

# WESLEY'S THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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## I. WESLEY'S EXPERIENTIALISM AND EXISTENTIALIST TENDENCY

**T**HE experiential nature of Wesley's theology is most clearly expressed in his epistemology. Whether consciously or not, Wesley's entire theology is built on the foundation of his epistemology which is not only experiential but also has an existentialist tendency.

There are some who may consider my conclusion concerning the existentialist tendency of Wesley's theological epistemology as rash. From the point of view of the history of thought the doubt may arise as to whether or not it is possible to combine existentialism, which stands in the stream of German philosophy as a reaction to such idealism as Hegel's philosophy, with experientialism which according to common understanding is part of the stream of empiricism derived from John Locke and David Hume in England.

In response to this there are three points that can be raised. In the first place, there are many differences even between the philosophies that exist inside the stream of empiricism. Locke and Hume shared a common understanding that the origin of knowledge is found in experience. However, they differed in that Locke recognized to a certain extent the active working of the mind on that which is given in experience, whereas, Hume found the origin of knowledge in experience only, understanding the mind as a completely passive recipient. Wesley was greatly influenced by Locke. However, the experientialism of Wesley, who was not a philosopher, is different from the empiricism of Locke, and, it goes without saying, from that of Hume. In the same way, although his thought is founded on empiricism, it is but natural that there should be various subtle differences. Consequently, it cannot be said that it is impossible that Wesley's experientialism includes an existentialist tendency.

In the second place, we ought not to be limited to the narrow confines of historical or cultural analysis of thought. Existentialism was indeed a flower which blossomed in the garden of German idealism, albeit as a reaction to the Hegelian type of idealism. Its soil was not that of British empiricism. However, existentialism also developed in Russia (Dostoevsky and Berdyaev) and in Spain (Unamuno). As

long as man is man, thought with an existentialist tendency will spring up regardless of geographical or temporal boundaries. Therefore, why in the case of Wesley only should it be thought strange to suggest that here we find an existentialist tendency.

Finally, it is not at all strange that there should be an existentialist tendency in Wesley. There is direct historical reason for this in the influence of German pietism mediated to him by the Moravians.

It is very interesting in relation to this question to note that Jean Wahl considers the Moravian pietistic tradition to have influenced Soren Kierkegaard.<sup>1</sup> According to Wahl, Kierkegaard's father was directly influenced by the Moravians. The father's pietism influenced the thought of his son at two decisive points. One of these was that Christianity is an existential relationship to the will of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The other was that the righteous man will be persecuted in this world. That these two ideas were decisive for Kierkegaard's existentialism is clearly revealed in his stress on the subjectivity of truth and the contemporaneity of Christ, and in his stress on the necessity of the suffering of the believer and opposition to the state-church. According to Wahl these two points were the very heart of Moravian pietism. The concept that true Christianity is found in the existential relationship to the will of God revealed in Christ is expressed in Wesley's emphasis on the subjectivity of the believer which is seen in his opposition to predestination and in the central emphasis of his theology on sanctification. The concept that the righteous man will be persecuted in this world is expressed in his emphasis on the importance of bearing the sufferings of the life of faith, in the fact that he organized the Methodist societies within the Church of England, and in his claim that true Christian life involved a concern more ultimate than the affairs of this world which is the biblical meaning of the believer's separation from the world. Of course, there are many differences between the thought of Kierkegaard and Wesley. For example, the organization by Wesley, a faithful clergyman of the Church of England, of Methodist societies inside the church was not at all with the intent of opposing the state-church. This is different from Kierkegaard's resistance to the state-church. Moreover, even though sharing an existentialist tendency, Wesley's theology has a fundamental emphasis on the happiness and peace found in the Holy Spirit in contrast to the melancholy of Kierkegaard.

Another example of the influence of pietism on existentialist thought is Martin Buber. From 1904 to 1909 Buber buried himself in the study of Hasidism. This left an indelible mark on his existentialist

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<sup>1</sup> Wahl, Jean, *Études Kierkegaardiennes* 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1949), pp. 2ff.

theology. The existentialist element of this movement is found in its attempt to experience a meeting with the living God in the midst of each minute detail of daily life while maintaining the biblical emphasis of separation from "the world." Moreover, almost all the similarities which Buber has with Wesley's thought on perfection are related to the point at which Hasidism recognized the possibility of achieving something like perfection in this life.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that when Buber describes the life of the Jewish believer, he does so in almost the same way that Wesley described the life of the perfect Christian. He believes that perfection is possible in this life although he, of course, rejects Hasidism's superstitious regard for the Zaddikim (the Righteous Ones) who were hereditary leaders of its local groups. Buber believes that man does not need to be a slave to sin in this life. Even though only gradually does man achieve the unity of his soul, he can finally arrive at the stage of perfection possible in this life. That stage, Buber describes as follows:

... any work that I do with a united soul reacts upon my soul, acts in the direction of new and greater unification, leads me, though by all sorts of detours, to a *steadier* unity than was the preceding one. Thus man ultimately reaches a point where he can rely upon his soul, because its unity is now so great that it overcomes contradiction with effortless ease. Vigilance, of course, is necessary even then, but it is a relaxed vigilance.<sup>3</sup>

All the above only goes to demonstrate that my positing of an existentialist tendency in Wesley is not as absurd as it might appear at first glance.

## II. THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AND EXPERIENCE

A typical expression of Wesley's theological epistemology is found in his journal entry for May 24, 1738. It goes without saying that this was the day of his experience of an evangelical conversion in Aldersgate. However, before describing the conversion experience, he notes the providential steps which led to that experience. One of these was his acquaintance with Peter Boehler. In this entry he notes his perplexity at the time Boehler talked about justification and sanctification by faith alone and how he came to accept this. Here is a clear statement of the methodology of his theological epistemology.

When I met Peter Boehler again, he consented to put the dispute upon the issue which I desired, namely, Scripture and experience. I first consulted the Scripture. But when I set aside the glosses

<sup>2</sup> Diamond, Malcolm L., *Martin Buber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 110ff.

<sup>3</sup> Buber, Martin, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), p. 150.

of men, and simply considered the words of God, comparing them together, endeavouring to illustrate the obscure by the plainer passages, I found they all made against me, and was forced to retreat to my last hold, 'that experience would never agree with the *literal interpretation* of those scriptures. Nor could I therefore allow it to be true till I found some living witnesses of it.' He replied, he could show men such at any time; if I desired it, the next day. And accordingly the next day he came again with three others, all of whom testified, of their own personal experience, that a true living faith in Christ is inseparable from a sense of pardon for all past and freedom from all present sins. They added with one mouth that this faith was the gift, the free gift of God; and that He would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it.<sup>4</sup>

The authoritative word of God in the Scripture is the starting point of Wesley's search for theological truth. Then the truth given through God's Word is appealed to and tested in experience. In another place Wesley asserts that there are three areas in which knowledge of truth takes place. These are the Bible, reason, and experience.<sup>5</sup> This hints that for Wesley reason is included in (encompassed by) experience. Moreover, experience is not individualistic but is understood as *experience within the fellowship*, as we see from the journal entry quoted above, where Wesley constructs an interpretation of truth by recourse to the experience of the three witnesses. The experience which Wesley asserts is experience in the fellowship of believers. Included in this is the tradition of the church.

However, Wesley's willingness to subject God's Word to the test of experience in order to get knowledge of truth raises the problem of whether or not he does not at this point depart from the Reformers' *sola scriptura* doctrine. Wesley had as high a regard for the Scriptures as the Reformers did. For him also "the written word is the only and the perfect standard for the believer's faith and practice."<sup>6</sup> His criticism of the Quakers, expressed in a letter dated November 10, 1748, makes this clear.

The Scriptures are the touchstone whereby Christians examine all, real or supposed revelations . . . . For though the Spirit is our

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<sup>4</sup> Curnock, Nehemiah, ed. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), Vol. I, pp. 471-472. Hereafter referred to as JOURNAL.

<sup>5</sup> JOURNAL, Vol. V, p. 492.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson, Thomas, ed. *The Works of John Wesley, A.M., Third Edition* (London: John Mason, 1829), Vol. VII, p. 198. Hereafter referred to as WORKS.

principal leader, yet He is not our rule at all; the Scriptures are the rule whereby He leads us into all truth.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, Wesley called himself *homo unius libri*<sup>8</sup> which did not mean, however, that he had no interest in any other books. Study of the *Journal* reveals how many different books he read and how wide his interest was. His calling himself a man of one book meant that as far as matters of religion were concerned the truth recorded in the Bible and the truths rationally deduced from it were the standard. As for matters that do not concern religion, they have nothing to do with the Bible, and it is proper for natural reason to exercise control over them.<sup>9</sup>

Wesley believed in the inspiration of the Scriptures. However, God's work was indirect, via the human authors. Consequently, the various circumstances and individual peculiarities of the authors are found in the Bible. In some ways Wesley's methodology is near that of modern Biblical scholars. This is recognized and demonstrated by Colin W. Williams in his study of Wesley.<sup>10</sup> The writers of the Bible were not simply passive agents of God's inspiration. They had to depend on their memories and were influenced by their inherited traditions. Wesley recognized that they sometimes make mistakes in quoting the Old Testament. On the other hand, Wesley strongly urged reading the Bible as literally as possible—he was against allegorical interpretation—and reading the text to be interpreted in context.<sup>11</sup>

William Arnett, in a doctoral dissertation presented at Drew University, provides an excellent summary of Wesley's method of Biblical interpretation. Williams quotes this and it is worth quoting again here.

1. The literal sense is emphasized, 'unless it implies an absurdity,' [WORKS Vol. VI, p. 395] and 'if it be not contrary to some other texts; but in that case the obscure text is to be interpreted by those that speak more plainly.' [LETTERS Vol. III, p. 129]
2. It is important to interpret a text in its total context.
3. Scripture must be compared with Scripture, and therefore a thorough knowledge of the whole is necessary for an interpretation of a part, 'seeing scripture interprets scripture; one part fixing the sense of another.' [WORKS Vol. X, p. 482]

<sup>7</sup> Telford, John, ed., *The Letters of The Rev. John Wesley*, A.M. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), Vol. II, p. 117. Hereafter referred to as LETTERS.

<sup>8</sup> Sugden, Edward H., ed., *Wesley's Standard Sermons* (London: Epworth Press, 1955), Vol. I, pp. 31-32. Hereafter referred to as SERMONS.

<sup>9</sup> SERMONS, Vol. I, pp. 225-226.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, Colin W., *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 26ff.

<sup>11</sup> LETTERS Vol. III, p. 129; cf. also WORKS Vol. X, p. 482.

4. Wesley was always anxious that, where possible, Scripture should be confirmed by experience. [JOURNAL, Vol. I, p. 471-72]
5. Reason is to be employed to understand what the Scriptures declare, and how this truth is to be declared to men. [WORKS, Vol. VI, p. 354-55]
6. The resultant exposition should be 'plain truth for plain people,' free 'from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings.' [SERMONS, Vol. I, p. 30]<sup>12</sup>

Wesley consistently maintained the primacy of God's Word in relation to experience. For Wesley, and this distinguished his position from some forms of British empiricism, experience is not simply the condition of passively receiving that which is thrust at one from outside oneself. There is a theological position which posits the objective authority of the Word of God over against experience saying that experience has nothing to say in response. Wesley's position is not that. In Wesley's theological epistemology experience is not that in which one's own spontaneity is lost due to the absolute objective authority of the Word of God as over against experience.

Experience, for Wesley, is that dimension in which one possesses consciously the existential question from his own side and from the point of view of the existential question he tries to encounter the Word of God which stands over against him. In the encounter the Word of God offers the authentic answer to the question. The authority of the Word of God is the authority that exists in that relationship. Why? In experience one cannot give an authentic answer out of oneself to the existential question that one has oneself proposed. Consequently, Wesley's theological epistemology has the tendency to concentrate everything in this mutual relationship of question and answer. The tendency is to disregard problems which do not fit into this mutual relationship as far as the question of faith is concerned. This tendency to disregard such problems, the tendency to attempt to limit the problem of faith to this mutual relationship only, however, lacks in Wesley the radical nature of the search for authenticity of faith which is characteristic of modern existentialist theology. However, it cannot be doubted that Wesley's theological epistemology is a step toward that type of thought of a radical nature of contemporary existentialism which I call "relationism." "Relationism" is that type of thought which deals with the Word of God only in terms of its relation to existential questions of experience. Wesley's epistemology is characterized by such an existentialist tendency.

Wesley's emphasis on the Holy Spirit, which is the experience of

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

present fellowship with God, and his emphasis on the joy, peace, and sanctification which accompany it, are decisive factors which point toward "relationism." In any case, there are words of Wesley himself which point to "relationism." These are found in the preface to the *Standard Sermons*.

I want to know one thing—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. . . . I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.<sup>13</sup>

With only that one experiential question, "how to find the way to heaven," Wesley attempts to interpret the Word of God. Things in the Bible which fall outside this area of concern are not emphasized.

Of course, experience has an individualistic moment in which the person is forced to stand alone before God. However, as I have said before, Wesley's experientialism was not individualistic. In the background was the fellowship of the church, including not only the present fellowship but also the experience of the tradition of the church.

Wesley discusses Clemens Romanus, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Clemens Alexandrinus, and Cyprian with great respect. While he recognized the mistakes and weaknesses that might be found in their writing he revered them for teaching true Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Wesley regarded the ante-Nicene Fathers highly because chronologically speaking they were near Christ and the Apostles and because they lived in the period of the one undivided Church.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he respected the subsequent tradition of the church, including of course, his own Church of England. As far as matters which were not prescribed by the Bible or were not contrary to the Gospel were concerned, Wesley esteemed tradition and ordinarily followed it.

### III. REVELATION AND REASON

Gilson's analysis of the three different understandings of the relation between revelation and reason in Medieval theology<sup>16</sup> provides a good introduction for our discussion of Wesley's thought at this point. The superiority of faith to reason is stressed by Augustine and Anselm. According to this position, reason always follows faith. Ultimate knowledge of reality is already given in the revelation in Jesus Christ though not in a systematic or logical form. The role of reason is to understand this given knowledge by conscious logical clarification.

<sup>13</sup> SERMONS, Vol. I, pp. 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> LETTERS Vol. II, p. 387.

<sup>15</sup> LETTERS Vol. VII, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Gilson, Etienne, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954).

tion. We believe in order to know (*credo ut intelligam*). A good contemporary example of this position is Karl Barth as is evidenced in his work on Anselm.<sup>17</sup>

Gilson points out that the fatal defect of this attractive position is that we cannot avoid the question of why if sufficient knowledge has already been given in Jesus Christ we should make any effort to understand it logically. The tendency inherent in the position is the neglect of reason.

The second position is that which emphasizes the superiority of reason to revelation. The Medieval Islamic theologian Averroes, who introduced Aristotle to the West, is given as an example. According to Averroes, for a man of imagination faith shows the way to rational truth. This is the lowest way of rational search. The next highest is theology. For the possessor of dialectical reason, theology takes the place of metaphysics. However, the highest way is the way of philosophy. On the basis of philosophy, meaning of course Aristotle's philosophy, absolute truth can be arrived at by proofs based on purely rational thought. As Gilson points out this position results in the interpretation of faith from philosophical presuppositions. Consequently, the mutilation of the nature of faith by philosophical understanding is unavoidable. That Gilson's fear is not unfounded can be understood by anyone who will look at the modernist understanding of Christianity based on Hegel's philosophy.

The third position, Gilson's, is Thomism which affirms the harmony of revelation and reason. According to this position there are orders in knowledge. There is a realm in which knowledge can be gained by the power of reason alone without the aid of revelation, for example knowledge of the existence of God, *i.e.* Aquinas' five proofs for the existence of God. However, it is by revelation alone that man comes to know the nature of God, as in the doctrines of the Trinity or *creatio ex nihilo*. In this position, says Gilson, the autonomy of reason and revelation are internally and harmoniously connected.

Wesley's understanding of the relation between revelation and reason is clearly closest to this third position, though as we know from a different philosophical background. It avoids the defects of the first two positions and although it is similar to Thomism in stressing the harmony of revelation and reason it is not based upon Aristotle's philosophy but rather on British empiricism, particularly that of John Locke.

Let us first consider the points at which Wesley agrees with Thomism, as far as concerns the harmony between revelation and reason. In one of his letters Wesley wrote as follows:

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<sup>17</sup> Barth, Karl, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 2nd edition (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1958).



It is a fundamental principle with us [Methodists] that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.<sup>18</sup>

In a sermon he says:

Let reason do all that reason can: Employ it as far as it will go. But at the same time, acknowledge it as utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love, and, consequently, of producing either real virtue, or substantial happiness. Expect these from a higher source, even from the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Seek and receive them not as your own acquisition, but as the gift of God.<sup>19</sup>

Williams, hesitating to associate Wesley's epistemology with Thomism, goes to great lengths attempting to demonstrate that Wesley's epistemology is the same as that of the Reformers.<sup>20</sup> Because of this, he is not able to interpret the words of Wesley which I have quoted above. However, as I will demonstrate below, if it is understood that Wesley's epistemology developed out of a different philosophical base than that of Aristotelian Thomism, there is nothing to fear from admitting the affinity of Wesley and Aquinas as regards the position of harmony between revelation and reason. In Wesley, as is apparent from the above quotation, the realm of revelation is thought to be beyond the boundary of the power of reason. There is a difference of rank in the relation of the two. For Wesley nature does reveal the glory of God.<sup>21</sup> The existence of creatures, by analogy, proves the existence of God, their Creator.<sup>22</sup>

Williams attempts to use the fact that Wesley did not make use of the rational proofs for the existence of God as evidence that he did not have an epistemology in which revelation and reason were treated hierarchically<sup>23</sup> are unpersuasive.

It is true, of course, that even though he admitted the possibility of proving the existence of God, Wesley never actually employed this approach. This fact means simply that he did not have the interest in metaphysical speculation that is found in Aristotelian Thomism. This shows that Wesley's concern lay in another area, that is, experience. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that he thought it possible to prove the existence of God by reason. Wesley presupposed this proof as a matter of course. The reason for this is that John Locke's empirical

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<sup>18</sup> LETTERS, VOL. V, p. 364.

<sup>19</sup> WORKS, Vol. VI, p. 360.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> LETTERS, Vol. II, p. 379.

<sup>22</sup> WORKS, Vol. VIII, p. 197.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

philosophy—traces of which are found in Wesley's epistemology—employs scholastic verification of the existence of God.<sup>24</sup> It would be more faithful to Wesley's thought to admit that he also accepted the verification of the existence of God as Locke employed it. Of course, this is an admission that Wesley was not consistent in his attempt to concentrate everything upon experience. Nevertheless, we have no recourse but to describe the facts as they are. Wesley thought it possible to prove God's existence through reason. His position is similar to that of Thomism. Wesley believed that while God's existence can be known by reason alone, the nature of God is known through revelation.<sup>25</sup> Only by revelation can we become acquainted with God.<sup>26</sup> By revelation we have direct insight into the fact that God reconciled himself to the world through Christ.<sup>27</sup> Wesley's epistemological position that God's existence can be known by reason alone but that fellowship (acquaintance) with God is given to men only by revelation is without doubt the same as the Thomist position of harmony between reason and revelation.

At this point, however, we must give attention to that which differentiates Wesley from Thomism. In the case of Thomism with its background of speculative Aristotelianism there is the tendency to concentrate the knowledge of God given in revelation, if we speak from the point of view of the human side, in speculative thought about the nature of God. This is the essence of Scholasticism. However, in the case of Wesley, such speculative tendency is very slight.

In Wesley it is the acts of God, God's act of reconciliation in Christ, the salvation of sinners, that takes first place. As proof of this, a negative proof I admit, but nevertheless sufficient, when Wesley discussed the relation between revelation and reason, he never touched upon knowledge about the essence of God but rather always talked about the acts of God. Certainly Wesley accepted the traditional doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. These as propositional truth are speculations about the essential nature of God. However, the fact that he never dealt with these doctrines when discussing the relation between revelation and reason, clearly indicates that his theology is essentially experiential rather than speculative in tendency.

The difference between Wesley and Aquinas is derived from his proximity to Locke's empiricism. That he knew Locke's thought is evident from his *Journal* entry for May 29, 1745.<sup>28</sup> In the entry for

<sup>24</sup> Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Richard Scott, 1818), Vol. II, pp. 127ff.

<sup>25</sup> WORKS, Vol. VIII, pp. 197-198.

<sup>26</sup> SERMONS, Vol. II, p. 216.

<sup>27</sup> WORKS, Vol. VI, pp. 274-275.

<sup>28</sup> JOURNAL, Vol. III, p. 179.

Dec. 6, 1756<sup>29</sup> he compares the Bishop of Cork's *Essay on Human Understanding* with Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, praising the former as clearer and more judicious than the latter. However, more important is the fact that on April 28, 1781 he began an extract of Locke's essay for his *Arminian Magazine*<sup>30</sup> and completed it a month later.<sup>31</sup>

However, there is more than external proof. There is also internal proof of the dependence of Wesley's theological epistemology on Locke's empiricism. This is seen in the assertion by Wesley that through revelation man is awakened to a new perception of God. Through this experience man knows the things of the spirit of God.

It is common knowledge that Locke hypothesized "... the mind to be . . . white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas . . ."<sup>32</sup> That which adds ideas to the mind is experience. Analogous to Locke's analysis of the origin of knowledge, Wesley writes of the birth of knowledge of God. Although it is a long quotation the following passage is of great importance.

I. 1. First, we are to consider, what is the proper meaning of that expression, "Whosoever is born of God. . ."

2. The ground and reason of the expression is easy to be understood. When we undergo this great change, we may, with much propriety, be said to be born again, because there is so near a resemblance between the circumstances of the natural and of the spiritual birth; so that to consider the circumstances of the natural birth, is the most easy way to understand the spiritual.

3. The child which is not yet born subsists indeed by the air, as does everything which has life; but feels it not, nor anything else, unless in a very dull and imperfect manner. It *hears* little, if at all; the organs of hearing being as yet closed up. It *sees* nothing; having its eyes fast shut, and being surrounded with utter darkness. There are, it may be, some faint beginnings of life, when the time of its birth draws nigh, and some motion consequent thereon, whereby it is distinguished from a mere mass of matter; but it has no *senses*; all these avenues of the soul are hither-to quite shut up. Of consequence, it has scarce any intercourse with this visible world; nor any knowledge, conception, or idea, of the things that occur therein.

4. The reason why he that is not yet born is wholly a stranger

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<sup>29</sup> JOURNAL, Vol. IV, p. 192.

<sup>30</sup> JOURNAL, Vol. V, p. 89, n.

<sup>31</sup> JOURNAL, Vol. VI, p. 318, n.

<sup>32</sup> Locke, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 10.

to the visible world, is not because it is afar off (it is very nigh; it surrounds him on every side); but, partly, because he has not those senses, they are not yet opened in his soul, whereby alone it is possible to hold commerce with the material world; and partly, because so thick a veil is cast between, through which he can discern nothing.

5. But no sooner is the child born into the world, than he exists in a quite different manner. He now *feels* the air with which he is surrounded, and which pours into him from every side, as fast as he alternately breathes it back, to sustain the flame of life: and hence springs a continual increase of strength, of motion, and of sensation; all the bodily senses being now awakened, and furnished with their proper objects.

His eyes are now opened to perceive the light, which, silently flowing in upon them, discovers not only itself, but an infinite variety of things, with which before he was wholly unacquainted. His ears are unclosed, and sounds rush in with endless diversity. Every sense is employed upon such objects as are peculiarly suitable to it; and by these inlets the soul, having an open intercourse with the visible world, acquires more and more knowledge of sensible things, of all things which are under the sun.

6. So it is with him that is born of God. Before that great change is wrought, although he subsists by Him, in whom all that have life 'live, and move, and have their being,' yet he is not *sensible* of God; he does not *feel*, he has no inward consciousness of His presence. He does not perceive that divine breath of life, without which he cannot subsist a moment: nor is he sensible of any of the things of God; they make no impression upon his soul. God is continually calling to him from on high, but he heareth not; his ears are shut, so that the 'voice of the charmer' is lost on him, 'charm he never so wisely.' He seeth not the things of the Spirit of God; the eyes of his understanding being closed, and utter darkness covering his whole soul, surrounding him on every side. It is true he may have some faint dawns of life, some small beginings of spiritual motion; but as yet he has no spiritual senses capable of discerning spiritual objects; consequently, he 'discerneth not the things of the Spirit of God; he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned.'

7. Hence he has scarce any knowledge of the invisible world, as he has scarce any intercourse with it. Not that it is afar off: no: he is in the midst of it: it encompasses him round about. The

*other world*, as we usually term it, is not far from every one of us: it is above, and beneath, and on every side. Only the natural man discerneth it not; partly, because he has no spiritual senses, whereby alone we can discern the things of God; partly, because so thick a veil is interposed as he knows not how to penetrate.

8. But when he is born of God, born of the Spirit, how is the manner of his existence changed! His whole soul is now sensible of God, and he can say, by sure experience, 'Thou art about my bed, and about my path'; I feel Thee in all my ways: 'Thou besettest me behind and before, and layest Thy hand upon me.' The spirit or breath of God is immediately inspired, breathed into the new-born soul; and the same breath which comes from returns to God: as it is continually received by faith, so it is continually rendered back by love, by prayer, and praise, and thanksgiving; love, and praise, and prayer being the breath of every soul which is truly born of God. And by this new kind of spiritual respiration, spiritual life is not only sustained, but increased day by day, together with spiritual strength, and motion, and sensation; all the senses of the soul being now awake, and capable of discerning spiritual good and evil.<sup>83</sup>

The achievement of Locke, even while retaining traces of scholasticism, in laying the foundation for the shift of philosophy from metaphysical speculation to anthropology, is universally recognized. Wesley follows the same course in the area of theology. I have called Wesley's theology experientialism for the purpose of distinguishing it from Locke's empiricism. However, the resemblance to Locke, is clearly seen in Wesley's emphasizing not speculation concerning God but the fellowship between man and God which is included in the realm of experience.

The "relationism" of Wesley (an existentialist trait) which I pointed out in my discussion of Wesley's hermeneutics is inseparable from the anthropological tendency of his experientialism. Therefore the new birth based on repentance holds a central position in Wesley's theology. Wesley points out the suffering from a consciousness of guilt occasioned by knowledge of the law even before coming to faith in Christ. This is a condition of the natural man reached through reason alone. Man meets the event of God's forgiveness of sins in Christ, which is the answer to this suffering, only in revelation. In this way, in Wesley, the mutual harmony of reason and revelation is established in the form of an anthropological or existential question and answer rather than as in Thomism as a metaphysical relationship of mutuality

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<sup>83</sup> SERMONS, Vol. I, pp. 300ff. (from Sermon XV "The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God"); cf. also SERMONS, Vol. II, pp. 232-234 (Sermon XXXIX "The New Birth").

between reason and revelation. If this is understood it is quite consistent that Wesley could make the following comment on the repentance which precedes faith.

And, first, 'repent'; that is, know yourselves. This is the first repentance, previous to faith; even conviction, or self-knowledge.<sup>84</sup>

This kind of existential self-understanding on the basis of reason is required as the dimension of the question which precedes faith and to which faith given in revelation corresponds as the dimension of answer. Self-understanding (reason) enters into a relationship of correspondence with faith (revelation). Thus revelation gives clarity to the self-understanding which preceded faith. Consequently, Wesley's theology places emphasis on the dialogue of human rational self-understanding with the revelational act of God in Christ. German pietism, specifically Moravianism, was the catalyst for Wesley's experientialism. However, his roots were in British empiricism. The foundation for Wesley's understanding of the relation between revelation and reason was laid in the dependence of his experiential theology on Locke's empirical philosophy.

#### IV. THE CATEGORY OF NATURE

Wesley's understanding of nature, implicit in the discussion above, is also derived from British empiricism and significant in his theological epistemology. Wesley's theology is a theology which deals with the problem of the ground of man's existence and of man's knowing. Nature is this ground.

As Cushman points out Wesley's theology does not, like that of Calvin, posit an absolute discontinuity between grace and nature.<sup>85</sup> According to Wesley God did not abandon nature after Adam's fall. Even before the ultimate revelation in Christ was given, God bestowed some grace upon mankind. Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace makes clear that nature has not been absolutely separated from grace.

Wesley's understanding of the essence of law makes this clear. For Wesley, the original law of God lies deep inside the nature of the creation as the ground of being. All phenomena in the world come into existence through this law. Therefore, in Wesley, when the thing roots in the law it is good and flourishes. When it exists in rebellion against the law, it is bad and becomes corrupt from within itself.<sup>86</sup>

Using the cultural analysis of Troeltsch, Wesley's understanding of law can be classified as characteristically English. In his *Deutscher*

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<sup>84</sup> SERMONS, Vol. I, p. 155.

<sup>85</sup> Cushman, Robert, "Salvation for All," in *Methodism* edited by W. K. Anderson (New York: The Methodist Publishing House, 1947).

<sup>86</sup> SERMONS, Vol. II, p. 48f.

*Geist und Westeuropa*<sup>37</sup> Troeltsch discusses the German spirit by means of comparison with that of England and France. According to Troeltsch's cultural types analysis, the English and French types stress the organic tie between man and nature. In contrast to this the German spirit emphasizes the confrontation of man in his freedom with nature. Man's freedom, according to the English and French types, consists in the fact that man's roots lie deep in nature and his life is free when he lives according to the law of nature. The German spirit, on the other hand, as is typically seen in the German idealism of the nineteenth century, insists on man's freedom to make his ground of existence his own free individual self. Man's existential posture is sought in completely cutting himself off from nature and standing over against it. Though similar in their insistence upon man's essential union with nature, the English and French types are different from one another in that the former considers nature morally positing a conscience common to all men illustrated by the Puritan revolution in the seventeenth century, while the latter considers nature in terms of reason as a common feature of all men as illustrated in the French Revolution of the eighteenth century. Both understand that when man lives in harmony with nature he lives best. The spirit seen in Wesley's theology clearly belongs to the English type. In Wesley the original law in nature is the universal ground of man's existence and knowledge. Man's freedom is in fulfilling the original law which is love. The fact that the original law constitutes the universal ground for the existence and knowledge of all mankind from the beginning makes it possible for man, carrying his existential questions, to meet God's revelation, which carries the answers.

Considering the matter in this light, we see that the existentialist tendency of Wesley's theology belongs to Troeltsch's English type. In Wesley's theology nature exists in the ground of man's being and knowing. In Wesley, however, nature does not have answers to the existential questions. Nature only raises the questions; it provides no answers. Man, who, on the basis of that original law which constitutes the ground of his being, is judged, who, burdened with sin, has existential anxiety and questions, receives forgiveness from Christ. Because the original law is conceived of as the common nature of all men, dialogue is possible between the believer and the non-believer. All men (consciously or unconsciously) share a common existential distress, the pain of the burden of sin. On that common ground, dialogue, the common existential questions and the expectation of answers to those questions can come into existence. Therefore, Wesley's theology can be called evangelical theology. The theological basis of his mission to

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<sup>37</sup> Troeltsch, Ernest, *Deutscher Geist und Westeuropa* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1925).

preach the visitation of salvation to all men is found at this point and it is essentially an epistemological point. The category of nature is the foundation of Wesley's epistemology. Nature, which is for Wesley the original law of love, is the foundation of man's being and knowing.

Thus, man, according to Wesley, repents under the influence of law (the working of God's prevenient grace in natural man) before he comes to justification by faith in Christ. God's special grace in Christ is the answer to the existential questions of natural man. There is, in this sense, *self-understanding* even before the reception of the special revelation.<sup>38</sup> There are two dimensions in Wesley's epistemology: the dimension of question and the dimension of answer. These are comparable to Tillich's correlationism. In Wesley, the questions are mostly existential and accordingly the answers are also mostly existential. This is a result of the fact that Wesley has been influenced not by Aristotelianism but by the empiricism of John Locke.

#### V. EXISTENTIALISTIC TENDENCY

Wesley's experientialism was one which had a distinctive tendency. In contemporary terms there is no other way to describe this than as an existentialist tendency. For the purpose of illustrating this I wish first to consider Wesley's attitude toward miracles. The following is a clear statement of Wesley's concerning the authority of Scripture.

There are four major arguments which strongly cause us to understand that the Bible is from God. In other words, miracles, prophecy, good doctrine, and the moral character of the authors.<sup>39</sup>

Wesley divided miracles into two classes and considered both as evidences of the truth of Christianity. The first, he called traditional evidence. These are the miracles related in the Bible. Wesley did not deny the authenticity of these miracles. He said they should be given their place and due honor. However, this traditional evidence because of the great length of time which has passed between it and us is weak in persuasive power.

The second type is the internal or inward evidence, and it is always fresh. It is the joy, peace, and holiness which God gives directly in the spirit of the believer. This very thing is the eternal life which we can experience here and now on this earth. Consequently, even if it were possible to shake the traditional evidence, the faith of one who has the internal evidence will not be shaken.<sup>40</sup> Wesley does not simply say that internal evidence is more valuable as evidence than traditional

<sup>38</sup> SERMONS I, p. 155. cf. note #34 above.

<sup>39</sup> WORKS, Vol. XI, p. 484.

<sup>40</sup> LETTERS, Vol. II, p. 383-385.



evidence. In one place he goes so far as to write as if they were opposite in effect.

I have sometimes been almost inclined to believe that the wisdom of God has in most later ages permitted the external evidence of Christianity to be more or less clogged and encumbered for this very end, that men (of reflection especially) might not altogether rest there, but be constrained to look into themselves also and attend to the light shining in their hearts.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, at least, Wesley is attempting to direct our attention to inner miracles by pushing aside outer miracles. If this were carried to its conclusion, concentrating completely on the inner, excluding concern for the outer, this indeed would be the appearance of existentialist theology.

Wesley's experientialism does not go that far. However, it clearly has a tendency in that direction. In any case, he strips away the necessity of relying on the traditional evidences of faith. Troeltsch recognizes this emphasis on inner miracle as characteristic of Methodism.<sup>42</sup>

The second thing I want to consider as an indication of the existentialist tendency of Wesley's experientialism is something that is inseparable from the argument thus far. This is his stress on the *immediacy* of the believer's fellowship with God. That which Wesley calls the internal evidence of Christianity is nothing other than walking the way of the new life in which the believer experiences the forgiveness of sins in the present fellowship with God.

It (salvation) is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death; or, as we usually speak, in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question: '*Ye are saved.*' It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of.<sup>43</sup>

Here also Wesley's tendency toward "relationism" is seen in his attempt to think of salvation concentrating on the present fellowship with God. The emphasis is placed on the believer's present existential relation to God.

The third thing I want to lift up as evidence of the existential tendency of Wesley's experientialism is his doctrine of Christian Perfection. The perfection he taught was not absolute perfection which is free from errors of knowledge, or from weakness, *i.e.* Adamic per-

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<sup>41</sup> LETTERS, Vol. II, pp. 384-385.

<sup>42</sup> Troeltsch, Ernst, *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung* (Berlin: Pen Verlag Rolf Heise, 1924), p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> SERMONS, Vol. II, pp. 444-445.

fection. Rather it was the perfection exemplified in the man Jesus who on the basis of love committed no sins. Wesley maintained that as it is assumed that we share the same human nature with Jesus Christ—this is, of course, the meaning of Incarnation—we also during this life can, like Jesus, come to the state where all our acts and thoughts are directed by love. However, perfection, even though we may possess it at one moment through God's grace, can be completely lost through our carelessness.<sup>44</sup>

Here, setting the self itself as subject, now in this very moment, the existential decisional self directed by love is being spoken of. In the moment of decision, the self, *becoming completely free from its past self*, and facing resolutely toward the immediate future, leaps forward with the intention of the formation of the true self of creative love. Otherwise, Wesley could not think of any possibility of perfection in this life at all. Such is the existentialistic tendency of Wesley's experientialism.

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. the author's article "Wesley's Understanding of Christian Perfection" in *Japanese Contributions to the Study of John Wesley* (Wesleyan Studies No. 3, Wesleyan College, Macon, Georgia, 1967), for a fuller discussion.

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