

John Wesley's Development in Faith

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To address the issue of spirituality and faith development in the Wesleyan tradition means to begin with the life and pilgrimage in faith of John Wesley. For no other major reformer or founder has so endeavored to make of his life an open book. None other that I know has so extensively made public what Gandhi (whom Wesley in some significant ways resembles) would have called "his experiments with truth." Indeed, Wesley's preaching, teaching, and spiritual direction arose out of his own struggles for and within faith. The distinctive emphasis and contours of the Methodist approach to faith and growth in grace have their origins directly in Wesley's own fiducial and vocational walk with God. My contribution, therefore, consists in a brief review and analysis of Wesley's pilgrimage of faith. Aided by the research and theory in faith development, which I and my associates have pursued over the last ten years, I shall try to identify some of the decisive turnings and transformations in Wesley's pilgrimage.¹

I

In our research on faith development we are learning to pay special attention to earliest infancy, a time for the formation of what we call *Primal* faith. It is in this time—and, indeed perhaps before, *in utero*—that the neonate forms its first pre-images of the character of life in this world. Birth brings both the trauma and the release of entry into our first physical and social environment. Pre-potentiated for

recruiting care and tenderness, at birth we begin our first formative experiences of mutuality and intimacy with those powerful adults who welcome and care for us. Rapid cognitive and physical developments in the first year of life require our dealing with a succession of differentiations and separations. We learn that objects and persons are separate from us; we awaken to deep anxieties and fears of abandonment and loss. Faith has its origins in the trust evoked and confirmed by *their* faithfulness in caring for us. A first sense of self is awakened under the benign gaze and in response to the encouraging voices, of those who give us primary care. The material of which we will construct our first representations of God is taken from our experiences of maternal and paternal presence and care. Primal faith involves some mixture of deepgoing trust and hope, with inevitable distrust and tendencies toward the rudimentary ego's defensive centering of the world in itself.

John Wesley was conceived in the midst of a time of reconciliation between his strong-willed parents. Children of dissenting families, both Samuel and Susanna Wesley had early made principled decisions to reunite with the Church of England. In 1701 they had quarreled over Susanna's refusal to pray for the King (William of Orange), whom she considered to be a pretender. Samuel Wesley, who had reason to be in London to attend Convocation, left home in anger and did not return to his own house until after March 8 of the following year (1702) after King William died. When Samuel returned he intended to stay only long enough to pack more of his things. Some of his parishioners set fire to the rectory while he was there, however, and the resulting crisis led to a tenuous reconciliation between the parents. Nine months later, June 17, 1703, John Wesley was born. John's birth position—fourteen years younger than his only living brother, and youngest brother to seven sisters, plus his coming after the death of an infant brother, Benjamin—gave him a very significant, special place in the family system. (Charles Wesley would not be born until 1707.)²

Much has been written about the remarkable Wesley household. By one year of age, Susanna wrote that the children "were taught to fear the rod and to cry softly, by

which means they escaped abundance of correction which they might otherwise have had. . . ."³ For Susanna, obedience was the fundamental foundation and goal of child development:

In order to form the minds of the children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper. To inform the understanding is a work of time; and must with children proceed by slow degrees, as they are able to bear it: but the subjecting the will is a thing which must be done at once, and the sooner the better; for by neglecting timely correction, they will contract a stubbornness and obstinacy which are hardly ever conquered. When a child is corrected it must be conquered. . . . I insist upon conquering the will of children betimes, because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education.⁴

We can be certain that John Wesley, who throughout his life would be centrally concerned with doing the will of God, responded compliantly to Susanna's firm efforts to instill obedience and self-control. Modern sensibilities may reject the suppression of spontaneity and willfulness implied in Susanna's approach. But we should note that her firmness, clarity, and even-handed consistency in dealing with her children did create for them a sense of order and meaning in what could have been a chaotic household. (When John was two, Samuel was imprisoned for some four months because of inability to pay his debts.)

In addition to conquering their wills, Susanna Wesley early taught her children to pray. Her own seriousness about this and daily family devotionals at dinner provided for tangible and powerful actualization of the reality of God.

In early childhood—roughly ages two to seven—children enter upon a way of being in faith that we call the *Intuitive-Projective* stage. Language is now available, stimulating and evoking imagination. Lacking cognitive operations that allow us to grasp cause and effect relations or to reverse and test our perceptions and conclusions, we find our dreams and fantasies to be as real as everyday experiences. Religiously we respond to story and ritual; we are terrified of images of the supernatural and of evil. We experience ourselves as separate from others, but we do not differentiate

their experience or points of view from our own. Dreams and illusions of our omnipotence struggle with terrors of helplessness and weakness. While we dream of being big and powerful, we have nightmare anxieties about the possible deaths of those we love and depend upon. Conscience is taking form and we internalize the judgments and expectations of parental figures far more harshly than they intend. We can form powerful and long-lasting images of God and God's expectations—harsh or benign—during this stage.

Taught by his mother and older siblings, John Wesley received many gifts to his imagination for the awakening of conscience and faith. Robert Moore in his book *John Wesley and Authority* contrasts Wesley's experiences with those of Susanna and Samuel during this period. Susanna's orderly, methodical, and rational approach to childraising bore fruit in John Wesley's approach to authority as an adult. Her by-laws, that a child would not be beaten if he confessed his transgression and promised to amend, were stern but just. Samuel, on the other hand, was mercurial, unpredictable, unorganized. His explosive temper and impetuous judgment, Moore suggests, evoked in the Wesley children elements of both *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*. Samuel was reported to have said that young John was so committed to arguing his position that he "would not attend to the most pressing necessities of nature unless he could give a reason for it."⁵ This remark discloses something of Samuel's character, even as it suggests a measure of oedipal impatience with this youngster who began to claim so special a place in his mother's and sisters' attentions.

In John's fifth year a much reported event must have made a particularly powerful impression on this precociously serious lad. The Epworth rectory again caught fire. So rapid was the fire's spread that father, mother (who was ill), and children had to scramble out doors and windows to safety. When the panicked family assembled in the garden, five-year-old John was not present. When his futile attempts to enter the holocaust failed, Samuel Wesley knelt down and commended to God the soul of his little son. Meanwhile John, who had been awakened by the flames and the noise, appeared in a window. By way of a human ladder he was

pulled from his second-story room even as the flaming thatched roof crashed down onto the house. Susanna Wesley saw John's rescue as evidence of providential intervention. She referred to him—as he often would refer to himself in the future—as a “brand plucked from the burning.” Susanna resolved to be “more particularly careful of the soul of this child, which God had so mercifully provided for.”⁶

Between ages six and eight we find a significant transition occurring in the way a child composes and maintains meaning. The emergent new stage we call *Mythic-Literal* faith. For most of us, operations of thought and reasoning begin to take form at this time, which allow us to “stop the world.” We begin to form stable categories of thought by which to understand cause and effect relations. We can reverse the operations of our reasoning, testing its adequacy. Thought is no longer so dominated by feeling and perception. More consistently we differentiate our own experiences, wishes, and interests from those of others. The world becomes a more predictable and lawful place. We sort out the real from the make-believe, and we impute to God (now understood more anthropomorphically) the same commitment to fairness and reciprocal justice that seems so “natural” to us. In this stage our meanings are grasped and conserved in stories: stories we hear, stories we tell. Not yet theologians or philosophers who form abstract concepts about our stories, as school-aged children, our meanings inhere in the narratives we hear and tell. In this stage—in fairly literal and one-dimensional understandings—we are drawn to the stories of our people: to know and thrill to their stories is to belong.

We know that after the rectory fire the Wesley children were dispersed to the homes of friends and parishioners. Following the several months it took to rebuild the rectory, Susanna reassembled the family, noting that their stays with strange families and their servants had set back much of the careful work she had invested in the formation of her brood. School, which met for six hours a day, was re-commenced under Susanna's demanding leadership. When the children reached six they were taught the alphabet in one day. Soon after that they were put to reading from Genesis. Not only

did they *hear* the stories of their people: they were able to read and reread them for themselves. In addition, Susanna set aside one hour a week to spend, usually in the time after dinner, with each child alone. During this time of what Wesley would eventually call “close conversation,” this remarkable mother took time to enter each of her children's worlds—and to give them access to hers. Until he was well past thirty John would write her asking her judgment about a doctrinal issue or a matter of ecclesial policy. And with sympathetic care she would respond, showing balance and judgment, orthodox passion, and impressive logical lucidity. Susanna took special pride in teaching her daughters to read and think before teaching them to sew. Hetty, and perhaps some of the other girls—as well as the boys—learned some Greek and Hebrew from their father, as well as receiving exposure to classical and Christian poesy.

From the richness and orderly care of this schoolhouse for faith John Wesley went, at age ten-and-a-half, to London to the Charterhouse school for boys. There, in an institution that combined a retirement home for men with a preparatory school for boys—both under religious auspices—Wesley augmented his considerable skills in language and received a first-rate preparation for Oxford. Dr. John King, headmaster to the school during most of Wesley's seven years there, always carried with him a copy of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. This may help account for the later significance of this book in Wesley's young adulthood. The schoolmaster, Dr. Thomas Walker, had the reputation of a man with an excellent knowledge of the ancient languages. He had a high regard for Wesley, and it is said that Wesley “acquired great facility in the composition of Latin verse, while he learned Hebrew with unusual rapidity.”⁷

The Charterhouse period is not very fully documented in the biographical studies of John Wesley. It spans the time in Wesley's youth when we have learned to expect another period of transition and regrouping in the life of faith. Between the ages of eleven and thirteen, typically, new modes of thought and reflection emerge, which both make possible and require a reorganization of beliefs, emotions, and awareness of self. Neither adolescence nor childhood

were thought of in the eighteenth century as the distinctive developmental periods we hold them to be in the twentieth. Except for those gifted and privileged youth who went on to "public" school and university, those we call teenagers in the eighteenth century entered into jobs or apprenticeships in their teen years, and before many years would be married and starting families. For those in Wesley's position, however, the rigorous leisure of studies gave space and provocation for the kind of revolution in mental operations we see occurring in adolescents today. Such a revolution begins with learning to think about our thinking. It involves the capacity to reflect upon the previous era's stories, to compare, contrast, and sift out meanings. It means the ability to formulate propositional statements, employ abstract ideas, to grasp and communicate the thrust or truth of a narrative or situation.

In interpersonal relations this emerging stage brings new capacities for self-awareness. Previously we could differentiate our perspectives from those of others, making cooperation and bargaining possible. But in this new era we form the ability to do a new and fateful kind of construction: we now begin to construct the perspectives which trusted others have toward ourselves. We begin to see ourselves as others see us. And more, we begin to know and allow for the fact that they see us seeing them. Writing about this period in his own adolescent development Augustine said, "And I became a problem to myself." Erik Erikson has captured the struggle of young persons in integrating the images of self they get from others with their own feelings of self with the phrase, "identity crisis."

Identity crisis, for a youth reared like John Wesley, would also be a crisis of religious belief and practice. Such evidence as we have suggests that Wesley experienced considerable continuity in his religious belief and practice at Charterhouse with what he learned at home.

Writing immediately after Aldersgate, Wesley said of this period at Charterhouse:

The next six or seven years were spent at school; where, outward restraints being removed, I was much more negligent than before,

even of outward duties, and almost continually guilty of outward sins, which I knew to be such, though they were not scandalous in the eyes of the world. However, I still read the Scriptures, and said my prayers, morning and evening. And what I now hoped to be saved by was 1. Not being so bad as other people. 2. Having still a kindness for religion. And, 3. Reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers.⁸

Although he accuses himself of leniency, the image of a fifteen-year-old boy praying twice a day, reading the Scriptures, and attending communion at every opportunity, suggests that Susanna had little to worry about regarding this special boy.

The quote from Wesley's *Journal* suggests that during the latter part of his Charterhouse period he made a transition to what we call the *Synthetic-Conventional* stage of faith. *Synthetic* here means a drawing together of the images of self into a first sense of identity. It means drawing together in a tacit, but real integration, the beliefs, values, and attitudes that support a sense of identity. *Conventional* in this stage means that the youth's integration of self-images and beliefs into a first synthesis involves drawing upon ideological contents available in the contexts of interpersonal relationships that have most importance for us.

At age seventeen John Wesley carried his Synthetic-Conventional identity and faith to Oxford where he became a member of Christ Church college.

II

Charterhouse school had been for Wesley a home away from home. Now with this entry into Oxford he, in a sense, leaves home—at least physically and intellectually. Leaving home emotionally and spiritually, for a boy like Wesley, would be a much more protracted, difficult, and dangerous journey.

During his five years at Christ Church, Wesley widened his world of experience and knowledge. He read in history and literature, philosophy and religion. In addition he allowed himself time to read and attend plays, to converse in pubs, and to participate modestly in tennis and rowing. Walking in

the fields around Oxford was a favorite activity. Evidently he preserved both the forms and the feelings of his religious life, but not with the intensity which his graduation and decision to enter holy orders would soon bring. Reviewing his life under the impact of Aldersgate, Wesley wrote of this period:

When I was about twenty-two, my father pressed me to enter into holy orders. At the same time, the providence of God directing me to Kempis's "Christian Pattern," I began to see, that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions. I was, however, very angry at Kempis, for being too strict; though I read him only in Dean Stanhope's translation. [Wesley would eventually make his own translation for his preachers.] Yet I had frequently much sensible comfort in reading him, such as I was an utter stranger to before: And meeting likewise with a religious friend, which I never had till now, I began to alter the whole form of my conversation, and to set in earnest upon a new life. I set apart an hour or two a day for religious retirement. I communicated every week. I watched against all sin, whether in word or deed. I began to aim at, and pray for, inward holiness. So that now, "doing so much, and living so good a life," I doubted not but I was a good Christian.⁹

The "religious friend" Wesley refers to in this passage is likely Sally Kirkham, a sister of a college friend of Wesley's. His correspondence with "Varanese"—his nickname for her—indicates that in his relations with her sentiments of piety were intermixed powerfully with affections of another kind. As she was already engaged to another, and as Wesley was moving toward a post as Tutor in Lincoln College, which required that he remain unmarried, the issue of deeper romantic intimacy was, for the time, avoided. She played a crucial role in his early adulthood, nonetheless, apparently introducing him not only to Kempis, but to Jeremy Taylor's books on *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* and *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*. The circle of friends around the Kirkham family included a young, vivacious widow, a bit Wesley's senior, named Mrs. Pendarves. With her, also, Wesley maintained a relationship and correspondence in which lively seriousness about religious life provided a medium for the sharing of lightly veiled romantic emotions.

With the deepened and focused attention to religious life that emerged in Wesley in 1725 (age twenty-two), many writers have urged that we see this period as the time of Wesley's conversion. Faith development theory offers a somewhat different and necessarily more complex perspective on this young adult time of transition.

Leaving home, in all of the senses I mentioned earlier, can precipitate for us the beginnings of one of the most consequential transitions in the course of faith development—the transition from a Synthetic-Conventional stage to the way of knowing and committing we call *Individuative-Reflective* faith. (A significant number of adults do not make this transition. For others it comes later—in their thirties, forties, or fifties. Even when it occurs in the twenties, as I shall argue that it did for Wesley, it is at best a protracted and difficult passage.)

Essentially what happens in the transition to the Individuative-Reflective stage is a double movement. In one of these movements our previous tacitly held worldview of the Synthetic-Conventional era comes to be an object for our reflection and decision. Our tacit beliefs, values, and assumptions must now be made explicit; as such they will require our making choices and entering upon a new quality of self-aware commitment. In the other movement of this transition we come to terms with issues of authority in our lives. We begin to form and trust what I call an "executive ego." This means a capacity for self-responsibility, a responsible freedom to commit our lives—in faith, in work or career (vocation), and in intimacy and love.

The intensification of religious involvement and commitment we see emerging in Wesley in 1725 seems to me to hallmark the beginnings of his transition into the way of knowing and committing that is the Individuative-Reflective stage. During this year he engages in his first theological dispute (over the stringency of Kempis's ideal of the imitation of Christ). He begins to correspond with his parents, as well as his peers, about issues of Christian doctrine and Christian praxis. Though admittedly at the urging of his father, he is moving toward ordination and the tangible shaping of a vocation. And he is beginning his struggles with risking

himself in intimacy—in the intimacy of “close conversations” about spiritual matters, and in the (more difficult for him) intimacy of the closeness of bodies in love.

In view of what we know is coming in the next fourteen years of Wesley’s life, and in view of that dramatic year, 1738, which assumes such pivotal significance in both Wesley’s life and the Methodist movement, I must ask you to probe more deeply with me into some peculiar features of Wesley’s transition toward Individuative-Reflective faith. In this probing I will magnify a bit some of the features of Wesley’s personality through lenses provided by psychoanalytic ego psychology. Though I will reach conclusions somewhat at variance with his own, I must acknowledge my indebtedness to the penetrating work of Robert L. Moore in *John Wesley and Authority*.

Moore refers to an insight of V. H. H. Green in his *The Young Mr. Wesley*. Green, he says, “has noted that the dominance of Susanna led to an intense dependency upon her in all of the Wesley children, and that though “in some respects the brothers were less tied, more especially Samuel as the eldest. . . even in *their* (the brothers’) development the powerful, loving, counselling and warning figure of Susanna Wesley was never far away.”¹⁰ With documentation Moore supplies, and on the basis of patterns we will see in Wesley’s life from ages twenty-two to thirty-five, I think we are in a position to grasp some of the unique dynamics of Wesley’s growth. These features, in turn, will make their distinctive contribution to later Wesleyan spirituality.

Specifically, I think we have to entertain the likelihood that Wesley brought to his transition into young adulthood a personality dominantly organized along patterns shaped by his superego. This means, oversimply put, that in his experiences of early nurture—the expectations, standards, and ideals of his parents assumed an overbalancing power in the shaping of Jacky Wesley’s motivations and desires. His own will, wishes, and purposes could scarcely be formed or acknowledged by himself, let alone others. Consciously, he claimed the parental aspirations for him as his own, including the powerful religious dimensions and groundings of those ideals. My assumption, based on clinical data, is that

Wesley’s deeper feelings of infantile anger, raw selfishness, lust, or murderous intent, were so powerfully repressed by his precocious conscious that they rarely showed themselves in his attitude or behavior. John Wesley was, and became a *very* good boy.

Through Charterhouse school and his undergraduate years at Oxford the organization of his growing personality along superego lines would account for a certain seriousness of purpose, a feeling of special responsibility and occasionally of special privilege. Apart from a vague sense of not fully being “one of the boys” (or as Wesley put it, “Not being so bad as other people”), it is unlikely that Wesley ever felt or experienced much inner or outer conflict.

Entering young adulthood, however, with his feeling the twin issues of making considerable choices about his beliefs and values, and his risking the self in vocational and romantic commitment, the superego domination of his personality felt threatened with a painful split. Intellectually, Wesley’s able mind and penetrating curiosity served him well in the transition toward an Individuative-Reflective style of faith. His difficulty would come in regard to the emergence of an executive ego.

In a personality organized or directed out of the superego, there is a sense in which we are not our own persons. Our goals and values serve as the internalized aspirations and standards of parent or parent-like persons. Our initiatives and purposes are likely to be the results of the expectations and hopes of respected authorities. In a religious person, sharply attuned to doing the will of God, the superego-organized personality experiences great difficulty when God seems to sanction two mutually exclusive options equally. The ego in such persons had little leeway in early childhood to develop its own autonomy and initiative. The ego early identified with the parental program, avoiding most rebellion, and put its energies and drives in the service of their visions and aspirations.

Wesley’s life from age twenty-two to his return from Georgia at age thirty-five presents us with a study in the early adulthood of a strongly religious, superego-dominated personality. On the one hand, there is much about Wesley’s

strenuous efforts to be a worthy Christian in those years that is admirable and heroic. On the other, there is a great deal that is filled with pathos, pain, and even low comedy. Wesley, returning from Georgia, characterized his time in the new world as "beating the air." There is a sense in which this phrase seems apt for describing the overt fruits of most of his ministry and labor in his young adulthood. Most of the images of Wesley as fastidious, priggish, naive, and rigid come from this period. Psychologically, Wesley was doing his utmost to give himself to God, when in fact he had never taken possession of himself. Little wonder that there was not inner freedom to give himself to another in love or marriage.

The personality pattern I have been describing means that as Wesley increasingly confronted situations requiring adult choices and commitments, he would intensify his efforts to be a "right" person. Increased self-watchfulness and scrupulosity and ever-renewed commitment to images of perfection would be required to deal with the ambiguities he encountered. Likely, he experienced oscillations between times of inflation, when he felt that his being congrued with his ideals, and times of abject deflation, when he felt that the gap between what he was and what he ought to be, was a yawning canyon. For most such persons there is a largely unconscious but pervasive feeling of unsoundness or lack of integrity—a vague sense that their lives have a sham quality or that they operate behind a facade. Erik Erikson, writing of this pattern, says, "It is as though the culture forces a man to over-advertise himself. While all along he knows that his mother really never believed it." It is not surprising that Wesley, confronted in Savannah by a Spangenberg, should feel such dis-ease at the Moravian's probing questions as to whether Wesley knew Christ as *his* savior and Lord.

We can surmise, further, that the superego-dominated young adult is likely to be carrying a considerable fund of unconscious anger. Much of this will be turned upon the self in times of self-criticism and depression, and in the maintenance of continual scrupulosity. Some of the anger may be directed at "safe" objects, displacing it from those most responsible for the contents of the superego. Wesley's anger at Kempis in 1725 may have something of this

character. His hostile break with William Law, about the time of the Adlersgate release, seems to me to have that quality of overdetermination about it, which suggests that it was fueled by anger Wesley felt toward others. My supposition is that Law symbolized Susanna and Samuel for John, and that the unconscious transferring of his wrath to Law was internally permissible in ways that overt anger toward the parents was not. In one incident in 1726 John confronted Samuel Wesley over his brutal and utterly insensitive treatment of Wesley's sister, Hetty. He confronted his father, however, only from the safety of the pulpit, and was later surprised that his father responded to his attack and reproof in kind. Upon feeling the force of his father's objection Wesley crumbled, doing penance by transcribing his father's voluminous manuscript on Job for the rest of the summer.

Certainly a critical step toward release from the domination of his superego and the emergence of his own executive ego came when John declined to accept the living at Epworth and Wroot. Over a period of two years, from 1733-35 Wesley resisted his father's pressures. In doing so he also withstood the argument that by replacing his father he could assure the continuity of a home for his mother and sisters.

Resistance to parental wishes in the Epworth matter, however, may have played a significant role in Wesley's decision to go to Georgia. There are reasons to suppose that Wesley felt considerable guilt over turning his father down (or, more properly, over having avoided a final decision for so long that by the time he accepted it, the post had already gone to another). At a deeper level, he likely felt both guilt and grief that in not returning to Epworth he tacitly passed judgment on the quality of his father's career-long ministry there. From his own writings it is also evident that the Georgia mission promised relief from Wesley's deep ambivalence regarding relations with women. His long correspondence with Mrs. Pendarves had just ended with his feeling futile and rejected. It appears that in his images of Georgia, he saw it as a land without women of his own race.

A kind of final breakdown—or breakthrough—from the dominating superego came with Wesley's failure and disgrace in Georgia. To be crude about it, we could say that in

the Georgia experience Wesley developed a "superego leak." The self-deception (or better, lack of self-knowledge) from which Wesley to this point had unknowingly suffered, was punctured in the events surrounding his abortive romance and failed mission to the Indians. The strategy of self-perfection and disciplined self-relinquishment to the will of God had proven disastrous. Paradoxically, it is on the return ship to England as Wesley begins to face his disillusioning situation, that his ego begins to have some room to take responsibility for his life. It is further paradoxical that only with the breakdown of his scrupulous, overaccusing, and controlling superego, could Wesley really see himself as a finite-sinner, in deep need of the grace of God. Georgia, for all its pain, was John Wesley's point of entry into a sense of real identification with the human race. It was to become a gateway to grace.

III

The profound experiential appropriation of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith freed Wesley to complete his protracted transition to the Individuative-Reflective stage of faith. The reality of justification by grace through faith gave him the leeway to begin exercising an executive ego. Not having to ground himself by his holiness began to give him the abandonment to *be* a self. A felt knowledge of the love that God had for him, John Wesley empowered him to love himself. The experience of being grounded in the love of God in Christ released him from the self-coercive love of neighbor under the domination of duty. He began to know in his gut that we love because God first loves us.

The transformation, however, was not sudden—the mere twinkling of an eye. From February to June of 1738, Böhler worked with the Wesley brothers, patiently, resourcefully, inspiredly, meeting them with scripture, doctrine, and affection-arousing prayer. One of the most moving moments in this spring of growth and struggle is reported in the journal of Peter Böhler for May 4, 1738. Böhler had brought three Moravians who related to Wesley how the onset of saving faith for them had been sudden. Wesley had been objecting

to this possibility. I quote now from the summary of Böhler's journal entry by Martin Schmidt:

At first "Wesley and the others who were with him" were "as though struck dumb at these narratives." Nevertheless he still held out. He said that four examples—obviously including Böhler's own account with the others—were not sufficient to convince him as yet. Straightway Böhler offered to bring eight more in London. After a short time Wesley stood up and proposed that they should sing Christian Frederick Richter's hymn, *My Soul before Thee prostrate lies*. It was one of the hymns he had translated in Georgia. During the singing he repeatedly wiped his eyes. Then he took Böhler into his bedroom with him alone and said he was now convinced of what he had said about faith and that he would not raise any further points. He saw indeed that he did not possess this faith, which he had to recognize as the genuine kind. "But how could he now help himself and how should he attain to such faith?" He said that he was a man who had not sinned so grossly as other people. Böhler answered, just like Zinzendorf and Luther, that he had sinned enough in not believing in the Saviour. He ought not to go away from the door of the Saviour until he had helped him. Wesley then asked Böhler to pray with him. . . . Wesley assured [Böhler] that if he gained a true and complete relationship with the Saviour he would then preach only about faith.¹¹

In the weeks and months after Aldersgate Wesley *did* preach only about faith. Some of the same anger he heaped upon Law he dumped on Anglican congregations to whom he proclaimed the message of grace. In the completion of his transition to the Individuative-Reflective stage Wesley exhibited a pattern typical for its early phases. He tended to see things in terms of sharp dichotomies. The espousal of grace meant the total rejection of anything that smacked of an effort to secure one's salvation by works. Wesley's brittle testimony, with its delivery fueled by outrage at the growing recognition of the extent of his previous self-deception, alienated Wesley from virtually every congregation he addressed. With impressive continuity Wesley's journal for these months records "was advised not to preach here again."

After his trip to Germany in the summer of 1738, however, Wesley's involvement with the Moravians in the Fetter Lane Society provided the kind of community in which he could "work out his salvation." No longer obsessively concerned

with gaining his own salvation, Wesley—and the members of this society—could concern themselves with mission and the sharing of the gospel, as well as with holiness and purity of life. In the fall of 1739, Wesley's call from Whitefield to assist in field preaching around Bristol provided concrete opportunity to be in mission. In accepting that challenge—and being instantly confirmed in the response the crowds made to his preaching—Wesley began to shape the contours of his genuine vocation.

Before speaking briefly about the last major transition a developmentalist sees in Wesley's pilgrimage in faith, there are a few loose ends that need to be tied off: (1) While I have made a good deal of the negative aspects of Wesley's dominant superego, looked at over the span of his life it also had some critical positive consequences. Wesley's superego, we may say, was the "custodian" of his vocation. Through marriage or through a complacent settling into a living as a priest or bishop, Wesley might have cut the nerve of "his pressing on toward the mark of the high calling of Christ." Each time those possibilities arose, the scrupulosity and hidden wisdom of his "specialness" and special calling inhibited Wesley's response. In fact, we may say that in a way different than Wesley understood the matter at the time, his life and will were put at the disposal of God's will—not by his own choice, but by that of Susanna and Samuel. Moreover, Wesley's dominant superego gave him a long period for finding—and being found by—his calling. Erik Erikson calls this long period of time which creative people claim for the finding and shaping of their adult vocations a "moratorium." Wesley's superego gave him—or divine providence through it gave him—a rich and substantial time of preparation. (2) Pathology is not the point here. In nothing I have proposed do I intend to see Wesley as William James's "sick soul," or as an obsessive-compulsive neurotic. A developmental approach allows us to see how features of personality and behavior, which could be characterized in those ways from other perspectives, are part of the integrity of a life of faith and vocation in progress, and are in important respects, *indispensable to it*. (3) The Aldersgate appropriation of grace as the basis of his life did not entirely overthrow Wesley's superego. It did not end his careful self-scrutiny, his strenuous

efforts to always "improve the time"; nor did it mark the end of all his difficulties regarding intimacy with women. Anna Freud in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* makes a vital distinction between defenses of the *ego*, which all of us need, and defenses of the *superego*, which perpetuate the kind of personality structuring we saw in the younger Wesley. Aldersgate, I would say, was the key event in a process by which Wesley was released from an excessive reliance on the superego and its defenses for the ordering of his life and faith. The marked changes in the responses of persons to his preaching and pastoral care, and the quality of calm confidence and courage that characterized his bearing in the 1740s and beyond, provide powerful testimony to his fundamental transformation.

IV

In some persons at or near midlife we see a transition to a stage beyond the Individuative-Reflective. We call this mid-life stage *Conjunctive* faith. The term comes from Carl Jung, who identified a number of polarities in our personalities that have to be acknowledged and integrated at midlife: polarities such as masculine and feminine, young and old, active and passive, creative and destructive, righteous self and shadow self, conscious and unconscious. The integration of these polarities at midlife involves a kind of balancing, a knowledge of the self that holds together our aspirations for excellence, moral and otherwise, with a chastened awareness of our capacities for evil, distortion, and self-deception.

Theologically, *Conjunctive* faith values multiple names and metaphors for God; it knows that we properly stutter when we address the Almighty. It affirms the quality of absoluteness that comes to expression in the event of Jesus Christ. But it knows the danger of idolizing the absolutes we formulate *about* Jesus Christ. Beyond tribal loyalties or denominational pride, *Conjunctive* faith is committed to justice, inclusiveness, and to the great church of those called of God.

The spirit of the theology, which Wesley evolved through his preaching in the years after Aldersgate, exhibits many of the qualities of *Conjunctive* faith. Certainly his theology of the grace of God held together—often under bitter attack and

provocation—a number of great polarities: human bondage and human freedom (through his doctrine of preventent grace); justification by grace through faith and the working out our salvation in fear and trembling; and grace as the power of salvation and law as the gift of God's grace. The qualities of Wesley's theology to which I want to call attention are the following: (1) Its integration of the Catholic and Protestant themes—sanctification and justification by grace through faith, respectively; (2) Its appreciation of the depths of our bondage in sin and its vision of the synergy of divine and human love in sanctification and the restoration of the *Imago Dei*; (3) Its evangelical fervor centered in the invitation to look to Christ and Christ alone for salvation, with its broad and irenic insistence on the universality of God's love. If there had been a theory of faith development (of the kind we work with) in the eighteenth century, certainly the theology of Wesley would have been a model for its version of Conjunctive faith.

Ultimately the question of using a stage theory developed in the twentieth century to examine theology and faith that flourished in the eighteenth becomes a tenuous and somewhat arbitrary effort. Perhaps the comparison does help somewhat, however, if it enables us to clarify ways in which Wesley's theology still strikes us as perennially solid and helpful, as well as clarifying some of the ways in which it has lost resonance in the intervening years.

From my standpoint the most difficult obstacles to a full embrace of Wesleyan spirituality today comes at two points:

(1) Despite all our emphasis upon the warm heart and experiential religion, Wesley's spirituality—his own and his movement's—retains a dominantly propositional, doctrinal mode of communication about faith. Very much an Enlightenment man, in this respect, Wesley's was and is a reasoned and reasoning faith. It was revolutionary for his own time, with its daring description of and address to the emotions. But it still partakes deeply of the Enlightenment's overtrust in words and reason. Wesley's mistrust of mysticism dictated that he stop short of an approach to prayer and scripture that could open up intercourse with the soul at the points of the will and the affections. The hymnody—and the poetry of Charles Wesley—were, of course, the saving medium in this

respect in Wesley's day. (2) Our century has witnessed two World Wars, Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Saigon and Beirut. We have been encultured into an intellectual world post-F Feuerbach and Marx, post-Freud and Einstein. What we find so appealing in Wesley's "optimism of grace" and his witness to the transformation grace works toward wholeness in sanctification, makes us anxious at the same time. Desperately in need of visions of the calling and potential of our kind in relation to God, yet we have been burnt—burnt by our own and others' self-deceptions; burnt by rigid imperialisms of the soul, which ask us to direct our climb heavenward without helping us see the weight and drag of cellar voices within us. As our earlier discussion of Wesley's superego-dominated personality suggested, Wesley (and, of course, his era) had little inkling of the unconscious. Not until a century later, in Copenhagen, would any theologian begin to trace the ironic ways in which our movements toward perfection bring new oppressions and suppressions.

All of this is to say that we who stand and work in Wesley's magnificent wake have the contemporary task, as far as spirituality and faith development are concerned, of bringing a richer anthropology to our theologies of grace and transformation. We require not only a hermeneutics of holiness, to use Carl Michaelson's beautiful phrase, but also a hermeneutics of suspicion sufficient to help us avoid self-deception and the offering of shallow salvation. But we *do* need to offer the invitation to a walk with God that permanently and powerfully modifies what our culture takes to be normal human development. We are called to offer a spirituality of critical and constructive thrust, which shows men and women the way to a Spirit-empowered mingling of divine and human love, not for the perfecting of individual souls, but for the kingdom of God.

And as we work at this task, Wesley will be out there ahead of us. His teaching of perfection, his tireless, creative envisioning of justification, regeneration, and sanctification as a great ongoing drama of transformation in divine-human partnership, is still capable of informing and guiding our work. And Wesley himself, spending and being spent still

among us, points to a horizon beyond Conjunctive faith which is truly *Universal*. Trying to describe the marks of the "genuine Christian," Wesley's characterization aptly expresses the shape of Universalizing faith, the last stage our research can identify:

Above all, remembering that God is love, [the Christian] is conformed to the same likeness. [The Christian] is full of love to [the] neighbor: of universal love, not confined to our sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with [us] in opinions, or in outward modes of worship, or to those who are allied . . . by blood, or recommended by nearness of place. . . . [T]his love resembles that of [the One] whose mercy is over all his works. It soars above all these scanty bounds, embracing neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. . . . For the Christian loves every soul that God has made, every child of man, of whatever place or nation.¹²

Notes

1. See Jim Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life-Maps* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1978); James W. Fowler, with Robin Lovin et al., *Trajectories in Faith: Five Life Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980); and James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); published in German by Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983.
2. For biographical background on Wesley, I rely primarily on Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, 3 vols., trans. Norman Goldhawk (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, 1972, 1973); and Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (Cleveland, New York: William Collins, Publishers, 1979). Robert L. Moore's *John Wesley and Authority: A Psychological Perspective* (AAR Dissertation Series 29: Scholars' Press, 1979) marshals a considerable amount of biographical materials useful for my purposes here. Where I have drawn explicitly on the latter I indicate it in footnotes. Where I quote either Schmidt or Ayling, or where they may disagree, I also provide a footnote. In matters of biographical interpretation where the two former sources agree, I generally do not cite a specific footnote.
3. Moore, p. 42 (quoting from Wesley's *Journal*, 3:34ff.).
4. Moore, p. 42.
5. Moore, pp. 44-45. (Quoting from G. Elsie Harrison, *Son to Susanna* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1938), 1:44.
6. Ayling, p. 20.
7. Schmidt, vol. 1, p. 67.
8. *The Reverend Mr. John Wesley's Journal from The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 1, p. 98, para. 2.
9. *Wesley's Journal*, p. 99.
10. Moore, p. 45, quoting V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), p. 54.
11. Schmidt, vol. 1, pp. 240-41.
12. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*, sec. 1., para. 5. Quoted in Albert Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 184.

Wesleyan Spirituality and Faith Development

Working Group Paper

Introduction

The working group on Wesleyan Spirituality and Faith Development represented a new focus of studies in the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. Others are better able than we to trace why, in 1981-82, planners decided that the Institute could well afford to include a dialogue between John Wesley's theology and praxis of growth in grace, and some twentieth-century perspectives on faith and human development. As we pursued this dialogue we had a growing sense of its importance: importance as an approach to the study of Wesley's *theology in action*, and therefore crucial for our historical understanding of him and his movement; importance as a contribution to the contemporary and future efforts of the church to shape methods of sponsorship, which can discerningly midwife the work of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of lives towards holiness and happiness.

Elements of Wesleyan Spirituality

Spirituality concerns the Way, the Walk, and the Goal of Christian discipleship. It considers the direction of our course, the manner of our journey, its temper and discipline. It refers to our attitude to the world and to other people, and the end, the *summum bonum*, variously described as the vision of God, perfection, deification, entire sanctification, heaven, the kingdom of God.