

## CHAPTER 1

# WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEW CREATION: AN INTRODUCTION

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*“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17)*

This exultation by Paul points to the new creation as the power of life in Jesus Christ and as the integrative center in which New Testament theological themes cohere. All Christian beliefs pivot on the trust that God will be “all in all” and that God’s ultimate rule will leave nothing to the dominion of death, sin, and evil. Thus the new creation is all-embracing in its integration of personal, historical, and cosmic dimensions of God’s relation to the world and our life in God.

The essays of this book focus on the biblical and theological concept of “new creation” and explore ways in which Wesleyan theology contributes to a contemporary Christian understanding of eschatology. The authors maintain that a Wesleyan perspective on new creation entails an eschatological cast that, if critically received, can be a lively resource for critical reflection on Christian practice today.

Christian faith withers unless it is embodied in love, and love falters unless it is energized by hope in God’s new creation of all things. Paul could therefore claim that we are “saved by hope” (Rom 8:24). Hope orients all thought, action, and relationships to God’s ultimate redemption of the creation and to the ultimate communion with the Triune God. So John Wesley: “There will be a greater deliverance than all this; for there will be no more sin. And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the

Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him."<sup>1</sup> Hope is the steady orientation to God's making all things new in the "constant communion" God creates with us and with the whole creation.

Hope, however, is fragile. It can be destroyed either when we no longer trust in the object of our hope or when the new creation seems too far separated from our daily life. Alternatively, hope can be destroyed by the sense that everything we hoped for has already been accomplished. Modernity seems to shift back and forth between these stances, sometimes in the pessimism that its great dreams cannot be realized and sometimes in surfeited optimism that historical efforts have been fulfilled or will soon fulfill everything we could have desired. The hope for God's new creation, however, is neither optimism nor pessimism. It is not grounded in the ups and downs of historical conditions. Rather, it is grounded in God's faithfulness to God's promise to make all things new and in trust that God has the power to make all things new.

If God does not express this power under the conditions of history, it would make no difference to what we decide and to the way that we act day by day. That is why it is crucial to recognize that the "new creation" is not simply about the end time or the end of time. The concern to make all things new is not merely the "last thing" of God; it suffuses all of God's work in the world and the whole of Christian life. The very possibility of Christian life arises out of God's acts of new creation even under the conditions of a world seemingly in love with death. As such, the whole of theology should be seen as thoroughly eschatological.

Modern liberalism tended to reduce theology's frame of reference to the world constructed by human beings. The counter creation made by human *techné* became the measure of all things. The result was a moralistic reduction of the Christian faith. Optimism about the course of modern history, however, found a bitter culmination in the conflagration of the First World War and the crumbling of the world economic order. In this context theologians rediscovered the reality that all of Christian theology must be eschatological. The modern notion of history's process of perfection was replaced in their eschatological theology with the notion of the redemption of history itself. Moreover, it was realized that new creation is not first about human doing, but about the receiving of a gift—a gift of ourselves and our world as the creation of God's grace.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, much of the developed world has fallen again into trusting in the world that we make, with enormous implications for the possible destruction of human beings and nature. An urgent theological task for today is to bring to the fore-

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1. Sermon 64, "The New Creation," §18, *Works* 2:510.

ground both the criticism of existing human pretensions and the empowerment for life that the new creation casts over the world. Wesley's emphasis on the objectivity of the new creation and its real presence, as Randy Maddox argues in the lead essay, contributes to a much-needed criticism of a Feuerbachian reductionism of God and God's work to the qualities and work of the human being.

The following essays undertake this needed task of exploring the interaction of Christian life in the present with the promised full reign of God's righteousness beyond history. They show that as hope anticipates the ultimate new creation of God it exposes what is sinful, evil, and tragic in human life and at the same time discloses this world's beauty and love whose perfection in the coming new creation can already be glimpsed. Most important, they stress that the new creation is the Spirit's power for life against everything that threatens life.

## **WESLEY'S INTEGRATING ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Wesley's reception of the theological motifs of new creation reveals some of the tensions found throughout the tradition. For Gregory of Nyssa, for example, the reality of the resurrection, even if in fragmentary form, is patent throughout the universe. The new creation makes possible a rich participation even now in Christ's new life, and hope for the ultimate new creation leads to a constant increase in the knowledge and love of God. Already present in our humanity, Christ through the Holy Spirit creates a correspondence of God's pervasive grace with humanity's capacity to respond to that grace.

Augustine, on the other hand, represents the tradition's more negative assessment of human capacity. We seem made for stumbling, for being uneasy and homesick as we anticipate eternal peace in the new creation. The Augustinian tendency is to separate the now and here from the then and there. Christ gives believers a new orientation on their pilgrimage, particularly a new remembering, knowing, and loving that sets their face toward a happy end in the new creation. There are continuing invasions of grace in the life of the Christian, but the inclination is to conflate justification and sanctification. The gulf between the new age and the present age tends to provide fertile ground for apocalypticism.

There are certainly aspects of both of these traditional tendencies in Wesley, but in his thought we find a theology knit together by trust in God's promise to create all things anew and an abiding confidence in the presence of the new creation as premise and power of the Christian life.

Randy Maddox traces a trajectory of Wesley's theology in which Wesley seeks a biblical and experiential alternative to the received views of the eschaton and salvation, of the new creation and its presence in our midst. Wesley's most frequent early use of new creation is in relation to new birth and sanctification. For Wesley the new creation has already begun in God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, but redemption is not yet completed. We are able to take up the "ministry of reconciliation" God entrusts to us because we are being redeemed. This spiritual transformation of those who are reconciled is, Maddox argues, a crucial component of any eschatological theology today.

But Maddox shows that the trajectory of Wesley's mature understanding of the new birth and sanctification led to crucial reflections on the socioeconomic and the cosmic dimension of God's work of new creation. Maddox encourages the continuing development of this trajectory as the best way to honor Wesley's breakthroughs in eschatology.

The remaining essays build a framework for a Wesleyan contribution to present-day eschatology by treating contemporary approaches to biblical eschatology, to apocalyptic, utopian, and millennial themes, to globalization, to ecclesial practices of new creation, to life with other religions, and to ecology.

## **BIBLICAL THEMES OF NEW CREATION**

Néstor O. Míguez draws on several strands of biblical traditions and argues that both the creation narratives and the new creation narratives of the scriptures are developed in opposition to the experience of empire among God's people. God's righteousness or justice is God's power of redemption that manifests itself over against various configurations of imperial power. God's new creation appears in times of oppression. The New Testament language of new creation develops by distinguishing God's grace from the attributes of imperial ideology and highlights the opposition between the liberating love of God and the enslaving love of power. In this confrontation the possibility of God's righteousness is at stake and with it the life and death of human beings and of all creation.

The Bible's creation narratives are set against the dualistic oppressive Babylonian myth of origin in which everything arises out of struggle and competition. The imperial human urge to dominate all, according to which the ruling elites identify themselves with the divine and thus justify the imposition of their rule on all who are not divine, emerges from primal struggles to be like the gods. Being godlike is to defeat the other; it is to rule over what is "lesser," the earth and the feminine.

For the biblical primeval story, on the other hand, creation comes not from struggle but as the gift of God. As a part of God's creation, human beings are intended to respond in gratitude to God's gift and are commissioned as the "image of God" to care for the creation according to God's will in relationships of freedom and equality. The distortion of the power and authority God gives to the human being as steward of creation leads to domination. Empire becomes a prime example of the refusal to live as creatures in gratitude to God and responsibility to God's intention for creation.

As the corruption of false worship spreads throughout the whole of reality, it leads to an insidious slavery to the law of sin and death and to a life of futility. Can there be any hope? Drawing on the prototypical story of the first liberation of the enslaved people from Egypt, Isaiah introduces "new creation" as God's measure to keep God's creation from succumbing to death (Isa 66:22-23). The vindication this new creation offers for those threatened with annihilation is clear. But what does the new creation mean for the old creation? How is the new creation present under the conditions of history?

## **APOCALYPTIC, UTOPIAN, AND MILLENNIAL VISIONS: GOD'S COMING TO GOD'S CREATION**

Does an eschatological hope imply an otherworldly denigration of the world and human embodiment? Does new creation mean escaping this world? The essays collected here are at pains to distinguish the new creation from apocalyptic and utopian views of this world and its future. Apocalyptic views portray the world as hopeless, futile, and unrighteous, and assume the only hope is the destruction of this world and the coming of a new age ruled by righteousness. But is this world to be destroyed? This is a crucial question since so many forms of apocalyptic terrorism have arisen in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam again in our time as a solution to the injustice and oppression of the world. As the September 11 tragedy made clear, the specter of cultural imperialism in the form of globalization/Americanization has fostered processes of polarization at both the local and international level. Radical responses such as racial violence and ethnic cleansing, terrorism, and war on terrorism are likely to intensify.

The positive dimension of apocalyptic is its use of the new creation as a light to expose all injustice and life-destroying powers. While biblical sources embrace this apocalyptic insight, they weave it into an eschatology with significantly different focus. The scriptures speak of the redemp-

tion of *this* body and *this* world. God so loved *this* world that God gave God's only Son for the life and future of this world. God does not condemn this world. Rather God comes into it and suffers for it against the deniers of God's holiness. This means that the new creation will not obliterate or displace the old creation. Ultimate judgment will be accomplished in a way that is not different from God's working in the death, resurrection, and future of Jesus—that is, by the rule of God's love. God's righteousness is the working out of God's love; God's justice serves God's love. The power of new creation is nothing other than God's love. As Wesley never tired of saying, God's grace spreads God's love abroad in us and in God's creation.

Pauline eschatology recovers the idea of new creation. In Romans Paul speaks of the gospel as the power of God because it reveals by faith God's righteousness or justice. Néstor Míguez assumes a coherent eschatological paradigm in Paul that functions to criticize the ideologies of power and the mechanisms of hegemony embedded in all cultural systems. Human injustice springs from the denial of the truth. The whole epistle revolves around the power of the new creation in Christ to set free human beings from the law of sin and death to the life-giving law of grace. It is God's free gift that makes human beings free to serve God's justice (Rom 6:13-14).

Human beings seem as a matter of course to raise the question, What does it cost? Slavery comes from debt, from the price that is assigned to human life. Getting out of debt or slavery is very costly. The work of ransom is a vicious circle. To attempt to free ourselves by buying ourselves is to submit to the same logic that led us into slavery. What we believe sets us free is only a different kind of slavery.

Therefore, God creates another way to redemption that is not controlled by the logic of prices, profits, and debt. The new creation is redemption through grace, the gratuity of life as creation. God gives us life in the Spirit so that we can keep God's "law of grace," that is, so that we can live in accordance with God's justice. God liberates us from the spirit of slavery so that we can receive the liberating spirit of God that is meant for the whole creation and that the whole creation should see in us. Truth has to be revealed, but this means that untruth has to be uncovered for what it is. The light of the new creation discloses the camouflages of injustice and the ideologies that exchange the truth for a lie.

In what sense is the new creation like the utopias of Western culture? Manfred Marquardt points to tensions in the new creation that are similar to and yet different from traditional utopian thinking. Marquardt addresses new creation in terms of the kingdom of God and thereby directs our attention to the synoptic gospels. Here we see that God's kingdom has both a temporal and an eschatological character. The kingdom of God is present because Jesus is present. The reign of God is present where the Spirit

renews both persons and structures, and where communities understand themselves in terms of God's power of righteousness working in them. The presence of the kingdom is a new message requiring a *metanoia* that, following a Wesleyan theme, touches the inmost reality of the individual as well as the whole of the cosmos. The final fulfillment of God's reign will be realized only at God's determination, but it is present and effective already in those who have become citizens of the kingdom in the world.

For both Míguez and Marquardt Christ's identity in crucifixion and resurrection is paradigmatic of new creation. The dialectic between "then and there" and "now and here" is governed by the claims of the crucified risen one. Thus the shape of the new creation is often hidden in the cross of Christ, yet everything that stands in the shadow of the cross grows toward the future in which the risen Christ will consummate all things.

To what extent does a theology of new creation require millennial thinking? Do we need simply to hope for the new creation? Is theological reflection on the millennium a needless appendage? Randy Maddox makes a strong argument that hope for the promises of God given in Israel and Jesus Christ is preserved in Christian millenarianism. Maddox offers an intriguing summary of traditional millennialist teachings and makes a bold argument that Wesley's mature view of the socioeconomic dimensions of God's work is accompanied by a postmillennial assumption that God's work of socioeconomic new creation is already underway, "proceeding by gradual degrees toward its full realization, and requir[ing] no dramatic return of Christ to usher in this culmination." Maddox's argument opens up important perspectives for treating the dangers of apocalyptic and utopian thinking in our time.

## **PRACTICES OF THE NEW CREATION**

Several of the essays deal with the Wesleyan theme of practical divinity as both reflection and servant of the new creation. Russell Richey shows that new creation was a prominent theme in early American Methodism, especially in the practices of conference. The rhetoric that issued from Methodist behavior, gatherings, and initiatives after the formation of The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 reflects an abiding theological sense that Methodism had been brought into being by God to serve God's purposes of new creation in America. Early Methodists imagined their structure and their discipline to be providentially ordained as God's new order. What was happening in their midst anticipated what God had promised in the new creation. Conference became a gathering that reflected God's new order in eschatological and eucharistic tones.

Employing the word “Zion” as self-description, Methodists understood that they were agents of God’s work of recreating and reforming a continent. Early Methodism was a movement that trusted the power of the Spirit to make new creations of persons whom the world regarded as having no dignity. Through their polity Methodists sought “a restoration of the image of God, a restoration of the natural image, of the political image, of the moral image.” The practices of the new creation had to conform to God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ, and thus the injustices of slavery and poverty had to be resisted. If Methodists were to emblemize God’s new order, they had to stand up against the life-denying principalities and powers of this world. Richey also points to Methodist ways of relating worship and life to nature that could be of great value today as we seek modes of living within and for nature, rather than against it.

Josiah Young deals with the “this-worldly” character of the new creation and the shape of life that can be lived through the power of new creation in the fallen world. What can the new creation mean for those who have suffered slavery and continuing racism? Slavery and racism, as the denial of the new being promised in Jesus Christ, shape the identity of both oppressors and the oppressed. Neither can be redeemed without the redemption of the other. In the final analysis, there can be no meaning to the lives of the oppressors or the oppressed unless Jesus incorporates them in the universal restoration of all things. According to Young, the newness of the new creation “means that the kingdom of Christ and the new creation to follow it have the character of resistance to evil and the death it brings until today.”

In order to speak of the actual effect of the new creation in the old creation, Young reflects on the power of resurrection in the martyred life of Martin Luther King Jr. This power enabled King to expose the interrelated evils of racism, poverty, and the pretensions of American empire. The aggressive instinct, “the bitter, colossal contest for supremacy,” and compulsions of the master-slave relationship appear in all of these spheres. The goal of the divine purpose, the “beloved community,” finds a fragmentary place among the open wounds of history as human beings stand up in the power of the resurrection against the powers that want human beings and the creation to bend down in submission.

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore compares the New Testament healing narratives and the breadth of Wesleyan images and argues that they both suggest that the practices of repentance, reparation, and reconciliation should be understood in a much broader way—a way that transcends juristic redemption theologies and points to the largess of God’s promises of new creation. God’s own praxis of liberation empowers human participation in God’s work and breaks open these categories.

Moore proposes that repentance should be reformulated as a turning toward shalom, with a strong emphasis on wholeness and healing. She is



searching for an understanding of repentance that includes the transformation of the oppressed *and* the oppressor, the turning away from sin and the overcoming of oppression. Invoking a Wesleyan perspective on giving, Moore claims that reparation means both recognizing that what we have is from God and “returning to those who have been deprived that which God intends for them.” Reparation should be understood as “the concrete repairing of injuries and relationships in a continuous cycle of discerning where injury exists and what is needed to respond.” Moore wants to understand reconciliation as the restoration of “relationships between and among God, human beings, and all of God’s creation, made possible by the triune God’s never-ending work for creation, in creation, and through creation.” Reconciliation is a joyful sign of the intimate union with God already accomplished under the conditions of history in Jesus Christ and the uninterrupted quality of its fulness in the future of the new creation. God’s promised new creation makes present power for repentance, reparation, and reconciliation, though the recalcitrance of sin and evil make it necessary for us to remain steadfastly in hope of the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises.

## **COMMUNITY WITH OTHER RELIGIONS**

Far from the utterly secular world modernity predicted, we live, arguably, in the most religious age in human history. Religion takes many forms within the interstices of the so-called secular world, but the dangers of religion have never been more apparent. Religions are on the front lines of the major world conflicts that threaten the future of the world. We desperately need community among the religions, so that we can learn to respect their irreducible differences as well as what each contributes to a just and humane future. If religions cannot learn how to live together, they are likely to be instruments of killing.

In the chapter by Jong Chun Park the implications of new creation are explored within the Christian-Confucian dialogue, with a focus on the cultural, economic, and ecological crises of our time. Park intends to contribute to an interreligious dialogue that is also “intrareligious” insofar as Confucianism is not simply the faith of other people but his own heritage as an East Asian Christian. This dialogue, like all interreligious dialogues, seeks to create space for a new civility against the deadly antagonism and competition among the religions. Going further, it aims at mutual transformation. Park maintains that Christians can learn from Confucians a widened anthropocosmic salvific vision, while Confucians can benefit from Christians in the critical distinction between God and the world.

Park argues that the Christian-Confucian dialogue should aim at the deconstruction of the social habits that lead to global injustices and at a shared practical divinity. To this end, he attempts a creative synthesis of Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* and Yi Yulgok's *A Compendium of Sage Learning*, a synthesis that may produce a concrete guide of practical divinity for East Asian Christians. Locating Wesley's doctrine of perfection in the wider framework of his theology—the new creation—makes possible this dialogue. Becoming a Christian sage or becoming a perfect Confucian, Park argues, is not merely an eschatological possibility; it is a historical possibility here and now. The possible contribution of the Christian-Confucian dialogue to practical divinity has to be sought in liturgy, spirituality, and education, as well as mission and evangelism in the postmodern/postcolonial time.

## **THE NEW CREATION AND THE CARE OF THE EARTH**

The natural environment is our home, but it is first God's creation. The cosmic scope of God's new creation embraces the whole of nature. According to the biblical notion of *shekinah*, God intends to dwell in the whole of God's creation, not just in the human part of it. The light that the new creation throws on the plight of the earth makes us aware of the groaning of creation and should lead Christians to a new theology of life with the earth.

In his essay, Mvume Dandala seeks to develop such an ecological theology for South African Christians, and, at the same time, he appeals to Christians all over the globe to take responsibility for the state of the earth in places like Africa where it is all too clear that environmental degradation and poverty go hand in hand. As Dandala maintains, "If the church is indeed guilty of having promoted an evangelistic approach that discounted the ecology of the continent of Africa and other places that were victims of global economic exploitation, then it is essential that the church find a prophetic voice to address this situation that will echo globally."

Dandala conveys a winsome picture drawn by Roger Hudson of a South African project involving church, local communities, and government aimed at a new development model linking rural livelihoods and agricultural strategies for the sake of the environment. He makes clear that living in the reality of the new creation requires a global solidarity manifested in localities if peoples and the land are to have a future. God's new creation uncovers the wounds to the land and to the lives of poor people and envisions a peace that embraces the life of the whole creation.