

1942 - Group 1

HOW DO WE DISCOVER THE PATRISTIC SOURCES
IN THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN WESLEY?

by

Roberta C. Chesnut

Without any doubt John Wesley is indebted to the patristic fathers in some way for a good deal of his theological synthesis: the question is, what would it take to be able to determine the extent of that indebtedness? The task is clearly not easy, for several reasons. Wesley himself on principle wrote, he says in his preface to the Sermons on Several Occasions, as though he had forgotten every thing he had ever read; he eschewed theological jargon and catch phrases taken from others, and he so thoroughly assimilated what he needed for his own system from his reading, that it is hard to determine what came from where. This being so, however, a great deal of useful work is still not only possible but necessary if Wesley is to achieve, finally, the attention as a theologian he deserves. This little paper is an attempt to sketch out some of the problems that need to be solved if we are to advance in our knowledge of Wesley's use of the fathers. I wish to identify three problems, though I shall spend most of my time discussing the first and third. These problems can be put as follows: (1) How are we to interpret the "patristic theology" supposed to have had an influence on Wesley? (2) How would Wesley have found this theology interpreted in his own day? (3) How are we to judge the direction and extent of any individual patristic writer's influence on Wesley? The first two

questions, hermeneutical and historical in character, must be carried out before we can hope for an accurate approach to individual texts.

I. When it comes to theology, as in so many other areas, we are the heirs of the Enlightenment and its consequences in the nineteenth century. Part of that heritage is an implicit judgment made for us that 'real theology' is only that which is systematic, speculative, and above all 'creative.' What is not real theological writing is that which is 'merely practical,' and which addresses itself most basically to questions pertaining to the Christian life in all its aspects--material classified in patrologies as 'ascetical writings', homiletical writings, and exegesis. No doubt this way of classification had its roots in the sense that 'real theology' is somehow 'universal' or at least 'universalizable', while the 'merely practical' is always too particular, and too contingent upon its own times. At any rate, for whatever reason we make such a judgment, neither the early church nor Wesley would have agreed with it. For them doctrine is significant in so far as it always has practical consequences in the life of the individual Christian, or in the life of the church: for example, in the christological controversies the underlying question always had to do with the issue of our own salvation in Christ. That is why people were so hot under the collar about how many natures there were in Christ. The heart and soul of the church of the fourth century lay, not with academic theologians, or even with archbishop theologians: it lay with the monks who acted as living witnesses to the reality of the Christian promises. Now Wesley was not a monk, but he shared with the early church their viewpoint concerning what the fundamental Christian enterprise was about. Creativity was not a virtue to the early church--indeed, it was de rigueur to accuse one's theological opponent of it--and it does not seem to have been a virtue for Wesley, either. For both Wesley and his patristic

predecessors believed in the reality of a living faith, faithfully handed down to us from the time of the apostles. (Wesley was original, of course, perhaps even brilliant in the way in which in all that he did he always insisted on maintaining the connection between doctrine and Christian action.) And so we are not surprised to find that Wesley includes in the first volume of the Christian Library not excerpts from Athanasius's On the Incarnation or Origen's On First Principles, but Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, and Macarius, all writers who gave concrete and humble embodiment to the great doctrines of the early church. If we wish to discover, then, Wesley's connection with the patristic fathers, we must ourselves take the early writers on the Christian life seriously as well as those whom we are more accustomed to regarding as 'real theologians.'

There is another important aspect to this interpretative task. Wesley without any doubt had read an amazing knowledge of patristic literature as a whole; he was widely read in latin patristics, he read Ephrem in Syriac, and he had a deep understanding of Greek patristics, from the second century onward. Onva Boshears, Jr.'s dissertation John Wesley, the Bookman: a Study of his Reading Interests in the Eighteenth Century (Univ. of Mich. 1973) recounts for us all that he read in each period of his life, both primary and secondary sources. The problem is this: how much did Wesley assimilate the basic themes and convictions of, most particular, Eastern patristics as a whole, and how much was he influenced by individual writers who took these themes as their own within their particular synthesis? The question is an important one, for unless one recognizes the particular themes of Eastern patristic literature as common to most theological writers of the early church, one will fall into the trap of finding the themes in a particular author, finding them in Wesley, and assuming, falsely, that Wesley must have been influenced by that particular writer. Let me list for you

some of these distinctive themes, every one of which Wesley incorporates, or shares, or uses in modified form in his own theological system.

1. The belief that God as creator has placed us in a universe which, in its ordered and regular functioning, expresses the intensely personal creator who informs it with his active presence.
2. The belief that God placed the human race in his universe, which already expressed his love and his power, to be his image, and gave to them his law (Wesley calls it the law of love), by which they were to be sustained in that image, participating in the life of God, and living in continuity with the universe. The law, lost or damaged in the human heart following the fall, has been restored to us in Christ. The key term for understanding the law: love.
3. Because of the fundamental connection between the law, our ability to know God, and the work of Christ, there can be no knowledge of God without a corresponding life of virtue.
4. The end of the Christian life is 'perfection' (Wesley calls it "perfection in love"; perfection takes a different shape in various Eastern writers, but all agree that it has to do with the restoration of the damaged image of God. It is attainable in this life, but never complete, even in the next life. It is not understood as a negative freedom from sin, so much as the attaining of the positive attributes of Christ.
5. The ability to attain any of these attributes, however, is the result of God's grace, without which human beings are unable to do any good work; at the same time, a Christian must work without ceasing to do his part in the restoration of God's image: characters are not transformed without human effort, as well as God's grace.
6. The work of Christ has to do with the restoration of the human potential, understood either as the restoration of our human nature, or of our human,

obedient will.

7. Our appropriation of the work of Christ begins with our baptism into his body and continues in the eucharist. But the efficacy of the sacraments, as well as the guarantee that the teaching we receive is the teaching of the apostles, depends on the faithful function of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the church. Unity and continuity are very important.

These are some, but not all of the basic themes of the early church which appear in one form or another in Wesley's theology. One must make some decisions about Wesley's relationship to these general themes and the form they take in Wesley's thought before one can go on to the question of the particular influence of individual writers on Wesley.

II. Yet here a second type of problem must be briefly mentioned, and it is an historical counterpart to the preceding task of interpreting patristic theology today. Wesley lived during a patristic renaissance, and he read a great deal that was written about the early church by writers of his own day. It would be most useful in a study of Wesley and the fathers to know what was in the secondary sources Wesley read, and how he stood with respect to them. Some of them we already know, of course, (see his Letter to Conyers Middleton), but most, I expect, we do not know. What were their issues? What themes would they pick out as major in patristic literature? Was Wesley a maverick in his reading? We need to know this in order to prevent the standards of present day patristic scholarship from being read automatically back into Wesley's time.

III. Finally, we come to the problem of reading particular authors for their influence on Wesley. But which authors shall we select? Wesley, as we know, was extremely well read in patristics, and was almost certainly influenced in some way by many different authors. In this short section I will merely suggest several names for further research. In addition I wish to spend a

little time with the Macarian Homilies addressing a peculiar problem with the literature as well as suggesting a model approach to it, for I believe the Macarian Homilies represent probably the single most significant patristic influence on Wesley.

It is Wesley himself who points us to the significance of Macarius in the first volume of the Christian library. This volume contains: (1) excerpts from Clement of Rome, Polycarp, and Ignatius, all of whom Wesley regarded with almost the respect he felt for the Bible, (2) excerpts from the Macarian Homilies, a collection of fourth century homilies believed in Wesley's day to have been written by one of the founding fathers of monasticism, Macarius the Egyptian (modern scholarship places the author of this literature more probably in 4th century Syria) and finally, (3) excerpts from John Arndt (1555-1621), a German Lutheran pietist who was steeped in the Macarian literature. What Wesley has done for us, therefore, is to provide us with patristic material he regarded as of fundamental significance, and some hermeneutical help in reading that literature. The task, therefore, is to make use of what Wesley has provided us with.

Though Macarius is the key figure here, for he and his commentator John Arndt occupy the major part of the volume, before we can get to the question of Wesley and Macarius, we have to tackle a question unnecessarily raised by the German scholar Werner Jaeger on the relationship between Gregory of Nyssa and the Macarian material. The outcome of Jaeger's theories and his refusal (which, fortunately, illustrates the impact of my previous two 'problems') to take the Macarian materials, including the homilies, seriously, has resulted in the widespread belief among Wesley scholars that Wesley was in fact influenced not by the Macarian synthesis, which we meet in the homilies, and which Wesley so beautifully presents, but by Gregory of Nyssa, in a watered down version in the homilies. Thus we have the baffling fact

of Brightman's dissertation on the relationship between Gregory and Wesley (he found no direct influence, by the way), but up until now, nothing on the relationship between the Macarian corpus and Wesley. As far as I can determine, here is how this happened: Jaeger discovered a manuscript, which he found to be in such a literary relationship to the Macarian "Great Letter" that one seemed to have borrowed from the other. The first appeared to be the product of Gregory of Nyssa. Now Jaeger, sharing the prejudices of other patristic scholars of his day, automatically assumed that the more "theological" and "original" of the two writers on other grounds would have been responsible for the earlier document; further, Jaeger was trained as a classicist, a scholar of Greek culture. He was not, therefore, I believe, prepared to treat the writings of a "barbarian" non-Greek seriously. Because Gregory is a "great theologian," and a Greek, the first half of the "Great Letter" was therefore determined to be a simple copying of Gregory's "On the Christian Mode of Life". As for the Macarian Homilies, which Wesley abridges and quotes from, Jaeger, with practically no study of them, claims that they, too, are merely workings out of Gregory of Nyssa's themes. Thus, Brightman's dissertation. But why does it matter? It matters because Gregory is a Christian platonist; Macarius is not. If one reads Macarius through the eyes of the Christian platonists, one misses altogether the true nature of the Macarian synthesis and its relation to Wesley. Sin, for example, has a significance and a reality for the Macarian author it does not have for Gregory, who regards it as a clouding over of the good by the passions. "Love," a key term for both writers, does not mean the same thing for both writers. In both of these examples, and there are many others, Wesley is closer to Macarius than to Gregory. So the first element of determining the influence of Macarius on Wesley is the laying to rest of Jaeger's hypothesis, and the discovery of the content of the Macarian synthesis.

The second element is to discover how Wesley read Macarius. There are three obvious steps necessary. First, one must make a careful study of what Wesley included, what he left out, and what he modified of the Macarian Homilies. This can be done by a comparison of Wesley's shortened version in the Christian Library with the full text of the homilies which he abridged. (A side question: what text did Wesley use?) An example: Macarius has a stern and peculiar doctrine of the Holy Spirit. What has Wesley done to it and why?

The second step: to determine by reading the patristic scholarship of Wesley's day which Wesley himself read, what was thought about 'Macarius', and what texts were available. How did Wesley make use of this material? Were the Macarian Homilies linked with any other patristic or modern writers? If so, in what way?

The third step: Wesley tells us in the preface to the volume that he has found a consistency, theologically speaking, in all the writings he includes together. This tells us to read the Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp, as well as the John Arndt as they stand in this volume as keys to Wesley's understanding of Macarius. (Of course, to see what he left out of these other writers, as well as noting how he modified them is another project.) An example of the value of this: One will find, I believe, that the Clement and especially Ignatius's Letter to the Ephesians will illumine the reading of Macarius, and will be most helpful in a discussion of the relationship of love and faith to the final end of the Christian life in Wesley. (...."Faith is the beginning, love the end: and both being joined in one, are of God. All other things pertaining to holiness follows. For no man that hath faith sinneth; and none that hath love hateth any man." Letter to the Ephesians.)

I have taken up a considerable amount of time on problems relating to Wesley's connection with Macarius, first, because they illustrate so well

what I have pointed out as problems in the first half of the paper; second, because they illustrate the kinds of tasks that must be done if we are to evaluate the influence of any particular writer on Wesley; and third, because I believe Macarius is in many ways the most important of Wesley's patristic influences. But Macarius is not the only important influence. In the little remaining time, let me suggest to you quickly other avenues of investigation that I am nearly certain will prove to be important: throughout his life Wesley read Ephrem Syrus, whom he referred to as that "man of a broken heart." Wesley would I imagine, have found Ephrem on repentance, the Holy Spirit, and faith most congenial, for Ephrem, like Macarius, takes the great Greek patristic themes and softens them in such a manner that they seem less in conflict with reformation theology. Ephrem was very popular in Wesley's century. How did Ephrem stand with respect to the themes already outlined? How did scholars and churchmen of Wesley's day read him and how did Wesley read them? Finally, what can be determined of how Wesley read Ephrem?

Next, a study of Wesley and Clement of Alexandria would be useful. Wesley, we know, made use of him early in life, but found him less congenial later on, finding him, he says, more Stoic and less Christian than he should be. Then also, work needs to be done on Wesley's relationship to the Christian platonists of the early church, perhaps most of all to Origen; particularly on the questions of the will, grace, love and our knowledge of God. Then there are the apostolic fathers, whom we have already met, and Cyprian on the doctrine of the church. All of these are useful projects for discovering the relationship between Wesley and the early church, and of course, many more are possible.

Nevertheless, once all these investigations are completed, we still will not have the final answer to the question of the patristic influences on Wesley,

because there will yet remain the question of the way in which Wesley combined what he read with the astounding amount of non-patristic theology he was equally at home in. What part of what he read reinforced, say, the Edwardian homilies in his mind, and what part made him read them in a different light? This we can never fully know; I am sure Wesley himself could not tell us the answer. But this ambiguity is always present when we study the thought of any historical figure. Conclusions are generally much more tentative than we like to think they are, but this does not take away from the value of the enterprise.

Wesley was a genius, a great theologian who has been underrated in the history of Christian thought, probably for some of the same reasons patristic writers on the spiritual life have been underrated. His deep understanding of the patristic sources upon which he draws and our own modern difficulties in tracing his particular influences tends, in my opinion, to underline that genius.

Roberta C. Chesnut
Associate Professor of Church History
Candler School of Theology
Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia 30322