

**WESLEY AS THEOLOGICAL MENTOR:
The Question of Truth or Salvation through Other Religions***

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In Memorium: Dr. Joseph Mayfield¹

In her 1974 presidential address to this society Mildred Bangs Wynkoop called upon Wesley scholars to develop a truly hermeneutical approach. She argued that the all-too-common practice of using Wesley merely as a scholastic authority (which she termed “Wesley as guru”) should be transformed into an approach that draws upon an historically-sensitive reading of Wesley to deal with contemporary issues (a model that she termed “Wesley as mentor”).² A few years later Albert Outler issued much the same plea in his address to the 1982 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. He suggested as a slogan for contemporary Wesleyan theologians: “Back to Wesley and his sources, and then forward—with his sense of heritage and openness to the future as one of our models.”³

My interest in and study of Wesley’s theology owes much to these two forebearers, and I have tried to follow their methodological advice in my own explorations of a contemporary Wesleyan theology. To the degree that I have been successful, I have found it to be a very fruitful approach. In hopes of illustrating this fruitfulness, I have chosen to devote this study to a correlation of Wesley and a contemporary issue.

The issue that I have selected to consider concerns the implications of the Christian confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior for understand-

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ing the status of other world religions. Does this confession exclude the possibility of any truth in other religions? Does it restrict final salvation to Christians alone? What are its implications for the motives and methods of cross-cultural evangelization? Anyone familiar with contemporary Christian theology knows that questions such as these are prominent in the discussion. That is one of my reasons for choosing this topic. The other major reason is that I believe that Wesley offers a distinctive contribution to this discussion, particularly to those in the Evangelical arena who typically claim him as one of their own.⁴

I. CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN DEBATE CONCERNING OTHER RELIGIONS

It is a severe understatement to say that there is a lack of consensus in current discussion of Christianity's relation to other religions. In an influential recent survey Paul Knitter distinguished four major contrasting positions.⁵ At one end of his spectrum is the Conservative Evangelical Model which defends the exclusive normative status of Christianity against all challenges. A slight modification of this is the Mainline Protestant Model which allows for some revelation of God in other religions but restricts its effect such that salvation is only possible in Christianity. Still further along the spectrum is the Catholic Model, drawing on post-Vatican II theology, which allows that God may work salvifically through other religions, but always in conformity with the norm of Christ's revelation. Finally, Knitter identifies (and argues for) a Theocentric Model, which limits the normativeness of Christ to the Christian religion—assuming that other religions constitute authentic independent avenues of salvation.

The Theocentric Model of Christianity's relation to other religions has found support beyond Knitter, most notably in the writings of John Hick.⁶ At the same time, its radical relativism has troubled many in main-stream Christianity, sparking sophisticated attempts to reaffirm Christ's universal normativeness without denying that truth might be found in other religions.⁷ The negative response to the proposals of Hick and Knitter has been even greater among Evangelical missiologists and theologians.⁸ Significantly, the issue that has emerged as central in this Evangelical discussion is the fate of those who are never exposed to the Christian message.⁹ It would appear that this specific issue pierces to the most fundamental convictions of one's understanding of God (a point I will return to in discussing Wesley).

We in the Wesleyan traditions, of all people, must surely recognize that several considerations come into play when deciding issues like those

involved in the current debate over the relationship of Christianity to other religions. For example, there should be 1) exegetical consideration of the relevant portions of *Scripture*; 2) phenomenological consideration of the claimed similarities, differences, and benefits that humans *experience* in the various world religions; and, 3) rigorous philosophical analysis of the clarity and cogency of the arguments presented (i.e., the contribution of *reason*). Such considerations are amply represented in recent publications on our topic. By contrast, there is another level of consideration that has received less attention than it warrants—that of *tradition*. What lessons about the possible positions on our topic, and the implications of these positions, can we glean from the wisdom of previous Christian reflection and life? That is the question which I want to put to Wesley.

The very notion of turning to an eighteenth-century figure with this question might seem senseless. If one judged by the standard selections of readings on Christianity and other religions, little of interest or help was written on our topic prior to the twentieth century!¹⁰ However, while it must be admitted that previous centuries of Christian theology did not possess as detailed or sympathetic a knowledge of the breadth of world religions as ours, this does not mean that the relevant issues were not dealt with in more limited contexts. More importantly, it does not mean that there was a uniform attitude to these issues through the prior history of the Church.

Indeed, the initial broader historical work that has been done suggests that Christian interaction with and evaluation of other religions has gone through three major phases.¹¹ During the first three centuries of Christian history there was significant interchange with Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy, including some positive readings (particularly by Greek theologians) of certain philosophers as defenders of the Divine truth definitively revealed in Christ.¹² Scattered examples of such positive interaction carry over into the seventh century, until—with the emergence and military spread of Islam—they are largely supplanted by conflict and controversy. Commercial and other contacts with the Islamic world and points further East began to increase significantly again in the sixteenth century. The exposure to other religions gained through these contacts helped to rekindle a diversity in theological evaluations of the availability of some knowledge of God apart from the definitive revelation of Christ.

This brief historical summary provides initial warrant for suggesting that Wesley might have something to offer us concerning the issue of

Christianity's relation to other religions. On the one hand, he had a particular fondness for many of the early Greek theologians who had championed a more positive evaluation of "pagan" wisdom.¹³ On the other hand, he was an early beneficiary of the increasing interest in other religions. To develop this latter point, it might be helpful to delineate Wesley's actual knowledge of and attitudes toward other religions, within his historical context.

II. EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH KNOWLEDGE OF AND ATTITUDES TO OTHER RELIGIONS

Our consideration of Wesley in this regard is benefited greatly by David Pailin's recent survey of attitudes to other religions in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.¹⁴ Pailin traces the growing awareness and comparative treatment of religions in England beginning with Herbert of Cherbury's *De Religione Gentilium* (1645). He shows that most eighteenth-century treatments had little reliable information to work with on any other religions than Islam, ancient Judaism, and (to a lesser extent) contemporary Judaism. As a result, most comparative studies identified only four major religions: Christianity, Judaism, Mohametanism (Islam), and Paganism.

This four-fold classification was specifically characteristic of those discussions of other religions with which Wesley was demonstrably familiar—writings by Isaac Barrow, Richard Baxter, and Edward Brerewood.¹⁵ As such, it is not surprising that Wesley also tended to organize religions in these categories.¹⁶

For example, Judaism was always included in surveys that Wesley made of human religions. I hasten to add, however, that Wesley (like his contemporaries) demonstrated limited interest in, or knowledge of, contemporary Judaism. Instead, most of his uses of the category "Jew" were historical or theological in intent—designating either a preliminary dispensation of God's grace and revelation that Christ brought to completion, or a person who obeys God out of fear rather than out of love.¹⁷ When Wesley did describe contemporary Judaism, he tended to echo the negative evaluations that Pailin has shown were common in his time.¹⁸ And yet, at least in his later years, he refused to condemn Jews summarily, arguing that Christians should leave their fate in the hands of God.¹⁹

In general, Islam received more focused (and, if possible, more distorted and hostile) treatment than Judaism in Christian evaluations from the thirteenth century on.²⁰ Two factors account for much of this situa-

tion: the military clashes between the two faiths, and the ironic apologetic method which transformed many of the arguments used to defend the superiority of Christianity over Judaism into comparisons of Islam versus Christianity! The reactionary evaluations of Islam continued into Wesley's immediate context.²¹ As such, it is hardly surprising that he would include a recital of the "barbarities" of Islamic practices and the "absurdities" of the Quran in his collation of empirical evidence for the reality of human depravity.²² Nor is it unexpected that he would react so negatively to the attempt of Henri de Boulainvillier to present Islam to the West as a desirable alternative to "Papism" and Christianity in general.²³ Just how negative (and misinformed) Wesley's general impression of Islam was is best seen in his judgement that "Mohametans" hardly differ from "heathens" in their lack of revelation, religious sensitivity, and moral concern.²⁴ Precisely because of this negative evaluation, however, it is striking that Wesley's late sermons should 1) forbid a summary damnation of Muslims, 2) praise the sincerity of their response to the limited revelation they have received (in explicit contrast to the English Deists!), and 3) argue that we have great reason to hope that some Muslims have indeed come into experience of true religion through their sensitivity to God's inward voice.²⁵ For Wesley, of course, such "true religion" would qualify one for eternal salvation!

Wesley's final category of religions were the "heathens" or "pagans." This was an inclusive category for all who lacked exposure to God's unique revelation offered to Israel and in Christ. We have already noted that Wesley at times placed Islam in this category. He consistently included three other identifiable groups among the heathen. The first of these groups is the Greco-Roman philosophical and religious traditions with which early Christianity interacted. Wesley's comments on this group reflect the tension of the early Church: on the one hand he praised signs of true piety and virtue among some philosophers; on the other hand he stressed even their limitations and denounced much of the popular mythology and religious practice.²⁶

A second identifiable group of heathen in Wesley's considerations were the tribal religions of Africa and North America. Most of his comments on this group focus on Native Americans because he had some direct experience with them. In his university years Wesley picked up a romantic conception of the "noble savage" as possessing a moral and religious clarity free from the distorting sophistications and ambitions of advanced culture. His actual encounters with Native Americans soon dis-

abused him of this fanciful image.²⁷ His immediate reaction was quite strong—he reclassified their religion as demonic!²⁸ Over time a nuanced tension emerged in his comments on such primal religions: when responding to romantic or deistic commendations of natural religion he critiqued the supposed religious and moral purity of native groups;²⁹ but when he turned his attention to the supposed moral superiority of English culture, he often used comparisons with the morality and humanity of native cultures to conclude that it would be preferable to “convert the English into honest heathens.”³⁰ His most biting comments come when he criticized supposed “Christians” specifically for how they had mistreated and enslaved these native peoples.³¹

A third possible group of heathens were the more developed religions of India and China. There was very little information about Buddhism available in Britain before the nineteenth century.³² Likewise, the few accounts of China that were available to Wesley dealt only in broad strokes with Chinese culture and were not very reliable even on these topics, as he realized.³³ By contrast, there were relatively more treatments of Hinduism published in Britain in the latter half of the eighteenth century.³⁴ However, these publications also tended to be unreliable, mixing elements of Buddhism and Zoroastrianism indiscriminately with Hindu teaching. Wesley’s reflections on the one such publication which we have any evidence that he read illustrates well such confusions.³⁵ More revealing are his reflections on an account of British colonial impact on India. Here again his sympathies came to lie with the native population, as he became convinced that it was the so-called Christians who were really acting like heathens!³⁶

Whatever their variety, the final point that I would make about the heathens is that the late Wesley again held out a significant hope that many of them might have found a true saving relationship with God by responding to the light that they had received!³⁷

III. WESLEY ON TRUTH AND SALVATION THROUGH OTHER RELIGIONS

On reflection, the point that emerges most dramatically from the preceding survey of Wesley’s comments on other religions is not the obvious limitations and distortions of his knowledge. It is the element of positive evaluation that is evident, especially in his later thought.

This element is particularly striking when viewed against his context. Having surveyed the attitudes to other religions in Wesley’s setting David

Pailin concluded that there were five major motivations for invoking consideration of other religions in theological debates of the time: 1) as a further means of attacking other Christian groups—by showing resemblances to heathens; 2) to distinguish Christian evidences of its truth claims from that of other religions (particularly Islam); 3) to show that there were no credible rivals to Christianity among world religions; 4) to enhance the readers’ appreciation of the merits of Christianity and promote their devotion to it; and 5) to gather evidence for or against currently debated notions, particularly that of “general revelation.”³⁸ One can find traces of each of these agendas in Wesley’s various comments on other religions. However, his dominant concern appears to focus increasingly on the latter issue of the reality and implications of a generally-available revelation of God.³⁹ If we are to gain a more systematic understanding of his view of other religions, we would do well to start with this topic.

A. The Gracious Character of *All* Revelation

There has been an ongoing debate in Wesley scholarship over whether Wesley believed that human beings could have knowledge of God apart from God’s definitive revelation in Jesus Christ. I believe that this debate results more from an inappropriate framing of the question than from ambiguities in Wesley. The debate has typically been framed in terms of whether Wesley affirmed a “natural revelation” or a “natural theology.”⁴⁰ Behind such designations is the assumption that any universal knowledge of God available through consideration of the world and human life would necessarily be “natural” knowledge *rather than* “gracious” knowledge.

It is not surprising that the question is frequently framed this way, because the polarization of “nature” and “grace” increasingly characterized Western theology, becoming definitive of much of Protestantism.⁴¹ Thus, when Wesley is read in a Protestant paradigm (as is most common), he is forced toward one or the other of opposing alternatives: either he is assumed to affirm that humans can have some knowledge of God apart from grace, or he is read to deny the existence of any significant knowledge outside of definitive Christian revelation.

By contrast with later Western theology, many early Greek theologians avoided such polarization. They made no absolute separation between “general” and “Christian” revelation. They saw *both* as based in God’s grace, with God’s revelation in Christ establishing and completing the divine revelation in creation.⁴²

Wesley's mature convictions about revelation appear to be more in line with such early Greek perspectives than with later Western theology. He too came to affirm that there is a basic knowledge of God universally available to those who have not heard of Christ, while insisting that this knowledge was itself an expression of God's gracious activity epitomized in the revelation of Christ.⁴³

To be sure, Wesley achieved this result in a different manner than was typical of early Greek theologians. They usually assumed that there was a continuing (weakened) influence of the grace of *creation* even after the Fall. Through his distinctive wedding of total depravity with universal Prevenient Grace, Wesley grounded the knowledge of God available to those who have not heard of Christ in an initial expression of the grace of *restoration*.⁴⁴

In other words, Wesley was convinced that no one had access to God apart from the gracious restoration of divine self-revelation. However, he also believed that this revelation was available in a continuum of progressively more definitive expressions, beginning with a basic knowledge that was universally available and reaching definitive expression in Christ.⁴⁵

B. Initial Universal Revelation

In keeping with his empiricist epistemological commitments, Wesley denied that humans have an innate idea of God stamped on our souls. All knowledge of God must come either through inference from God's works or by direct sensation through our "spiritual senses."⁴⁶ For initial *universally-available* knowledge about God, the major source that Wesley consistently identified was inference from God's creation.⁴⁷ Beyond this constant, his precise convictions about the content and effectiveness of God's universal beginning self-revelation fluctuated somewhat through time. This fluctuation was not arbitrary, but illustrates a pattern many scholars view as characteristic of a broader integrative development in Wesley's theological convictions, a pattern distinguished into three main periods: the "early Wesley" (1733–38), the "middle Wesley" (1738–65), and the "late Wesley" (1765–91).⁴⁸

As I noted previously, the early Wesley romanticized the situation of native peoples. He assumed that they were innocent, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God. He even claimed that one of his main reasons for undertaking the mission to Georgia was to present his understanding of the gospel to the Native Americans, for they would immediately discern if his doctrines were authentic or not!⁴⁹ We also saw

that his actual encounters with Native Americans failed to live up to such unrealistic expectations, leading to an initial reaction of characterizing all religion of those who have no revelation of Christ as demonic.

Wesley's disillusionment in Georgia coincided with his heightened appreciation for the Protestant emphasis on distinctively Christian grace. As a result, the period shortly following 1738 evidenced his most negative evaluations of initial universal revelation. He did not deny it, but he saw it as nearly empty. Consideration of God's creation might convince us of God's *existence*, but it could tell us nothing of God's *nature*.⁵⁰

As time passed, Wesley's estimation of the contribution of universal revelation appears to have increased. In 1748 we find him suggesting that God's basic attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, and wisdom can be deduced from creation.⁵¹ By 1754 he included at least a vague awareness of the general lines of good and evil in the knowledge universally available.⁵²

This is not to say that Wesley now considered this initial universal revelation to be self-sufficient. Indeed, in 1757 he wrote a lengthy polemic against Bishop John Taylor's "deistic" claim that heathens have sufficient knowledge and power to know God and obey God's will. Given the situational nature of this piece, it is not surprising that it one-sidedly emphasized the limitations of universal revelation. However, even here Wesley did not deny that some knowledge was available to all, only that it was effective in producing virtuous (i.e., holy) lives.⁵³

By the 1780s Wesley had nuanced even this assumption. He now claimed that initial universal revelation enabled people to infer not only that there was a powerful, wise, just, and merciful Creator, but also that there would be a future state of punishment or reward for present actions. More importantly, he suggested that God may have taught some heathens all the essentials of true religion (i.e., holiness) by an "inward voice."⁵⁴ That is, he raised the possibility that Prevenient Grace might involve more than simply strengthening our human faculties and testifying to us through creation. It might also provide actual overtures to our "spiritual senses!"⁵⁵ With provisions such as this, some people would surely pursue virtuous lives, and the late Wesley appeared willing to acknowledge some attainment. However, he was quick to add that such cases would be less pure and far less common than in the Christian dispensation. Moreover, he was convinced that these persons would not have the *assurance* that is available to Christians through the Spirit.⁵⁶

C. The Uniqueness of Definitive Christian Revelation

Wesley's acknowledgement of, and understanding of, the initial universal revelation of God would have been largely acceptable to the emerging deistic temper of his day. That is, until he raised the suggestion of direct spiritual sensation! Here lies the crucial parting of the roads between Wesley and Deism (in both its rationalist and empiricist forms). They limited all credible revelation to that either grounded in or conformable with general human knowledge. Wesley, by contrast, assumed that the most definitive and important knowledge of God was not universally available, nor derived by mere inference. It must be obtained directly from God.⁵⁷

Obviously, Wesley believed that this definitive revelation of God took place in Christ and is found in Scripture. What might not be so obvious are the major distinctive elements of the Christian worldview which he assumed could be known only through this revelation. He ultimately reduced these to two: the free forgiveness of God evident in Christ and the renewing power of God present in the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸ On reflection, these two are inherently interrelated. One of Wesley's most fundamental convictions was that authentic Christian life flows out of love, and that genuine human love can only exist in *response* to an awareness of God's pardoning love to us. It is in Christ's atoning work that the Divine pardoning love is clearly assured to humanity and it is through the witness of the Spirit that this love is "shed abroad in our hearts," empowering our loving response.⁵⁹ Herein lies the rationale for Wesley's assumption, noted earlier, that Christians have available a greater potential for recovering holiness of life than do those with only initial revelation.

D. The Possibility of Extra-Christian Salvation?

This brings us, of course, to the perennial Christian perplexity about how God will deal with those who are never exposed to definitive Christian revelation. It must be noted at the outset that Wesley rejected one possible solution to this problem that has had advocates through the history of the Church—namely, the claim that God might provide another chance after death for those who do not receive the full revelation in this life, so that they might be made aware of it and respond (positively or negatively). He specifically rejected the Roman Catholic notion of limbo for patriarchs.⁶⁰ He even opposed the idea that Christ descended into Hell between his death and resurrection!⁶¹ In both cases his primary concern seems to have been avoiding any weakening of the importance of responding to the gospel in this life.⁶²

Then how does Wesley believe that God will deal with the unevangelized? Will they be “saved”? Given his understanding of salvation as recovered holiness (not merely forgiveness), this issue had two dimensions for Wesley. At its most abstract level, it was simply the question whether those who lack definitive Christian revelation will be summarily excluded from eternal blessing. At a more concrete level, it was the question whether such persons can (or *must*) develop at least a degree of holiness *in this life*, which Wesley considered to be the Christian foretaste and condition of final salvation.

Wesley’s answer to the first question is fairly clear and apparently consistent throughout his life. His conviction of the unfailing justice and universal love of God made it impossible for him to believe that people who lacked knowledge of Christ through no fault of their own (i.e., invincible ignorance) would be automatically excluded from heaven.⁶³ Accordingly, he repeatedly prefaced claims about the qualifications for eternal salvation with an exemption from consideration of those who received only initial revelation. He argued that Scripture gave no authority for anyone to make definitive claims about them. Their fate must be left to the mercy of God, who is the God of heathens as well as of Christians.⁶⁴ This conviction took its most formal expression when he deleted the Anglican Article XVIII (“Of Obtaining Eternal Salvation Only by the Name of Christ”) from the Articles of Religion that he sent to the American Methodists.⁶⁵

At times, Wesley ventured beyond this mere refusal to condemn those who had available only initial universal revelation. When he did so, the second dimension of the issue—the connection of present salvation (holiness, in some degree) to future salvation—came into play. Given his assumption that God’s self-revelation in Christ and the Spirit empowered humans to recover a level of holiness unattainable through initial revelation, Wesley’s unique dilemma was why God allowed some to be born in areas where the development of requisite holiness was not possible (he rejected the suggestion that it was punishment for pre-existent disobedience).⁶⁶ This situation struck at the heart of Wesley’s theological concern, because a God of truly “responsible grace” could neither summarily condemn such people for lacking holiness nor indiscriminately affirm them all (i.e., universalism), thereby denying them the freedom to refuse divine grace.⁶⁷

The late Wesley (with his more positive estimate of initial revelation) turned to another solution for this problem that had recommended

itself to many Christians before him: God will judge the heathens with some discrimination after all; not directly in terms of their appropriation or rejection of Christ, but in terms of how they respond to the gracious revelation (light) that they do receive.⁶⁸ This assumes, of course, that some degree of true spirituality or holiness can emerge in response to God's gracious initial revelation—a possibility that the late Wesley was willing to admit.⁶⁹ To be sure, this holiness may fall short of Christian standards for final salvation, but the lack would be supplied by divine indulgence.⁷⁰

IV. CONCLUSIONS

We have covered a wide and varying terrain in this study. What general conclusions might we draw to round it off?

A first conclusion is fairly simple and should have been sufficiently demonstrated by now: there is a stronger suggestion than has usually been recognized in Wesley's mature thought that *some* of those who have never heard of Christ may experience a degree of God's present saving power and enter into God's eternal saving Presence.⁷¹

Of course while such salvation would be apart from explicit *acquaintance* with Christ, Wesley would always maintain that it too was *through* Christ, since any human response to God was possible only because of the universal Prevenient Grace of God, which is rooted in the atoning work of Christ.⁷² Likewise, Wesley was certainly not advocating universal salvation; like all Divine grace, Prevenient Grace is "responsible," empowering but not overriding human accountability.⁷³

It is also important to note that Wesley would not see this possibility of salvation among the heathen as in any way lessening the urgency of their evangelization, much less suggesting that they are better left without the added "responsibility" for definitive Christian revelation.⁷⁴ For Wesley the good news of God's pardoning love manifest in Christ does not add extra *content* to the task of obedience, it brings a renewing *power* for the life of obedience.

One thing that remains unclear is how Wesley would respond to persons of other religious faiths who are presented with the message of Christ and opt to remain in their original community. The most likely community with which he would have experienced this firsthand was Judaism, and he showed some ambivalence between condemning their "hardness of heart" and arguing that we should leave them in God's hands. One gets the sense that he cannot imagine the message of

Christ being placed aside, *if* it has been presented truly—e.g., not drowned out by the contradictory lives of the Christian community that bears the message.

From what we have seen about Wesley's estimation of the situation of the heathen one might also draw some conclusions about appropriate means of evangelization. In particular, Mark Royster seems correct in his claim that Wesley's doctrine of Prevenient Grace supports a positive valuation of the agenda of inculturating or contextualizing the Gospel in evangelism and missions.⁷⁵ If God is already graciously at work in a beginning sense in one's existing cultural setting, then conversion to Christianity need not require a comprehensive rejection of this culture. Rather, one would begin the demanding perennial task of cultural discernment, in light of the definitive revelation of Christ.

The final conclusion that I would note is the most general, and the one that I find most relevant for the current Christian debate over the nature and status of other religions. Particularly in Evangelical circles suggestions of some truth existing in other religions, or of some possibility of salvation among those who have never heard of Christ, are typically charged with a lack of appreciation for the indispensable role of divine grace in salvation.⁷⁶ But this cannot be said of Wesley. He quite clearly grounds all salvation in God's grace. If he differs from other theologians who would rule out any possibility of salvation among the heathen, it is not in the *need* for grace, but in the *nature* of God's grace.⁷⁷ In other words, the convictions that lead Wesley to suggest that a truly loving and just God would judge the heathen in terms of their response to the light of initial universal revelation are the same convictions that had led him earlier to reject unconditional predestination.⁷⁸

NOTES

Abbreviations

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| <i>John Wesley</i> | <i>John Wesley</i> . Ed. Albert C. Outler. A Library of Protestant Thought Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964. |
| <i>Journal</i> (Curnock) | <i>The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.</i> 8 vols. Ed. Nehemiah Curnock. London: Epworth, 1909–16. |
| <i>Letters</i> (Telford) | <i>The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.</i> 8 vols. Ed. John Telford. London: Epworth, 1931. |

<i>NT Notes</i>	<i>Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.</i> 2 vols. London: Bowyer, 1755.
<i>Survey</i>	<i>A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy.</i> 5 volumes. 5th edition. London: Maxwell & Wilson, 1809.
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley.</i> Editor in Chief, Frank Baker. Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff. (Volumes 7, 11, 25, and 26 appeared as the <i>Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1975–83).
<i>Works (Jackson)</i>	<i>The Works of John Wesley.</i> 14 vols. 3rd ed. Ed. Thomas Jackson. London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872.

1. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Mayfield (1911–1991), my first mentor in the craft of teaching and a model of scholarship placed in service to the church.

2. Wynkoop, “John Wesley—Mentor or Guru?” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 10 (1975):5–14.

3. Outler, “A New Future for ‘Wesley Studies’: An Agenda for ‘Phase III’,” in *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 34–52; reprinted in: *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert D. Outler*, eds. T.C. Oden & L.R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 126–42.

4. In one recent evangelical consideration of this issue Wesley is only mentioned in passing as an alternative to the more typical Reformed evangelical perspective—William V. Crockett and James Sigountos, eds. *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 259. He received more sympathetic and extended notice in John E. Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 249–51. A detailed study of his stance may help his alternative view to be considered even more seriously.

5. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

6. See especially Hick, *God Has Many Faces* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982). Note also the collection of essays in John Hick & Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

7. Particularly to be recommended are: Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990); S. Mark Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way?* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985); and several essays in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24.1 (1987):1–52.

8. Cf. Ralph R. Covell, "The Christian Gospel and World Religions: How Much Have American Evangelicals Changed?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 15 (1991):12–17; and Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

9. The typically negative Evangelical evaluation of the unevangelized is amply represented in Crockett & Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?*. For some cautiously more positive evaluations, see esp. Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1984), 137–75; *Christianity and Other Faiths: An Evangelical Contribution to our Multi-Faith Society* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 22–24; Peter Cotterell, "The Unevangelized: An Olive Branch From the Opposition," *International Review of Mission* 78 (1988):131–35; Millard Erickson, "Hope for Those who Haven't Heard? Yes, But . . .," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11 (April 1975):122–26; and Evert D. Osburn, "Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (1989):367–72. The strongest current Evangelical voices for the possibility of salvation among the unevangelized are surely John Sanders (*No Other Name*) and Clark H. Pinnock—cf. "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, ed. Mark Noll & David Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 152–68; "Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religion," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (1990):359–68; "Acts 4:12—No Other Name Under Heaven," in Crockett & Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 107–15; and *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

10. Cf. Owen C. Thomas, ed., *Attitudes Toward Other Religions: Some Christian Interpretations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969; reprint, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986); and John Hick & Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). The only selections that Thomas includes

from prior to the twentieth century are by Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Hick & Hebblethwaite begin with one of the last pieces of Ernst Troeltsch (1923).

11. See esp. Gerhard Rosenkranz, *Der christliche Glaube angesichts der Weltreligionen* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1967); and Anastasios Giannoulatos (Yannoulatos), *Various Christian Approaches to Other Religions: A Historical Outline* (Athens: Poreuthentes, 1971). On early writers—particularly Greek, see Richard C. Hanson, “The Christian Attitude to Pagan Religions,” in *Studies in Christian Antiquity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 144–229; Chrys Saldanha, *Divine Pedagogy: A Patristic View of Non-Christian Religions* (Rome: Editrice Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1984); and James Sigountos, “Did Early Christians Believe Pagan Religions Could Save?” in Crockett & Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 229–41.

12. As Hanson and Sigountos point out, the positive evaluations were not of polytheistic Greco-Roman religions, but of monotheistic philosophical critiques of the former. Such appeals were useful to the early Christian apologists in answering popular attacks on the “atheism” of Christianity. At the same time, the apologists often hastened to suggest that the pagan philosophers had “borrowed” their ideas from Moses! Given the historical impossibility of this suggestion, later persons (like Wesley) who also discerned elements of Christian truth in these philosophers developed further an alternative explanation—general revelation.

13. On this general point, see Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45.2 (1990):29–53.

14. Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). For a somewhat related study, see Peter Harrison. *‘Religion’ and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Harrison’s agenda is to trace the emergence of a truly “secular” study of religion in seventeenth-century England.

15. Wesley was familiar with at least some of Barrow’s sermons (cf. Letter to ‘John Smith’ [30 Dec. 1745], §11, Works 26:180). In these sermons can be found this four-fold distinction: see *The Works of Isaac Barrow* (New York: John Riker, 1845), 2:316–44, 591–96. Richard Baxter is

frequently quoted by Wesley, thus he may have known the section in Baxter's *The Reasons of the Christian Religion* (abstracted in Pailin, *Other Religions*, 154–57) which invokes this four-fold division. Finally, Wesley frequently referred to Edward Brerewood's *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chief Parts of the World* (London, 1614) which made such a distinction in its preface. For a few references to Brerewood, see Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," §1, Works 2:485; Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §3, Works 4:87; *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Pt. I, §II.1, Works (Jackson) 9:208; and *Letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Gloucester* (26 Nov. 1762), §II.9, Works 11:508.

16. The best example is Sermon 106, "On Faith," Works 3:492–501.

17. E.g., Sermon 106, "On Faith," §I.5, Works 3:495; and *Minutes* (13 May 1746), Q. 11, *John Wesley*, 157.

18. See the negative descriptions in *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. II, §I.3–19 & §III.13–14, Works 11:204–13, 261–63 (note however that he also gives a negative description of contemporary Christians in §II, for his theme is the fallen nature of all England). Cf. Pailin, *Other Religions*, 63–80.

19. Sermon 106 (1788), "On Faith," §I.6, Works 3:495. See also the grudgingly appreciative comment on a synagogue service in *Journal* (23 Feb. 1770), Works 22:216.

20. Cf. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1960).

21. Cf. Pailin, *Other Religions*, 81–104. See also the representative extract from Isaac Barrow on 202–4.

22. *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Pt. I, §II.6, Works (Jackson) 9:215–16.

23. The book in question is Henri de Boulainvillier's, *The Life of Mahomet* (trans. from French, London, 1731). Wesley disparaged this work by comparison to one by Humphrey Prideaux (*The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet* [London, 1697]) which had defended the superiority of Christianity, in *Journal* (23 Nov. 1767), Works 22:113–14. Extracts of Boulainvillier and Prideaux can be found in Pailin, *Other Religions*.

24. Cf. Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," §3, Works 2:486; and Sermon 106, "On Faith," §I.3, Works 3:494.

25. See Sermon 130 (1790), “On Living Without God,” §14, Works 4:174; and Sermon 106 (1788), “On Faith,” §I.3–4, Works 3:494–95 (while perhaps not focusing on Islam, this passage uses a Muslim as an example!). Wesley’s positive comments on Islam are noted (with some surprise) in Thomas E. Brigden, “The Wesleys and Islam,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 8 (1912):91–95.

26. Compare (in chronological order): *Journal* (11 Oct. 1745), Works 20:95; *Journal* (12 Aug. 1748), Works 20:238; *NT Notes*, Acts 17:28–30; *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Pt. I, §I.12, Works (Jackson) 9:202; *Journal* (12 Sept. 1776), *Journal* (Curnock) 6:128; *Journal* (25 June 1778), *Journal* (Curnock) 6:202; Sermon 70, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” §II.6, Works 2:596; and Sermon 83, “On Patience,” §3, Works 3:171.

27. Compare his Letter to John Burton (10 Oct. 1735), Works 25:439; with his interview of some Chickasaw Indians published in a Letter to Editor of *Gentleman’s Magazine* (20 July 1736), Works 25:464–66 (reprinted in *Journal* [20 July 1736], Works 18:165–67).

28. E.g., *Journal* (9 July 1737), Works 18:185; and *Journal* (2 Dec. 1737), §§23–28, Works 18:202–4. Cf. J. Ralph Randolph, “John Wesley and the American Indian: A Study in Disillusionment,” *Methodist History* 10.3 (1972): 3–11.

29. E.g., Sermon 38, “A Caution Against Bigotry,” §I.9, Works 2:67; Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” §2, Works 2:486; *Journal* (18 Jan. 1773), *Journal* (Curnock) 5:497; and “Thoughts on a Late Publication,” Works (Jackson) 13:411–13.

30. E.g., Sermon 28, “Sermon on the Mount VIII,” §9, Works 1:616–17; and *Journal* (8 Feb. 1753), Works 20:445.

31. See *Journal* (12 Feb. 1772), Works 22:307; and *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, esp. §IV.8, Works (Jackson) 11:59–79. Some hint of the same point in connection with Native Americans can be found in Sermon 69, “The Imperfection of Human Knowledge,” §II.6, Works 2:580.

32. Cf. Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

33. Cf. Thomas Brigden, “Wesley’s References to China and the Chinese,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 9 (1914):130–33.

34. Cf. Peter James Marshall, *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970).

35. See his Letter to the Editor of *Lloyd's Evening Post* (28 Nov. 1774), *Letters* (Telford) 6:118–23. Wesley remarks here on a book by a Mr. H-- that was “an exact translation of the Koran of Indostan, of the Shastah of Bramah” (I have not yet determined the exact book in question). For some other examples of these typical confusions, see Pailin, *Other Religions*, 48ff.

36. Wesley's impressions are based on his reading of William Bolts, *Considerations of India Affairs*, 3 vols. (London, 1772–75). See his various reflections in *Journal* (23 Feb. 1776), *Journal* (Curnock) 6:97; *Journal* (13 Nov. 1776), *Journal* (Curnock) 6:131; Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” §29–33, Works 2:465–68; and Sermon 69, “The Imperfection of Human Knowledge,” §II.4, Works 2:578–79.

37. Sermon 106 (1788), “On Faith,” §I.4, Works 3:494.

38. Pailin, *Other Religions*, 13.

39. Pailin would agree that this is Wesley's focus, though he notes mainly the negative dimensions of Wesley's comments on general revelation (cf. *Other Religions*, 33–35). We hope to show that there was a much stronger positive role than Pailin recognizes.

40. For strong denials of any “natural theology” in Wesley, see Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1946), 47; Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 31, 42; and Kenneth Collins, “Wesley's Platonic Conception of the Moral Law,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 21 (1986):116–28, 118. For counterarguments that there is indeed at least an implicit “natural theology” in Wesley, see H.D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 253; Yoshio Noro, “Wesley's Theological Epistemology,” *The Iliff Review* 28 (1971):59–76, 67–68; and Melvin Hendricks, “John Wesley and Natural Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18.2 (1983):7–17.

41. For an articulation (and defense) of this Protestant polarization, see Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). Actually, Calvin gives more place to general revelation than Demarest admits, though later Calvinism downplayed this.

42. Cf. Saldanha, *Divine Pedagogy*, esp. 97–98, 151ff.

43. The best evidence of Wesley's difference from typical Western theology here is his abstract of Peter Browne's *The Procedure, Extent, and*

Limits of Human Understanding. When Browne made a distinction between knowledge that we have by our own faculties through the light of nature and that additional knowledge communicated from God, Wesley added a footnote that all “light of nature” so-called flows from Preventing Grace; *Survey*, 5:185.

44. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, forthcoming), Chapter Three.

45. See especially Sermon 106, “On Faith,” §§2–3, Works 3:492–93. Here Wesley appropriates John Fletcher’s delineation of four *dispensations* of the grace of God, distinguished by their progressively greater degrees of revelation.

46. The empiricist nature of Wesley’s epistemology and the role of the “spiritual senses” in knowledge of God has been carefully studied in Rex Matthews, “Religion and Reason Joined: A Study in the Theology of John Wesley,” (Harvard University Th.D. thesis, 1986).

47. E.g., Sermon 69, “The Imperfection of Human Knowledge,” §I.4, Works 2:571.

48. Richard Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), Vol. 1, page 31.

49. See Letter to John Burton (10 Oct. 1735), Works 25:439.

50. E.g., *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. II (1745), §III.21, Works 11:268.

51. Sermon 10, “Sermon on the Mount VI,” §III.7, Works 1:581.

52. *NT Notes*, John 1:9, Rom. 1:17–19.

53. The document in question is *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Works (Jackson) 9:191–464. On this point, note especially Pt. I, §II.2–5 (pp. 209–15); and Pt. II, §II.6 (p. 267). See also the homiletical distillation of this work in Sermon 44, “Original Sin,” esp. §II.2–3, Works 2:177.

54. Sermon 106, “On Faith,” §I.4, Works 3:494. He had earlier (1754) suggested this possibility for the “wise men” mentioned in Matthew and certain Old Testament figures, *NT Notes*, Matthew 2:1.

55. See the discussion of the various aspects of Preventive Grace in Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, Chapter Three.

56. On these claims, see Sermon 70, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” §II.6 (on Socrates’ virtue but lack of hope), Works 2:596;

and Sermon 119, “Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith,” §§8–10, Works 4:51–52; and “Thoughts on a Late Publication,” §3, *Works* (Jackson) 13:412.

57. Note the methodological claim in his introduction (§24) to the compendium on natural philosophy: “concerning God and Spirits ... we can neither depend on Reason nor Experiment. Whatsoever [we] know, or can know concerning them, must be drawn from the oracles of God,” *Survey*, 1:8 (also in *Works* [Jackson], 13:487).

58. Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §§1–2, Works 3:199–200.

59. These points permeate Wesley’s works. For a few examples, see *Minutes* (13 May 1746), Q. 6, *John Wesley*, 160; *The Character of a Methodist*, §13, Works 9:39; *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §61, Works 11:70; *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §I.3–6, Works 11:106–8; Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit I,” Works 1:274; and Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Spirit,” §15, Works 1:309.

60. *A Roman Catechism, with a Reply Thereto*, Q. 25, *Works* (Jackson) 10:100. This work was not original to Wesley, but his reissue endorses it and he specifically referred to it as defining his position in *Journal* (20 Dec. 1768), *Journal* (Curnock) 5:296.

61. See the discussion in John Deschner, *Wesley’s Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), 51–52.

62. Cf. Sermon 115, “Dives and Lazarus,” §III.1–2, Works 4:16–17.

63. E.g., Letter to ‘John Smith’ (25 June 1746), §2, Works 26:198; and Sermon 55, “On the Trinity,” §18, Works 2:386.

64. See especially, *Minutes* (25 June 1744), *John Wesley*, 137; Sermon 91, “On Charity,” §I.3, Works 3:295–96; Sermon 127, “On the Wedding Garment,” §17, Works 4:147; and Sermon 130, “On Living Without God,” §14, Works 4:174.

65. A convenient copy of Article XVIII can be found in Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 118. It had explicitly ruled out salvation based on a response to the “light of nature.”

66. The clearest expression of this dilemma is Sermon 91, “On Charity,” §I.3, Works 3:295. For the conjoined denial of a pre-existent cause,

see Sermon 69, “The Imperfection of Human Knowledge,” §III.1–2, Works 2:582–83.

67. The notion of Wesley’s theological orienting concern of “responsible Grace,” is developed throughout Maddox, *Responsible Grace*.

68. This solution was articulated by many of the early Greek fathers (cf. Saldanha, *Divine Pedagogy*). It had also been defended by many Quakers and Anabaptists (against whom Anglican Article XVIII had been framed!). Wesley was aware of the Quaker claim and accepted it; *A Letter to a Person Lately Joined with the People called Quakers* (10 Feb. 1748), §6, *Letters* (Telford) 2:118. For Wesley’s own appeal to this criterion, see “Large Minutes,” Q. 77, *Works* (Jackson) 8:337; *NT Notes*, Acts 17:28; and Sermon 91, “On Charity,” §I.3, Works 3:296.

69. While the middle Wesley acknowledged some light of general revelation, he remained pessimistic about its effectiveness (cf. *NT Notes*, Romans 3:14). Perhaps he was echoing the doubts of Richard Baxter expressed in his *More Reasons for the Christian Religion* (see *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, ed. William Orme [London: Duncan, 1830], 21:569ff). The late Wesley is much more optimistic about the possibility of heathens attaining a measure of true religion (cf. Sermon 106, “On Faith,” §I.4, Works 3:494). Possibly he is influenced by the series of sermons of Isaac Barrow on “The Doctrine of Universal Redemption” (see esp. *Works of Barrow*, 2:85–86, 97), which are most likely the sermons referred to in Letter to ‘John Smith’ (30 Dec. 1745), §11, Works 26:180.

70. Cf. *NT Notes*, Acts 10:4.

71. Actually, this topic has not been widely discussed by Wesley scholars. For relevant discussions (arranged by increasing affirmation of salvation beyond Christ), see: Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992), 171 fn69; Charles Rogers, “The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley,” (Duke University Ph.D. thesis, 1967), 178, 245; Lycurgus Starkey, *The Work of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Wesleyan Theology* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 43; Williams, *Wesley’s Theology*, 45; Olé Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 126; David Naglee, *From Everlasting to Everlasting: John Wesley on Eternity and Time* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 594–99; and Michael Hurley, “Salvation Today and Wes-

ley Today,” in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, ed. K.A. Rowe (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1976), 94–116. See also the discussion in David Lowes Watson, *God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 101ff.

72. Cf. *Minutes* (2 Aug. 1745), Q. 8, *John Wesley*, 150; and *NT Notes*, Acts 10:35.

73. Positions like Wesley’s are often accused of being universalistic by Reformed evangelicals! Cf. Crockett & Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 24ff.

74. Note how frequently this concern comes up in relation to positions like Wesley’s, in Crockett & Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 43, 260.

75. Cf. Royster, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective” (Asbury Theological Seminary D.Miss. thesis, 1989). A similar point has been made more briefly in S. Wesley Ariarajah, “Evangelism and Wesley’s Catholicity of Grace,” in *Future of Methodist Theological Traditions*, 138–48.

76. An excellent example is Douglas Moo, “Romans 2: Saved Apart From the Gospel?” in Crockett & Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, 137–45.

77. This point is recognized by many contributors to Crockett & Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, esp. 32, 44, 111.

78. Note in this regard that Isaac Barrow’s series of sermons on “The Doctrine of Universal Redemption” dealt with *both* the possibility of salvation among the heathen and his rejection of limited atonement (cf. *Works of Barrow*, 2:85–86, 97, 112). This conjunction is not accidental.