

JOHN WESLEY AND WAR

BRIANE K. TURLEY

John Wesley had much to say about the moral issues of war. However his polemology, like his theology, may be characterized as lacking systematic development. Wesley apparently never wrote a treatise on war that offers a definitive and detailed treatment of the subject for the modern scholar. Nevertheless, careful analysis and gleaning of all of Wesley's writings yield a significant body of data which, when correlated, reveals that Wesley possessed a generally consistent point of view in his appraisal of war.

While it is readily admitted that Wesley was unsystematic in much of his writings, it can be said in his favor that he was a master of practical theology. Carefully avoiding abstract concepts, Wesley sought to clarify all that he wrote in order that his ideas could be effectively transmitted to those who might benefit most—the common person. Today, as in Wesley's day, systematic theologians, moral philosophers and students of international law seldom bear responsibility for actually taking up arms and slaying their enemy; that is a task usually relegated to the non-elitist citizens of the state. Michael Walzer has put the issue this way: "Indeed, philosophers who seek such an engagement [what Walzer calls "practical morality"] often miss the immediacies of political and moral controversy and provide little help to men and women faced with hard choices."¹ Wesley's understanding of war merits serious consideration if for no other reason than the fact that he directed his message to those individuals most likely to become involved in armed conflict.

Wesley's contribution to the discipline of "practical morality" notwithstanding, there have as yet been few significant attempts to elucidate Wesley's attitude toward the subject of armed conflict. Egon Gerdes was the first to broach the topic in his unpublished 1960 doctoral dissertation written at Emory University and entitled *John Wesley's Attitude Toward War*. Gerdes did a splendid job of discovering and then annotating what Wesley had to say on the subject in the readily available sources. His research has made the researcher's task a simpler and more enjoyable one. Most germane to this study is Gerdes' accurate observation that, for Wesley, all war is the natural consequence of human sin.

Another significant study, published after Gerdes' 1960 dissertation, is an article by Leon Hynson which appeared in the Summer 1976 edition

¹Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), xv.

of *Religion in Life*.² Under the broad title "War, the State, and the Christian Citizen in Wesley's Thought," Hynson's essay offers a succinct description of Wesley's opinion on the evils inherent in war, but Hynson's contention that Wesley "does not specifically justify Christian involvement in war" is, as will be demonstrated, an untenable interpretation of the sources.

It is the purpose of this essay to describe not only Wesley's philosophy of armed conflict and the Christian's responsibility in the circumstances of war, but also to address the issue of Wesley's theology of perfect love and the dilemma that arises when a Christian must balance the dictum, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" on the one hand, with the call to take up arms on the other. Wesley taught that the Christian should earnestly seek to be cleansed from "all inward sin" so that "no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remain in the soul; and that all thoughts, words and actions [be] governed by pure love."³ The primary question addressed in this essay is, then, how was Wesley able to justify participation in war, whether it be offensive or defensive in nature, by eighteenth-century Christians who believed themselves to be perfected in love?

The student of Wesley who has been reared in a democratic society imbued with egalitarian principles may incur some difficulties with what, on the surface, might appear as an inconsistency between Wesley's pietistic theology and his understanding of war. It is essential to this study, then, that the purview of Wesley's political philosophy be considered along with his analysis of international conflict. Wesley's political views are inseparable from his metaphysical thinking. Throughout his career he remained critical of those who, like the Quakers, he perceived as exhibiting contempt for government officials.⁴ The apparent reason for his intolerance toward dissenting groups might be summed up in Wesley's own words: "[Government] is a trust, but not from the people: 'there is no power but of God.' It is a delegation, namely, from God; for 'rulers are God's ministers,' or delegates."⁵ With few exceptions, Wesley taught that dissension against the state is tantamount to rebellion against God.

The compass of this article does not permit a thorough exploration of Wesley's political theory. Nevertheless, a brief overview of the topic should prove beneficial for gaining insight into Wesley's apparent willingness to acquiesce to the British government's call to arms. I use the term "apparent" here because there is one salient quality in John Wesley's writings that makes the undertaking of such a project an unusually challenging one, and that is his obstinate allusiveness. The modern Wesleyan scholar must maintain at least some semblance of a sense of humor,

²Leon Hynson, "War, State and Christian in Wesley's Thought," *Religion in Life* (Summer, 1976), 204-219.

³John Wesley, *Works of John Wesley* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), Vol. XI, 394.

⁴Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. X, 187.

⁵*Ibid.*, Vol. XI, 105.

otherwise the task of discovering where Wesley actually stood on the issue can easily slide into a labyrinth of frustration.

Wesley's above mentioned criticism of Quakerism serves as a splendid example of his ability to dodge a direct encounter with the question of human aggression and the legitimacy of a non-violent response. Appearing in a letter written in 1748 to an unnamed Quaker convert, Wesley's disputation against Quakerism consisted of a series of propositions, generally accepted by the Quakers, that Wesley either affirmed or contradicted. Wesley managed to offer his opinion on every proposal except *one*. Responding to a bifurcated proposition: "It is not lawful for the Christian to swear before a magistrate, nor to fight in any case," he established the ideal opportunity to express his views on the principle of Christian non-violence. But observe how Wesley managed to side-step the issue, allowing the opportunity to make a direct statement on Christian pacifism to evaporate. "Whatever becomes of the latter proposition, the former is no part of Christianity; for Christ himself answered upon oath before a magistrate. . . ." ⁶

Nevertheless, enough evidence can be found in Wesley's writings to establish a place for him in history alongside of individuals who, like St. Augustine, Hugo Grotius and Martin Luther, may be properly described as "just war theorists." Although in Wesley's case the bulk of the evidence available in support of this claim is implicit rather than explicit in nature, the content of Wesley's political philosophy negates even the remotest possibility that he may be properly interpreted as a Christian pacifist in the modern sense. Many Methodists of the eighteenth-century served in the British army and navy. There is no firm evidence to support the assertion that Wesley ever objected to this service. On the contrary, he is often supportive of the military's role in society. In a 1779 letter addressed to Samuel Bradburn, a Methodist preacher, Wesley wrote: "You did well in lending the preaching-house to the Army. I would show them all the respect that is in my power." ⁷

This article will present three major arguments. First, John Wesley advocated a theology of perfect love, a doctrine he formulated based upon the *prima facie* duty of every Christian to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength; and as a corollary to this, the responsibility to love one's neighbor in such a manner that "Every thought, word and work" toward one's neighbor "be governed by pure love." ⁸ Second, it will be demonstrated that Wesley was not an advocate of absolute non-violence. Passivity toward military duty was, with the exception of some Socinian and Anabaptist groups, a rare phenomenon in the eighteenth century. While

⁶*Ibid.*, Vol. X, 187.

⁷John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, Eight Volumes (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), Vol. VI, 352.

⁸*Works, op. cit.*, Vol. XI, 394.

it is true that Wesley maintained an unmitigated aversion toward the causes and consequences of armed conflict throughout his life, he condoned the use of military force in some instances. Finally, through an explication of Wesley's political philosophy, which was derived from his metaphysics, I will demonstrate how Wesley avoided the apparent contradiction between the two positions of perfect love and war.

This essay begins with a brief exploration of John Wesley's contribution to religious history, including a brief analysis of his theology of "perfect love." The complexities of Wesley's understanding of war will then be addressed. Wesley's position in history as a just war theorist is defended by describing how he maintained certain rules of conduct for soldiers involved in militaristic ventures. Evidence of these rules of conduct can be gathered from a wide variety of sources, including Wesley's four-volume work: *A Concise History of England: From the Earliest Times, to the Death of George II* (1776). Actually an abridgment of, or, a borrowing from, the work of several historians, namely Oliver Goldsmith, Tobias George Smollette, William Warner, and Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, Wesley wrote the history of England in order to "see God perforcing the moral as well as the natural world. . . ."

I would fain have others to see him in all civil events as well as in all the phenomena of nature. I want them to learn that the Lord is King, be the earth never so impatient; that He putteth down one and setteth up another, in spite of all human power and wisdom.⁹

The 1776 edition was never republished and, like Wesley's 1781 publication of a *A Concise Ecclesiastical History*, it has received almost no scholarly attention during the past two hundred years. A good example of its relative obscurity can be found in the indices of Thomas Jackson's *Works of Wesley*. Jackson confused Wesley's extensive *History of England* with a history of England Wesley prepared for the use of children twenty-five years earlier.¹⁰ Consequently, it would appear that this study is the only modern scholarship to utilize Wesley's *Concise History of England* as a primary source.¹¹ It might be argued that because it is essentially an abridgment rather than an original work, Wesley's *Concise History* is of little use as a barometer of his own thinking. However, it is fortunate, at least for the purposes of this study, that Wesley inserts a significant number of his own historical interpretations parenthetically into the body of the text. It is these "roses amongst the thorns," in an otherwise turbid render-

⁹John Wesley, *A Concise History of England: From the Earliest Times to the Death of George II* (London: R. Hawes, 1776), Vol. I Preface.

¹⁰*Works*, Vol. XIV, 432.

¹¹Refers to published works. Neither Gerdes nor Hynson make reference to Wesley's *Concise History*.

ing of British history, that makes the study of *A Concise History of England* a worthwhile endeavor.¹²

The Contribution of John Wesley to the History of Christian Thought

For John Wesley, justification alone is not the Christian's ultimate goal in this life. Augustine, Luther and Calvin understood justification, regeneration and sanctification as being essentially equal in meaning.¹³ Wesley believed the three to be inseparably connected yet distinct one from another. Rather than serving as the ultimate goal, justification is viewed as a first step on the Christian's journey that would result in entire sanctification.

While Wesley came "a hair's breadth" from accepting the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, he vigorously denied that the root of sin was located in the passions.¹⁴ For Wesley, sin is a derivative of the will, "a voluntary transgression of a known law."¹⁵ Having thus defined sin as a deliberate act of the will, Wesley went on to assert that the Christian can anticipate being cleansed of sin in this life.

Arguing against a Neo-Platonic anthropology that posits a dichotomy of spirit and "sinful human flesh," Wesley reasoned that the expression, "sinful flesh" was ambiguous. Wrote Wesley, "The word 'sinful body' is never found [in the Bible]. And as it is totally unscriptural, so it is palpably absurd. . . . spirits alone are capable of sin. Pray in what part of the body should sin lodge? It cannot lodge in the skin, nor in the muscles, or nerves or veins or arteries; it cannot be in the bones, any more than in the hair or nails."¹⁶

Wesley taught that, subsequent to justification, sanctification continues as a gradual process which may (although in many cases it may not) culminate with the subject become sanctified "wholly." In other words, at the time of justification, the process of dying to sin is set in motion, and at some future point in this life, the Christian may anticipate being

¹²Wesley's personal comments can be distinguished by comparing his history with the works from which he drew. It is equally important to note that Wesley clearly adopted the interpretation of history presented in *A Concise History* as his own. In the preface to his history, Wesley wrote, "Let there be at least one History of England which uniformly acknowledges this [that the Lord is sovereign in human history]; let there be one Christian History of what is still called (though by a strong figure) a Christian country."

¹³Paul M. Bassett, et. al. *Exploring Christian Holiness* Vol. II (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1985). Prof. Bassett demonstrates that, in many respects, for Augustine and the reformers: regeneration = justification = sanctification.

¹⁴Outler, *Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, 25. Wesley taught that sin, properly defined, is a derivative of the will and not the passions.

¹⁵*Works*, Vol. VII, 417. See also Outler's comments (*Ibid.*, 25) Sin is "a violation of a known law of God."

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 418.

entirely sanctified and imbued with the gift of perfect love. Although the Christian will remain ignorant to the perfect will of God in innumerable situations, one thing is certain: without exception, every believer is obligated to participate in the process of grace that enables him to love “the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength . . . And loving God, he loves his neighbor as himself; he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea, and the enemies of God.”¹⁷

Christian perfection is the perfection of the will — the enabling of the Christian actively to love God and humanity. Hence, for Wesley, the doctrine of Christian perfection is inseparable from his social ethic. The process and eventual realization of entire sanctification carries with it a responsibility for social action, a challenge to whose seeking to reveal God’s mercy to all humanity. The content of mercy is evidenced through the proliferation of charitable acts. Wesley’s Anglican heritage nurtured within him an awareness, not only of sins of commission, but of omission as well. “Beware of sins of omission;” wrote Wesley, “lose no opportunity of doing good in any kind. Be zealous of good works; willingly omit no work, either of piety or mercy. Do all the good you possibly can to the bodies and souls of man.”¹⁸

It is at this stage of development of Wesley’s theology of perfect love that the dilemma, *vis á vis* his understanding of war, arises. Wesley’s theology of sanctification moves beyond a simple requirement for acts of mercy. Maintaining that true holiness would be evidenced by a Christ-like attitude of selfless love toward one’s neighbor, Wesley taught that God has chosen to convey his love “through one man to another.”¹⁹ The love of Christ is exemplified by an attitude and a will of meekness and humility.²⁰ The Christian, having such love perfected within his heart, loves his neighbor as Christ has loved him. Aided by God’s grace, the Christian is compelled to demonstrate love and mercy even to those who oppress or persecute him. Wesley argued that the believer has “‘need of gentleness toward all men’; but especially toward the evil and unthankful. . . .”²¹

The perfection of love precipitates a desire to do good both to friend and foe. Christian perfection is, above all, a morally demanding dynamic in the life of the Christian, a dynamic which unleashes the will from sin — the absence of love — and establishes a conscious desire to accomplish God’s perfect will by all possible means. The demonstration of love, or mercy, toward one’s enemy is the normative consequence of salvation and the process of sanctification.

¹⁷ *Works*, Vol. XI, 371-372.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 432.

¹⁹ *Works*, Vol. V, 285.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 262ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 264.

Had Wesley advocated a pacifist ethic, or even a posture of non-violent resistance, the harmonization of his theology with his understanding of war would be a facile endeavor. Wesley was by no means a pacifist, nor did he ever explicitly advocate a systematic ethic of non-violent protest. Abhorring all forms of armed conflict, however, he believed that war had a deleterious effect upon the realization of the Kingdom of God. Yet, as already noted, Wesley may be properly interpreted as a just war theorist. While it is true that, for Wesley, all war is the consequence of sin, and while he did concede the necessity for armed conflict in some circumstances, Wesley's main concern was that war remain the final recourse of nations. The apparent lack of congruence between Wesley's polemology and his theology of love cannot be fully harmonized, at least not in any modern sense. But for Wesley there was no contradiction between an ethic of love, that demonstrated total obedience to God, and the call to take up arms in defense of King and country.

Wesley, Politics and War

In a letter, ostensibly addressed "to a friend," and published in 1770, John Wesley remarked: "I am no politician; politics lie quite out of my province. Neither have I any acquaintance, at least no intimacy, with any that bear that character."²² While Wesley never vaunted his political acumen, he did address political issues throughout his long career. It is important to recognize that Wesley did not separate his political theory from his metaphysics.

All power, including the power invested in governments, emanates from God.²³ In much the same manner that God has elected to convey his love "through one man to another," he has established governments in order to regulate society. Wesley never insisted that God prefers one form of government to another, but there can be little doubt that he maintained some personal convictions on the matter. In his 1776 publication, "Some Observations on Liberty," written in response to Richard Price's "Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty," Wesley remarked that the "greater share the people have in the Government, the less liberty, either civil or religious, does the nation enjoy. Accordingly, there is most liberty of all, civil and religious, under a limited monarchy, there is usually less under aristocracy and least of all under a democaracy."²⁴

Methodism's founder consistently interpreted political issues through the eyes of a theologian. Wesley was concerned that governments that did not concentrate their God-given power in the hands of a few would lack

²²Wesley, *Letters*, Vol. V., 370-71.

²³*Works*, Vol. XI, 47.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 105.

the moral force to counter immorality in society. When Richard Price wrote, "To be guided by one's own will is freedom; to be guided by the will of another, is slavery. . . ." Wesley responded with the following diatribe:

This is the very quintessence of republicanism, but it is a little too barefaced; for, if this is true, how free are all the devils in hell, seeing they are guided by their own will! And what slaves are the angels in heaven, since they are all guided by the will of another!²⁵

Wesley conceded the legitimacy of democratic rule in some rare instances,²⁶ but he was thoroughly convinced that the potential for anarchy in a republic far outweighed the limitations that might be encountered by citizens under a constitutional monarchy. Wesley viewed contemporary theories of popular sovereignty with suspicion, interpreting these as attempts to usurp the rightful place of God as the legitimate source of power. In his 1772 publication of "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," Wesley posed the question: "What is the origin of power? What is its ultimate source?"²⁷ In an era that was largely dominated by Lockean political views, Wesley responded by affirming that the state's power is derived from the Creator: "There is no power but of God."²⁸ Democratic forms of government might succeed, but their existence must ultimately be interpreted as part of the same metaphysic that determines the existence of a monarchy; that is to say, all power is derived from God, not the people. Wesley concurred with Richard Price's assertion that "Government is a trust, and all its powers a delegation." But Wesley tempered this statement with his own ontology: "It is a trust, but not from the people: 'There is no power but of God.' It is a delegation, namely, from God; for 'rulers are God's ministers,' or delegates."²⁹ Even Oliver Cromwell's seventeenth-century ascension to the position of "Protector of the Commonwealth of England" could only be interpreted as an act of providence:

Thus an obscure and vulgar man, at the age of fifty-three, rose to unbounded power, first by following small events in his favor, and at length by directing great ones. A striking proof, that it is God, who according to his own will casteth down one and setteth up another!³⁰

Whatever the form of government a state might adopt, whether it be a monarchy, an oligarchy or even a republican system, one thing remained constant: all governments owe their existence, and their ability

²⁵*Ibid.*, 105.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 47.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 105.

³⁰Wesley, *A Concise History*, Vol. III, 238. Cf. Vol. I, 130, 335.

to exercise any authority, to the gracious power of God. Within these broad metaphysical parameters, it is the duty of the state to preserve basic human rights. As Wellman Warner has observed, regardless of how a government might be structured, Wesley taught that "the general welfare is its indispensable justification."³¹

Although Wesley conceded a limited role to human agency in the establishment and maintenance of governments, he always returned to his original position that all political power is vested entirely in God. Consequently, the power for determining matters of life and death does not belong to "the will of the people." The power of the sword is reserved for God alone: "There is no supreme power, no power of the sword, of life and death, but what is derived from God, the sovereign of all."³² No individual can give the power of the sword to another, for "*Nihil dat quod non habet*," none gives what he has not."³³ Human agency does not possess the right to forfeit life; therefore, it cannot confer that right upon the state. Hence, no government possesses the right to wage war; such authority is bestowed upon the state by God alone.³⁴

Wesley viewed the state as an instrument of God's providential love. His insistence that "rulers are God's ministers" demonstrates that he drew a fine line between state authority and authority in the church. So close is this relationship between the state and the Christian religion that Wesley could argue, "Above all, mark that man who talks of loving the Church, and does not love the King. If he does not love the King, he cannot love the Church. He loves the Church and the King just alike. For indeed he loves neither one nor the other."³⁵ Other nations might establish alternative political leadership, but it seemed self-evident to Wesley that the British monarchy had been ordained through providential means. This fact was so obvious that Wesley warned, "beware of dividing the King and the Church, any more than the King and the Country."³⁶

Wesley believed that the individual should maintain a position of relative passivity toward the legitimate authority. As a providential manifestation of authority, the government should receive loyal support as long as it acts morally to promote the public welfare. Wesley maintained that the American colonists had enjoyed the privileges of genuine liberty up until 1776, when a "part of them enslaved the rest of their countrymen."³⁷

³¹Wellman Warner, *The Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 79.

³²*Works*, Vol. XI, 47-48.

³³*Ibid.*, 52.

³⁴Egon Gerdes, *John Wesley's Attitude Toward War*, unpublished dissertation (Emory University, 1960), 55.

³⁵*Works*, Vol. XI, 197.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 197-198.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 92.

In an attempt to reason indirectly with the “misguided” colonist, Wesley insisted that every British subject “must needs be subject to the power [of the King] as to the ordinance of God. . . .”³⁸ Their submissiveness to the state should evolve, not only from the fear of “wrath” and “for fear of punishment,” but above all, “for conscience sake.”³⁹

And what if the constituents of a monarchy, or any other form of government for that matter, judge their leaders unfit for the exercise of legitimate authority? Wesley never satisfactorily answers this question.⁴⁰ Never the abstract political philosopher, Wesley thought it sufficient to structure his arguments upon present realities. And for Wesley, the citizens of eighteenth-century England were “possessed of the greatest civil and religious liberty that the condition of human life allows.”⁴¹

It was Wesley’s tenacious loyalty to the Crown, coupled with his traditional Anglican heritage, that fostered an acceptance of church–state unity—a perception that allowed him to justify Christian involvement in war. Wesley’s tendency to combine his political and theological constructs into one unified system is underscored by a letter written in 1777 to his brother Charles, in which Wesley reported:

It is my religion which obliges me “to put men in mind to be subject to principalities and powers.” Loyalty is with me an essential branch of religion, and which I am sorry any Methodist should forget. There is the closest connexion, therefore, between my religious and my political conduct; the self same authority enjoining me to “fear God” and to “honor the King.”⁴²

Wesley’s understanding of perfect love included loyalty to legitimate political authority. This was a demanding ethic placed upon the Christian citizen, for it required the abandonment of all self interest in order to better serve the society.⁴³ Wesley could say that the Methodists “have no conception of piety without loyalty,”⁴⁴ because he understood loyalty as one of the highest expressions of Christian love.

Other factors interplay with Wesley’s political construct and his justification of the Christian’s involvement in war. In what was perhaps his most direct statement on the war issue, Wesley made application of two New Testament texts in support of his views. A question, posed dur-

³⁸*Ibid.*, 116.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁰One minor chord in Wesley’s thought that has been interpreted as a paradigm for passive resistance is found in Wesley’s lengthy “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.” *Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 120. Commenting upon a hypothetical Canon law that might infringe upon the rights of the Methodist societies, Wesley wrote: “That Canon I dare not obey because the law of man binds only so far as it is consistent with the word of God.”

⁴¹*Works*, Vol. XI, 118.

⁴²*Ibid.*, Vol. XII, 435.

⁴³*Ibid.*, Vol. IX, 175.

⁴⁴Warner, *Industrial Revolution*, 110.

ing the first Methodist conference in 1744, asked, "Is it lawful to bear arms?" Wesley responded: "We incline to think it is: 1. Because there is no command against it in the New Testament; 2. Because Cornelius, a soldier, is commended there."⁴⁵

Yet, while Wesley justified Christian participation in war under certain circumstances, he remained, for the most part, openly cynical of the enterprise. Addressing the cause of war — human sin — Wesley lamented,

. . . let us calmly and impartially consider the thing itself. Here are forty thousand men gathered together on this plain. What are they going to do? See there are thirty or forty thousand more at a little distance. And these are going to shoot them through the head or body, to stab them, or split their skulls, and send most of their souls into everlasting fire. . . .⁴⁶

The phenomenon of war is the result of human pride. War is the most horrible manifestation of original sin. Wesley posed the question, "Why do the nations fight? "Why so? What harm have they [the opposing forces] done to them?" And he responded:

O none at all! They do not so much as know them. But a man who is king of France, has a quarrel with another man, who is king of England. So these Frenchmen are to kill as many of these Englishmen as they can to prove the King of France is in the right. Now, what an argument is this! What method of proof! What an amazing way of deciding controversies!⁴⁷

Nations resort to military force because they are sinful. Societies are composed of individuals who are proud and ambitious, and are, therefore, possessed with an inclination toward violence.⁴⁸ With stinging sarcasm, Wesley offered an illustration that underscores human perfidy. Describing the exploits of two soldiers of the Inquisition who, having broken into the home of a poor countryman in Flanders, Wesley reported that they

butcherd him and his wife, with five or six children; and after they had finished their work, sat down to enjoy the fruit of their labour. But in the midst of their meal conscience awaked. One of them started up in great emotion, and cried out "O Lord! What have I done? As I hope for salvation, I have eaten flesh in Lent!"⁴⁹

The collective avarice of all the individuals within a society provides the foundational basis for war. Succinctly stated, war is "a demonstrative

⁴⁵Minutes of the First Conference (1744), quoted by Richard Cameron, "Methodism and Society in the Historical Perspective" (New York: Abingdon, 1961), Vol. 1 of *Methodism and Society*. Cf. Donald Dayton "An Historical Survey of Attitudes Toward and War and Peace With the American Holiness Movement," from *Perfect Love and War*, Paul Hostetler, ed., (Napanee, Indiana: Evangel Press, 1974), 134.

⁴⁶*Works*, Vol. IX, 222.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 222.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. IX, 217.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 218.

proof of the overflowing of ungodliness in every nation under heaven.”⁵⁰ As Egon Gerdes has asserted, for Wesley, sin is the cause of war, the content of war and the consequence of war.⁵¹

Although he never advocated a philosophy of pacifism for the individuals called upon to fight in a sinful cause, Wesley did establish parameters for a *jus ad bellum* theory. In addition to yielding to right authority, Wesley argued that the taking of life is justifiable only as a last resort, “in particular cases, in cases of absolute necessity for self defense.”⁵²

Wesley believed that a nation may be justified in defending itself from two types of aggression. It is apparent from a perusal of his writings during the Seven Years War that any nation, including the Christians who dwell therein, may take defensive action against a foreign aggressor. It was during the Seven Years War that Wesley, in a most unusual manner, gave tacit approval to the justifiability of defensive war. In the year 1756, Wesley adopted a strategy for enhancing the defense of England against an invasion of Frenchmen. In a letter to James West, Wesley outlined his plans to recruit soldiers from among the Methodist societies. Wesley had envisioned that the implementation of his scheme would receive the support of George Whitefield, but when Whitefield backed away from the proposal, he wrote to West, stating his intention to “raise for His Majesty’s service at least two hundred volunteers, to be supported by contributions among themselves; and to be ready in case of an invasion to act for a year (if needed so long) at His Majesty’s pleasure, only within ____ miles of London.”⁵³ John’s brother Charles, apparently thinking the proposal laughable, recorded his opinion in a journal entry: “I question whether my brother’s soldiers, with all his pains and haste to train them up, will not be too tardy to rescue us.”⁵⁴

A nation may also act to defend its sovereign interests against internal rebellion. The paradigm of revolution for eighteenth-century England was, of course, provided by the American colonies. Wesley remained generally sympathetic toward the American cause until 1776, yet he could never fully comprehend what benefit the recalcitrant Americans hoped to gain by severing all political ties with the Crown. In his *Observations on Liberty* (1776), he accused the colonists of having usurped the legitimate authority and establishing “an illegal authority over their countrymen.”⁵⁵ Viewing the conflict as an internal rebellion, or, as he put it, taking “up arms against their King,”⁵⁶ Wesley justified Great Britain’s militaristic response as an act of self-defense:

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 238.

⁵¹Cf. Gerdes, *John Wesley’s Attitude Toward War*, 79ff.

⁵²*Works*, Vol. XI, 70-71.

⁵³Wesley, *Letters*, Vol. III, 164.

⁵⁴Charles Wesley, *The Journal of Charles Wesley*, Vol. II, 200 (Quoted from Gerdes, 185).

⁵⁵*Works*, Vol. XI, 113.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 113.

But can we declare, in the face of the sun, that we are not aggressors in this war? We can. 'And that we mean not, by it, to acquire dominion or empire, or gratify resentment?' I humbly believe, both King and his ministers can declare this before God: 'But solely to gain reparation for injury' from men who have already plundered very many of His Majesty's loyal subjects, and killed no small number of them."⁵⁷

But as the harrowing accounts of human carnage continued to arrive from across the Atlantic, the issues of England's "just cause" became less certain in Wesley's mind.⁵⁸

What harm have [the soldiers] done to one another? Why, none at all. Most of them are entire strangers to each other. But a matter is in dispute relative to the mode of taxation. So these countrymen, children of the same parents, are to murder each other with all possible haste, to prove who is in the right. Now what an argument is this! . . . Now, who that seriously considers this awful contest can help lamenting the astonishing want of wisdom in our brethren to decide the matter without bloodshed?⁵⁹

The traditional *jus ad bellum* parameters must be strictly adhered to in Wesley's polemology. Even before the American Revolution, Wesley had openly decried the militaristic intentions of earlier British monarchs. Commenting on the renewal of the Hundred Year's War that occurred under Henry V, Wesley castigated the monarch for having "attacked [France] without the least provocation." Observed Wesley, "He filled it with widows and orphans, lamentation, misery, and every species of distress. And he died in full persuasion of having acted according to equity. So he deceived himself, as well as others! But there is one that judgeth righteously."⁶⁰

The structure of Wesley's just war theory provides the basis, not only of the *jus ad bellum*, but the foundations of the *jus in bello* as well. Wesley was particularly concerned about the just conduct of war at two levels. First, with regard to the treatment of noncombatants, Wesley maintained that it is morally indefensible to threaten or harm those who are no longer directly involved in a conflict. This moral principle applies to non-combatants and prisoners of war alike. Lamenting the cruelty of war in his *Concise History*, Wesley wrote: "How guilty so ever an enemy may be, it is the duty of brave soldiers to remember that he is only to fight an opposer and not a suppliant. . . ."⁶¹ In point of fact, the victory over the rebels of Charles Edward Stuart in 1746 "was in every respect decisive, [but] humanity to the conquered would have rendered it glorious."⁶²

In "Thoughts upon Slavery" (1774), Wesley offered the rationale of support for his just conduct theory. Eschewing the Justinian position that legitimized the enslavement of war-time prisoners, Wesley argued that "war

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 121f.

⁶⁰Wesley, *Concise History*, Vol. II, 25.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 227.

⁶²*Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 227.

itself is justifiable only on principles of self-preservation: Therefore it gives no right over prisoners but to hinder their hurting us by confining them. Much less can it give the right to torture, or kill, or even enslave an enemy when the war is over.”⁶³

Wesley was less explicit at the second *jus in bello* level—that of proportionality—which mandates that the means of war must never exceed the task of war.⁶⁴ Wesley’s frustration with those who had violated this principle is most evident from his interpretation of history. Wesley accused Egbert (ninth-century King of Wessex), Edward I (1242–1307), and the Duke of Marlborough (John Churchill, b. 1650) of “cruel” and “unjust” behavior and for having applied more force than was necessary for the restoration of the society’s welfare.⁶⁵

A war might be justified, but unjust means must never be employed in the establishment of the state’s goals. Wesley denounced, for example, the practice of bribing an invading army.⁶⁶ It is equally immoral to resort to plunder and pillage when invading a foreign country,⁶⁷ as it is an “atrocious act” worthy of the “reproach of all good men” to hold a prisoner of war hostage for ransom.⁶⁸ Wesley’s view on proportionality in warfare is tacitly summarized in his *Observations on Liberty*. Even a just campaign, like that pursued by Great Britain against the rebellious colonists, must not be waged in order to “acquire dominion or empire, or to gratify resentment. . . . But solely to gain reparation for injury,” and nothing more.⁶⁹

Conclusion

John Wesley was neither a pacifist nor a militarist.⁷⁰ The evidence tends to bear out the argument that Wesley takes his place in history as a legitimate proponent of a just war theory. The structure of Wesley’s polemology falls within the parameters of the *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* which, in turn, are the integral components of the classical just war tradition.

It is important to note that although Wesley never spoke in terms of the “righteousness” of war, he did, from time to time, concede its

⁶³Works, Vol. XI, 71.

⁶⁴James Turner Johnson, *Can Modern War Be Just?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 3.

⁶⁵Wesley, *Concise History*, e.g., Vol. I, 33; Vol. IV, 90.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, Vol. I, 55.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 90.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. III, 199.

⁶⁹Works, Vol. XI, 115.

⁷⁰Cf. Gerdes, *Wesley’s Attitude Toward War*, 156. Gerdes arrived at the same conclusion, but he failed to determine within which tradition, if any, Wesley should be interpreted.

⁷¹Works, Vol. X, 71.

necessity. War may be necessary in cases of "self preservation,"⁷¹ and for the restoration of internal order and peace.⁷² Nevertheless, an apparent tension arises between Wesley's theology of perfect love and his admission that Christians may participate in properly authorized armed conflicts. Though this tension cannot be eliminated entirely in Wesley, at least its resolution can be understood. Wesley's view of the state was derived from a metaphysical presumption that true government is "a delegation, namely, from God. . . ."⁷³ In effect, Wesley bracketed his theology of perfection within the boundaries of his metaphysical system. He could maintain a just war posture, while, at the same time, positing a doctrine of perfect love, because he believed that the power of the sword is delegated to earthly authorities; and it is the Christian's moral duty to submit in loving service to those authorities.

War is the most horrible manifestation of original sin, but Wesley believed that there are priorities of perfect love which transcend even the issues of war. These priorities must be taken into serious consideration by every Christian. Wesley's first loyalty was, above everything else, to God, the source of all power. All subordinate authority on earth derives from God, hence Wesley could declare that the leaders of the state function as "God's ministers or delegates."⁷⁴ Wesley was personally convinced that the limited monarchy was the highest expression of this metaphysic, thus it was quite impossible for Wesley to divide his loyalty to God from loyalty to his political sovereign.

For Wesley, pacifism could never mean anything more than passive obedience. "For I am an High Churchman, the son of an High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance."⁷⁵ Loyalty to one's government is one of the highest expressions of one's love for God. Indeed, no individual has the "right at all to be independent, or governed only by himself; but is in duty bound to be governed by the powers that be, according to the laws of the country."⁷⁶ The individual is not an isolated particle; each person is considered a part of the greater society, and as such, is subject to the society's rules. Assuming the cause is a just one, and the rulers have called upon the citizenry to take up arms and come to the defense of the nations, the Christian is free to do so. In fact, with Wesley, loyalty to the state seems to be an obligation rather than a choice.

What if the cause is not a just one? It seems that it never occurred to Wesley to address this question. It was sufficient that the causes for

⁷²*Ibid.*, 115.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁵*Letters*, Vol. VI, 156.

⁷⁶*Works*, Vol. XI, 97.

which England fought during the eighteenth century were, in his opinion, justified as defensive struggles, or, in the case of the American Revolution, an action motivated by the necessity of restoring internal order. His understanding of war, like his theological views, sprang from the demands of his own experience. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that Wesley's famous ability to "think and let think" applied to those whose conscience on the matter of armed conflict, differed from his own. Quoting an unidentified author, Wesley wrote with approval:

Everyone should deeply consider, what he is called to do. Some may think it would be a sin to defend themselves. Happy are they, if they can refrain from judging or condemning those that are of a different persuasion. Certain it is, some have fought and died in a just cause, with a conscience void of defense.⁷⁷

Apparently Wesley harbored at least a tacit sense of respect for those whose Christian convictions would not permit them to participate in any form of armed conflict. Wesley's own political antecedents would never allow more than this. The primary consideration for Wesley was not whether Christians should or should not participate in war. What was important was that the Christian take positive steps toward the realization of a just and lasting peace. It is the Christian who truly recognizes the source of all power, and it is the Christian, advancing the cause of peace, who can face the future in calm assurance that the Lord of history is active in the universe, transforming the darkness of injustice to the light of perfect love.

⁷⁷John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* ed. by Ernest Rhys (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1913), Vol. 2, 317.