

Some Eighteenth Century Views Of The Relationship Of Science To Religion

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Abstract

During the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the western world began to perceive reality as, in some way, separate from the self. The kind of truth that was sought prior to Descartes differed from that generally sought afterward. Explanations of *why* things were as they were became less interesting, while people became preoccupied with explanations of *how* they happened. Nevertheless, some theologians and "natural philosophers" of eighteenth century Britain were able to blend elements of these different viewpoints, combining differing world views. John Wesley, for example, genuinely respected and eagerly utilized scientific advances and new philosophical ideas, yet he used many of the thought forms of his day to create new syntheses. Marrying empiricism and rationalism in such a way as to inspire human imagination to an understanding which cannot be attained by rational calculation or logic in and of itself, Wesley and others like him were able to preserve a place for humanity in the larger context of the universe in which humans were neither mere machines nor objects. They thus did much to avoid bifurcation between such polarities as subject versus object, faith versus reason, or teleology versus ontology.

Introduction

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constituted a period of momentous transitions in world view. These transitions have been described in various ways, often beginning with Francis Bacon (1561-1626), René Descartes (1596-1650), and Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), who for many historians were among the major instigators of modernity. These three people differed greatly philosophically. For example, Descartes was a rationalist while Bacon was an empiricist. Nevertheless, each contributed to the development of certain aspects of modernity.

Bacon advocated collecting observations and using experimentation in order to gain power over the forces of nature. His utilitarian understanding of natural philosophy became an important part of the mindset of the scientific revolution. He was convinced that knowledge of natural phenomena was the key to power over nature for the good of humanity. For this reason, he advocated scientific experimentation under "vexations" or controlled conditions, as opposed to merely observing nature as it takes its own course. In his *New Organon*, he wrote that "the

secrets of nature reveal themselves more readily under the vexations of art than when they go their own way.”¹

Descartes, with his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”),² made what some postmodern interpreters feel is a false distinction between the individual and the outside world.³ His premise that reason is the principal method of determining truth was used by others, such as Spinoza, to discredit the authority of the scriptures.⁴ His insistence upon clear and distinct ideas as necessary for knowing truth seemed opposed to maintaining doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, which could not really be explained on rational grounds.

Several other key theses of Descartes were of enormous consequence for subsequent thought. According to Descartes, mankind was unable to know any of God’s purposes, and because man is unable to discover the purposes or ends of the creator, philosophy must exclude the search for final causes.⁵ Thus, Descartes’ understanding was that philosophical (scientific) explanations should be entirely mechanical,⁶ with final causation totally excluded.⁷ Descartes

¹Francis Bacon, New Organon 1.98.

²Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method 4.

³Morris Berman has written that “the idea that man can know all there is to know by way of his reason, included for Descartes the assumption that mind and body, subject and object, were radically disparate entities. Thinking, it would seem, separates me from the world I confront. I perceive my body and its functions, but ‘I’ am not my body” (The Reenchantment of the World [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981], 34).

⁴Spinoza, in his Tractatus (1670), 195, wrote: “We must draw the absolute conclusion that the Bible must not be accommodated to reason, nor reason to the Bible” (cited in Gerard Reedy, The Bible and Reason: Anglicans and Scripture in Late Seventeenth-Century England [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985]: 11).

⁵Richard S. Westfall, Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 51.

⁶Herbert Butterfield, The Origins of Modern Science (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 128. See also, Stephen Gaukroger, “The Resources of a Mechanist Physiology and the Problem of Goal-Directed Processes,” in Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster and John Sutton, eds., Descartes' Natural Philosophy (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 383-400.

was therefore more interested in *how* one knows than in *what* one knows, and because of his influence, for philosophers from his time onward *knowing*, or epistemology, was considered to be prior to *being*, or ontology.⁸ Because of its exclusion of teleological explanations, Cartesianism emphasized fact to the exclusion of value.⁹ Descartes also defined matter as extension,¹⁰ helping to pave the way for materialism. Moreover, he insisted that the only means by which causes could produce effects was through direct contact,¹¹ implying a mechanistic universe.

Gassendi was attracted to Epicureanism and therefore wrote extensively on Epicurus.¹² He advocated a view of the universe according to which the only real things in existence were matter and motion. Gassendi considered matter to consist of tiny indivisible particles, or atoms, which had been created by God, who had set them in motion. He was able to make the atomism

⁷Descartes, Principia philosophiae (1644) 1.28.

⁸James W. Sire, The Universe Next Door, 3d ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 176. Sire writes, “Descartes is seen as the first modern philosopher, not the least because he was more interested in how one knows than in what one knows. For his philosophic approach—and the approach of almost every major philosopher from his time on—knowing is prior to being.”

⁹Morris Berman, The Reenchantment of the World (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1981), 194.

¹⁰John Hedley Brooke, Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 132.

¹¹Brooke, 120.

¹²Pierre Gassendi, De vita et Moribus Epicuri (On the Life and Character of Epicurus), 1647. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was an advocate of the atomic theory of Democritus (400s BCE), according to which all things are composed of minute, invisible, indestructible particles of matter. According to Epicureanism, nothing else exists, and the human “soul” is only a chance combination of atoms which dissipates at death.

of Epicurus and Lucretius¹³ acceptable to European Christians by modifying it in such a way as to posit that the atoms did not have an eternal existence, but were created by God. His views, therefore, also ended up paving the way for a materialistic understanding of the universe.

In Gulliver's Travels (1726), Jonathan Swift provided a glimpse into the flux that was taking place in western European thought in the early eighteenth century. Gulliver was visiting Glubbudrib, an island of magicians where the governor was able to bring up any figure from the past. Gulliver asked for Aristotle in order to hear his views on recent developments, and Aristotole's finding was that "Gassendi, who had made the doctrine of Epicurus as palatable as he could, and the vortices of Descartes, were equally exploded."¹⁴ With reference to Newtonian theories, he continued: "new systems of nature were but new fashions, which would vary in every age; and even those who pretend to demonstrate them from mathematical principles would flourish but a short period of time."¹⁵ With the advent of the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics in the twentieth century, these conclusions came to historical realization.

Basil Willey has observed that the kind of truth that was sought prior to Descartes differed from the kind of truth generally sought afterward. There was a radical change in prevailing interests, such that to the people of the seventeenth century, explanations of *why* things were as they were became far less interesting than explanations of *how* they happened,

¹³The poem De Rerum Natura ("On the Nature of Things") by Lucretius (first century BCE) is a major source of our knowledge of Epicureanism.

¹⁴Isaac Asimov, ed., The Annotated Gulliver's Travels: Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1980), 188. The vortex theory of Descartes posited that space was filled with matter in different states, encircling the sun. According to this theory, gravitation could only happen as a result of direct contact of matter with other matter. Colliding particles therefore supplied the force that pushed the planets in their orbits around the sun.

¹⁵Asimov, 188.

which were suddenly of the utmost importance.¹⁶ According to Willey, during the seventeenth century such concepts as “truth,” “reality,” and “explanation” were being formed, or perhaps recast, in such a way as to mold all subsequent thinking.¹⁷ Willey stressed his understanding that this shift constituted a change in interests rather than the rejection of error or the discovery of new truth.¹⁸

In his study of the early background to the scientific revolution, Paul H. Kocher pointed out that in the west, there were always two competing world views, the Christian (and/or Jewish) viewpoint, as opposed to the naturalistic and/or materialistic view, although some people attempted to take mediating positions.¹⁹ Other interpreters, such as Andrew Dickson White, had earlier maintained quite decidedly that these two world views were fundamentally irreconcilable.²⁰

John Dillenberger has sought a mediating interpretation of this era, castigating as obscurantist and dogmatic those who interpreted these events from extreme positions, such as A.

¹⁶Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 4.

¹⁷Willey, 2, states that it is in the seventeenth century that one encounters “the sense of emancipation from inadequate notions, of new contact with reality. It was then, too, that the concepts of ‘truth,’ ‘reality,’ ‘explanation’ and the rest were being formed, which have moulded all subsequent thinking.”

¹⁸Willey, 15.

¹⁹Paul H. Kocher, Science and Religion in Elizabethan England (San Marino, Ca.: The Huntington Library, 1953), 4-5.

²⁰Andrew Dickson White, A History of the Warfare of Science With Theology in Christendom (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896).

D. White and John William Draper, who were suspicious of theology, or C. A. Coulson and Charles Raven, "who were interested in a religion which had lost its classical form."²¹

Others, such as Owen Barfield²² and Morris Berman,²³ have maintained that the western world since the beginning of the time of the scientific revolution (c. 1600) has had a detached and therefore flawed perception of reality because it has thought of nature in a non-participatory way. For them, modernity is devoid of participating consciousness, which Berman defines as a "state of consciousness in which the subject/object dichotomy breaks down and the person feels identified with what he or she is perceiving."²⁴ According to them, nearly all cultures have taken such participation for granted except western culture in the modern period. Similar sentiments had earlier been expressed by Emil Brunner,²⁵ although Brunner attributed the origins of what he called the "Subject-Object antithesis" to Greek Philosophy, whereas Barfield and Berman considered Plato and Aristotle, properly understood, to be major proponents of participating consciousness.²⁶

²¹John Dillenberger, Protestant Thought and Natural Science (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), 14.

²²Owen Barfield, Saving the Appearances, 2d ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988). Barfield was a close friend of C. S. Lewis, and a member of the "Inklings" with Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, J. R. R. Tolkien, and a few others. In this book, he mentioned that he was influenced by Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, an offshoot of Theosophy.

²³Morris Berman, The Reenchantment of the World (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981).

²⁴Berman, 346-347.

²⁵Emil Brunner, The Divine-Human Encounter, trans. Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), 7.

²⁶Brunner, 7; Barfield, 45; Berman, 47-48.

Richard S. Westfall has written about a shift during the seventeenth century in the relative authority of natural philosophy (science)²⁷ and inspired divinity, with natural philosophy slowly gaining ascendancy. During this process, there was a progression, during which time theism was continually modified in certain ways, permitting a less dynamic role for God because of an increasing tendency to think of nature mechanistically.²⁸ According to E. J. Dijksterhuis, this transformation to a mechanistic conception of the world was perhaps the most profound and far-reaching of all of the changes that took place during this period.²⁹

Herbert Butterfield has observed that there were a number of factors that paved the way for the shift from Christian theism to a secular world view.³⁰ One key catalyst for these changes

²⁷The word "science" was not coined until the early nineteenth century. Prior to that time, "natural philosophy" was the term used for the study of natural phenomena. According to the "Cunningham thesis," it is inappropriate to use "science" as a synonym for "natural philosophy," since it is anachronistic, imposing a modern understanding of science upon natural philosophy. See Paul Wood, Science and Dissent in England, 1688-1945 (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004), 42. Cunningham attempts to differentiate science from natural philosophy by calling attention to procedural differences, or differences of intentional activity, in these two disciplines. He admits, however, that it is "very difficult, perhaps impossible, actually to demonstrate that science is an intentional activity" (Andrew Cunningham, "Getting the Game Right: Some Plain Words on the Identity and Invention of Science," Studies in History and Philosophy of Science 19 [March 1988], 373). Cunningham dates the invention of science at the period circa 1780-1850 (Cunningham, 385). On the other hand, Frank A. J. L. James has written that the clash between the bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, and T. H. Huxley at the British Association meeting at Oxford in June of 1860 has "come to be seen as one of the milestones in the process of the transformation of natural philosophy into natural science free from theological fetters" ("An 'Open Clash between Science and the Church'?" in David M. Knight and Matthew D. Eddy, eds., Science and Beliefs : From Natural Philosophy to Natural Science, 1700-1900 [Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005], 173). Cunningham, however, wrote, "In the light of the writings of Michel Foucault and others which deal with or touch on the origin of disciplines, it may seem no great novelty to claim that the enterprise of science was invented in the decades around 1800" (Cunningham, 385).

²⁸Richard S. Westfall, Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 21. Westfall, 11 wrote that "the study of Christianity and the virtuosi is a case history of intellectual change, an example of the process through which mankind lays aside a pervasive world view which has governed its intellectual outlook and takes up another."

²⁹E. J. Dijksterhuis, The Mechanization of the World Picture (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3.

³⁰Herbert Butterfield, The Origins of Modern Science 1300-1800 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 179-183. For Butterfield, in addition to Fontenelle, some of the primary factors involved at the beginning of the eighteenth century were that there was a "break in the generations—the young reacting against the ideas and educational system of their fathers," an appeal against the Church and the universities to a wider general reading

was Bernard de Fontenelle (1657-1757), who was secretary of the French Royal *Academie des Sciences* from 1691 to 1741. In the process of popularizing the scientific achievements of the seventeenth century, Fontenelle translated them into a new, secular world view.³¹ By and large, the seventeenth century natural philosophers themselves, including Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and much earlier, Johannes Kepler, held to a Christian world view.³² Fontenelle, on the other hand, had skeptical views prior to becoming involved in the scientific movement. Herbert Butterfield has written of Fontenelle that “a skepticism which really had a literary genealogy [including Lucretius, Machiavelli, and Montaigne] combined to give to the results of the seventeenth-century scientific movement a bias which was rarely to be seen in the scientists themselves, and which Descartes would have repudiated.”³³ Thus, according to Butterfield, it was not the new discoveries of science of that era which were decisive for Western intellectual history. Rather, it was the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment who were decisive, especially

public as new arbiters of human thought, a return to stability after upheaval, allowing the possibility of making important steps forward, a growing influence of people from middle class families such as Colbert, who was the son of a draper, “the intellectual leadership which France had acquired as a result of her brilliance in one kind of literature she used in the eighteenth century to disseminate a different type of civilization altogether,” and in politics, that the early eighteenth century was the time of the beginning of developments leading to the French Revolution.

³¹Butterfield, 127. Butterfield wrote of Fontenelle, “He did not merely popularize the scientific achievement of the seventeenth century. It is important to note that [this] literary man intervenes at this crucial stage of the story and performs a second function—the translation of the scientific achievement into a new view of life and of the universe.”

³²Butterfield, 127-128. He wrote, “Many of the scientists of the seventeenth century had been pious Protestants and Catholics, and in this very period both Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton showed considerable fervor concerning their Christianity—even Descartes had thought that his work would serve the cause of religion. It had almost been a mystical urge and a religious preoccupation which had impelled a man like Kepler to reduce the universe to mechanical law in order to show that God was consistent and reasonable—that he had not left things at the mercy even of his own caprice.”

³³Butterfield, 128.

Fontenelle and those who followed in his footsteps.³⁴ Fontenelle's success in his efforts to secularize scientific thought can be attributed, at least partly, to his method of appealing to the general public rather than to the established institutions of his day.³⁵ Butterfield observed that, as a result of the work of Fontenelle and others like him, "a number of things in our intellectual tradition were undoubtedly lost for the time being."³⁶ Ironically, the Cartesian method was used by Fontenelle to generate the very type of skepticism that Descartes attempted to circumvent by developing and using his methodology.³⁷

The transitions of this period provided an intellectual milieu that was conducive to combining ideas in fresh ways, and to holding in tension various viewpoints that were later considered irreconcilable. The opportunity for synthesis was probably greatest during the eighteenth century, and for this reason it is valuable to study closely those who were able to incorporate various polarities into coherent systems of thought during that era.

³⁴Butterfield, 128. He wrote, "The great movement of the eighteenth century was a literary one—it was not the new discoveries of science in that epoch but, rather, the French philosophe movement that decided the next turn in the story and determined the course Western civilization was to take. The discoveries of seventeenth-century science were translated into a new outlook and a new world-view, not by scientists themselves, but by the heirs and successors of Fontenelle."

³⁵Butterfield, 128-129. He wrote, "The appeal against the learned world of the time, against both Church and universities, to a new arbiter of human thought [was to] a wider general reading-public. . . . It is the literary men who, sometimes in a rapid manner, perform[ed] the momentous task of translating the results of scientific work into a new general outlook, a new world-view."

³⁶Butterfield, 132. He continued as follows: "One could write a whole history even of those things which have been recaptured into our tradition since that time, or those cases in which we have had to rediscover the meaning of ideas that during a considerable period had been dismissed as useless. In addition, the whole transition was achieved by intellectual conflict—which involved passions, misunderstanding and cross-purposes—and those who were fighting the obscurantism of universities, priests and provincially-minded aristocrats were tempted to be cavalier on occasion—they had no time to worry if there were a few unnecessary casualties in the course of the struggle."

³⁷Butterfield, 135. "The methodical doubt, upon which Descartes had insisted at a very high level—and with peculiar implications as well as under a particularly strict discipline, as we have seen—was a thing easily vulgarized, a thing already changing its character in the age of Fontenelle, so that it had come to mean simply an ordinary unbelieving attitude, the very kind of skepticism which he had tried to guard against."

John and Charles Wesley

Due to their wide influence as leaders of the Evangelical Awakening and as founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley might perhaps be of particular relevance for further study of these matters.³⁸ This is particularly the case since John Wesley and his brother Charles maintained a dynamic role for God during the time of the rise of Newtonian science.³⁹ Perhaps their understanding of how the action of God relates to nature has the potential to speak to the twenty-first century discussion regarding how one should relate the teachings of science to religion. It is possible to argue that they avoided falling prey to some of the pitfalls that are now of concern to postmodernism.

David Ray Griffin has written of how modernity has brought about the “disenchantment of nature,” which he defines as “the denial to nature of all subjectivity, all experience, all feeling. . . . Without experience no aims or purposes can exist in natural entities, no creativity in the sense of self-determination or final causation. With no final causation toward some ideal possibility, no role exists for ideals, possibilities, norms, or values”⁴⁰ By making room for experience

³⁸For a treatment of Jonathan Edwards along similar lines, see Avihu Zakai, "Jonathan Edwards and the Language of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning, The Journal of Religious History 26 (February 2002): 15-41. Zakai writes of Edwards that "His force of mind is evident in his exposition of the poverty of mechanical philosophy, which radically transformed the traditional Christian dialectic of God's utter transcendence and divine immanence by gradually diminishing divine sovereignty with respect to creation, providence, and redemption, thus leading to the disenchantment of the world. Edwards constructed a teleological and theological alternative to the prevailing mechanistic interpretation of the essential nature of reality, whose ultimate goal was the re-enchantment of the world by reconstituting the glory of God's majestic sovereignty, power, and will within the order of creation" (Zakai, 15).

³⁹See Sara Joan Miles, "From Being to Becoming: Science and Theology in the Eighteenth Century," Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 43 (December 1991): 215-223, according to which "Wesley tried to validate a continuing dynamic revelation of God" (Miles, 215).

⁴⁰David Ray Griffin, The Reenchantment of Science (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 2.

as an important part of his epistemology and by affirming final causation, Wesley managed to avoid becoming a party to the disenchantment of nature of which Griffin wrote. Wesley thus seems to have been immune from many aspects of modernity, including lack of appreciation for participation as described by Barfield and Berman. In his preface to A Survey of the Wisdom of God, he says that “by acquainting ourselves with subjects in natural philosophy, we enter into a kind of association with nature’s works, and unite in the general concert, of her extensive choir. By thus acquainting, and familiarizing ourselves with the works of nature, we become as it were a member of her family, and participate in her felicities.”⁴¹

In escaping some of the pitfalls of modernism, Wesley was not necessarily reverting to premodernism. Rather, he drew from Christian Platonism to construct a uniquely Christian epistemology which reserved a place for experience,⁴² yet he retained a place for reason without falling into the hard rationalism of many of his contemporaries.⁴³

On the other hand, in order to bring science and religion together, Griffin would want to see science rid itself of atheism and materialism and religion shed its supernaturalism.⁴⁴ This latter suggestion would have been unthinkable for John Wesley, who defended the idea that

⁴¹John Wesley, A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation (Philadelphia: J. Ponder, 1816), 1: ix.

⁴²See William J. Abraham, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” in Wesleyan Theology Today, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1985), 119-126.

⁴³William J. Abraham draws a distinction between “soft rationalism” and “hard rationalism,” in An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985), chapters nine and ten, according to which hard rationalism is associated with a tension between reason and revelation. On the other hand, soft rationalism retains a place for reason in epistemology without giving it free reign. In the case of soft rationalism, factors such as experience have a place in epistemology along with reason and revelation.

⁴⁴ David Ray Griffin, Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), vii.

miracles were taking place in his own generation.⁴⁵ This need not be problematic, however, since it is possible to argue that science is not necessarily incompatible with a worldview according to which miracles can occur. In fact, although he believed that miracles were possible, Wesley respected the developments of his day in the field of natural philosophy, or science, but he held those developments in perspective. For example, he did not acquiesce to the tendency of his era to relegate the activity of God to the initial creation of the world as a machine.

Other postmodern authors have made reference to the failure of Cartesianism due to its emphasis on “fact” at the expense of value. For example, Morris Berman bemoans not only that Cartesianism ignores value, but that its opposites, which Berman identifies as mystical or occult philosophies, dispense with fact. He writes, “it seems to me that we should be able to do better than merely alternate between extremes.”⁴⁶ Wesley embraced both “fact” and “value,” not emphasizing either at the expense of the other. Wesley's approach was to give up neither value nor fact, maintaining a holistic understanding of the relationship between them.

Wesley's understanding would not in our own day necessarily solve all of the issues raised by postmodernism. For example, Wesley's thought cannot easily be reconciled with the rejection of the possibility of determining the ultimate reliability of any kind of knowledge as true in an absolute sense.⁴⁷ Moreover, as Rebekah L. Miles has pointed out, Wesley was more

⁴⁵John Wesley, “A Letter To Conyers Middleton,” in Thomas Jackson, ed., The Works of John Wesley, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), 10:1-77.

⁴⁶Morris Berman, The Reenchantment of the World (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1981), 194.

⁴⁷In his introduction to From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 17, Lawrence Cahoon, ed., writes that “Methodological postmodernism rejects the possibility of establishing the foundations, hence the ultimate reliability, of knowledge understood as valid in a realist sense, that is, knowledge claimed to represent the true, independent ‘real’ nature of its objects.”

optimistic than some postmoderns about the possibility of determining truth with the use of “our shared human capacity for reason . . . when accompanied by experience.”⁴⁸ For many postmoderns, Wesley’s dependence upon common human experience would be considered culturally naïve. Miles also observes that, although Wesley was very much aware of human sin and self-interest, he “did not exhibit a high level of sensitivity . . . to the use and misuse of reason by those in power to further their own interests.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Wesley provides a refreshing alternative to many of the assumptions of the modern era, such as the rejection of final causes with its repudiation of teleology, the priority of epistemology over ontology, and the precedence of fact over value.

Wesley equated the power of God with nature, saying that God “is the true *primum mobile*, the spring of all motion throughout the universe. . . . The power of God, vulgarly termed *nature*, acts from age to age, under its fixed rules.”⁵⁰ Wesley believed that nature itself was “but the art of God, or God’s method of acting in the material world.”⁵¹ To Wesley, therefore, God is the one who is behind everything that happens in nature. Wesley also understood humanity to be a part of nature⁵² and believed that a human being must make room for the experiential.⁵³ This

⁴⁸Rebekah L. Miles, “The Instrumental Role of Reason” in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), 103-104.

⁴⁹Miles, 104.

⁵⁰John Wesley, “The Doctrine of Original Sin, According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience,” section VIII, Jackson, 9:335.

⁵¹John Wesley, “Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon,” Jackson, 11:6.

⁵²John Wesley, in “The Imperfection of Human Knowledge,” I.13 in Bicentennial Edition, 1:576, explores human beings as though they are in some sense one of many aspects of nature.

⁵³John Wesley, “The Witness of the Spirit,” III.7 in Jackson, 5:128.

is evident in his experiential understanding of the Christian faith, according to which one can become cognizant of God's active work in oneself, as when Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" on May 24, 1738.⁵⁴

Wesley may well have avoided the "domestication of transcendence," William C. Placher's term for that which went wrong with theology beginning in the seventeenth century, when the attempt was made "to subject the divine to the structures of human reason."⁵⁵ Placher states that seventeenth century thinkers grew more confident about human ability to understand God and his role in the world, while they narrowed their understanding of what constituted reasonable articulation of Christian faith and proper argumentation for it. "That combination of a kind of confidence in human abilities and constricting definitions of acceptable reasoning," Placher maintains, "led theology astray."⁵⁶ However, although he respected reason, Wesley did not have the same unbounded confidence in reason that typified the "age of reason" in which he lived.⁵⁷

In a discussion of Martin Luther, Placher points out that, for Luther, while God's will "can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered," this does not imply that humans and other forces are merely passive. Rather, "the picture involved two quite different orders of causal efficacy, and, for Luther as for Aquinas and Calvin, it confuses everything if we think of God as

⁵⁴John Wesley, Journal, Jackson 1:103.

⁵⁵William C. Placher, The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 7.

⁵⁶Placher, 3.

⁵⁷See, for example, Rex Dale Matthews, "'Religion and Reason Joined': A Study in the Theology of John Wesley," Th.D. diss.: Harvard University, 1986.

an agent operating at the same level as other agents.”⁵⁸ For Wesley, God was completely sovereign. But for him also, this did not mean that people or other instruments God might use were merely passive.⁵⁹ People still had free will.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, for him, whatever happened, God was in complete control of all things.⁶¹ Wesley was unlike Luther, not only in his belief in free will, but also in that he lived in a world of thought, the Enlightenment, which could be classified as prototypical of modernity. Yet for Wesley also, it could be said (as Placher said regarding Luther) that there were two “orders of causal efficacy.”⁶² For Wesley, also, it would confuse matters “to think of God as an agent operating at the same level as other agents.”⁶³ In his “Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon,” he wrote, “allowing there are natural causes of all these, they are still under the direction of the Lord of nature.”⁶⁴ Wesley

⁵⁸Placher, 119.

⁵⁹John Wesley, “Thoughts Upon God’s Sovereignty,” Jackson, 10:361-362. Wesley wrote, “God reveals himself under a two-fold character; as a Creator, and as Governor. These are no way inconsistent with each other; but they are totally different. . . . As a Creator, he has acted, in all things, according to his own sovereign will. . . . [yet,] whether we can account for it or no (which indeed we cannot in a thousand cases) we must absolutely maintain, that God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. But he cannot reward the sun for shining, because the sun is not a free agent. Neither could he reward us, for letting our light shine before men, if we acted as necessarily as the sun.”

⁶⁰In “Predestination Calmly Considered,” John Wesley wrote, “have you not often felt, in a particular temptation, power either to resist or yield to the grace of God?” (Jackson, 10:230).

⁶¹Wesley’s understanding of particular providence was that, when it was applied uniformly to everything, it was really no different from general providence. In “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” he wrote, “And if there be a particular providence, it must extend to all persons and all things,” Jackson, 5:476.

⁶²Placher, 199.

⁶³Placher, 119.

⁶⁴John Wesley, “Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon,” Jackson, 11:6.

thereby preserved a more dynamic role for God, perhaps, than was allowed by many of his contemporaries,⁶⁵ since for him, God was active in everything that happened.

The same marriage of free will and God's sovereignty can also be seen in "Predestination Calmly Considered," in which John Wesley defended the idea that people have free will, yet at the same time maintained that it was God *alone* who was glorified when sinners chose to walk in holiness,⁶⁶ indicating that there were both primary and secondary causes involved.

In a discussion of the views of Thomas Aquinas regarding free will, Placher noted that, for Aquinas, "what is from freewill and what is from predestination . . . are not distinct, [any] more than what is from a secondary cause and what is from the first cause. God's providence procures its effects through the operation of secondary causes."⁶⁷ Placher notes that one of the implications of Aquinas's viewpoint as it is expressed here is that "it is therefore not wrong to pray for the salvation of souls, on the grounds that their fate is predestined. Here too God chooses to work through secondary causes and those secondary causes really do produce their effects."⁶⁸ Placher was implying that by the time of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, theologians were not as able to make room for polarities of this kind.

However, for Wesley, it is equally the case that what arises from free will and what arises from predestination are not opposed to one another. For Wesley, God, in his providence, works through secondary causes. One could pray for the salvation of souls, and this prayer, a

⁶⁵According to Russell, 182, Wesley was regarded "with aversion and fear" because he was "incomprehensible to the tidy rationalism of the Enlightenment."

⁶⁶Jackson 10:230-231.

⁶⁷Placher, 121, citing Aquinas, Summa Theologiae 1a.23.5.

⁶⁸Placher, 121.

secondary cause, would produce real effects, because God chooses to work through secondary causes. In contrast, for many of Wesley's contemporaries, God was not understood to be actively working through secondary causes.⁶⁹ For many of them, God did some things, while natural causes did other things. For John and Charles Wesley, however, God was behind all things. John Wesley wrote, "Scripture . . . asserts, in the clearest and strongest terms, that 'all things' (in nature) 'serve him;' that (by or without a train of natural causes) He 'sendeth his rain on the earth;' that He 'bringeth the winds out of his treasure,' and 'maketh a way for the lightning and the thunder;' in general, that 'fire and hail, snow and vapour, wind and storm, fulfill his word.' Therefore, allowing there are natural causes of all these, they are still under the direction of the Lord of nature."⁷⁰ Along the same lines, Charles Wesley wrote, "earthquakes are the works of the Lord, and He only bringeth this destruction upon the earth."⁷¹

Wesley's contemporaries, influenced by Descartes and Leibniz, thought of God as a separate substance.⁷² As a result, they were left trying to determine where to put God, and/or attempting to ascertain what mechanism God used to interact with other substances. But for Wesley, God was not a separate substance. God was Spirit, yet intimately involved in all things, great and small. Wesley considered the relation of God to the world to be intimate and not simply one of causality, as it was for many of his contemporaries, following Descartes.⁷³

⁶⁹Placher, 134.

⁷⁰John Wesley, "Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon," Jackson 11:6.

⁷¹Charles Wesley, "The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes," Jackson 7:387.

⁷²Placher, 141.

⁷³Gerard Reedy, in The Bible and Reason: Anglicans and Scripture in Late Seventeenth-Century England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 17, comments that "the divines of the later seventeenth

Placher complains regarding many of the theologians of the seventeenth century that “as they pushed toward univocity of language and clarity of argument, [they] thought of God as one agent among others in the world, so that they started to ask where God was and which things God did.”⁷⁴ In contrast, Wesley understood God to be everywhere, sustaining and directing the world.

Some interpreters have pointed out that for Descartes and those influenced by him, teleological explanations, or explanations of *why* things were as they were, were not interesting, while explanations of *how* they happened came to be of supreme importance.⁷⁵ John Wesley had an interest in both, and held them in balance. Wesley respected science, but he understood the scientific method to be a tool only. He understood that science should remember God as its source and its final end. Wesley’s ability to integrate faith and science is illustrated by his use of the latest medical techniques while continuing to make full use of prayers for the sick. For example, in 1746, Wesley established a free medical dispensary in London, and the following year he wrote a handbook of popular medicine, Primitive Physick.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, in his “Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton,” Wesley defended the possibility that miraculous healing could take place in his own lifetime.⁷⁷

century, especially Edward Stillingfleet, occasionally proclaimed their independence of René Descartes. Yet their writing suggests a profound dependence on his work.”

⁷⁴Placher, 146.

⁷⁵Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 4.

⁷⁶John Wesley, Primitive Physick: Or, an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases (London: Thomas Trye, 1747).

⁷⁷John Wesley, “A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton” in Jackson, 10:40-41.

For Wesley, there was no inherent contradiction between God's power over all circumstances, and the operation of natural causes in bringing them about. To the contemporary discussion on the relationship between science and religion, the Wesleys bring the advantage of a perspective that makes room for both as valid. For them, questions asking "how" and questions asking "why" were equally valid, and explanations of reality therefore did not need to be restricted either to teleological questions or to non-teleological ones. Not only were they at home with both, but they were at home with these two realms interacting with one another, preserving a dynamic role for God even in a Newtonian or post-Newtonian universe since for them, all truth was, after all, God's truth.

John Wesley had respect for science, or "natural philosophy" as it was called in the eighteenth century. This was probably at least partly a result of his upbringing and education. His father and older brother Samuel were both members of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, other members of which included Alexander Pope and Sir Isaac Newton.⁷⁸ He attended the Charterhouse School in London, and then Oxford, where he earned a B.A. in 1724 and then a master's degree in 1727.⁷⁹ Upon receiving his Master's degree he delivered three lectures, one of which was on natural philosophy.⁸⁰ He then developed and routinely followed a detailed plan of study, devoting every Friday to metaphysics and natural philosophy.⁸¹

⁷⁸J. W. Haas, Jr., "John Wesley's Vision of Science in the Service of Christ," Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 47 (Dec 1995): 235; John C. English, "John Wesley and Isaac Newton's 'System of the World,'" Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society 48 (October 1991): 70.

⁷⁹Herbert W. Byrne, John Wesley and Learning (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishing Co., 1997), 34.

⁸⁰Byrne, 34.

⁸¹Byrne, 34.

In addition to his widely read book on popular medicine, Primitive Physick,⁸² Wesley also wrote a small volume on the use of electricity for therapeutic purposes.⁸³ In 1758, he began to prepare a popular survey of natural science, the Survey the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy, first published in 1763.⁸⁴ The first edition was of two volumes, and was an abridgment of a Latin work by John Francis Buddeus of the University of Jena containing excerpts from John Ray, William Derham, Bernard Nieuwentijt, Cotton Mather, and Chambers' Dictionary.⁸⁵ An edition in 1777 was of five volumes and included additional abridgements from Charles Bonnet and Deuten.⁸⁶

Although Wesley did not always agree with Isaac Newton, often siding with the anti-Newtonian philosopher John Hutchinson,⁸⁷ he referred to Galileo and Newton as “the greatest of all modern philosophers.”⁸⁸ Elsewhere, Wesley wrote, “the immortal man, to whose immense genius and indefatigable industry philosophy owed its greatest improvements, and who carried the lamp of knowledge into paths of knowledge that had been unexplored before, was Sir Isaac

⁸²John Wesley, Primitive Physick: Or, An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases (London: Thomas Trye, 1747).

⁸³John Wesley, The Desideratum: Or, Electricity made Plain and Useful by a Lover of Mankind and of Common Sense (London: W. Flexney; E. Cabe; George Clark; George Keith; T. Smith; and at the Foundery, 1760).

⁸⁴J. W. Haas, Jr., “John Wesley’s Views on Science and Christianity: An Examination of the Charge of Antiscience,” Church History 63 (1994): 383.

⁸⁵Haas, 383.

⁸⁶Haas, 383. For a fuller discussion of the sources used by Wesley for this work, see Randy Maddox, Responsible Grace (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1994), 266-267, notes 62 and 64.

⁸⁷English, 73.

⁸⁸English, 73, citing John Wesley, A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, 3d ed. (London: J. Fry and Company, 1777), 5: 73, 100, 117.

Newton.”⁸⁹ In his Address to the Clergy, II.2 (5), Wesley recommended that all ministers should have a mastery of Newton’s *Principia*.⁹⁰ This work was also prescribed by Wesley as part of the curriculum at the Kingswood School,⁹¹ which he had founded in 1748 near Bristol for the children of coal miners.⁹²

Wesley maintained a practical Christianity in which God was active in his life and in the lives of the people in the Methodist movement that grew out of his ministry. He approved of the use of lightning rods, yet at the same time, he recognized the involvement of God’s sovereignty with respect to where lightning might strike.⁹³ There was a holistic balance to his theology which avoided many of the pitfalls of his contemporaries.

According to Michael J. Buckley, natural theology, the idea that knowledge about God could be obtained through human reason by observation of the natural world,⁹⁴ provoked the emergence of atheism.⁹⁵ To what extent did John Wesley fall prey to the pitfalls inherent in this approach? What were his views of natural theology? While Wesley considered natural theology to be

⁸⁹ English, 73-74, citing John Wesley, *A Concise Ecclesiastical History* (London: Paramore, 1781) 5: 332.

⁹⁰Jackson, 10:492.

⁹¹Bicentennial Edition 3:93, note 18; English, 72, note 12.

⁹²Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1999), 90.

⁹³Brooke, 191.

⁹⁴Michael J. Buckley, in *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 55, writes that “an independent ‘natural theology’ begins to emerge” in the early seventeenth century. According to Jeremy Gregory, “the popularity of natural theology in the eighteenth century was crucial in the dissemination of the new science” (Jeremy Gregory, “Christianity and Culture: Religion, the Arts and the Sciences in England, 1660-1800,” in Jeremy Black, ed., *Culture and Society in Britain, 1660-1800* [Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997], 113).

⁹⁵Maddox, 266, note 61.

helpful for strengthening peoples' Christian convictions,⁹⁶ he did not believe that reason in and of itself could prove theological truths.⁹⁷ Regarding whether reason had potential for demonstrating theological truths, Wesley wrote, "Try whether your reason will give you a clear, satisfactory evidence of the invisible world . . . Alas, you cannot, with all your understanding."⁹⁸ Wesley added that reason was powerless to effect deliverance from doubt: "And what can poor reason do for your deliverance? The more vehemently you struggle, the more deeply you are entangled . . ."⁹⁹

Wesley's viewpoint on the limitations of human reason, including his own, is also evident in a letter of 1762 in which he wrote, "in spite of all my logic I cannot so prove any one point in the whole compass of Philosophy or Divinity as not to leave room for strong objections, and probably such as I could not answer. But if I could, my answer, however guarded, will give room to equally strong objections. And in this manner, if the person is a man of sense, answers and objections may go on *in infinitum*."¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, there was a sense in which John Wesley considered reason to be very important. In 1768, in answer to an objection by Thomas Rutherford that "it is a fundamental

⁹⁶Romans 1:20, according to which God's eternal power and divine nature are evident in the works of creation, may have been the basis for Wesley's publication of his Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, although it is also the case that Wesley was writing in a commonly used genre that had existed since the preceding century, beginning with works such as John Ray's Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation (1691).

⁹⁷Maddox, 35.

⁹⁸John Wesley, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," in The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2: 595.

⁹⁹Bicentennial Edition, 2:595.

¹⁰⁰John Wesley, "To Samuel Furly," May 21, 1762, in John Telford, ed., The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 4: 181-182.

principle in the Methodist school that all who come into it must renounce their reason,” Wesley replied that, on the contrary, “it is a fundamental principle with us, that to renounce reason is to renounce religion.”¹⁰¹ For Wesley, “religion and reason go hand in hand . . . all irrational religion is false religion.”¹⁰² Rex Dale Matthews has correctly pointed out that Wesley, as the child of an Oxford educated father and “an extraordinarily intelligent and theologically acute mother,” who was himself a product of two colleges at Oxford and a fellow and lecturer at one of them in Greek and logic, and who was also a “voracious reader and, when necessary a tenacious controversialist,” was “very much more a child of the ‘Age of Reason’ and a citizen of the 18th-Century Commonwealth of Ideas than many students of his thought, or of the period, seem to have realized.”¹⁰³

For Wesley, reason was a “precious gift of God. . . . When therefore you despise or depreciate reason you must not imagine you are doing God service; least of all are you promoting the cause of God when you are endeavoring to exclude reason out of religion.”¹⁰⁴ Wesley did not see any real inconsistency between Christian faith and reason. He wrote, “Now, I believe and reason too: For I find no inconsistency between them. And I would just as soon put out my eyes to secure my faith, as lay aside my reason.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, for Wesley, reason was integral to Christianity: “Whenever, therefore, you see an unreasonable man, you see one who

¹⁰¹John Wesley, letter to Thomas Rutherford, March 28, 1768, in Jackson, 14:354.

¹⁰²Jackson, 14:354.

¹⁰³Rex Dale Matthews, “‘Religion and Reason Joined’: A Study in the Theology of John Wesley,” Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1986.

¹⁰⁴John Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” in Bicenennial Edition, 2:599.

¹⁰⁵John Wesley, “A Dialogue Between An Antinomian and His Friend,” in Jackson, ed., 10:267.

perhaps calls himself by that name, but is no more a Christian than he is an angel. So far as he departs from true genuine reason, so far he departs from Christianity.”¹⁰⁶

The use of reason for Wesley, however, was tempered by his commitment to Scripture, tradition, and experience. He was consistent in his desire to be a “Scriptural, rational Christian” with respect to “every point, great and small.”¹⁰⁷ His antidote for “enthusiasm”¹⁰⁸ was reason, but he also recognized the danger of following reason if it was not firmly anchored to the Scriptures, interpreted through Christian tradition and personal experience.

Without this anchoring, reason could lead a person astray, according to Wesley. He wrote that “reason is good, though idle reasonings are evil. Nor does it follow that I am an enemy to the one because I condemn the other.”¹⁰⁹ These comments were within the context of a discussion of natural religion, which, he felt, was “not sufficient to teach . . . true religion.”¹¹⁰ For Wesley, true religion could only be known through the scriptures.

Wesley had certain suspicions of human reason, which he inherited from his father, who had told him at one point that “very little is ever done in the world by clear reason.”¹¹¹ Wesley quoted, with approval, some verses to this effect by Horace, and added that “passion and

¹⁰⁶John Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” in The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 11:54-55.

¹⁰⁷John Wesley, letter to Freeborn Garretson, June 16, 1785, in Jackson, 13:73.

¹⁰⁸The word “enthusiasm” had a wide semantic range, mostly negative in connotation, in the eighteenth century. In his sermon on “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” Wesley provided examples of several kinds of enthusiasm. He wrote about some enthusiasts who, “in preaching or prayer, imagine themselves to be . . . influenced by the Spirit of God, [when] in fact, they are not” (Jackson, 5:472).

¹⁰⁹John Wesley, letter to the Bishop of Gloucester in Jackson 9:148.

¹¹⁰Jackson 9:148.

¹¹¹John Wesley, letter to his brother Joseph, October 5, 1770, in Jackson 12:412.

prejudice govern the world; only under the name of reason.”¹¹² He believed that this difficulty could be overcome through “religion and reason joined.”¹¹³

In his sermon, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” Wesley pointed out that there were dangers, both in undervaluing reason, and in overvaluing it.¹¹⁴ On one hand, among those “who despise and vilify reason you may always expect to find those enthusiasts who suppose the dreams of their own imagination to be revelations from God.”¹¹⁵ On the other hand, there are those who seem to think of reason as nearly infallible, considering it to be “able, by its native light to guide them into all truth, and lead them into all virtue.”¹¹⁶

In this sermon, Wesley’s objective was to point out to undervaluers of reason what it could do, and then, to point out to those who overvalue reason, what it could not do.¹¹⁷ Wesley took care to define reason as “the faculty of the soul” which includes three things: (1) “simple apprehension,” or “barely conceiving a thing in the mind,” (2) “judgment,” or “the determining that the things before conceived either agree with or differ from each other,” and (3) “discourse,” or “the motion of progress of the mind from one judgment to another.” For Wesley, all three of these were entailed in the meaning of “reason.”¹¹⁸

¹¹²Jackson, 12:412.

¹¹³Jackson, 12:412.

¹¹⁴John Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” in The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:587-588.

¹¹⁵Bicentennial Edition, 2:587.

¹¹⁶Bicentennial Edition, 2:588.

¹¹⁷Bicentennial Edition, 2:589.

¹¹⁸Bicentennial Edition, 2: 590. According to William J. Abraham, with this threefold definition of reason, Wesley is following “the Aristotelian tradition which had been brought to something of a climax at Oxford by Henry

Wesley considered reason to be extremely useful, enabling lawyers to “defend the property or life of their fellow-subjects,” and doctors to “cure most of the maladies to which we are exposed in our present state.”¹¹⁹ In fact, reason “is absolutely necessary for the due discharge of the most important offices.” But, he asked, “What can reason do in religion?” His answer was that “it can do exceeding much, both with regard to the foundation of it, and the superstructure.” The foundation of “true religion,” for Wesley, “stands upon the oracles of God. It is built upon the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone.”¹²⁰ He exclaimed, “Now of what excellent use is reason if we would either understand ourselves, or explain to others, those living oracles! And how is it possible without it to understand the essential truths contained therein?”¹²¹

Wesley’s next thought comes close to advocating a natural theology: “Is it not reason (assisted by the Holy Ghost) which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God? Concerning his eternity and immensity, his power, wisdom, and holiness?”¹²² While reason is needed in the process of understanding and/or appreciating God, Wesley indicates here his view that the scriptures are also needed for this process, along with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Aldrich” (William J. Abraham, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, ed. Theodore Runyon [Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1985], 121). Aldrich (1647-1710), Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, was author of a book on logic, *Compendium Artis Logicae*, which, in the form of a revision by Henry Longueville Mansel, was in use at Oxford until the late nineteenth century.

¹¹⁹Bicentennial Edition, 2:591.

¹²⁰Bicentennial Edition, 2:591-592.

¹²¹Bicentennial Edition, 2:592.

¹²²Bicentennial Edition, 2:592.

In this passage, Wesley used a phrase, “the being and attributes of God,” which was part of the title of Samuel Clarke’s work, A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God (1705), a highly influential work. Beginning with twelve propositions, Clarke had constructed a systematic natural theology using Isaac Newton’s natural philosophy as a model.¹²³ Michael J. Buckley has asserted that Baron d’Holbach later made use of the same twelve propositions of this work to argue for atheism.¹²⁴ The French edition of D’Holbach’s work, *The System of Nature*, had been published in London in 1771 and attributed to Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, ten years previous to Wesley’s sermon, which was written on July 6, 1781.¹²⁵ It is unlikely, however, that this publication, as the work of an atheist, would have substantially influenced Wesley in the writing of this sermon, which was not addressed to the concerns or claims of atheism.

¹²³Buckley, 173. While many interpreters have made the claim that Newton was a Deist or proto-Deist who did not accept Biblical revelation, this position is called into question in James E. Force, "The Newtonians and Deism," in James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin, Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 43-73. Along similar lines, P. M. Heimann takes issue with Richard S. Westfall's assertion 'that Enlightenment skepticism was "already present in embryo among [the virtuosi]" ("Voluntarism and Immanence: Conceptions of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Thought," Journal of the History of Ideas 39 [1978]: 272). A related assertion, according to which "Newtonian Christianity" posed a threat to orthodox Christianity, is critiqued in Robert G. Ingram, "William Warburton, Divine Action, and Enlightened Christianity," in William Gibson and Robert G. Ingram, eds., *Religious Identities in Britain, 1660-1832* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005), 97-117. Nevertheless, it is probably the case that, although Newton affirmed that God was continually engaged with his creation, "Deists increasing drew comfort from Newtonian natural philosophy, because they could argue that the design argument established God as creator but failed to offer evidence for a God continually engaged with his creation." (Richard G. Olson, Science and Religion, 1450-1900 [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004], 125. On the other hand, it is also probably true that during the late eighteenth century, Newton and Locke were "distorted into seemingly materialist thinkers by the French philosophes" (B. W. Young, Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998], 118, citing "The Charge of Samuel [Horsley] Lord Bishop of Rochester, To the Clergy of his Diocese" [1800]).

¹²⁴Buckley, 174.

¹²⁵The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:612.

In contrast to Samuel Clarke, who depended entirely upon philosophical reasoning for his conclusions, Wesley was careful to say that it is reason, assisted by the Holy Ghost, “which enables us to understand what the Holy Scriptures declare concerning the being and attributes of God.”¹²⁶ In this case, reason is not providing a demonstration, or a proof. Rather, it is simply granting the ability to understand that which was already provided in scripture regarding God’s existence and His attributes, and it can only properly do so under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley was uncomfortable with philosophical demonstrations, or proofs, of God’s existence, or of His qualities, and some of his statements to this effect contain references to Samuel Clarke. In a letter of September 24, 1753 to Dr. Robertson, Wesley wrote, “we can have no idea of God, nor any sufficient proof of his very being, but from the creatures; . . . the meanest plant is a far stronger proof hereof, than all Dr. Clarke’s or the Chevalier’s demonstrations.”¹²⁷ On the other hand, Wesley’s allusion to “the meanest plant” as “far stronger proof” leaves open the possibility that the works of nature, apart from discourse, could function as strong testimony to the existence of a creator.

In “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” Wesley went on to make clear his understanding of the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding human reason. It is through reason that we understand the meaning of repentance, “his Spirit opening and enlightening the eyes of our understanding.”¹²⁸

¹²⁶Bicentennial Edition, 2:592.

¹²⁷Jackson, 12:211.

¹²⁸John Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” in The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2: 592

For Wesley, reason in and of itself could not produce faith.¹²⁹ For Wesley, faith itself was what supplied evidence regarding God, “bringing a full conviction of an invisible, eternal world.”¹³⁰ As has been mentioned in a previous context, in 1735, when Wesley was at his father Samuel’s bedside when the latter was close to death, his last words to John Wesley were that “the inward witness” was “the strongest proof of Christianity.”¹³¹ This event may well have contributed to a quest on Wesley’s part to obtain experiential faith, culminating in his Aldersgate experience. In any case, Wesley’s epistemology is partly dependent upon the experience of faith.

It is possible that Wesley’s view of natural theology changed over the course of time. For example, in 1756, he wrote that “‘His eternal power and Godhead,’ the existence of a powerful and eternal Being, may still be inferred from these his works, grand and magnificent, though in ruin [due to the fall]. Consequently, these leave the Atheist without excuse.”¹³² In 1785, Wesley was able to say that “some great truths, as the being and attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, were known, in some measure, to the heathen world.”¹³³

Modern science has been generally concerned with observable phenomena and possible hypotheses that might best explain those phenomena. In general, personal experiences,

¹²⁹Jackson, 2:593.

¹³⁰Jackson, 2:593.

¹³¹Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999): 38.

¹³²John Wesley, “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” III in Jackson, 9:322.

¹³³John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” Jackson 6:506.

especially those associated with religious faith, are not repeatable, and are thus not ordinarily subject to the types of observation that are usually considered necessary for scientific observation.

Because Wesley did not utterly reject reason in his epistemology, he offered, as Abraham says, “in embryonic form a third alternative to the fideism of, say, Tertullian and Barth, and the hard rationalism of, say, Aquinas and Swinburne.”¹³⁴ Abraham’s point is that “it is possible to argue that Wesley’s emphasis on evangelical experience can be integrated with an appeal to the classical tradition of natural theology in such a way that it is both religiously and philosophically satisfactory.”¹³⁵

Therefore, Wesley bridges the gap between faith and reason. He is able to encompass both Christian faith and the scientific method in such a way as to avoid some of the dilemmas of modernity. As Randy Maddox has phrased it, Wesley’s approach “holds promise as an alternative to the frequent modern polarity of extreme fideism and hard rationalism.”¹³⁶ The key to this approach lies within Wesley’s understanding of experience, balanced in certain ways by these polarities.

One aspect of John and Charles Wesley’s earthquake sermons is very telling; both make a distinction between primary and secondary or natural causes, both of which are at work in causing the phenomena of nature. This understanding of primary and secondary causes is a key

¹³⁴Abraham, 125.

¹³⁵Abraham, 125.

¹³⁶Maddox, 32.

to Wesley's ability to retain both a respect for science and a dynamic understanding of God in the era of the rise of Newtonian science.

John Wesley's "Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon" contains many indications of his belief that if natural causes were involved in bringing about the Lisbon earthquake, God was nevertheless at work through those natural causes. The same can be said of the sermons of his brother Charles. At the very outset of his sermon "The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes," prompted by the London tremors of 1750, Charles Wesley makes plain his view that while God is the "author" of earthquakes, sin is the "*moral* cause," natural causes are also at work as secondary causes. He writes, "that God is himself the author, and sin the *moral* cause, of earthquakes (whatever the natural cause may be) cannot be denied by any who believe the scriptures."¹³⁷ The implication is that, regardless of whatever natural or secondary causes are involved, God is the one who brings about earthquakes. The sermon was subtitled "A Sermon Preach'd from Psalm xlvi.8," which is quoted immediately below the title, "O come hither, and behold the works of the Lord, what destruction he hath brought upon the earth!"¹³⁸ For Charles Wesley, the warnings God gave through earthquakes provided people with an opportunity to repent before the time of the last judgment.¹³⁹

Indications of the views of John Wesley on causation are evident in his preface to A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation, in which he wrote, "it will be easily observed, that I endeavor throughout, not to *account for* things; but only to *describe* them. I undertake barely to

¹³⁷Charles Wesley, The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes: A Sermon Preach'd from Psalm xlvi.8 (London, 1750), in Kenneth G. Newport, ed., The Sermons of Charles Wesley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 227.

¹³⁸Newport, 227.

¹³⁹Newport, 226.

set down what appears in nature; not the *cause* of those appearances.”¹⁴⁰ Wesley carefully distinguishes here between description and explanation, or between “what appears in nature,” and “the *cause* of those appearances.” The context would indicate that by “*cause*,” Wesley means the final cause, or a teleological explanation explaining why something happens. Fundamentally, this is the distinction between a primary (or final) cause and a secondary (or efficient) cause.

Wesley made other comments in the preface to his Survey of the Wisdom of God further indicating his intention to differentiate between primary and secondary causes. He wrote, “as to the reasons of almost every thing which we see, hear, or feel, after all our researches and disquisitions, they are hid in impenetrable darkness.”¹⁴¹ For Wesley, science could provide descriptions, but not explanations for why things happened, which could only be determined through the revealed truths of the scriptures. John Hedley Brooke has observed concerning this work that “his aim was not to account for things, only to describe them.”¹⁴²

There had been a long tradition according to which such distinctions were considered appropriate. Following Aristotle,¹⁴³ Aquinas had distinguished between four types of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final.¹⁴⁴ The material cause was roughly equivalent to the physical material out of which something was made. The formal cause was its form, or source,

¹⁴⁰John Wesley, A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: Or, a Compendium of Natural Philosophy: in Five Volumes, 4th ed. (London: J. Paramore, 1784), 1:vi (emphasis in the original).

¹⁴¹John Wesley, A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation, 1: vi.

¹⁴²Brooke, 191.

¹⁴³Aristotle, Physics 2.3.

¹⁴⁴Thomas Aquinas, De Principiis naturae 2.

such as the idea in someone's mind guiding his or her activity. The efficient cause was the person or thing acting to make something happen, while the final cause was the purpose of that action. Efficient causes came to be known as secondary to primary, or final causes (purposes). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a controversy between Molinist Jesuits and Dominicans regarding the relationship of divine grace with man's free will. A related issue had to do with the role of efficient causes. The Dominicans followed the traditional understanding of Aquinas, while the Molinists considered the role of efficient causes to be of greater importance in understanding natural phenomena.¹⁴⁵ This helped to initiate a trend toward natural explanations of observed phenomena. While Hume is said to have later discredited the idea of primary and secondary causes,¹⁴⁶ he was working within the context of assumptions that can easily be questioned.¹⁴⁷

Ian G. Barbour has written of primary and secondary causality that he is inclined to agree with Thomas Tracy that they "do not provide a coherent solution to the problem of God's action in a world of scientific law and human freedom."¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the question is more a philosophical one than a purely scientific one, and in the field of philosophy, there are compatibilists who, with a certain degree of success, have argued for the compatibility of both free will and determinism.

¹⁴⁵Luis Miguel Carolino, "Does God Act as a Craftsman? The Theological Controversy 'De Auxiliis' and the Molinist Account of Nature," unpublished paper, n.d. (email: carolino@ucvora.pt).

¹⁴⁶David Hume in A Treatise of Human Nature (1739), Book I, Part III, Chapter XIV, wrote that "There is no foundation . . . for that distinction . . . betwixt efficient causes, and formal, and material . . . and final causes."

¹⁴⁷Brooke, 187. Brooke wrote that Hume's empiricism "was arguably as subversive of science as of religion."

¹⁴⁸Ian G. Barbour, When Science Meets Religion (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000), 161.

Wesley's sermon, "Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon" provides some important insights into his understanding of primary and secondary causes. He wrote, "you may descant ever so long on the natural causes of murrain, winds, thunder, lightning, and yet you are altogether wide of the mark, you prove nothing at all, unless you can prove that God never works in or by natural causes."¹⁴⁹ Wesley believed that it was impossible to prove that God never works through natural causes. For him, all things, even natural disasters, were under his total control. Wesley pointed out that all things in nature serve him, and "by or without a train of natural causes," he "sends his rain upon the earth."¹⁵⁰ For Wesley, "True philosophy therefore ascribes all to God."¹⁵¹

T. D. Kendrick went so far as to say that, in his sermon on the earthquake, "Wesley turned angrily upon the presumptuous people who thought earthquakes and related events were accidents of nature."¹⁵² While it is true that Wesley did not believe that earthquakes were accidents of nature, this did not mean that he turned angrily upon those who did not agree with him in this regard. If there was any anger involved, then perhaps it was only anger that, from his perspective, people were being misled into thinking that there was no danger in continuing without repentance. However, Kendrick does bring out the important point here that for Wesley,

¹⁴⁹Jackson, 11:6.

¹⁵⁰Jackson, 11:6.

¹⁵¹Jackson, 11:7.

¹⁵²T. D. Kendrick, The Lisbon Earthquake (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1956), 160.

God was behind all events, even earthquakes. According to Wesley's world view, nothing happens by chance.¹⁵³

Wesley's view of nature, specifically within the context of his "Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon," has been described by Colin Russell as "radical Christian theism," meaning that "God is the immediate as well as the ultimate cause of *all* phenomena in nature."¹⁵⁴ According to Russell, this same viewpoint "seems at times to be present in the writings of Boyle, Clarke and others, but is overshadowed by the prevalent notion of a rule of law which does, indeed, make God redundant *as a scientific hypothesis*."¹⁵⁵ Wesley, however, avoids making God redundant by retaining a balance, not only by avoiding overemphasis of the rule of law, but also (and perhaps at least equally importantly) by making room for the possibility that miracles could and did take place in his own lifetime.¹⁵⁶

The views of Robert Boyle, Samuel Clark and others, which tended to place emphasis upon the laws of nature, were certainly also present among the clergy. In fact, Thomas Herring (1693-1757), the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a private letter to his friend William Duncombe regarding Wesley's opinion on the earthquake in which he said, "I have read his *Serious Thoughts*, but, for my own part, I think the rising and the setting of the sun is a more

¹⁵³John Wesley, "On the Education of Children," Bicentennial Edition, 3:353, states, "God orders all things: he makes the sun shine and the wind blow, and the trees bear fruit. Nothing comes by chance: that is a silly word: there is no such thing as chance."

¹⁵⁴Russell, 96.

¹⁵⁵Russell, 96.

¹⁵⁶John Wesley, "A Letter To Conyers Middleton," Jackson, 10:1-77.

durable argument for religion than all the extraordinary convulsions of nature put together.”¹⁵⁷

In fairness to Wesley, though, he was not using the earthquake as an argument for religion so much as a means, perhaps, of exhorting people to wake up to the frailty of human life and the consequent necessity of living rightly before God and seeking him while he may be found.

Wesley’s resistance to encroaching naturalism may have been viewed dimly by the majority of his contemporaries, but it was this very resistance that enabled him to preserve a dynamic role for God in nature and to avoid the very pitfall that Michael J. Buckley and others say led to the development of atheism in succeeding decades.

Wesley believed that nature itself was “but the art of God, or God’s method of acting in the material world.”¹⁵⁸ God is the one who is behind everything that happens in nature. This understanding of nature as God’s artistry can be seen, also, in Wesley’s preface to A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation, in which he says, “I have sometimes a little digressed, by reciting both uncommon appearances of nature, and uncommon instances of art.”¹⁵⁹ Wesley’s purpose in compiling a general survey of “natural philosophy,” or science, was to enable readers “to contemplate the goodness, wisdom, and power of the Creator, displayed in his works.”¹⁶⁰ To appreciate the works of the artist is to begin to appreciate the artist Himself.

¹⁵⁷Quoted in T. D. Kendrick, The Lisbon Earthquake (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1956), 161. Elsewhere, Kendrick mentions of the Bishop of Exeter, George Lavington (1684-1762), that “an example of the kind of thing the Bishop of Exeter so much disliked was the popular and fast-selling pamphlet by John Wesley, Serious Thoughts occasioned by the late Earthquake at Lisbon” (Kendrick, 159).

¹⁵⁸Jackson, 11:6-7.

¹⁵⁹John Wesley, A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy (Philadelphia: Jonathan Ponder, 1816), 1: v.

¹⁶⁰Wesley, Survey, 1:v..

Even the very use of the word “nature” was, for Wesley, an important indication that, as far as he was concerned, people were falsely attributing the works of God to second causes. In his sermon “On the Education of Children,” Wesley complained that parents tended to encourage atheism in their children by “ascribing the works of creation to nature” rather than to God.¹⁶¹ He asked, “Does not the common way of talking about nature leave God quite out of the question?”¹⁶² He felt that it was inappropriate to ascribe events “to the wisdom or power of men, or indeed to any other second causes, as if these governed the world.”¹⁶³

Wesley’s understanding of nature as under God’s total control necessarily raises questions regarding theodicy. If, indeed, all that happens is from God, then, according to Wesley, in addition to being omnipotent, how can God be totally benevolent at the same time? What accounts for evil, and for terrible disasters such earthquakes? Why would God allow them?

For Wesley, that natural disasters were possible was a result of the fallenness of all of creation. In his sermon, “The General Deliverance,” Wesley expressed his understanding that the fall of man had effects upon all of creation. Every living creature was “subject to vanity” and therefore subject “to sorrow, to pain of every kind, to all manner of evils.”¹⁶⁴ He considered earthquakes and other natural disasters to be among these evils. Prior to man’s fall there were no earthquakes: “there were no agitations within the bowels of the globe, no violent convulsion, no

¹⁶¹Bicentennial Edition, 3:352.

¹⁶²Bicentennial Edition 3:352.

¹⁶³Bicentennial Edition 3:352.

¹⁶⁴“The General Deliverance,” Bicentennial Edition, 2:442.

concussions of the earth, no earthquakes.”¹⁶⁵ Similarly, earthquakes would no longer exist after the time of the redemption of the earth. In “The New Creation,” he wrote that the earth “will no more be shaken or torn asunder by the impetuous force of *earthquakes*.”¹⁶⁶

Wesley distrusts the idea that there are any “second causes” independent or separate from God and insists that no experience, not even the experience of suffering, comes to men by chance; no part of life is outside God’s influence and control.¹⁶⁷ Wesley observed in his sermon “On Divine Providence,” that “all things, all events in the world, are under the management of God.”¹⁶⁸ God is concerned with everything that happens at every moment to every creature, especially to human beings:

He is concerned every moment for what befalls every creature upon earth; and more especially for everything that befalls any of the children of men. It is hard indeed to comprehend this; nay, it is hard to believe it, considering the complicated wickedness and the complicated misery which we see on every side. But believe it we must unless we will make God a liar, although it is sure no man can comprehend it.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵“God’s Approbation of His Works,” Bicentennial Edition, 2:390.

¹⁶⁶“The New Creation,” Bicentennial Edition, 2:507. Italics in the original.

¹⁶⁷Wilson, 131, quoting Wesley’s *Notes*, Hebrews 12:5, Wilson wrote that Wesley warned the Methodists not to “impute any affliction to chance or second causes.”

¹⁶⁸“On Divine Providence,” Bicentennial Edition, 2:535.

¹⁶⁹Bicentennial Edition, 2:540.

Wesley believed that all things are for the purpose of assisting humanity in the working out of salvation, as far as this can be possible without violating the free will of the one being assisted:

He commands all things both in heaven and earth to assist man in attaining the end of his being, in working out his own salvation—so far as it can be done without compulsion, without overruling his liberty.¹⁷⁰

In two sermons (“On Divine Providence” and “The General Deliverance”) Wesley took exception to a statement in Alexander Pope’s Essay on Man (i. 87-88) according to which “He sees with equal eyes, as Lord of all, A hero perish or a sparrow fall.” Wesley felt, based upon Matt. 6:26 and 7:11, that God’s concern over the lives of human beings is actually even greater than his concern with the sparrows.¹⁷¹ Wesley also took issue with Pope on the question as to whether God ever suspends natural laws for the sake of his people:

But it is on supposition that the Governor of the world never deviates from those general laws that Mr. Pope adds those beautiful lines in full triumph, as having now clearly gained the point:

Shall burning Etna, if a sage requires,
Forget to thunder and recall her fires?
On air or sea new motions be impressed,

¹⁷⁰Bicentennial Edition, 2:541.

¹⁷¹Bicentennial Edition, 2:545 and “The General Deliverance,” III, 5 in Bicentennial Edition, 2:447.

O Blameless Bethel! to relieve thy breast?

When the loose mountain trembles from on high,

Shall gravitation cease, if you go by?

Or some old temple, nodding to its fall,

For Chartres' head reserve the hanging wall?

We answer: if it please God to continue the life of any of his servants he will suspend that or any other law of nature. The stone shall not fall, the fire shall not burn, the floods shall not flow. Or he will give his angels charge, and in their hands shall they bear him up, through and above all dangers.¹⁷²

For Wesley, should God consider it appropriate to do so, he could and would go to the length of performing a miracle to protect the life of one of his servants. He continued in the same sermon, as follows:

Let all earth and all hell combine against you—yea, the whole animate and inanimate creation—they cannot harm while God is on your side; his favorable kindness covers you 'as a shield'!¹⁷³

In a passage reminiscent of Paul's comment in Romans 8:28 to the effect that all things work together for good to those who love God, Wesley wrote in Discourse 3 of "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount":

¹⁷²"On Divine Providence," 21, in Bicentennial Edition, 2:545-546.

¹⁷³Bicentennial Edition, 2:548.

His eye is ever open, and his hand stretched out to direct every the minutest circumstance. When the storm shall begin, how high it shall rise, which way it shall point its course, when and how it shall end, are all determined by his unerring wisdom. The ungodly are only a sword of his; an instrument which he uses as it pleaseth him, and which itself, when the gracious ends of his providence are answered, is cast into the fire.¹⁷⁴

If, for Wesley, God controls every characteristic of every storm, then it would only be a small step to conclude that for Wesley, also, God has been in control of every aspect of every natural disaster.

How did Wesley relate all of this to natural philosophy, as understood by his contemporaries? This is an important question, since scientific models of the way in which nature works can be directly related to the way in which the theological doctrine of providence is understood. A mechanical conception of nature had come to be accepted by nearly all of the *virtuosi*, or natural philosophers. Although adherence to this mechanical hypothesis would not rule out the idea of general providence in which God preserves the whole system, maintaining its laws, it would rule out the possibility of particular providence if particular providence were understood to refer, not only to the *spiritual* welfare and salvation of the individual, but also to divine protection for the *physical* well being of individuals.¹⁷⁵

It is perhaps because of the ascendancy of the ideas of the *virtuosi* that the doctrine of general providence was emphasized by many theologians in the eighteenth century. Particular

¹⁷⁴Jackson 5:288.

¹⁷⁵Westfall, 76.

providence, if interpreted to refer to one's physical well being, was not seen as compatible with the understanding of nature that had begun to arise in the wake of the scientific revolution. Boyle envisioned matter as composed of fundamental, irreducible particles or atoms which acted as gears and levers which were running the basic parts of the cosmic clock.¹⁷⁶ It was therefore always possible for a particular individual to get caught in the gears, as it were.

Wesley, on the other hand, abhorred the doctrine of general providence; he understood it to be a watered down version of the doctrine of providence. When he addressed this topic in his sermon on "The Nature of Enthusiasm," he said, "I do not say, his *general* providence; for this I take to be a sounding word, which means just nothing."¹⁷⁷ He felt that particular providence, when applied uniformly to everything, was really no different from general providence: "And if there be a *particular* providence, it must extend to all persons and all things."¹⁷⁸

For Wesley, general providence, if it did not include the particulars, was not really providence at all. In his sermon "On Divine Providence," he put the following statements into the mouths of the "wise men of the world"¹⁷⁹: "We all acknowledge a providence. That is, a general providence, for indeed the particular providence of which some talk, we know not what to make of."¹⁸⁰ Wesley set this comment in opposition to his own position: "I believe the Bible;

¹⁷⁶Westfall, 74.

¹⁷⁷Jackson 5:475-476.

¹⁷⁸Jackson, 5:476.

¹⁷⁹The phrase, "wise men of the world," is meant here in a derogatory sense, as it was in I Cor. 1:20.

¹⁸⁰Jackson, 6:320.

wherein the Creator and Governor of the world himself tells me quite the contrary.”¹⁸¹ For Wesley, particular providence was central to any theological doctrine of providence, and it extended, not only to the spiritual well-being of individuals, but to their physical well-being as well, at least for those cases in which God willed it. Wesley was asserting these things with a view to retaining a dynamic role for God in all circumstances.

In this regard, he differed from the general trend away from particular providence in the thinking of the *virtuosi*. This distinction between Wesley and his contemporaries is one of the keys to understanding how he avoided falling into the pitfall of so many Christian thinkers in his era, who, by discussing matters of this kind in philosophical terms rather than in specifically Christian terms, began to pave the way for the transition from theism to Deism, and ultimately to atheism.

Conclusion

Because Wesley lived in an era of incredible transitions in world view, he was able to blend elements of different viewpoints, combining both past and present world views. He could do so in convincing and creative ways, bringing about some syntheses that may be of particular interest to the postmodern world, which has come to recognize that many modern methodologies, priorities, and ways of comprehending reality are misguided.

Early Methodism, as it was understood and practiced by its founders, preserved a dynamic role for God at a time when there was an increasingly mechanistic understanding of the universe. It genuinely respected and eagerly utilized scientific advances and new philosophical ideas, yet at the same time it employed many of the thought forms of the day to create new

¹⁸¹Jackson, 6:320.

syntheses, joining empiricism with Christian Platonism, and making use of an analogy of sensation to clarify, explain, and better understand spiritual truths.¹⁸²

Wesley was able to marry empiricism and rationalism in such a way as to inspire human imagination to an understanding which cannot be attained by rational calculation or logic in and of itself. In so doing, he preserved a respect for values as well as for facts. He was also able to preserve a place for humanity in the larger context of the universe in which humans were neither mere machines nor objects. He thus did much to avoid bifurcation between such polarities as subject versus object, faith versus reason, and teleology versus ontology.

For Wesley, God was active in everything that happened, even in the free will decisions of human beings and natural disasters, both of which he viewed as secondary causes. God was personal, and took an active interest in all that happened at every moment. In contrast, for many of Wesley's contemporaries, God intervened only on occasion if at all, and God did not operate through the agency of free and rational human beings. God was an agent, operating at the same level as other agents. For them, God was not always active. Rather, they had a mechanical conception of nature according to which God had wound up the clock of the universe and left it to run by itself, like clockwork.

In Wesley's universe, God in his providence worked through all natural causes. This was true for all events. In the universe of many of his contemporaries, some events were simply natural events, a natural outworking of what God had done in the beginning when he created the

¹⁸²Wesley's understanding of the spiritual senses as analogous to the five physical senses is the primary topic of Laura Bartels Felleman, "The Evidence of Things Not Seen: John Wesley's Use of Natural Philosophy," Ph.D. diss.: Drew University, 2004.

world. For Wesley, God was behind all things, while for them, God may have done a few things, but natural causes were the true explanation for most things.

For Wesley, God was Spirit, intimately involved in all things, great and small. He was neither a substance nor an object. For a great many people in the eighteenth century, God was, in a sense, a substance occupying space, using some mechanism to interact with other substances. For them, God therefore related to the world through causality.

Wesley believed that God was everywhere and was sustaining and directing the world, moment by moment. In his particular providence, he was actively protecting those whom he wished to protect. According to many of his contemporaries, however, God was one agent among many other agents in the world. In His general providence, He may have superintended some of the most important things, but there was no particular providence.

Most of the theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries helped to lay the philosophical groundwork for modern atheism by attempting to meet their opponents on their own ground, arguing for God's existence using proofs that had been advanced in classical antiquity prior to the advent of Christianity. In contrast, John Wesley tended to be suspicious of rational proofs for the existence of God. The God of Plato and Aristotle was an impersonal first cause, whereas Wesley's God was the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the New Testament.

During the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the western world began to perceive reality as, in some way separate from the self. Wesley's view of reality was more participatory. The kind of truth that was sought prior to Descartes differed from the kind of truth generally sought afterward. Explanations of why things were as they were became less interesting, while in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, people became preoccupied with explanations of how they happened.

Increasingly before and during Wesley's lifetime, it was believed that man was totally incapable of discovering the purposes or ends of the creator, and that philosophy must therefore exclude any search for final causes. Wesley, on the other hand, held to an experiential epistemology according to which there is an extent to which God can and will reveal his purposes to those whose spiritual senses have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

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