

John Wesley: A Man Between Worlds

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The world of John Wesley was in the beginning stages of great upheaval. The 18th century witnessed the mechanization of industry, the final stages of the enclosure of agricultural lands, and the rise of a prosperous middle class. It also witnessed an increasing number of poor whose traditional way of living had been drastically changed. In many respects, John Wesley stood astride these two worlds. His desire to reform church and society was balanced by a desire to conserve what he thought was good. This tension can be seen in his attitude towards the king, the church, social classes and women.

Wesley remained a loyal Tory who defended the king and showed no sympathy for the American Revolutionaries or the Jacobites. However, John Wesley was hostile towards the aristocracy and did much to bring churches under the control of laymen and to provide a means to educate them. Wesley contended that a, “newly awakened people should be plentifully supplied with books, hereby the awaking is both continued and increased.” (Brantley, 119) Wesley was so convinced by the power of the written word that “he insisted on his preachers being colporteurs or book agents...They travelled on horseback with a saddle bag filled with Wesley’s publications.” (Brantley, 118) Wesley entered into the book printing business in order to make books more affordable. His book *Primitive Physic*, “was so cheaply printed that it was among the dozen or so most widely read books in England from 1750 to 1850.” (Brantley, 118) In 1771 *The*

Arminian Magazine had a circulation of 7000 compared to *The Gentleman's Magazine* with 4,550.

Wesley claimed to be faithful to the Anglican church and prided himself on being a 'Lincoln fellow' but he also drew extensively on the works of non-conformists. The largest part of his volume of abridged classics, *Christian Library*, consisted of the work of Puritan divines. (Rack, 347) To those that accused Wesley of creating a church within a church, he writes, "I teach the doctrines which are comprised in those Articles and Homilies to which all the clergy of the Church of England solemnly profess to assent, and that in their plain, unforced, grammatical meaning." (Jones, 91) Wesley professed that his disagreement with the Anglican Church was not doctrinal. His dispute with the Anglican Church had to do with church order which he believed alienated the poor.

Although Wesley worked hard to maintain a 'genteel' status, he made it a practice of staying with the people he was ministered to. He once famously declared, "The world is my parish" and he made good on that claim by preaching in "a meadow at St. Ives, to a brickyard at Bristol, to the house where the lead miners were getting paid at Blanchland, to the copperworks near the Hayle, to the High Street at Stockton, to the common at Portsmouth." (Abelove, 24)

Wesley taught traditional relations between husband and wife but he also placed women into high positions in the Methodist administration and his correspondence with women shows a genuine appreciation for their intellect. In correspondence with a Miss March he discusses the writings of Norris and Browne. He encouraged his niece to read Locke's *Essay* and Malebranche's *Search After Truth* and encouraged Mary Bishop to teach these two books to her school children. To Anne Foard he wrote, "It is right for you to cultivate your understanding

though wrong to lean on it” (Brantley, 116) The reason for Wesley’s positive attitude towards women may have been due to his reliance on his mothers insight evident in his letters during his years at Oxford.

The above examples highlight the difficulty of applying any particular label or category to Wesley and his followers. In some respects Methodism was a reactionary movement. At Oxford, John and Charles Wesley founded the Holiness Club to counter what they considered to be the lax moral standards of the college. Wesley railed against the Cambridge Latitudinarians whose neo-Platonic theology reduced Christianity to a set of rules to be followed. But Methodism was not only reactionary. It was part of a much larger Evangelical movement that swept the European continent as well as North America around the same time. This movement had its roots in earlier Reformation theology, with its emphasis on salvation by grace alone through faith, and the reality of the new birth. Wesley’s grandparents on both sides of the family had subscribed to reformed ideas although his mother and father had made a conscious decision to return to the Anglican church. Wesley was first exposed to reformation ideas through encounters with the Salzburgers and the Moravians during his time in Georgia. He took those reformation ideas and combined them with traditional Anglicanism to create his unique form of reformation theology. Wesley taught salvation by grace through faith but retained much of the traditional Anglican emphasis on salvation as a process in which works played an important part in preparing the heart to receive God’s grace and to continue in it. Wesley’s Anglican roots reveal themselves most clearly in his intense dislike of anything that appeared to be antinomian or against free will. This is why, although acknowledging his indebtedness to Luther at Aldersgate, he did not include either Calvin or Luther in his *Christian Library* - a massive compendium of Christian writers.

Wesley declared himself to be *homo unius libri* or 'a man of one Book' but this did not prevent him from making use of the works of many diverse traditions and gleaning from them whatever he thought was beneficial. In short, Wesley was eclectic and this would become a hallmark of the Methodist movement. In *Large Minutes* Wesley rebuked a preacher for not broadening his mind by reading widely. When the preacher said that he had no taste for reading any book other than the Bible, Wesley replied, "Contract a taste for it or return to your trade." (Jones. 35)

Wesley's eclecticism allowed him to draw extensively on Anglican, Puritan and Reformation ideas but there is another important influence on Wesley's thinking that is worth discussing in detail; that is his reliance on Locke. It is here that we find Wesley attempting to stand astride the old and the new worlds of epistemology; or in the words of Jones, "to maintain some of the newer methodological insights while not giving away the traditional view of inspiration and infallibility." (Jones, 36)

It should not be surprising that Wesley would have an affinity towards Locke. Wesley had a natural disposition towards analysis that can be traced back to his childhood. When a neighbour asked if young John wanted food between mealtimes, he would reply, "I thank you, I will think of it." (Rack, 58) His father, exasperated by his son's thoughtfulness and who was himself susceptible to emotional outbursts, scolded John, "you think to carry everything by dint of argument, but you will find how little is ever done in the world by close reasoning." (Rack, 58)

It seems John took his father's advice for he proved to be an able administrator as well. But John was like his mother, a logician, just as much as his brother Charles was like his father, a poet.

John read Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1725 before he was elected to a Fellowship at Lincoln College. He thought highly enough of Locke to publish a series of extracts from his *Essay* and a letter written to his mother during his time at Oxford, reveals an

early attempt to reconcile Locke's Essay with religious faith. He writes, "I call faith an assent upon rational grounds; because I hold Divine testimony to be the most reasonable of all evidence whatever. Faith must necessarily, at length, be resolved into reason." (Piette, 256) His mother, however, urged Wesley to recognize a distinction between faith and empiricism. Suzanna's response to Wesley is revealing and worth quoting at length, "You are somewhat mistaken in your notions of faith. All faith is an assent, but all assent is not faith. Some truths are self-evident, and we assent to them because they are so. Others, after a regular and formal process of reason by way of deduction from some self evident principle, gain our assent. This is not properly faith but science. Some again we assent to, not because they are self-evident, or because we have attained the knowledge of them in a regular method by a train of arguments; but because they have been revealed to us, either by God or man, and these are the proper objects of faith. The true measure of faith is the authority of the revealer, the weight of which always holds proportion to our conviction of his ability and integrity." (Piette, 257) Suzanna's discerning reply reveals a well thought out understanding of faith that shares much in common with Blaise Pascal. She separated natural philosophy from knowledge of the first order that could only be gained by means of revelation.

Wesley acknowledged his mother's insistence that propositions received on faith were not the same as ones arrived at through empiricism but Wesley did not give up on Locke's emphasis on reason. Probably one of the clearest examples of Locke's continued influence on Wesley can be found in his sermon, *An Earnest Appeal*. In this sermon he clearly defines his epistemology. He writes, "our ideas are not innate but must all originally come from our senses, it is certainly necessary that you have senses capable of discerning objects of this kind - not those only which are called 'natural senses', which in this respect profit nothing, as being altogether incapable of

discerning objects of a spiritual kind, but spiritual senses, exercised to discern spiritual good and evil” (Brantley, 48) By connecting ideas with senses, Wesley defends *tabula rasa*, and rejects the Cambridge Neo-Platonist’s view that all ideas correspond to pre-existing forms that are impressed in our minds at birth.

Wesley also read and abridged *The Procedure*, written by an Irish bishop, Peter Browne, which attempted to synthesize Locke’s philosophy and religious faith. In the procedure, Browne emphasized the reasonableness of Christian faith and outlined three kinds of proof that can be drawn from revelation: “Moral evidence”, a phrase which refers to the palpable superiority of Jesus’ teachings or the personal character of the biblical witnesses; “sensitive evidence,” the miracles performed by the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself; and the argument from the Old Testament “Types and Prophecies” to their fulfillment in the New.” Browne’s emphasis on ‘evidence’ follows the same line of thought as Locke who wrote that knowledge mediated by nature was “enlarged by a new set of Discoveries communicated by God immediately, which Reason vouches the truth of, by the Testimony and Proofs it gives, that they come from God.” (Brantley, 36) Revelation then, consisted of propositions that were true or false based on their inherent reasonableness. But Browne went further than Locke by stating that ‘faith’ served as a sixth sense that provides a window into an unseen world.

Following *The Procedure* Wesley drew an analogy between faith and experience. He writes, “Faith is with regard to the spiritual world what sense is with regard to the natural. It is the eye of the newborn soul. Hereby every true believer in God ‘seeth him who is invisible’” (Brantley 51) However, Wesley’s understanding of spiritual experience went beyond either Locke or Browne and may reveal, together with Isaac Watt, a shared dissatisfaction with Locke’s over-emphasis on reason without allowing for the direct ‘ministrations’ of the Spirit. This

dissatisfaction can perhaps best be understood from several lines of Isaac Watt's poem, *Horae Lyricae*, in which Locke is placed in heaven and is heard to say,

Forgive..., ye Saints below

The wav'ring and cold Assent

I gave to Themes divinely true. (Brantley, 46)

Wesley's emphasis on the immediacy of spiritual experience may in part be influenced by the writings of John Norris. Norris had graduated from Exeter College, the same college Wesley's father graduated from around the same time. Between 1725 and 1735, the year Wesley sailed for Georgia, he read "at least fifteen items published by Norris." (English, 62) and published an abridgement of John Norris's *Reflections* in 1734. Norris believed that it was possible to know God "essentially" and "directly" without the mediation of ideas. 'Ideas' in John Norris scheme were brought about by sense perception but this could not be the case for ideas about God. Instead, John Norris replaced the word 'ideas' for 'perceptions.' In doing so, Norris reveals the neo Platonism that characterized his thinking. "Just as the human 'understanding' needs the physical senses in order to know the phenomenal world, so it requires senses of a higher rank if it is to know the world of the Spirit." (English, 69) To Wesley, this experience was real and powerful and could impart a simple understanding that was not necessarily mediated by the Bible. He writes, "only men of a strong and clear Understanding can be sensible of its [the Bible's] full force. On the contrary, how plain and simple is this; and how level to the lowest capacity! Is not this the sum; "One thing I know; I was blind, but now I see." (Brantley, 64) Wesley's emphasis on 'the inward witness' could be mistaken for mysticism but for Wesley it was actually an argument based on reason. Wesley believed that the, "inward witness... is the

proof, the strongest proof of Christianity.” Just as we can discover truth in the physical realm by discovering it with our senses, so we discover Truth in the spiritual realm through our spiritual perceptions. Wesley draws on Augustine to defend this understanding of spiritual experience by citing his famous autobiographical account of religious experience, “O Eternal Truth! Thou art my God. Day and night I sigh after thee. And when I obtained my first knowledge of thee, thou didst take me to see that there was something which I might behold... Though didst likewise beat back the weakness of my own sight, and didst thyself powerfully shine into me. I trembled with love and with horror... I exclaimed, “Is truth a nonentity?” - And thou didst reply from afar, “No, indeed! I AM THAT I AM” – I hear this, as we are accustomed to hear in the heart; and there was no ground whatever for doubting. Nay, I could more easily doubt of my existence itself, than that it was not the Truth.” (Brantley, 57) Like Augustine, Wesley brought to his philosophical studies a conviction that God can be known directly and intimately.

Wesley’s belief in direct perception unmediated through Scripture opened him up to the charge of religious ‘enthusiasm’ and caused Bishop Butler to exclaim that the “pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Spirit is a horrid thing - a very horrid thing” (Roberts, 492) The Anglican Church was in the grip of Latitudinarians who were relatively open to religious ideas but the Methodist faced strong and sometimes violent opposition in many centers, especially in those centers serviced by an Anglican clergyman. For example, even the rector at Epworth did not allow Wesley to preach in his father’s old parish. So Wesley chose instead, to speak for eight days from the top of his father’s grave. Many Methodist ministers were refused communion. During the Jacobite rebellion, Methodist ministers were charged as vagabonds without employment and were impressed into the army. The most visible opposition arose in London, Bristol and Newcastle; the Wednesbury riots of 1743-44.

Wesley's meetings were sometimes accompanied by visible outpourings of emotion. Wesley recorded in his journal the response he received to his message, "Immediately one, and another, and another, sunk to the earth; they dropped on every side as thunderstruck... all Newgate rang with the cries of those whom the word of God cut to the heart; two of them were in a moment filled with joy, to the astonishment of those that beheld them." (Piette, 382) In his tract, *A Farther Appeal to men of reason and Religion*, Wesley defends himself from the charge of "religious madness". His faith, Wesley argues, was both "rational and scriptural; it is as pure from enthusiasm as from superstition." He goes on to ask, "is it enthusiasm to rejoice in the *sense* of his love to us?" (Brantley, 53) In a series of letters addressed to 'John Smith', likely a pseudonym for the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Secker, Wesley argues that, "No man can be a true Christian without such an inspiration of the Holy Ghost as fills his heart with peace, and joy, and love; which he who perceives not, has it not... This I take to be the very foundation of Christianity." (Brantley, 54) Thus we see that Wesley's emphasis on experience as proof of reality. By Wesley's accounting, "religious experience was as objective as sensory experience was for Locke." (Jones, 95) Although Wesley emphasized the importance of Reason, he also believed that it was finite and darkened by sin. Only the Spirit of God could open the eyes of faith could bring knowledge of the things of God.

As a young man Wesley sought to understand Christian doctrine and to discover a vital faith in a society where, "deism and scepticism reduced the hold of the church on the learned mind." (Stone, 45) Wesley did not follow the Latitudinarians but chose to accept the Bible as a Divine and inspired book. Some reproached Wesley and the Methodists with being, "Bible moths – feeding, they said upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth." (Jones, 31) Wesley did not shy from declaring himself, *homo unius libri*, 'a man of one book' as an accurate description of his view

of the Bible's authority. This was a position that Wesley held consistently throughout his life. Rupert Davies makes the observation, "Wesley is quite clear in his own mind as to the source of his doctrine of salvation [...] He claims to derive it immediately from Scripture, and from nowhere else at all [...] This claim is repeated time and time again in all Wesley's writings and it is not unjustified." (Bullen, xviii) Rationalist within the Anglican Church and on the continent placed an increasing amount of emphasis on reason as the sole arbiter of truth. Wesley sought to embrace this emphasis on reason while remaining faithful to the Bible. For Wesley, reason was an important tool for understanding the Bible. The importance of reason can be seen in the emphasis Wesley placed on Locke. Following the methodology of Locke, Wesley believed that the Bible contained propositions that could be accepted as true or false based on their reasonableness. Just as ideas in the realm of nature come through our physical senses, so ideas in the spiritual realm are mediated through our spiritual senses. Faith becomes a sixth sense that accesses another realm of knowledge through the Spirit of God. Brantley notes that, "the possibility of a reasonable faith as well as a deeply felt faith was both a Wesleyan and a rather Lockean property." (Brantley, 14) However, in considering the impact of Locke and other authors on Wesley, Rack is right to warn us from placing too much emphasis on the books that Wesley read. He writes, "It is true that the books mentioned did influence him, some of them (even the mystics) long after his conversion. But he read and abridged them very selectively and built them into patterns of his own." (Rack, 97) Wesley drew on many eclectic sources, but ultimately Wesley was a *homo unius libri*.

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