



## Providence and Prevenience: Wesleyan Theology for a World Context

Philip R. Meadows

In his discourse *Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (III)*, Wesley takes the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God," and makes a direct connection between Christian maturity and a life lived in the immediate and abiding presence of God.

The pure in heart see all things full of God... They see the Creator of all wisely governing all, and 'upholding all things by the word of his power.' 'O Lord, our Governor, how excellent is thy name in all the world! In all his providences relating to themselves, to their souls or bodies, the pure in heart do more particularly see God.'<sup>1</sup>

Wesley is here indicating that purity of heart involves an opening of the spiritual senses, as the veil of our sinful affections is lifted, such that one can, by faith, perceive God's purpose and activity. "God is in all things," says Wesley, and

we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism, but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

Through his preaching, teaching, and pastoral genius, Wesley sought to draw people into what we would refer to today as a particular 'worldview': a way of reading the world in God, and God in the world, which has deeply spiritual and practical consequences for the Christian life. These passages most succinctly encapsulate the basis of Wesley's worldview, which envisions all of life lived in the presence of God, a God of providence who cares for the whole world and, more particularly, the well-being and flourishing of every creature within it.

The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* states that "a worldview constitutes an overall perspective on life that sums up what we *know* about the world, how we *evaluate* it emotionally, and how we *respond* to it volitionally." We all have some worldview or other (whether it is religious or not) that is constitutive of all our patterns of thinking and doing.<sup>3</sup> Having a worldview is not an optional extra in life, but a fundamental part of our human cognitive makeup that conditions the way we interpret the world and respond to it. It explains our attitudes toward people of other races, cultures and religions. It conditions our reactions to the developments of medicine, science and technology. It determines our responses to the needs of the poor, social caring, and the pursuit of justice. In short, it is the cause and the condition for the way we understand and value the world, what it means to be human, and how we should live together. Here, I argue that the doctrine of providence forms perhaps the most fundamental category for understanding the worldview of Wesley and his successors, and is the basis for many of their practical-theological perspectives. 2

Wesley lived, however, in a time when people's understanding of the world was changing dramatically. In particular, he sought to articulate his theology against an emerging rationalistic and Deistic worldview, propelled by advances in scientific discovery, that tended to remove God from the world. In their hands, God was becoming an impersonal and distant Creator who made the world to function as an autonomous mechanism, subject to its own inbuilt 'natural' laws and teleology, without any further 'intervention' or 'interference.'

It remained acceptable, however, to construe the idea of God's providence in *general* terms, as the enduing of creation with the resources necessary for its own continuing existence. What was becoming an anathema to such thinking, however, was the notion that God should care in a *particular* sense, partially and providentially, for the well-being of individual creatures. Now, this Deistic worldview was antithetical to Wesley's own experience and pastoral concerns. For him, God is present and active, everywhere and in all

circumstances, taking the initiative to transform hearts and minds in the pursuit of human flourishing.

In his sermon *On Divine Providence*, which takes the text of Luke 12:7, "Even the very hairs of your head are numbered," Wesley gives a useful definition of providence as the truth "that all things, all events in the world, are under the management of God."<sup>4</sup> As an indication of the importance of this doctrine for Wesley, he placed this sermon first in volume six of his *Sermons on Several Occasions*, and Outler highlights the fact that "from 1744 through 1785 he had used this present text (Luke 12:7) no fewer than forty-five times."<sup>5</sup>

In the first place, Wesley rightly reads the biblical narratives, from both the old and new testaments, as pointing to the personal involvement of God in the history of world, acting in particular ways, with particular people (or nations), to particular ends. Scripture is a 'book of providence,' or the 'history of God,' which testifies to the purpose and providential activity of 'God with us.'<sup>6</sup> The theological method which Wesley employs in defence of this doctrine moves dialectically between the particular and the general. It is, however, from the universal experience of God's *particular* providence, a view which he wants to draw us into, that Wesley expounds the *general* attributes of God's relationship with the world. To complete the hermeneutical circle, it also becomes clear that Wesley's concept of prevenience (or prevenient grace), as defining the special relationship between God and human beings is a particular instance of, his wider concept of providence.

In this paper I shall outline some aspects of Wesley's theology which help define his multi-faceted doctrine of providence. In doing so, I shall follow the argument as presented in his sermon *On Divine Providence*, inscribing other key texts and insights from the tradition where relevant.<sup>7</sup> In the light of this study, I will suggest some key features, or trajectories, which could inform the enterprise of doing Wesleyan theology today, in a world context. That is, for developing a Wesleyan worldview which can inscribe the plurality and ambiguity of our contemporary context.

### Providence: God's Relationship with the World

In order to understand the nature of providence, one must understand the nature of the God of providence; for what God does is determined by what God is.<sup>8</sup> God is first and foremost *Creator*, bringing the world into existence 'out of nothing,' *ex nihilo*. In our sermon, Wesley briefly recapitulates the order of creation found in Genesis in order to establish two things: first, that God made and declared every *particular* part of his creation 'good'; but second, that it was in the interdependence and interconnectedness of its great complexity and diversity that God declared it to be 'very good.' The point that Wesley makes here, is that the fitness of creation as a whole is measured by its ability to foster the fitness of individual creatures.

Wesley stresses the theme of creation *ex nihilo* to emphasise the absolute ontological and existential contingency of the world on God. It is in this context that he also describes God as not only Creator but *Sustainer* and *Preserver* of the world.<sup>9</sup> Just as God's creative power "was absolutely necessary for the *beginning* of their existence," says Wesley, "it is equally so for the *continuance* of it: were his almighty influence withdrawn they could not subsist a moment longer."<sup>10</sup> If the presence of God the Sustainer were to be withdrawn even for a moment, the whole universe, created out of nothing, would fall into nothing. For only God is self-existent.<sup>11</sup> As Preserver of the world, Wesley means that God keeps all creatures in that degree of well-being which is suitable to their several natures. He preserves them in their several relations, connections, and dependencies, so as to compose one system of beings, to form one entire universe, according to the counsel of his will."<sup>12</sup>

Wesley's argument proceeds by grounding the concept of providence in God's attributes of *omnipresence*, *omniscience*, and *omnipotence*:<sup>13</sup> between which there is a necessary logical and theological connection.<sup>14</sup> Wesley's personalism is manifest in the idea that God, like any other personal being, can only act where he is present: God never achieves his purposes by proxy, but through personal relation.<sup>15</sup> In order to sustain the world in every part, from moment to moment, therefore, God must be omnipresent.<sup>16</sup>

Not only that, for God to preserve his creatures in all their complexity and diversity, with all their various needs, he must also be omniscient.<sup>17</sup> To speak in terms of God as all knowing denotes his immediate and intimate knowledge of all creatures: their creaturely capacities and interrelations, in all their contingent states, and with all their future

possibilities.<sup>18</sup> God is omniscient because he sees all things, from moment to moment, and he sees all things because He is omnipresent.<sup>19</sup>

For Wesley, the question of omnipotence also lies in its meaning for God's personal and providential care of the world. The emphasis is on God's infinite power to sustain and preserve the whole created order, and his ability to act ceaselessly and ubiquitously towards the good of all creatures. God is omnipotent because he can act everywhere, and he can act everywhere because he is omnipresent.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Wesley points out that "to deny the omnipresence of God implies likewise the denial of his omnipotence. To set bounds to one is undoubtedly to set bounds to the other also."<sup>21</sup> Which is, of course, precisely what the Deists had done.

Although the manner of God's presence and activity ultimately remains a mystery, Wesley is clearly attracted to the idea that there is an homology between the pervasive presence and government of the human soul over its body, and that of God as the soul of the world.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Wesley allows anthropology to model cosmology. For Wesley, the value of this lay in understanding that God, like the human soul, "is not only 'all in the whole, but all in every part'" of creation.<sup>23</sup> Here, again, Wesley keeps in view his primary concern for the fulness of God's presence and particular providence toward every creature. The dialectic between the general and the particular, the macroscopic and the microscopic, is a recurrent feature in Wesley's theology of providence, and throughout the Wesleyan tradition.

God's knowledge is both universal and atomic in scope; penetrating the essence of all things: their relatedness, properties, powers, needs, and experiences are all immediately present to him. Thus, Wesley's God is poles apart from the Epicurean tendencies of the Deists: affirming his continual interest in the welfare of both individual people and the whole created order. As a theological consequence of God's immediate presence, Wesley suggests that God even "sees what any angel, any devil, any man, either thinks, or speaks, or does; yea, and all they feel. He sees all their sufferings, with every circumstance of them."<sup>24</sup> Given Wesley's understanding of the immediacy of God's presence and experience - that he is the soul, not only of the world, but of human souls - it is not going too far to suggest that God is even the subject of our subjectivity. That is, God experiences the affections of human beings as though they were his own; not least, because the very capacity for affection in them is grounded in his sustaining and motivating presence.

In his sermon on *The Worship of God*, Richard Watson enlarges upon these divine attributes by emphasising that God is also 'unchangeable,'<sup>25</sup> or immutable. Watson carefully defines this attribute in terms of God's personal relationship with the world, in which it is quite proper for God to be the subject of various changing affections in relation to world events. Unchangeability is not impassability; rather, God's experimental knowledge of the world reflects the constant holiness, love and goodness with which he responds to the needs of creation. Thus, says Watson, "the Scriptures nowhere warrant us to consider God as a cold metaphysical abstraction."<sup>26</sup>

In stark contrast to the Deists, Wesley asserted that the stuff of the universe is *in itself* totally inert: without motion, direction, or purpose. It is only as God the *Author* of all, fills, energises and actuates the whole, and every part, that there can be any causal connections in the universe at all.<sup>27</sup> It is the idea of God as *Governor* of the world, however, which includes and completes all the other attributes: God continuously superintends the whole creation, directing all things, in their complexity and diversity, to their various ends. Wesley finds in the words of St. Augustine a formula which expresses this well - "thou presidest over each creature as if it were the universe, and over the universe as over each individual creature"<sup>28</sup> - a formula which he uses frequently. Again, in contrast to the Deist's view, which stressed the autonomy of the world, Wesley clearly articulates an inseparable moment to moment dependence of the world on God.

Finally, Wesley describes God as the *Redeemer* and the *End* of all things,<sup>29</sup> signifying the purpose and goal of God's presence and providential activity: in saving people from the guilt and power of sin, in and through the vagaries of worldly existence, as their vale of soul making.



### Reading the World Providentially

The emerging Deistic worldview of Wesley's time could not conceive of God's providential action in anything other than general terms. It was common to uphold God as the Creator, or First Cause of the universe, but then to assign all subsequent events to the operation of secondary causes independent of any continuing divine agency. Central to the Deistic view of general providence, therefore, is God's impartiality and passivity over the already established created order: God created and invested the natural world with its own teleology, to be governed by its own *natural* laws. For Wesley, however, there is no such thing as a natural law, if by 'natural' one means an inherent direction or purpose in creation considered apart from God. The regularities of nature are but manifestations of the faithfulness and consistency of God in upholding the complexity and interrelatedness of creation, from moment to moment.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, it *is* possible to speak of God as upholding general laws, but to begin with generalities is to miss the theological point. For the Deists, it is an anathema to suggest that God pays attention to, and acts on behalf of, any particular creature. For Wesley, however, the reality is that all God's providential activity is particular. Wesley asks, "what is a general (of whatever kind it be) that includes no particulars? Is not every general necessarily made up of its several particulars?"<sup>31</sup> The existence of any general 'laws' is entirely dependent upon God acting in a particular way, with faithful and dependable regularity.

Indeed, it is only with respect to the *particularity* of God's activity that we can speak of his personal government and guidance of the universe: any law taken in its *generality* is ultimately impersonal, impartial, and unconcerned for the well being of individual creatures. Adam Clarke tells us that

It is impossible for what we term *general* laws, to guide and govern the universe. God's providence *is* general... but it is also particular; it takes in the isles as well as the continents, the species as well as the genera, the individual as well as the family... It is by a particular providence that God governs the world, notices the fall of a sparrow, and number the hairs of our heads.<sup>32</sup>

There is no creature, at any time, that is governed by impersonal 'laws,' for all circumstances and events are grounded in God's personal and providential activity. To think of God's guidance and rule over events in the world as 'interference' or 'intervention' is to miss the point: outside God's moment to moment providence, there is nothing to interfere with!<sup>33</sup> It is also for this reason that Wesleyan theologians have refused to rule out miracles. The rationalists' rejection of miracle is consistent with the autonomy of 'natural' law. On these terms, miracle must involve the omnipotent intervention of a *transcendent God* overruling the natural regularities of the world, *from the outside*. For Wesley, on the other hand, miracle involves the omnipotent providence of an *immanent God*, choosing to do things differently for a moment, *on the inside*. William Burt Pope insisted that miracle, as a manifestation of God's "personal authority is not a violation of law, nor a suspension of it, but the introduction of a new and sufficient cause of any effect he would produce."<sup>34</sup>

Miracles aside, the key truth at stake for the Wesleyan theologian is the providential care of a personal God over particular creatures. Reading the world providentially is about growing a worldview which interprets all the regularities and vagaries of existence to be in the good purpose of God for our lives. In January 1804, Joseph Benson, the editor of the *Methodist Magazine* began a regular column entitled *The Works of God Displayed*, in which he began by publishing extracts from famous works on divine providence for the readers.<sup>35</sup> In June of that year, juxtaposed to this column, Benson also began publishing personal anecdotes, as evidence in support of the truths being taught, under the title of *The Providence of God Attested*.<sup>36</sup> These columns, like the class and band meetings before them, sought to nurture people in a Wesleyan worldview, an experimental religion grounded in the ever loving presence and gracious activity of God.

The continuing fundamental issue is how one reads and interprets the events of the world. A Wesleyan approach to this is to employ different modes of theological discourse which, when applied to any given event, can afford a number of true perspectives simultaneously. In his sermon on *God with Us*, Richard Watson laments the way that many

Christians were being persuaded by the discoveries of science, and the developments in medicine, to remove God from the phenomenal universe. He says:

The fault which is charged upon these philosophising Christians is not that secondary causes are investigated, arranged, and exhibited by their industry; but that they do this in an atheistical manner; and that these second causes are used, not as manifestations of God, but as veils to hide him from the sight of his creatures, - in a word, as criminal contrivances to forget him.<sup>37</sup>

Rather, science and theology are not in conflict but represent different ways of reading the world, involving different modes of discourse: both *natural* and *supernatural*. So, the language of science is an appropriate way to describe the world from a naturalistic point of view. The deeper Wesleyan response to such discoveries, however, is to interpret its true significance in a world filled with the presence and providence of God. Scientific explanations, therefore, can be valued on their own terms, but they do not represent the ultimate significance of things.<sup>38</sup> For Wesley and his successors, the natural is grounded in, and finally explained by, the supernatural.

Thus, Wesleyans reading the world providentially can affirm the method and explanatory power of naturalistic discourse, without reducing the world to *mere* nature, construing its ultimate significance as manifesting God's providential activity.

### **Prevenience: God's Relationship with Human Beings**

As I have emphasised, Wesley's pastoral-theological enterprise is primarily concerned with the *modus operandi* of God's particular providential care over humankind. Returning to his sermon *On Divine Providence*, Wesley says that

Herein lies the depth of the wisdom of God in his adorable providence! In governing men so as not to destroy either their understanding, will, or liberty! He commands all things both in heaven and on 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. An attentive inquirer may easily discern, the whole frame of divine providence is so constituted as to afford man every possible help, in order to his doing good and eschewing evil, which can be done without turning man into a machine..<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the naturalistic descriptions of human beings as self-governing mechanisms, Wesley insisted that our *raison d'être* is constant personal communion with a present God, freely loving and responding to him, in the pursuit of holiness and happiness. In making human beings free moral agents, God has defined for himself the nature and limits of his own freedom to act in their lives. On the one hand, God can providentially order events, objectively speaking, so as to give his creatures every opportunity for turning to him and doing good. On the other hand, God acts through the operations of human conscience, subjectively speaking, to encourage the pursuit of holiness. In both these ways, says Wesley, "His power, being equal to His wisdom and goodness, continually *co-operates with them*."<sup>40</sup> Now, when we refer to God's particular activity in salvation, we use the language of grace; and when we refer to the *universal* nature of saving grace, we employ Wesley's language of prevenient grace.<sup>41</sup> Providence and grace are inseparable patterns of speech in Wesleyan theology. Indeed, Wesley himself tells us that prevenient grace is nothing other than an expression of the 'peculiar providence' of God.<sup>42</sup>

Wesley also affirms that, "the one end of all God's providential dispensations...is solely our sanctification; our recovery from that vile bondage... to the free love of our Creator."<sup>43</sup> The work of the Spirit *for us*, supplying the needs of our physical existence, supports the work of the Spirit *in us*, restoring us to holiness of heart and life.<sup>44</sup> Adam Clarke takes the text of Psalm 39, verses 5-9, as the basis for his sermon *On the Operations of Providence and Grace*, in which he tells us that "the operations of God's grace in the endless salvation of men, are not less conspicuous than his providential care in the support and preservation of their lives."<sup>45</sup> Clarke uses the metaphor of 'being under the shadow of God's wings,' to connect the ideas of providence and grace by exhorting people to take refuge

under the "two wings of that celestial benevolence": namely "(1) to trust in the divine providence for the preservation and supply of their bodies" and "(2) to trust in his mercy for the salvation of their souls."

William Burt Pope analyses God's providential work in terms of familiar Trinitarian discourse. The providence of the Father is displayed in his governance of all the *general* 'laws' of physical, mental, and spiritual 'nature,' and the *particular* care worked in and through them for meeting our creaturely needs. The providence of the Son, in his mediatorial role, is the governance of human beings as creatures in need of redemption.<sup>46</sup> The Spirit is also the God of providence in administering the activity of the Father and the Son in a co-operative unity. The Spirit of Christ, says Pope, "is the very hand of providence... in all the processes of salvation, preceding, accompanying, [and] following conversion."<sup>47</sup>

It is in this context, that the pattern of our Trinitarian language moves from that of God the Father, as Creator of human souls, to that of God the Son, as Saviour of human souls; and from Spirit of the Father, immanent in the world, to the Spirit of the Son, indwelling the human heart. Either way, providence or grace, we are speaking of the Spirit's immediate presence and ceaseless activity, caring for every human being. Although the language of providence is usually reserved for the work of God the Father, "if providence is taken in its widest meaning," says Pope, it includes "all the ways of God with man."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it is the testimony of the whole of scripture, Pope continues, that "the provision of his providence carries out the purpose of his grace."<sup>49</sup>

When we examine Wesley's language of universal prevenient grace, we find him using natural and supernatural modes of discourse analogous to the cosmological perspectives described above. The *locus classicus* for the doctrine of prevenient grace is to be found in Wesley's sermon *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*,<sup>50</sup> in which he makes several important points. First, we note Wesley's use of the term 'grace' which, frequently throughout his writings, actually signifies the indwelling and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, striving for the redemption and regeneration of humankind. Second, this universal presence and work of God is ascribed to the Spirit of Christ, who is the Light that enlightens everyone that comes into the world. Elsewhere, Wesley connects this idea of universal prevenient grace, as a fruit of the atonement, with the pre-existence of Christ as the 'Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world.' In this way, he gives a firm Christological basis for the redemptive operations of grace through the whole course of human history.<sup>51</sup> Third, no human being is in a state of *mere* nature: On the one hand, their very existence and agency is contingent upon the immediate sustaining and motivating presence of the Spirit. On the other hand, their moral sense comes by the Spirit's activity in and through the operations of conscience: a capacity contingent upon the presence and promptings.<sup>52</sup> Just as there are no natural 'laws' inherent in nature at large, so there is no natural conscience inherent in *mere* human nature, i.e. considered apart from the prevenient presence of God. The opening of our spiritual senses and the capacity for critical self-reflection, or human conscience, come from the Spirit's "holy motions within us,"<sup>53</sup> to which we can respond or resist.

When speaking of human subjectivity in this way, we are also encouraged to employ different modes of discourse. On the one hand, *naturally speaking*, human beings are spiritually inert, in bondage to their sinful natures, and unable to act rightly or salvifically. On the other hand, *supernaturally speaking*, the existence of conscience, liberty, and moral agency are expressions of God's prevenient presence in his creatures, governing and guiding them from moment to moment. When asking what it means to be human, then, it is proper but insufficient to speak simply in *natural* terms, for human beings cannot be reduced to mere physical or biological systems. To understand what it means to be fully human, one must employ *supernatural* terms: all human beings are graced, to a greater or lesser extent, by the indwelling presence of the Spirit, without which "we should be devils the next moment."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, to be human is to be inseparably dependent upon God for all that pertains to life: both physically and spiritually speaking. It is quite proper to say, therefore, that human *personality*, or human *subjectivity*, is co-constituted by nature and grace.<sup>55</sup>

To appreciate the salvific value of 'doing good works,' it is necessary to read human activity in its supernatural sense:<sup>56</sup> human beings can be said to work out their own salvation only insofar as it is God who works in them. It is, nevertheless, a human work, since all the



faculties of moral agency in the human subject are co-constituted by the presence and power of God.

What is certain is this, that God's providence and prevenience work *for us* and *in us* to bring about our salvation, understood broadly as both the promise of heaven and our present holiness (or wholeness) and happiness. This is a divine care that respects the particular circumstances of individuals and nations, and deals with all differently according to their need, as they are located in the complex web of creation history.

### **On Being 'Practical Theists': Partners in Providence**

The doctrines of providence and prevenience together express the outworking of God's will and purpose for the world, in creation and redemption, for body and soul. One might say that they define *the mission of God* to promote the prosperity and flourishing of all his creatures, physically and spiritually, in time and eternity. Through the operations of prevenient grace, human beings are enabled to perceive and co-operate with God's wider providential activity in the world; and in this way to become partners with providence.<sup>57</sup> This responsive partnership can be understood, therefore, as a *sharing in God's mission*, in seeking the well being of one's neighbours and all creation.

Adam Clarke points out that the inner compulsion, which all human beings share, to relieve the needs of their fellow creatures, is also a fruit of the Spirit of Christ, which enlightens all people. Reading the human condition supernaturally, such impulses are not 'natural' feelings, in the sense that they are inherent in *mere* nature, but flow from the prevenient presence of the Spirit in our hearts. "It is the *immediate* fruit of the *immediate* influence and inspiration of Jesus Christ," says Clarke:

it is something supernaturally communicated to the fallen spirit of man... a new principle implanted in human nature... in order that we might live in a kind of brotherhood with all mankind, and that every man might feel himself concerned and interested in the welfare of another.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, human beings can become "the means of dispensing many blessings to those in need,"<sup>59</sup> i.e. as partners in God's providence. This means getting involved with God's activity of sustaining, preserving, governing, and redeeming life according to his good purpose. It means being responsive to God wherever we are, from moment to moment, in very practical and particular ways. For neither God's providence nor Christian service is by proxy! God has given humankind a truly significant share in his purpose for renewing the world.

In drawing together the strands of our discussion so far, I want to suggest three dimensions of a Wesleyan worldview which can help fulfil this broad vision: that it should be open, optimistic, and dialogical.

### **Openness**

In the sermon *On Divine Providence*, Wesley begins by claiming the testimony of even non-Christians to the particular providential care of a personal God (or gods) in creation. This understanding derived from the prevenient illumination of their spiritual senses, enabling them to infer from creation the truth about God's provision, his justice and righteousness, and post-mortem states of existence. The universal light of Christ, which enlightens all human beings to varying degrees, means that God has never in any age or nation left himself without a witness in the human heart.<sup>60</sup>

This is typical of Wesley's openness to the universal work and experience of God in people's lives, though he is also at pains to point out that non-Christian belief systems, which attempt to express these experiences, are more or less defective compared to the truth revealed through the Christian scriptures.<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting, however, that although God may be revealed generally through creation history, and particularly through the Christian scriptures, neither are autonomous sources of knowledge. In his battle with the Deists, Wesley's position emphasises that God can only be known *through* the world, because God is *in* the world. Further, God can only be known *by* human beings, because God is *in* human beings. Reading the world providentially means that there is no general revelation or natural theology, if by 'general' or 'natural' one means an inherent power to communicate knowledge of God. It is only as the Spirit preveniently illumines the spiritual senses and the

faculty of reason that one can 'see' the God of providence at work. Similarly, there is no inherent power in the scriptures to reveal God, except that the same Spirit which inspired its writing, should illuminate one's reading. So, in the words of William Burt Pope, "all revelations of the unseen in the constitution of his [i.e. human] nature are supernatural; and all evidences of the presence and glory of God in the universe as seen by a man are supernatural."<sup>62</sup>

Just as both natural and moral laws are expressions of God's moment to moment government, so all the possibilities of human cognition and agency are governed by God, who is the inward principle of motion to our souls. Thus, the process of revelation is a matter of reading human cognition supernaturally. The promptings and guidance of the Spirit, are not violations of the 'natural' process of human cognition, as though we could think apart from God, but God speaking into a process which he himself sustains. The prophetic activity of the Spirit, which might be considered an epistemological 'miracle,' cannot be ruled out for the same reason. Indeed, whether it is knowledge of God or nature, it is the prevenient light of Christ which *gives* revelation and *aids* reason, to discover God in the world, and the world as it is in God.<sup>63</sup> Reason is not to be set against revelation, as the Deists suppose, but is itself 'revelatory' in operation: God reveals the nature of the world to human beings as well as revealing himself in and through it. It is possible, therefore, to see all great thinkers and humble learners as vehicles of revelation: communicators of truth, whether scientific, philosophical, ethical, aesthetic, or spiritual.

The only definition of *enthusiasm*, which Wesley allows no grounds for claiming at all, is "the imagining those things to be owing to the providence of God which are not owing thereto."<sup>64</sup> Why, because there is nothing that does not owe its existence, sustenance, and government to the particular providence of God. For Wesley, true religion is about walking by faith, with spiritual senses open to see the evidence (*elenchos*) of God's presence and activity in and through the whole creation.<sup>65</sup> In the words of The Marquis de Renty, Wesley describes spiritual maturity as bearing "an experimental verity and plenitude of the presence of the ever-blessed Trinity."<sup>66</sup> It is, thus, about constant communion with God: "no less than living in eternity, and walking in eternity... in the love of God and man," says Wesley. As such, it is the antithesis of dissipation, which Wesley defines as "the art of forgetting God, of being altogether 'without God in the world' - the art of excluding him, if not out of the world he has created, yet out of the minds of all his creatures."<sup>67</sup> This, says Wesley, "is the very quintessence of atheism," and he dubs all who live this way as *practical atheists*,<sup>68</sup> including the Deists, who, though they "may not advert to it, are really 'without God in the world.'"<sup>69</sup> In fact, we are all 'atheists in the world,' by nature, each necessitating an awakening of our spiritual senses, incipiently by prevenient grace, and fully in new-birth.<sup>70</sup> Practical atheism is, in effect, looking upon the world, and using the things of the world, as though they were separate from God.<sup>71</sup> "Whoever is habitually inattentive to the presence and will of his Creator," says Wesley, "he is a dissipated man."<sup>72</sup>

Christian maturity, therefore, might be thought of antithetically as becoming *practical theists*; which is, however, more than being a *mere* theist. It is all the difference between having right *doctrine*, and living right *discipline*; between having an *understanding* of God and living in the *presence* of God; between sound *opinion* and faithful *obedience*; between the *form* of godliness and the *power* of godliness; between *dissipation* and *constant communion* with God. In short, it is an openness to see nothing as separate from God, but God in all things, and all things in God. It is about having a spiritual vision which can read God's providential activity in creation, and understands that our own lives are inextricably bound up with our neighbours, and the world as a whole. It is a vision which translates into responsible action as we respond to the work of the Spirit *in us* and *through us* in meeting the needs of others. In this regard, God's work of providence is both the *means* and the *purpose* of the Christian life.

### **Optimism**

Being practical theists also provides a basis for understanding the nature and significance of religious pluralism. In both the sermon *On Divine Providence*<sup>73</sup> and that on *Spiritual Worship*, Wesley adopts the idea that God governs the world according to a threefold circle of divine providence: The outermost circle includes the whole human race, that is, "heathens, Mahometans, Jews, and Christians."<sup>74</sup> The intermediate circle is made to include all 'nominal



Christians,' but the implication is that it denotes all those who are inheritors of the Law, i.e. those who might be servants but not sons of God. The innermost circle, however, includes all those who have received the Spirit of adoption, and worship in Spirit and in truth. It is also possible to correlate these circles of providence with God's different covenanting initiatives: first with Noah, then through Moses, and finally to the new covenant in Christ.<sup>75</sup> Again, a correlation can be made between circles, covenants, and the kind of divine knowledge which God has made available: The outermost circle, which encompasses all peoples and religions, is the realm of *general* revelation. The innermost circle, to whom the Christian gospel of grace has been entrusted, is the realm of *special* revelation in Christ.

It is, however, in the work of John Fletcher that we find a most explicit theological system to which Wesleyans might look for constructing a theology of religions.<sup>76</sup> Fletcher, who faithfully built upon Wesley's own position, found that the universality of God's providence and prevenience fit well with a dispensationalist approach to God's saving activity throughout the history of humankind:<sup>77</sup> an analysis that Wesley himself explicitly approves of in his sermon *On Faith*. All people fall under one or other dispensation of grace, distinguished by the degree of light God providentially gives to each: a small degree of light is given to those under the 'heathen' dispensation; a much greater degree of light is given to the Jewish nation; and the clearest light of all is given to those under the Christian dispensation. Similarly, degrees of light also correspond to degrees of faith. Both Wesley and Fletcher encourage us to affirm the genuine faith found in other religions, and even to see it as potentially 'saving faith,' that is, an awakening of the soul to God through the operation of prevenient grace. Thus, the pessimism of an Augustinian assessment of human nature, which considers the vast bulk of humankind to be reprobates on their way to damnation, is overthrown by a Wesleyan optimism of grace which sees every human being as a "candidate for heaven," to use Fletcher's expression, or "a probationer for a blissful immortality."<sup>78</sup> The practical theist does not ask *whether* God is at work in people of other religious traditions, but in *what manner*, and to *what degree* he is working. Mature faith sees God at work in and through all peoples, religions, and cultures: and recognises their place in the great scheme of his providence and prevenience.

Adam Clarke frequently emphasised the universally directing, convicting, and saving light of Christ in the world:<sup>79</sup> "We know," says Clarke, "that the Gentiles who act according to the dictates of that *light which lightens every man that cometh into the world*, shall on their death enter into paradise; for, in every nation, he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him."<sup>80</sup> "By this light," he continues, "the heathens are taught the general principles of right and wrong. And on this ground God will judge the heathen, who have never been favoured with divine revelation [i.e. the Christian gospel]. Those who have acted conscientiously, according to the dictates of this heavenly light in their minds, shall not perish eternally, but have that measure of glory and happiness suited to their state."<sup>81</sup> Thus, providence and prevenience strive together for the holiness and happiness of human beings, whatever their context; and God's approbation rests on all who respond to him. Even Richard Watson, the apologist and missionary theologian, allows this, despite the many and obvious inadequacies of belief and practice in other religions.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, it is God who judges what God does and how human beings respond.

Wesleyans, therefore, tend to be optimistic about the *possibility* of divine knowledge and salvation for those without explicit faith in Christ. This does not mean, however, that there is salvation apart from faith, or apart from Christ.<sup>83</sup> What is important is that each faithfully responds to the light of Christ which has been received, which will be demonstrated in holiness of heart and life, personal and social. Wherever there is moral truth and right action, there is prevenient grace at work. Wherever there is love for God and neighbour, there is prevenient grace at work. And this becomes Wesley's central criterion for 'true religion.'

Thus, we can begin to form a picture of the significance of religious pluralism which also goes beyond the question of eternal salvation. A more immediate consequence of God's prevenience is that other religions can be thought to have providential roles in God's mission strategy in the world.<sup>84</sup> Providence and prevenience weave together to provide a basis for the common pursuit of holiness, social caring, and the struggle for justice. We should be able to say with John Telford that "the theology of our time is not blind to the light shining in those outer courts of the temple."<sup>85</sup> It is beholden upon Christians to enter into interreligious

dialogue and co-operation, for to do so means responding to what God himself is doing through others: a sharing in God's mission.

Christian maturity involves seeking first the kingdom of God, that is, to discover how God is at work in the souls of everyone we meet.<sup>86</sup> Being a practical theist means being open to the alien, in whatever form it takes. Some are alienated by their race, religion, or cultural origins; some are alienated by their embodiments through physical handicaps; some are alienated by mental and psychological disorders; and, perhaps one day, some will be alienated because they come from other worlds. If the Pathfinder robot actually does find life-forms on Mars, however, we can be sure that they are a part of the providential ordering of creation: God will be caring for their bodies, and if they are sentient, caring for their souls as well. The outermost circle of God's providence extends throughout the whole cosmos. Thus, practical theism means being open, optimistic, and even committed to all that is 'alien.' It means caring for and co-operating with the possibility that any of God's creatures can become his providential instruments in ameliorating our lives (no matter how uncomfortable or unwelcome that may be). For nothing is alien to God's presence and activity. Indeed, whenever we alienate others, we effectively alienate ourselves from God himself.

### *Dialogue*

The *optimism* of grace could easily become a romantic distortion of reality if it were not also balanced by the *conviction* of the Spirit. It is the pattern of God's gracious government *both* to enable and direct human beings *and* to reprove and challenge them when they deviate from his good purpose. Being a practical theist, therefore, means not only affirming light (in its varying degrees) wherever it is found, but exposing darkness (in its varying degrees) also: i.e. those patterns of life which frustrate the work of providence and grace in caring for bodies and souls, individually and socially. It is in this sense that *openness* to others must always be met by an *offering* of ourselves, in both constructive and challenging dialogue. First, such dialogue can be the context of fruitful co-operation in partnership with each other and with the providence of God. Second, such dialogue should also become a 'medium of authentic witness' for Christians to share gospel truths and values: to affirm the light of Christ that they find, but also to challenge and guide others with the special revelation that has been entrusted to us. Therefore, dialogue is not just about *commitment* and *co-operation*, but also *conversion*. In general, it is about awakening people to the light they possess and the responsibility that brings, enabling them to respond in godly patterns of life. In particular, it is about inviting people to join the Christian movement, 'the more excellent way,' and to become followers of Jesus Christ.

Being practical theists means applying both natural and supernatural modes of discourse to social and cultural forms as they function in terms of public, as well as private, morality. Reading society in its supernatural sense involves acknowledging the collective work of God in and through the interrelatedness of human beings. The Spirit gives freedom and moral responsibility at both the individual and corporate level, to whole nations and cultures. The variety of 'affections' which condition human willing and doing, as structures of personal subjectivity, are analogous to the structures and movements of society, both good and bad. It is the role of the Christian community, therefore, to affirm and challenge social forms. Through prophetic dialogue, our conversations and activities are to be the 'holy motions' of the Spirit, influencing a wider social conscience.<sup>87</sup>

Many have found dialogue in the pursuit of justice to be impossible, however, because their interlocutor's hearts, and their social structures, have become hardened to the truth. In circumstances like these, Christians must not lose sight of the providential presence of God, but remain optimistic about the possibility of becoming partners in that providence and grace which is already striving to change things. Such activity may be counter-cultural and involve resistance to *the status quo*, using both active and passive means. Practical theists, as partners in providence, are often called to be transformers of the world, not conformers to it.

Perhaps the most global response to the providence of God comes in the form of humankind's concern for ecology. On the one hand, it seems to be a Wesleyan instinct to ascribe *all* sentient life to the possession of a soul: whether it be human, animal,<sup>88</sup> or even, speculatively speaking, extra-terrestrial! Animal souls differ in degree rather than in kind from ourselves - in their powers of liberty, will, and understanding - and should be treated

respectfully as such. It is sobering to remember that neither human nor animal souls have life or immortality by 'nature,' but only as God sustains their existence into eternity. Indeed, it looks as though there will be animals in heaven!

On the other hand, Wesleyans can affirm the instincts of process theologians, and those who refer to the world as God's body. Describing this relation as a homologue of that obtaining between the human soul and its body, however, is intended to denote God's all pervading presence, knowledge, and government. In other words, to describe God as the soul of the world should be understood principally in epistemological rather than ontological terms:<sup>89</sup> God intimately knows, experiences, and lovingly cares for his creation. Reading the world providentially can ground our ecological concern in a divine immanence and transcendence which does not fall prey to the distortions of either pantheism or dualism. As Frederic Platt has put it, divine "immanence enriches the natural with spiritual dignity, for it leaves no part of the universe without the presence of God."<sup>90</sup> The transcendence of God over the world is about distinctness not remoteness; about ontological priority not identity; about superiority not separateness. A practical theism, which sees God in all things, and all things in God, will challenge any practice that compromises the interrelatedness, interdependence, and flourishing of the created order as a whole.

As practical theists, however, our concern should also extend from natural-space to cyber-space! Those who would want to claim that Internet technologies and virtual reality represent a private Utopia, a morally free environment in which anything goes, need to be challenged by people who see that the whole of life is lived *coram deo*, before God. There is no aspect of personal life that does not ultimately affect others, the public and the private are inseparably connected, and this means that no activity is ethically neutral. Advances in science, technology, and medicine *should* receive our approbation, and we *should* be committed to their best use in relieving the needs of our fellow creatures. Dialogue will also mean, however, constantly struggling to challenge and guide these enterprises when God given freedom becomes irresponsible or God-less abuse. We must be concerned about the purpose and ends to which we employ scientific techniques and technological mechanisms, from genetic engineering to cyborg prosthetics, that they reflect the particular, moral, and personal concern of divine providence.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, then, being a practical theist is about having a worldview which reads the world providentially and acts responsibly. It is that *mysticism of service* that so attracted Wesley in people like De Renty.<sup>91</sup> It is about becoming partners in God's providence, or sharing in God's mission to the world: social caring, the pursuit of justice, and the proclamation of the gospel. Being partners in providence means co-operating with what the Spirit is doing in one's own life, and through the lives of others (whoever they are), for our mutual well-being. This kind of living, in *communion* with God, and in *community* with our neighbours, requires a depth of spirituality which extends beyond formalisms of doctrine and practice. Being practical theists means having one's spiritual eyes opened, by the grace of God, to 'practice the presence of God'; and requires the nurture of a Christian community which can nourish a sense of openness, optimism, and dialogue. Here is a quality of practical-spiritual life which the Church might do well to recover for responding to the ambiguities of our increasingly plural and technologised world.

**For the Oxford Institute (1997)**



## Abbreviations

BCE	The Bi-Centennial Edition of the works of John Wesley
CCT	William Burt Pope, <i>A Compendium of Christian Theology</i> (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room, 1880).
WJW	The Jackson edition of the works of John Wesley
WJF	<i>The Whole Works of the Rev. John Fletcher</i> (Devon: S. Thorne, 1835)
WAC	<i>The Miscellaneous Works of Adam Clarke</i> (London: William Tegg, 1860)
WRW	<i>The Works of the Rev. Richard Watson</i> (London: John Mason, c1865)
WTJ	<i>Wesleyan Theological Journal</i>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>BCE 1: Sermon 23, *Sermon on the Mount III*, 1.6-7.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*, 1.1.

<sup>3</sup>See also William Alston, "Problems of Philosophy of Religion," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 6 (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1972). Here, Alston argues that "human beings have a deep seated need to form some general picture of the total universe in which they live, in order to be able to relate their own fragmentary activities to the universe as a whole in a way meaningful to them; and that life in which this is not carried through is a life impoverished in a most significant respect" (p.286).

<sup>4</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.1. Wesley goes on to stress both the importance and neglect of this doctrine, saying that "there is scarce any doctrine in the whole compass of revelation which is of deeper importance than this. And at the same time there is scarce any that is so little regarded, and perhaps so little understood" (para.7). In fact, Outler points out that Wesley's thinking is in line with classical Anglican statements of his day, e.g. Hooker, Pearson, Ussher, and particularly John Wilkins, *Discourse Concerning the Beauty of Providence* (1680) (*ibid.*, intro comment, p.534). Wesley's statement is most likely made in response to the then current spread influence of Deistic thought.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.*, introductory comment (p.534).

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.*, para.4; The scriptural symbol of 'I/Emmanuel, God with us' is frequently used by later Wesleyan theologians as a sign denoting God's universal presence and providence in the world - a truth revealed through the incarnation. See, for example, WRW 3:240-245. Here, Watson interprets the significance of 'Emmanuel, God with us' as *in the world* by his general providential presence, *in history* through the particularity of the incarnation, and *in us* preveniently by his Spirit.

<sup>7</sup>I draw upon the reflections of some of Wesley's successor-interpreters, to demonstrate the continuing importance of the doctrine, and to see how they enlarged and deepened the patterns of thinking we find in Wesley. In particular, we shall consider the work of John Fletcher (1729-1785); Adam Clarke (c1760-1832); Richard Watson (1781-1833); William Burt Pope (1822-1903).

<sup>8</sup>Although Wesley's pattern of speaking about the economy of God frequently associates creation with the work of the Father, redemption with the work of the Son, and human transformation with the work of the Spirit, he is no modalist. Rather, he emphasises that the attributes of the divine nature are shared by all three Persons. Thus, all the divine attributes woven together in Wesley's doctrine of providence belong to both the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. One of Wesley's most comprehensive descriptions of the divine nature, in all these aspects, is given in his sermon on *Spiritual Worship* (December 22, 1780; again, of the mature Wesley), where he first defines God as spirit, and then ascribes all his attributes to the Son. Indeed, this earlier sermon has many themes in common with that *On Divine Providence*.

<sup>9</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.9.

<sup>10</sup>BCE 3: Sermon 77, *Spiritual Worship*, 1.3, emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Watson tells us that the existence of the world, "being originally dependent and derived, must

continue so. It is not, so to speak, in its nature to live... and what it has not from itself, it has received, and must, through every moment of actual existence, receive from its Maker" (WRW, 9:487). See also WRW, 2:198, where Watson points out that all things "are kept in existence, not by a general law, but by incessantly repeated acts of upholding and succour."

<sup>12</sup>BCE 3: Sermon 77, *Spiritual Worship*, I.4; See also WRW 4:484-6. Again, Watson takes the text from John 4:24 which speaks of God as a Spirit, in the context of our worship. The same theme can be found in WRW 10:2.

<sup>13</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.9-13.

<sup>14</sup>See BCE 4: Sermon 120, *The Unity of the Divine Being*, paras.3, 5-6.

<sup>15</sup>For a detailed personalist analysis of divine providence in the Wesleyan tradition see Thomas Stevenson, *Divine Providence in the Light of Personality* (London: Epworth Press, 1930); published for the Fernley Lecture Trust.

<sup>16</sup>See BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.10: "As certain as it is that he created all things, and sustains all that he has created, so certain it is that he is present at all times, in all places."

<sup>17</sup>*ibid.*, para.9: "Now it must be that he knows everything that he has made, and everything he preserves from moment to moment. Otherwise he could not preserve it: he could not continue to it the being which he has given it. And it is nothing strange that he who is omnipresent... who is in every place, should see what is in every place, where he is intimately present."

<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*, para.11: "Now it must be that he knows everything that he has made, and everything he preserves from moment to moment. Otherwise he could not preserve it: he could not continue to it the being which he has given it. And it is nothing strange that he who is omnipresent... who is in every place, should see what is in every place, where he is intimately present." In contrast to the scholastic notion of God's omniscience as *totum simul est* - i.e. of One who stands outside creation history capturing it in one 'snapshot' - God knows through a personal relation of immediate presence to all that happens in time. Wesley also refers, with approval, to Sir Isaac Newton's description of the omnipresence or 'immensity' of God as having "infinite space as the sensorium of the Deity."

<sup>19</sup>See BCE 2: Sermon 69, *The Imperfection of Human Knowledge*, I.2: "The omnipresent God sees and knows all the properties of all beings that he hath made. He knows all the connections, dependencies, and relations, and all the ways wherein one of them can effect another."

<sup>20</sup>BCE 4: Sermon 118, *On the Omnipresence of God*, II.1: "God acts everywhere, and therefore is everywhere; for it is an utter impossibility that any being, created or uncreated, should work where it is not."

<sup>21</sup>*ibid.*, II.6: "...we cannot believe the omnipotence of God unless we believe his omnipresence. For seeing (as was observed before) nothing can act where it is not, if there were any space where God was not present he would not be able to do anything there."

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*, II.8.

<sup>23</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.10. Richard Watson, while frequently alluding to this homology as an explanation is alert to the possibilities of construing this idea in terms of pantheism or panentheism, which would diminish the personality of God. See for example, WRW 9:506, 508; 9:510

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.*, para.12.

<sup>25</sup>WRW 4:483-487.

<sup>26</sup>WRW 10:31.

<sup>27</sup>See BCE 3: Sermon 77, *Spiritual Worship*, I.5-6; also BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.22.

<sup>28</sup>*ibid.*, I.8.

<sup>29</sup>*ibid.*, I.7,10.

<sup>30</sup>Richard Watson connects the idea of God's immutability with "the stability of the divine operations and counsels, as indicated by the laws of the material universe and the revelations of his will" (WRW 10:41).

<sup>31</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.23. See also Adam Clarke's sermon *On the Being and Attributes of God*, WAC 5:33.

<sup>32</sup>WAC 8:61, *The Doctrine of Providence*.

<sup>33</sup>Adam Clarke argues that the particularity of God's providential care can be understood in the context of, and without compromising the necessity of regular world processes: "General laws do not provide for all particular cases; hence it ever requires the ever-directing energy of the omnipresent God to give those laws their particular direction in all especial cases; to suit their operation to those cases, and thus evidence at once both his wisdom and goodness... [Thus] he can stay, alter, suspend, accelerate, or retard the thing... as to make it work for good, without preventing the proper effect of its general tendency" (WAC 7:308, *The Operations of Providence and Grace*).

<sup>34</sup>CCT 1:62

<sup>35</sup>In the first instance, Benson edited works like Flavel's *Mystery of Providence*, and Cicero's *Arguments in Proof of the Being and Providence of God* which Wesley also included in his *Christian Library*. Later, he also included extracts on recent discoveries in science and natural history, on the basis that they manifest the wisdom and goodness of God's creative and providential activity, as indicated by their title: *The Works of God Displayed*.

<sup>36</sup>These anecdotes bore witness to the deeper meaning of both the pleasures and pains of worldly existence read as God's activity in saving and transforming human lives. In and through the events of life one can read testimonies to God's saving mercy and justice; his rewards and punishments; his affirmation and remediation; his routine care and miraculous provision.

<sup>37</sup>WRW 2:200.

<sup>38</sup>This, indeed, was the method employed by Welsey in his voluminous work, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy* (London: Maxwell & Wilson, 1809).

<sup>39</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.15.

<sup>40</sup>*ibid.*, para.14; emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup>For a comprehensive analysis of the context in which Wesley developed his doctrine of prevenient grace, and the sources upon which he drew, see Herbert McGonigle, *John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace* (The Wesley Fellowship, 1995).

<sup>42</sup>BCE 1: Sermon 23, *Sermon on the Mount*, III, III.8.

<sup>43</sup>BCE 4: Sermon 146, *The One Thing Needful*, II.4.

<sup>44</sup>*ibid.*, II.5. Here, Wesley refers to these as 'external dispensations' and 'internal dispensations' respectively.

<sup>45</sup>WAC 7:320, *The Operations of Providence and Grace*.

<sup>46</sup>See CCT 1:441-2. Pope points out that "this government of the Son is not usually in scripture or in dogmatic theology called providence, but all that the word imports is included in the authority vested in him who is *head of all things*..."

<sup>47</sup>CCT 1:441-2. This is an expression which Wesley frequently uses to describe the all-encompassing and saving grace of God.

<sup>48</sup>CCT 1:443.

<sup>49</sup>CCT 1:445.

<sup>50</sup>BCE 3: Sermon 85, *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, III.4: "there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly devoid of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed preventing grace... Every one has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world... So that no man sins because he has not grace, but but because he does not use the grace which he hath."

<sup>51</sup>See BCE 2: Sermon 61, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, para.3; also WJW, *Predestination Calmly Considered*, para18.

<sup>52</sup>Adam Clarke defines conscience as "a recipient subject, which is capable of receiving light, and transmitting it to the judgement, in order to enable it to form a proper estimate of the moral conduct of its owner." (WAC 5:92, *God's Willingness to Save all Men*). In other words, conscience is neither a unilateral work of the Spirit, nor a power of human nature, but the co-operation of grace and nature.

<sup>53</sup>An expression which from William Tilly's sermon *On Grieving the Holy Spirit*, which Wesley abridges. See Outlers notes in BCE 4:531.

<sup>54</sup>BCE 1: Sermon 14, *The Repentance of Believers*, II.5.

<sup>55</sup>John Cobb has helpfully drawn out the truth of this in *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), chapter 2. The relation between nature and grace is one of inseparable though non-reciprocal dependence, not one of substantial identity. In other words, it is necessary to affirm that nature and grace are distinct, if inseparable, realities. In this sense, we ought to draw a distinction between the way that human *existence* is said to be inseparable from God, and the way human *personality* can be thought of as co-constituted by nature and grace.

<sup>56</sup>It is in this context that Wesley approves John Fletcher's criticism of the Calvinistic claim that the human condition is as "dead as a stone," spiritually speaking. This is because "no man living is without some preventing grace; and every degree of grace is a degree of life" (WJW 12: *Letter to John Mason*, 21 November 1776). The predestinarian order of salvation for the Calvinist was dependent upon the sovereign and omnipotent activity of God, overruling human beings from outside the historical process. Ironically, the Calvinists and Deists had at least this much in common, that in reducing human beings to *mere* nature, they excluded the universal presence and work of God's Spirit in human lives.

<sup>57</sup>I take this expression from the title of a book by John Telford, *Man's Partnership with Divine Providence* (London: Robert Culley, c1908). The work proceeds from the 38th annual Fernley Lecture to the British Methodist Conference.

<sup>58</sup>WAC 8:191 *The Doctrine of Providence*. Clarke also points out that "wherever we find this good feeling, or influence; whether it be in human or any other nature, it must emanate from him who is the Father of lights"; also WAC 7:303, *The Operations of Providence and Grace*: God "is righteous... and they who receive his influence, and abide under his shadow, show mercy, justice, goodness, and truth to their fellows."

<sup>59</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>BCE 4: Sermon 119, *Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith*, paras.8-9; also Sermon 69, *The Imperfection of Human Knowledge*, I.5, II.1. Adam Clarke tells us that "God has left an impression of his being on every mind..." which are "initiatory rays of salvation." See WAC 2:328ff; WAC 3:297ff; WAC 7:409f.



<sup>61</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, para.1-4. For a helpful exposition of Wesley's developing attitude, see Randy Maddox, "Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions," *WTJ*, 27:1-2 (Spring-Fall, 1992), pp.7-29.

<sup>62</sup>CCT 2:62.

<sup>63</sup>See Frederick Platt, *Immanence and Christian Thought* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1915).

<sup>64</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 37, *The Nature of Enthusiasm*, para.28. Platt claims that "the Laws of thought, therefore, are indications of God's activity in the physical world... The light of reason is a perpetual revelation of the indwelling God. Intellectual discoveries are the manifestation of the Divine Mind within the limitation of the human" (p.279).

<sup>65</sup>See BCE 4: Sermon 117, *The Discoveries of Faith*, para.7; Sermon 119, *Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith*, para.18.

<sup>66</sup>BCE 4: Sermon 117, *The Discoveries of Faith*, para.17.

<sup>67</sup>BCE 4: Sermon 119, *Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith*, para.20.

<sup>68</sup>See BCE 4: Sermon 130, *On Living without God*.

<sup>69</sup>BCE 3: Sermon 106, *On Faith*, II:2

<sup>70</sup>BCE 3: Sermon 79, *On Dissipation*, para.7.

<sup>71</sup>BCE 1: Sermon 23, *Sermon on the Mount III*, I.11.

<sup>72</sup>BCE 3: Sermon 79, *On Dissipation*, para.12.

<sup>73</sup>BCE 2: Sermon 67, *On Divine Providence*, paras.16-18.

<sup>74</sup>BCE 3: Sermon 77, *Spiritual Worship*, I.9. This is a fourfold classification which was common-place in Wesley's eighteenth century context. See David Pailin, *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>75</sup>WAC 5:77, *The Plan of Human Redemption*. Adam Clarke traces the mystery of divine providence through the different covenants to "preserve man in a salvable state... The wonders of creation, the wonders of providence, and the wonders of grace, all produced, guided, governed, and directed by this sovereign Christ."

<sup>76</sup>See Philip Meadows, "Walking in the Light," in: *Windows on Wesley* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997), forthcoming.

<sup>77</sup>See BCE 2: Sermon 68, *The Wisdom of God's Counsels*, para.6; also WRW 10:41. Watson connects this dispensationalism with the 'immutability' of God: the changelessness of his nature towards them as the ground of hope for the "penitent and the pious." Thus, human beings covenant responsibilities before God are also unchanging.

<sup>78</sup>WJF, *Third Check to Antinomianism*, p.85.

<sup>79</sup>See WAC 5:93, *God's Willingness to Save all Men*: Clarke tells us that "this light, Jesus, as Mediator, has imparted to all men, in all ages, and in all countries."

<sup>80</sup>WAC 5:107.

<sup>81</sup>WAC 8:233-4, *The God of all Grace*.

<sup>82</sup>It is in this context that we find a rare instance in which Richard Watson *explicitly* comments and draws upon Wesley's position. He points out that one cannot infer anything from the *apparent* state of non-Christians about their actual salvability: for we might be ignorant as to the manner in which repentance, faith, and righteousness is worked in them, i.e. so that they should be acceptable to God. He understands the possibility of salvation to result from God placing them under the universal patriarchal dispensation. "The question is not, what the Heathen are," says Watson, "but what they have had the means of becoming," by prevenient grace (WRW 11:491-3).

<sup>83</sup>WAC 8:234-5.

<sup>84</sup>In his sermon on *The Imperfection of Human Knowledge*, II.2-4 & III.1, Wesley makes it clear that the lives of nations, and presumably cultures and religions, all come under God's providential dispensations, though we may never fully understand his purposes.

<sup>85</sup>Telford, *Partnership*, p.53.

<sup>86</sup>Clarke points out that the kingdom of God is usually associated with the gospel dispensation, but in this context "it denotes the government of God in the soul of man...[which is] its most universal meaning." (WAC 8:67, *The Doctrine of Providence*).

<sup>87</sup>Wesley tells us that "it is not true, that either the public or the moral sense (both of which are included in the term conscience) is now natural to man... both the one and the other is now a branch of that supernatural gift of God which we usually style, prevenient grace" (BCE 3: Sermon 105, *On Conscience*, I.9).

<sup>88</sup>WRW 9:484-5.

<sup>89</sup>Ontologically speaking, the world is inseparably dependent upon the immediacy of God's sustaining presence. It is, however, a relationship of non-reciprocal dependence, and not identity, in which God remains utterly transcendent. The human body, however, may be existentially dependent upon its soul (as vitalising principle), but is not ontologically dependent in this way.

<sup>90</sup>Platt, *Immanence*, pp.xi, 123ff.

<sup>91</sup>See Robert Tuttle, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1989), pp.93, 162ff., 180ff. Platt described mysticism as the subjective side of divine immanence (Platt, *Immanence*, p.506).

He also suggests that in "ministering to man we find God... the service of man may, therefore, be the nearest road to the vision of God" (p.539).