THE CATHOLIC WESLEY:
A REVISIONIST PROLEGOMENON

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This bibliographic essay explores recent historiographic attempts to clarify John Wesley's relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, and, by extension, with the larger Christian tradition, in order that a more complex (and realistic) Wesley might emerge from the rather one-dimensional portrait painted by nineteenth-century evangelicals.

Mr. Wesley has been the object of considerable revision already. As Kenneth Rowe has observed in his "Search for the Historical Wesley," historians had long been at the mercy of Victorian Noncomformists and American evangelicals when George Croft Cell arrived on the scene in 1935. With the publication of Cell's *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, however, it became historically and theologically fashionable to claim Wesley for one's own religious "cause." There appeared then a plethora of works attempting to explicate the "true" John Wesley: Martin Schmidt's pietist account, Robert Monk's portrait of a latter-day Puritan, Leo Cox's presentation of Wesley as a progenitor of the Holiness Movement, and, perhaps most interesting of all, John Deschner's claim of discovering in Wesley a "proto-Barthian."

In light of this tradition, this essay proclaims itself unabashedly revisionist, as it is based on an hypothesis advanced by Albert Outler, a scholar who has pressed the claim for Wesley as "Anglican in earnest." Outler has argued convincingly that Wesley recognized more clearly than any other theologian of his age that the old "Reformation polarities" lacked any promise for the Christian future. Outler states that

Wesley sought an alternative to both Catholic and Protestant polarities, for the only conceivable Christian future was in a church truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed.6

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*Albert Outler, "The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition," in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, Kenneth Rowe, ed., see above.
Catholic historiography on Wesley, if it has rendered any service at all to the cause of scholarship, has demonstrated the surprising amount of "Roman" spirituality which Wesley incorporated into his "practical divinity," a divinity which frightened his Protestant critics as being "altogether too Papist." But Wesley was not a "closet Papist" in any sense, as some of his Roman admirers would have us believe. Rather, he was closer to the synthetic position advanced by Outler.

The ecumenical implications of Wesley’s "Post-Reformation" position are awesome, and it would be wonderful to "prove" conclusively such a thesis for the sake of providing a model for inter-confessional dialogue. But such a vast project cannot be "proven" in so brief a space as an article. Thus, I propose a more modest task: to review the ambiguous position of Wesley himself towards the Catholic Church, and then to examine the major historiographic treatments of Wesley by Catholic scholars, to sketch out the direction which future ecumenical treatments of Wesley might take in examining the "catholic" side of his theology and spirituality.

In that sense, this article remains a prolegomenon—a prefatory review of the state of scholarship with an eye to future research, research that may aid in discovering creative ways of healing the divisions within the Church Catholic.

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Wesley himself is responsible in large part for the ambiguities which plague the scholarship dealing with him, ambiguities nowhere more apparent than in his attitude towards Catholicism. He has, in fact, left a trail of puzzling "clues" as to how he perceived that vast "unreformed" church. His changing attitudes toward the Church of Rome are further complicated by the almost continual stream of accusations levelled against him of being both a "Papist" and a "Jesuit." While such epithets were stock in trade for those who perceived any deviation from the Anglican settlement, the sheer number of such accusations, recorded in his Journal, must have had a debilitating effect on his naturally irenic temperament.

But beyond these "implicit" considerations, we find in Wesley definite changes of stance towards Roman Catholicism and the eschatological prospects of its adherents.

Thus, in his Journal, the following somber reflection was entered for August 27, 1739:

> The report now current in Bristol was that I was a Papist, if not a Jesuit. I can by no means approve the scurility and contempt with which the Papists have been treated. But I pity them much, having the same assurance as we, that Jesus is the Christ, and yet that no Romanists can expect to be saved according to the terms of his covenant.7

In contrast to this grim entry, we must consider his public response five years later, after many accusations of papistry and jesuitism, to the Anglican apologist, a Mr. Church, who had accused Wesley of abandoning the “true Church” for Rome:

You have said that there is no true church but yours; yea, that there are no Christians out of it. . . . There are exceeding great mistakes in the Church of Rome, yet in as great mistakes have holy men both lived and died. Thomas à Kempis and Francis de Sales, for instance, and I doubt not that they are now in Abraham’s bosom. 8

It was this irenic strain, found in the letter of 1744, which Wesley developed in his subsequent works. We find him in 1749, following the anti-Protestant riots in Ireland, publishing an open Letter to a Roman Catholic, urging mutual forebearance and even creative cooperation:

My dear friend, I am not persuading you to leave or change your religion, but to follow after that fear and love of God without which all religion is vain. . . . We ought to love one another. We ought, without this endless jangling of opinions, to provoke one another to love and good works. Let the points wherein we differ stand aside. Brother, I hope to see you in heaven. 9

His irenic spirit is even more clearly seen in a letter to John Newton, published in 1765, in which he declares:

‘Oh, but Mr. Hervey says you are half a papist.’ What if he had proved it? What if he had proved that I was a whole papist? Is not a papist a child of God? Is Thomas à Kempis, De Renty, Gregory Lopez gone to hell? Believe it who can. 10

Wesley’s position on the Catholic Church, developed in these works, emerges as surprisingly irenic and even appreciative. If these were the only works extant, Wesley’s position on Catholicism could easily be outlined as an initial (and typically English) dislike, followed by a growing appreciation of the richness of the Catholic tradition.

Unfortunately, such clarity was muddied by the 1770s, a decade of crucial importance for understanding Wesley’s “anti-Catholic” fears. After breaking with his Calvinist fellow-evangelicals in 1770, Wesley became more cautious in expressing his sympathy with, and appreciation of, Catholic spirituality. This was due in considerable part to the Calvinists’ accusations of Wesley’s less-than-orthodox Protestantism, especially his teaching on sanctification.

But the event which seemingly galvanized Wesley into a vocal (and for British historians prominent) anti-Catholic was the controversial Catholic Relief Act of 1778, which removed the more heinous disabilities which Catholics incurred in England in the practice of their faith. It was in response to this politically volatile act that Wesley, a loyal Englishman,

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voiced what became his "accepted" anti-Catholic position among Protestant political historians.

In 1779, the year after the act had been passed, Wesley published *Popery Calmly Considered*, in which he voiced his hope that he could "lay all prejudice aside, and consider calmly and impartially" the implications of the Relief Act. Notwithstanding either its title or his stated hopes, there is little calmness in the pamphlet. Wesley particularly emphasized the dangerous political implications for England in the famous Catholic political dictum (enunciated at the Council of Constance) which said that "no faith is to be kept with heretics."

The combination of the Act's genuine unpopularity among the working classes together with Wesley's strong denunciation of it unleashed an evangelical antipathy towards Catholic emancipation which became embodied in the Gordon Riots, for which Wesley was partially blamed.

To distance himself from these violent acts, but also to clarify and restate his reasons for opposition to Catholic emancipation, Wesley published an open letter in 1780 in which his individual ambivalence is evident:

> I persecute no man for his religious principles. I will set religion, true or false, utterly out of the question. No Roman Catholic does, or can, give security for his allegiance or peaceable behavior. Therefore they ought not to be tolerated by any government.

Thus, Wesley had attempted to distinguish between religious principles of toleration, which he adhered to, and the exigencies of political life, which demanded caution in removing the checks against those perceived to be hostile to the principles upon which the English constitution rested. While this was an admirable attempt by the politically conservative Wesley to deal with a volatile constitutional issue, neither his critics nor his Methodist followers were convinced.

Wesley himself was appalled by the violence of the anti-Catholic riots, and, while understanding their fears, consistently denounced violent activities. In 1782, plagued by accusations that his denunciations were but crocodile tears, Wesley published his *Disavowal of Persecuting Papists*, wherein he declared his "utter abhorrence of persecution in any form." He acknowledged that he knew many Catholics who loved God and their neighbor; but he could not trust their political principles:

> I wish papists to enjoy the same toleration as all; I would not persecute a hair of their head. Meantime, I would not put it into their power to hurt me, or any other persons they believe to be heretics. I steer the middle way. I would neither kill nor be killed. ... I wish them well, but I dare not trust them.

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13John Wesley, *A Disavowal of Persecuting Papists*, in Emory, V, p. 826.
This "middle way," enunciated in the public letters of 1780 and 1782, came to represent Wesley's total relationship to Catholicism for both evangelical and political historians. For them, Wesley represented the prototypical Protestant evangelist, grudging in his toleration for "papists" and fearful of their seditious religious principles. Such a picture was, of course, ideal for political historians, interested primarily in the role which Methodists played in the political disturbances which led up to the Catholic Relief Act of 1829.

It would be misleading, however, to imply that this shallow portrait was created and sustained solely by the efforts of hagiographers and polemical Whig historians. Scholars of the stature of J. H. Hexter and Elie Halevy also declared, in academically impeccable tones, that Wesley was, at heart, anti-Catholic. We therefore find Hexter announcing that Wesley had reached the "dispassionate conclusion" that Catholics were "no holier than the Turks," and that, from this personal anti-Catholicism, the broader bigotry of the Gordon Riots emerged.14

Likewise, Elie Halevy, in his classic History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century stated unequivocally that "from the very nature of Wesley's creed, the evangelicals were anti-Catholics."15

It is in light of the above considerations that we can understand the large lacuna which developed in Wesleyan historiography, which deductively sacrificed theological complexity for a clear political genealogy: if Methodists played an important role in anti-Catholic agitation prior to 1829, they must have inherited their bias from Wesley himself. Indeed, relying on the picture painted by evangelical hagiographers, in which Wesley had "turned from all things Catholic" at Aldersgate, mainstream British historiography gave the impression that this particular issue was settled.

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It is against this historiographical tradition that we must place Roman Catholic treatments of the "Catholic Wesley," revisionist studies that have attempted to highlight the non-Protestant areas of Wesley's thinking and spirituality. Catholic historians have tended to present a High Church Wesley, educated in the Church Fathers at Oxford, conversant with continental mystics and spiritual writers, and deeply aware of being part of the "church catholic."

One of the earliest (and most heavy-handed) of these Catholic revisionist works was that of Maximin Piette in John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism. The heart of Piette's book is the rather polemical

thesis that the "Protestant principle" (private judgment) was bankrupt from its inception, and that most of Protestant history since 1517 has actually been a series of internal reactions against this vacuum at the heart of the tradition.16

Thus, from within Protestantism itself has emerged the "Prophetic-Communistic" Reaction (the Anabaptists), the "National" Reaction (Anglicanism), and the "Theological" Reaction (Calvinism). These "progressive" reactions move further from the original Lutheran impulse as history itself uncovers the sterility at the center of Protestantism. It is in this historical process that Piette places Wesley and his evangelical movement as the fourth "reaction" from within Protestantism.

We learn from Piette that Wesley appreciated the spiritual bankruptcy infecting eighteenth-century Anglicanism, and that he therefore strove to "combat the anarchy of thought laying waste the Protestantism of his day."17 This tide of religious anarchy was especially dangerous in Wesley's England, where "the most shameless licentiousness" and free-thinking had moved in to fill the vacuum left by the death of Puritanism.18 In the midst of this spiritual decadence, Wesley appeared, having been nourished with continental Catholic spirituality by his mother (Pascal, Thomas à Kempis), and with the salutary doctrines of the Church Fathers at Oxford. Indeed, we are warned that we must be wary of reading too much originality into Wesley's thought and spirituality; it is, in fact, his lack of originality that renders Wesley a truly Catholic thinker:

The justification by faith which he preached was nearer to the doctrine of the Council of Trent than what Wesley contemptuously called Luther's "crazy solifidianism." Similarly, his unswerving Arminianism put him in direct opposition to Geneva.19

Piette portrays a deeply Catholic Wesley, aware of the barrenness unleashed by Luther and Calvin, a Wesley who attempted to bring the Church of England back into the "great Catholic tradition" of practical spirituality.

Piette's study of Wesley, published in a pre-ecumenical stage, is perhaps too easily caricatured, due to the author's polemical style and tendentious use of historical evidence. But this study did serve a number of important purposes: he was among the first European Catholic historians to take Wesley's place within the larger catholic tradition seriously, and he attempted to "redeem" Wesley's valuable insights from the "taint" of Protestantism. Further, Piette's militantly anti-Protestant interpretation of Wesley's spirituality helped to offset the preponderant evangelical por-

17Ibid., p. 199.
18Ibid., p. 200.
19Ibid., p. 475.
trait drawn by the nineteenth-century Methodist hagiographers by emphasizing Wesley's ecclesial and sacramental concerns.

Piette's book manifests the spirit of its time, partaking of that polemicism which informed most Protestant-Catholic discussions. More recent and less polemical, but still flawed, is John Todd's 1958 study, *John Wesley and the Catholic Church*. Free of Piette's overt prejudice, Todd's professed purpose in the book is to show the extent to which Wesley's spirituality derived from "the inner force of the Catholic faith," and thus the extent to which Wesley's "evangelical" doctrines can be harmonized with Roman teaching. 20

Todd sees Wesley's ambivalence towards the Roman Catholic as due to an "incomplete" Catholic education: Wesley has been introduced to just enough of the Fathers and continental mystics at Oxford to give him a false sense of doctrinal knowledge, without the necessary catechesis which "enlivens" and explains the full implications of the Christian tradition. Thus, Wesley's anti-Catholic statements were actually repudiations of a mythic Romanism:

He supposed that he was teaching something which the Roman Church opposed; the doctrine of grace implied for him a rejection of "papist materialism"... but this was a mere travesty of Catholic teaching. 21

With "misunderstood Catholicism" as his predominant heuristic tool, Todd proceeds to "prove" that all of Wesley's theological positions were actually quite Catholic. Even the apparent stumbling block of Wesley's "Reply to the Roman Catechism," wherein Wesley closely analyzes the proceedings and decisions of the Council of Trent with an impressive mastery of Roman theology, does not break the author's stride:

Wesley did indeed study the acts of the Council of Trent, but it is hardly surprising that he did not see them in the grand historical perspective that we do. 22

Armed, then, with a "grand historical perspective," Todd uncovers for us the true (Catholic) Wesley. 23 After constructing a "straw man" portrait of Anglican spirituality and Puritan rigidity ("Wesley was no Puritan; he did not practice asceticism for its own sake") Todd "stumbles" onto St. John of the Cross as the best model for understanding Wesley's own "journey of the soul." Straining both Johns to the limit in order to fit the English evangelist's "call to perfection" into the mold immortalized in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, both Wesley and John of the Cross emerge (not surprisingly) as "soul mates." 24

21 Ibid., p. 28.
22 Ibid., p. 32.
23 Ibid., pp. 105, 146, 148, 175.
24 Ibid., pp. 57-65.
Todd’s book, while straining to be irenic and conciliatory, presents, ironically, a kind of “polemic in reverse”: while eschewing the overt polemicism and triumphalism of Piette, Todd nevertheless “saves” Wesley by reshaping his spirituality into a grotesque kind of “anonymous catholicism.” For Todd, whatever is good in theology and the Christian theology must be Catholic. It is inconceivable to him that anyone who has read Tauler, à Kempis, and de Sales, and values their insights, could willingly remain outside of the Roman Communion. 25

If Todd’s “sympathetic” treatment of Wesley is more palatable than Piette’s, it is, for that very reason, much more insidious. Here is no genuine rapprochement with a non-Catholic; rather, here is deductive apologetics in the guise of historical scholarship. While the hostility of earlier Catholic historiography is absent from Todd’s work, it is as tendentious and “sectarian” as that earlier style, only in “polite” form.

More recent Catholic treatments of Wesley, however, evince a methodological sophistication and integrity not found in Piette and Todd. This is due, in part, to the “post-polemical” scholarship of historians like Martin Schmidt, whose “theological biography” of Wesley evaluates (sympathetically) the influence of continental Catholic groups, like the eucharistic societies of Jean de la Badie, on the creation of Wesley’s bands and societies. 26 Equally important is the influence of the Second Vatican Council, which destroyed much of the polemical spirit that had infected Catholic scholarship for four centuries. In light of its aggiornamento, Catholic historians were allowed to study post-Reformation developments outside of the Roman Church without rancour or defensiveness.

This change in the spirit of Catholic scholarship can be seen in the work of Jean Orcibal, whose essay, “The Theological Originality of John Wesley and Continental Spirituality,” presents a balanced and insightful study of Wesley’s debt to the continental mystics. Orcibal, like earlier Catholic historians dealing with Wesley, outlines the evangelist’s familiarity with, and use of, the Catholic spirituality of à Kempis, de Ren­ty, and de Sales. The important difference is that his work is marked by nuance and perspective in treating Wesley’s “catholicity.” Indeed, one can speak of his work as Catholic historical scholarship on Wesley “come of age.” 27

Orcibal traces the subtle effects which the Imitatio Christi and Fénelon had on William Law, as well as Jeremy Taylor’s appreciation of Jansen’s Augustinus and Pascal’s Pensées. Given the importance of both Law and Taylor to Wesley’s religious development, the reader begins to

25 Ibid., pp. 29-32.
appreciate the subtle continental influences of Catholic mystical writers on the evangelist. Further, Orcibal explores Samuel Wesley, Sr.’s love of Bossuet, de Renty, and Pascal (“he knew the *Pensees* almost by heart”).

Orcibal thus presents a picture of the Epworth rectory wherein the best of continental and British spirituality are intermingled; indeed, high-church Anglicanism and Catholic Gallicanism seem to be “of a kind,” differing more in emphasis than in basic values or beliefs. It is from this ecumenical “household-spirituality” that Wesley enters Oxford, where Orcibal finds him reading Taylor, Law, de Renty, Pascal, and de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life.* It is at Lincoln College that we find Wesley delighting in the “practical mysticism” of Tauler and Molinos, ranking them closely after à Kempis himself.

Traditionally, it was at Aldersgate that Wesley “turned from all things Catholic,” and entered unambiguously into his “evangelical” phase. For Orcibal, however, there was nothing either unambiguous or instantaneous about Wesley’s “conversion.” While Wesley might have indeed insisted later in his life that at Oxford he held a “false notion of faith,” his somewhat cooled Protestantism after Aldersgate did little to satisfy his suspicious Protestant critics, for it “smacked too much of the scholastic conception of faith informed by charity.”

Indeed, long after Oxford Wesley continued to read (and encourage others to read) works of Catholic spirituality. Thus, in publishing his “Christian Library” between 1750 and 1756, Wesley included among his chosen fifty volumes the works of Pascal, Fénelon, the *Letters* of John of Avila, the *Life* of Gregory Lopez, and a *Guide* to Molinos, a “heavy dose” of Roman spirituality even for a Roman Catholic.

But Orcibal reveals his historical skills most impressively in exploring Wesley’s doctrine of perfection, a particularly important area of his theology as it received explicitation during and after his “anti-Catholic” period. For Orcibal, the Calvinists’ break with Wesley in 1770 and their subsequent accusations of his “papist theology” were founded on more than ill-feeling or misunderstanding: indeed, Wesley was quite conscious that his teaching was a “necessary synthesis” of the Protestant ethic of grace and the Catholic ethic of holiness.

Referring back to his carefully reconstructed outline of Wesley’s continental influences, Orcibal states that we must seek the origins of Wesley’s perfectionism in continental Catholic sources; indeed, Wesley himself supplies the names of à Kempis, de Sales, and Fénelon. It was, in fact, precisely such “breadth of spirit” in turning to Catholic spiritual writers to

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28Ibid., pp. 86-87.
29Ibid., p. 88.
31Ibid., p. 93.
32Ibid., pp. 102-103.
work out his ideas of sanctification and perfection that harmed Wesley's reputation as a "Protestant" theologian. 88

For Orcibal, Wesley's "theological originality" lay not in creating new forms of religious thought, but in his ability to select and assimilate the insights of many theological traditions:

Wesley's originality—as long as we understand that to mean an ability to select and assimilate and not to create—becomes all the more striking as the variety and breadth of his sources are revealed. In 1740, he enacted a revolution in completing the doctrine of justification of faith by means of the teaching of the synoptic gospels as sanctification. 84

Orcibal's fresh look at Wesley within the context of the western spiritual and mystical tradition lifted the Catholic historiographic discussion of Wesley to a new level: his valuable insights into Wesley's use of various traditions adumbrates an important, scholarly, approach to ecumenical discussion.

But Orcibal's emphasis on Wesley's assimilation of continental spiritualities has blinded him to the new "post-Reformation" configuration of the "finished product," seen most clearly in Wesley's doctrine of sanctification. While exploring the various strands of Catholic spirituality, Orcibal has failed to take the further step of recognizing the ecumenical and qualitatively new nature of the spirituality which emerged. This is the more unfortunate given the fact that the more recent Catholic treatments of Wesley, which fall appreciably short of Orcibal's scholarly analysis, have been undertaken by "ecumenists."

The more recent ecumenical approach can be seen in the work of Michael Hurley, an Irish Jesuit involved in the World Methodist Conference. His concern in studying Wesley is the purely pragmatic one of finding "an example of what can and ought to be done together." In his introduction to John Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic, which he edited, Hurley explicitly states that Wesley shows us the "scope and limitations of ecumenical dialogue." 35

Hurley professes to take seriously Wesley's self-proclaimed loyalty to the Church of England; in fact, he compares Wesley to Francis of Assisi, in that both founded religious societies within an established church whose dogmatic and liturgical standards neither questioned. Further, Hurley is careful to emphasize how emphatically sacramental and eucharistic ("Anglican") Wesley's Protestant revivalism appeared. 86

But for Hurley, Wesley's "usefulness" for contemporary Christians and for scholars does not consist in his "synthetic" doctrine of sanctifica-

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83Ibid., p. 108.
84Ibid., p. 110.
86Ibid., pp. 23-26, 29.
tion, but in the opportunities which his "practical divinity" presents for a shift away from discussions of important theological differences to practical cooperation among the churches in various endeavors. In examining Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic, Hurley emphasizes that Wesley's toleration was "practical rather than doctrinal."37

From Hurley, we learn that the main point of Wesley's irenic Letter, written in 1749 immediately after the anti-Protestant (or more specifically anti-Methodist) "Cork Riots," was that Catholics and Protestants should work together before worshipping together. Indeed Hurley quotes with approval Wesley's seemingly cautious advice on ecumenical cooperation.

For Hurley, the essentially Protestant Wesley remains an "outsider" for Catholics. Like Wesley, Hurley evinces a healthy sense of the need for practical cooperation among Christians of various groups, before proceeding to the weightier matters of doctrine and discipline.38 Thus, Hurley uses Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic as a model for ecumenical dialogue based on common action, and quotes Wesley:

Let the points wherein we differ stand aside; there are enough wherein we agree to be the ground of every Christian temper and action.39

But common cooperation, based on Wesley's own doctrine of "orthopraxy," will not necessarily lead to the immediate resolution of theological differences, and Hurley posits Wesley's own cautious ecumenism as a viable model for Christians of today:

For Wesley himself, stressing common ground between those of different communions and advocating the fullest collaboration according to conscience, neither demanded in theory nor incarnated in practice the renunciation of one's own opinions and principles; conversely, Wesley showed that differences of opinion and principle do not preclude cooperation.40

While Hurley lacks the "French touch" of subtlety and nuance seen in Orcibal's scholarship, his introduction to Wesley's Letter nonetheless signals a definite advance in Catholic Wesleyan scholarship, an important change of scholarly perspective, so that Wesley ceases to be merely an object of historical (and possibly polemical) interest, and becomes instead a source of "possible options" in structuring actual dialogue.

Hurley's more recent work on Wesley witnesses to this advance even more clearly. In "Salvation Today and Wesley Today," published in 1968, Hurley uses Wesley's own missiology to address the problems which had been voiced in the Fourth Roman Synod of Bishops. To the questions at hand, "should the Church save souls or attempt a change in the structures in society," Hurley presents the picture of Wesley who "went about distributing both pills and tracts." For Wesley (as for the best Catholic missionaries), Christianity is a religion of "both piety and service."41

37Ibid., p. 38.
38Ibid., p. 46.
39Ibid., p. 42.
40Ibid., p. 45.
Hurley states that Wesley provides for Roman Catholics the perfect model of “a reforming and missionary agency by means of which a deep and widespread religious revival took place.” Denouncing the “stampede of the Germans and Latin Americans” (the image alone makes the article valuable), which sought to make the Roman Synod declare definitively in favor of either the “vertical” or “horizontal” model of missiology (saving souls or society, respectively), Hurley again presents Wesley’s doctrine of orthopraxy, “a faith which worketh by love, provoking one another to good works.”

In the second half of the article, Hurley examines the theological problem of the salvific role of non-Christian religions, a question much debated in post-Vatican II Catholic circles. Hurley again discovers in Wesley the kernel of a creative, contemporary answer, especially in Wesley’s idea of “preventing grace.” Defined by Wesley as that first wish to please God emerging from a blind and unfeeling heart, it is actually present in “every man that cometh into the world.”

For Wesley, “preventing grace” or repentance necessarily led to “convincing grace,” or faith, and thus to justification. But as Hurley observes, Wesley himself was concerned with the “invincibly ignorant,” and cautioned his own missionaries against excluding “fiducial faith” entirely from repentance:

The benefit of the death of Christ (everlasting life) 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 benefits of his death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer His saving grace to take place in their hearts. (italics mine)

We have here the somewhat surprising case of a Roman Catholic (and a Jesuit at that!) holding up John Wesley to other Catholics as a model for creative theological discussion on missiology. It is important, then, to recognize in Hurley’s use of Wesley the implicit recognition that Wesley appears useful for contemporary Catholic discussion, not because of his “implicit” Catholic spirituality, or because of his irenic letters to Catholics in an intolerant age, but because Wesley’s “practical divinity” contains insights and a “post-Reformation” spirituality that both Catholics and Protestants can study with profit; it is but a short leap from this recognition to Outler’s explicit ecumenical position, a position from which we can make some preliminary conclusions.

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42Ibid., p. 95.
43Ibid., p. 98.
44Ibid., p. 108.
Catholic treatments of Wesley in this century have been marked by increased methodological sophistication (Piette to Orcibal) and by a growing awareness of the complexity and maturity of Wesley's spirituality and theology (Todd to Hurley). But much has yet to be done. It is the purpose of this final section of the essay to "sketch out" where Catholic "revisionists" (like myself) must go in reinterpreting Wesley for both historical and ecumenical purposes.

As we have seen, Catholic historiography has, if it has done nothing else, rescued Wesley from both the one-dimensional portrait drawn by evangelicals and the more sophisticated treatments of political historians like Hexter and Halevy. The latter's deductionistic account of Wesley's anti-Catholicism, buried in one of the classic treatments of nineteenth-century England, became one of the "givens" of historical wisdom. The Catholic revisionism which attempted to recapture a more complex Wesley, then, was perhaps not as tendentious as would appear at first sight.

Maximin Piette's early "sympathetic" account, while deeply flawed, at least recognized those aspects of Wesley's "Protestant" evangelicalism generally ignored by previous historians. Unfortunately, Piette advances the distinct impression that Wesley remained theologically static after Epworth and Oxford—as though Aldersgate were merely a footnote to this theological development.

Jean Orcibal's examination of the formative continental influences on the development of Wesley's spirituality is a major advance in Catholic historiography. Unfortunately, Orcibal, like Piette, has chosen to ignore Wesley's sermons and letters, thus continuing the one-sided treatment of a pre-Aldersgate Wesley. This is more puzzling, given Orcibal's professed interest in the continental sources of Wesley's mature doctrine of perfectionism in Catholic writers like à Kempis, de Sales, and Fenelon. The fact that he leaves literally untouched Wesley's "Plain Account of ... Perfection" thus renders his scholarship one-sided; Wesley's life, or at least the Catholic version of it, would seem to end at Aldersgate.

John Todd has attempted a "baptism" of precisely this mature Wesley, with decidedly mixed results. Emphasizing Wesley's distrust of "those Lutheran and Calvinist authors, whose confused and undigested accounts magnified faith to such a size that it hid all the other commandments," Todd is at pains to demonstrate how the evangelist rejected an "overgrown fear of popery" and, in effect, embraced Catholic doctrine. While admitting of Wesley's strong political fears of Catholicism, Todd dismisses such fears (out of hand) as "not really relevant to the theme" of his book; what is relevant for Todd is that "Wesley preached a doctrine of grace thoroughly and typically Catholic."^{45}

^{45}Todd, p. 71.
In examining Wesley's later sermons and letters, Todd fails to come to grips with Wesley's own ambivalence between Catholic discipline and Catholic spirituality, an ambivalence all too quickly dismissed by Todd as "misinformation." Thus, while venturing into the writings of the mature Wesley, Todd presents such a tendentious account of Wesley's "Catholic" theology that the result of his scholarship is at least as problematic as that of Piette.

It is noteworthy that Michael Hurley's Wesleyan scholarship was the fruit of ecumenical dialogue with Methodists, and is perhaps for that reason the most exciting work done to date. Unfortunately, Hurley does not possess the methodological skill or theological background of Orcibal and the French school, thereby leaving his writing creative but undirected. Thus, an awareness of the "gaps" which emerge in considering even reputable scholars like Orcibal and Hurley can be of value in redirecting the efforts of Catholic historiography on Wesley. The continental "mystical" influence of Wesley's Epworth and Oxford periods has been over-researched, leaving the ecumenical possibilities inherent in his later writings virtually untouched. Wesley's "controversial writings"—his various letters, his tracts, like Popery and A Disavowal—have remained outside the purview of Catholic historians. This is rather more than an unfortunate oversight, for even discounting Wesley's explicitly irenic works (e.g., Letter to a Roman Catholic), Wesley's attitude towards the Roman Church emerges as less ambiguous than evangelical historians have led us to believe. His sermons, especially, present themselves as an unexplored mine for research. Thus, in Sermon LXXIX ("Of the Church"), Wesley states:

I dare not exclude from the church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines are frequently preached. . . . I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship; nor would I, on these accounts, scruple still to include them within the pale of the Catholic Church.46

Likewise, in his sermon on "Catholic Spirit" (number XXXIX) Wesley announces:

But although a difference in opinions of modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet it need not prevent a union in effection. Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.47

And in "A Caution Against Bigotry" (Sermon XXXVIII), Wesley warns his evangelical audience:

What if I were to see a papist, an Arian, a Socinian, casting out devils? If I did, I would not forbid even him, without convicting myself of bigotry. . . . O stand clear of

46 John Wesley, "Of the Church" (Sermon LXXXIX), in Emory, vol. II, p. 158.
this! ... In every instance of this kind, whatever the instrument be, acknowledge the finger of God.44

Wesley’s sermons witness to the distinctly ecumenical tone of his preaching; the fact that Catholic historians have left analysis of this vast sermonic literature to Protestant, evangelical interpreters underscores the need for a closer look at the theological content of Wesley’s “evangelical” pronouncements.

The fact that Wesley’s sermons have not been utilized by Catholic historians in examining the “ecumenical” aspects of Wesley’s spirituality is unfortunate; the fact that Wesley’s treatises on sanctification and perfectionism have been overlooked verges on serious negligence. Jean Orcibal’s brief exploration into the spirituality of Lopez and Renty (three pages) is the closest Catholic scholars have come to analyzing Wesley’s perfectionism; given the newer ecumenical purposes of Wesleyan scholarship, this is almost criminal.

What is most desperately needed is a close textual (and contextual) analysis of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, not unlike what Hurley undertook in his edition of Wesley’s Letter to a Roman Catholic. In his Account, Wesley renders a detailed account, not only of how his doctrine of sanctification emerged from his “Catholic” readings, but also presents a distinctly “Roman” interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels on good works. Echoing his twelve sermons based on Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount (Sermons XXI or XXXIII), Wesley rehearses for his hearers the scriptural reasons for their striving to “be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.”49

Wesley explicitly analyzes de Renty, à Kempis and other continental writers in his Account, explaining how his own doctrine of sanctification incorporates (and modifies) their teaching. Further, he clearly links his doctrine to avoidance of antinomianism, schism, and elitism, sounding in the process like Francis de Sales.50

An examination of the Plain Account and other, later, treatises on perfectionism by Catholic scholars would yield important fruit, not in order to “baptize” Wesley’s spirituality in the manner of Piette and Todd, but to support and extend Outler’s thesis (from the Catholic side) that Wesley was the first religious thinker in modern times to transcend the “old Reformation polarities” in the search for a truly catholic church, a church neither Roman, Reformed, nor Anglican.

The fact that Wesley was distrusted and disclaimed by Catholic, Calvinist, and Anglican spokesmen during his lifetime has given historians pause; by the same token, all three traditions have obvious claims to parts

50Ibid., pp. 55-60.
of his evangelical synthesis. Catholic scholars, in uncovering precisely the ways in which Wesley was (and was not) Catholic thus contribute in an important way to ecumenical dialogue. In so doing, there is no need to practice cosmetic surgery on Wesley's post-1738 pronouncements; there is enough genuine "Catholic" content in his later treatises to justify some claim on his spirituality by Roman Catholics. More important than such a claim, however, is the possibility that such revisionist scholarship, undertaken by scholars of the various religious traditions which Wesley incorporated into his synthetic spirituality, might thereby contribute to healing divisions in the Church Catholic, a concern closely to Wesley's heart.