact, nowadays. It is the Christian perspective in general that is lacking, in the churches and out—and there are few who will stay to hear it expounded in any fullness (not even in our classrooms). Moreover, the electronic media could not provide protracted exposure for us, even if they wanted to. The "hot-gospellers" are exceptions; their "show-biz" is quite different. But it flashed through my mind, as this man was talking, that this was the function of those "short sketches" that Wesley sprinkled so liberally throughout his sermons and letters: short summaries of his gospel or of his special way of putting it. And this is why he could oversimplify without embarrassment and rely on metaphors in place of argument.

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45 Cf., e.g., "Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels," I.3, and "The Wedding Garment," P6; also his letter to George Downing, April 6, 1761 (Letters, IV, 146) and his open letter "To Various Clergymen," April 9, 1764 (Letters, IV, 237).
46 As in the famous simile about the "porch," the "door" and the "room" of religion; cf. his letter to Thomas Church, June 17, 1746 (Letters, II, 268).
For my own part, I realize that I'm too set in the old ways to learn to do this sort of thing very well. I mistrust aphorisms, for I've seen them degraded into slogans all too easily. And whenever a theological formulation of mine comes out too clear and simple, there is a reflex uneasiness that something's been overlooked. But I do believe that there's a lesson somewhere here in Wesley that a new generation of preachers might very well learn to translate into their own "new rhetoric," with "rules" that might run something like this:

1. The people must be "made" to hear the whole Gospel (and this means pithy, arresting, summative language);
2. Our aim must be reaction (the "direct pitch" for action—what Wesley called "application");
3. Actions must be aimed at sustained responses (e.g. reinforcements by significant interest groups);
4. Persuasion must be based on nuances of competence and authority, not their flaunting!

Preaching like this might very well turn the church around—and Wesley would be the first to ask, "Why not?"

I know, as well as you, that any such advertisement of Wesley's relevance as a contemporary theologian is largely fatuous, in our present situation. For one thing, it implies a challenge to Methodist theologians and preachers alike to take him seriously—precisely as a theologian!—and we are tragically unprepared for anything like this. We have, by now, a nearly irreversible tradition of "anti-intellectualism" in Methodism which neither nourishes nor cherishes theology as top priority. Moreover (or, rather, consequently!), we have no developed, ecumenical tradition of Wesley-studies at all comparable to what is already commonplace in the case of Luther, Calvin, St. Thomas, et al. Most of our Methodist theological professors have been trained in ecumenical centers (which is altogether right and proper) but with often little or no acquaintance with Wesley himself as a resource for ecumenical theologizing. The result is that Wesleyan theologians are rare enough to be listed as "an endangered species." And, speaking generally, Wesley has still to be "discovered" by the non-Methodists as an ecumenical resource for them—save for bare glimmers of recognition from Orthodox like Georges Florovsky,

Catholics like Michael Hurley, Pentecostalists like Richard DuPlessis, Lutherans like Martin Schmidt and Anglicans like Garth Lean. Even so, the day will come—or at least should be prepared for—when Wesley's embracing vision of God's grace transforming human nature into its full potential, of the Cross of Christ and the glory beyond, of "holiness" as the Christian life style will find its rightful place in the kind of Christianity that can survive the catastrophes that almost surely lie ahead.

Wesley died with a hymn on his lips; its text was Isaac Watts' "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath." You can call it a pious gesture, if you like—for there is no doubt that Elizabeth Ritchie's account of Wesley's death is a highly self-conscious example of the ars moriendi tradition that Wesley had taught his people for so long. But there was also something more: it was a closing statement as to what the breath of life is for—and what it had been for, for him, over the span of seven incredible decades. God has made us (all of us) for himself. He has made us so that all our lives may be protracted acts of praise and blessing. This is not only our chief end but our true enjoyment. Wesley had been a wayfaring, joyful witness to this bedrock reality: it was the cantus firmus of all his experience and reflection. Thus it was a last reiteration, at the very end, of his earliest vision of "holy living and holy dying":

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,
And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers.
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,
While life and thought and being last—
Or immortality endures!

48 "To make our daily employment a sacrifice to God: to buy and sell, to eat and drink, all to his glory," in "Sermon on Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount IV," III.4.