

Creation, New Creation and Theological Method in Wesleyan Perspective
By José Carlos de Souza

After the world conference ECO/92, realized in Rio de Janeiro, Leonardo Boff wrote his first book on ecological issues. Based on data from the Worldwatch Institute, he drew a drastic picture of current reality:

The estimates are astonishing. Between 1500 and 1850 one species every ten years was eliminated. Between 1850 and 1950 one species per year was eliminated. In 1990, ten species disappeared per day. It is estimated that in 2000 one species per hour will disappear. The process of death accelerates more and more. Between 1975 and 2000 20% of all life species will have disappeared¹.

Unfortunately, ten years thereon, nobody can say if the situation is better. Several problems – such as acid rain, progressive deforestation and desertification, destruction of the ozone stratum, atmospheric warming, air and water pollution, uncontrolled demographic, and many other factors – threaten not only mankind, but also all types of life on earth. The ecological crisis affects all countries, but it is graver in the Third World. Natural resources are exploited in order to avoid poverty. Governments of developed countries and transnational companies use undeveloped countries as deposits for toxic waste. Moreover, not always we can observe good will to dialogue and look for solutions. For example: by arguing that it cannot threaten its economic growth, some rich nations, such as the United States of America, have systematically refused to sign the *Kyoto Protocol*, which regulates the emission of pollutant gases.

For some persons, this subject sounds totally alien to the Christian faith. Dualistic discourses sustain the complete separation between material and spiritual concerns, the sacred and the profane, what proceeds from God and what is created by humans. Theology should be related only to the eternal salvation of humanity. Churches cannot spend time on matters of secondary importance. To be worried about daily life, environment or social questions is a misinterpretation of the gospel. This mentality has prevailed in Brazilian Methodism since its origins as fruit of the expansion of religious revival from the south of the United States of America.

¹ Boff, Leonardo. *Ecologia, Mundialização e Espiritualidade: a emergência de um novo paradigma*. São Paulo: Ática, 1993, p. 22.

However an increasing number of theologians, as well as common people, have criticized these types of arguments. In fact, they do not support individualism, the privatization of Christian faith, and the emptying of the public dimension of the Church life and mission. In an age such as ours, when the destructive power of human society seems to have reached its maximum expression; when the market economy transforms social goods, including natural resources and everything that is necessary for life, into commodities; when countless men and women are excluded from life; when nature is voraciously devastated in order to obtain profit; keeping silent means to ignore the prophetic aspects of the biblical message, to deny that this world “and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24.1) is God’s creation, and, finally, to legitimate the *status quo*.

How can Wesleyan theology help us in the contemporary situation? Are there elements we can appropriate to rethink our praxis and position? To situate Wesley among ecologists is, in fact, an anachronism. The eighteenth century was a typical transition phase. During that period, domestic production of goods co-existed with modern industries. For all practical purposes, neither of the dramatic problems that confront us today worried the citizens of Wesley's times. Therefore “ecology was not on the theological agenda in Wesley’s day”². The expression itself was coined only in 1866 by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel, who defined it as a branch of biology that studies the relationship among living organisms and between organisms and their environments³. This meaning, however, has been vastly enlarged in recent times. Ecology, at present, has become a key concept to understand life in all its aspects, economic, social, political, cultural and so on, and, as such, is not limited to biology. The enlargement of this meaning is the result of the recognition that this model of civilization, constituted since the nineteenth century, has become a menace to the survival of the planet. In general terms, the discourse about ecology always involves the way human beings interpret their relation with themselves, others in human society, and the surrounding world. It implies reflection on the values that sustain this

² Runyon, Theodore. *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 200.

³ Cf. *Dicionário de Ecologia e Ciências Ambientais*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2001, p. 175.

kind of connection.

This topic leads us once again to the question of the role Christianity has developed in recent historical processes. In his polemic work, *The Secular City*, Harvey Cox links the phenomenon of secularization to biblical sources. “The Genesis account of Creation”, for example, “is really a form of ‘atheistic propaganda’”⁴. By rejecting this magical vision, according to which the cosmos is constituted by a system, which is inhabited by gods and semidivine beings, the Hebrews contributed to the disenchantment of nature, as Max Weber called it. Because they are mere creatures, natural elements can be manipulated freely by humans. This change of mentality has become a condition *sine qua non* for the development of the natural sciences and, in consequence, for modern urbanization⁵.

The difficult is that Cox positively evaluates such alterations as signs of maturity, whereas other thinkers point to its disastrous effects. For the American historian Lynn White Jr., biblical religion, at least in its Western variety, has stimulated narcissist behavior. The divine commandment to have domination over creation (Gen. 1:28) has justified an exploitative attitude concerning nature⁶. Anthropocentrism reached its highest level with the rise of Christianity. It is necessary to maintain a certain balance in this discussion. To attribute exclusive, or primary, responsibility for ecological catastrophe to Christian doctrines is an exaggeration. No one can disregard the economic circumstances or cultural dimensions that condition the interpretation of church tradition. The order in Genesis to subjugate all creatures has been read in the context of the expansion of capitalism and modernity. This fact may

⁴ Cox, Harvey E. *The Secular City: secularization and urbanization in theological perspective*. London: SCM Press, 1965, p. 23.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p.21-24. Cox still examines *the Exodus as the desacralization of politics* (pp. 25-30) and *the Sinai Covenant as the deconsecrating of values* (pp. 30-36).

⁶ I have no access to his essay, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” [Science, 155, (1967)]. My comments are founded in Portuguese translation of the Keith Thomas’s book, *Man and the Natural World: Changing attitudes in England, 1500-1800* [O Homem e o Mundo Natural: mudanças de atitudes em relação às plantas e aos animais (1500-1800)]. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, pp. 28-29]. Cf. also McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp. 273-274.

explain why the relationship between humankind and nature has become so cruel. On the other hand, no one can claim absolute neutrality. How we do theology can be important to acting in responsible manners *hic et nunc*. It is in this sense that we intend to reinterpret John Wesley's theology. Is it capable of inspiring an ethic of life for the present era?

Recovering the theology of creation

According to Albert C. Outler, "*Salvation, Faith and Good Works* is (...) a genuine foundation of Wesleyan theology"⁷. Actually Wesley himself sums up his point of view along these lines: "Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, — that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself"⁸. For this reason, a great deal of works on Wesleyan theology focus on soteriology. The posterior theology, especially in light of religious revival, concentrated even more on the doctrine of salvation, in particular the necessity of personal conversion or new birth.

This concentration on individual deliverance from sin induced Christian communities to underestimate the bodily and cosmic aspects of redemption. Indeed, when theologians neglect the theme of creation, the negative consequences are unavoidable. Such a process establishes a complete separation between the individual and the world. Hope is spiritualized and Christian life is empty of significance. Without faith in God's creation, the idea of salvation itself makes no sense. That is why the early church reacted so strongly against Gnostic movements. For instance, Irenaeus – among other Church Fathers – insisted one couldn't distinguish the God of our salvation from the God who created the world. His notion of recapitulation joined both features of God's economy in a coherent way.

Wesley shared this vision with the primitive church. If the emphasis of his

⁷ Outler, Albert C. (ed.). *John Wesley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 123.

⁸ *The Principles of a Methodist Father Explained*. In: *The Methodists Societies: history, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert Davies, *The Bicentennial Edition of Works of John Wesley* vol. 9, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 227.

theology falls on salvation, he never denied that the universe is a divine opus nor set creation in a less important place. On the contrary, creative activity is one more plentiful manifestation of the Grace of God:

The eternal, almighty, all-wise, all-gracious God is the Creator of heaven and earth. He called out of nothing, by his all-powerful word, the whole universe, all that is. "Thus the heavens and the earth were created, and all the hosts of them." And after he had set all things else in array, the plants alter their kinds, fish and fowl, beasts and reptiles, after their kinds, "He created man after his own image." And the Lord saw that every distinct part of the universe was good. But when he saw everything he had made, all in connection with each other, "behold, it was very good"⁹.

At this point, a few observations may be made without any pretension to exhausting this subject. First, the God who created the world is not an arbitrary divinity. His will is free and sovereign. He made the universe not impelled by necessity or solitude. God called all things to existence as a demonstration of his love. By counseling parents to instruct their children in faith, Wesley bound together the majesty and the self-gifting love of God, in very simple manner:

To take a small example: Bid the child look up; and ask, "What do you see there?" "The sun." "See, how bright it is! Feel how warm it shines upon your hand! Look, how it makes the grass and the flowers to grow, and the trees and everything look green! But God, though you cannot see him, is above the sky, and is a deal brighter than the sun! It is he, it is God that made the sun, and you, and me, and everything. It is he that makes the grass and the flowers grow; that makes the trees green, and the fruit to come upon them! Think what he can do! *He can do whatever he pleases. He can strike me or you dead in a moment! But he loves you; he loves to do you good.* He loves to make you happy. Should not you then love him? You love me, because I love you and do you good. But it is God that makes me love you. Therefore, you should love him. And he will teach you how to love him"¹⁰.

This paragraph reveals a great many of the characteristics of Wesleyan

⁹ Sermon 67, "On Divine Providence", §8, *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Bicentennial Edition of Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985, pp.537-538. See also *A Letter to a Roman Catholic*, § 6.

¹⁰ Sermon 94, "On Family Religion", §III.7, *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Bicentennial Edition of Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 341. Italics are mine.

theology. It is wholly upside down to metaphysical speculation. It is in the ambit of liturgical celebration, the preaching of the word, Christian practice, daily witness, family relations, and solidarity with the poor that Wesley's theological concerns take shape. Its nature is pastoral, in the broadest sense; its aim is to spread scriptural holiness; its addressees are the common people who participate in Methodist societies. Though sometimes Wesley conjectures about creation in its original state, nothing like a detailed cosmogony is elaborated. To identify God's purpose for creation it is enough to recognize God acting in love as Sustainer and Provider.

Second, Wesley reaffirms the conception of *creatio ex nihilo*. Despite the fact that the metaphor of God as supreme architect expresses the ideas of planning and deliberate intention, it does not sustain the notion of pre-existent material. In such a case, God cannot be understood as the unique originator of all that exists. Wesley refused this interpretation in his comments on the Genesis 1:1:

Observe here (3): The manner how this work was effected; God created, that is, made it out of nothing. There was not any preexistent matter out of which the world was produced. The fish and the fowl were indeed produced out of the waters, and the beasts and man out of the earth; but that earth and those waters were made out of nothing¹¹.

From these considerations, one can conclude correctly that God is qualitatively different from creation (Acts 17:24). I suppose Wesley would not disagree with neo-orthodoxy theology, which underlines the transcendence and *otherness* of God. The Creator is *totaliter aliter*: "God is in heaven, you are on earth..." (Eccles. 5:2). Even so, creation should not be separate from God. There is an inevitable correlation between God as Creator and the cosmos. "The world is not Godhead, but is of and from God,

¹¹ Wesley, John. *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*. Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers, 1975, v. 1, p. 2. [Italics are from the author]. Wesley criticized emphatically William Law who, inspired in Mystic authors, advocated the nature was coeternal with God. Wesley quotes phrases from Law's tract, *Spirit of Love*, to appoint their contradictions: "*Nature as well as God is antecedent to all creatures*" (p. 59). "*There is an eternal nature, as universal and as unlimited as God*" (p. 64). After that, Wesley asks: "Is then nature God? Or are there two eternal, universal, infinite beings?" Of course, the answer must be negative. To talk about a creation out of nothing, he deduces at last, "is indeed tautology; since the single term *creation* is equivalent with production out of nothing". Cf. "A Letter to Reverend Mr. Law" (6 January, 1756). *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Jackson, v. 9, p. 467, 470.

and God is in his world”¹². Like a parent, God takes care of all creatures in the universe (Psalm 36:6- 10)¹³.

The affirmation concerning the goodness of creation is intimately related to the previous point. The Genesis account of creation testifies that at the end of each day’s work “God saw that it was good” (1:10, 18, 21, 25, 31). There is no foundation in the biblical legacy for the Gnostic belief that the world is inherently evil. Also there is no place for any type of ontological dualism. In spite of the fall, the universe proclaims the glory and the wisdom of God (Psalm 19:1). If now we see blemish, corruption and destruction, in the beginning everything was different. If it were not so, there would be no possibility for redemption. Wesley approaches this topic in sermon 56: *God’s Approbation of His Works*. His starting point is Genesis 1:31:

Whatever was created was good in its kind; suited to the end for which it was designed; adapted to promote the good of the whole, and the glory of the great Creator. This sentence it pleased God to pass with regard to each particular creature. But there is a remarkable variation of the expression, with regard to all the parts of the universe, taken in connexion with each other, and constituting one system: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good"¹⁴.

¹² Klaiber, Walter & Marquardt, Manfred. *Viver a Graça de Deus: Um compêndio de Teologia Metodista* [German original: *Gelebt Gnade – Grundriss einer Theologie der Evangelisch- methodistischen Kirche*]. São Bernardo do Campo: Editeo, 1999, p. 82.

¹³ Cf. Wesley, John. *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*. Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers, 1975, v. 2, pp. 1675-1676: “V. 6. (...) *Man* – The worst of men; the brute-beasts have experience of thy care and kindness. V.7. *Loving-kindness* – Though all thine attributes be excellent, yet above all, thy mercy is most excellent, or precious and amiable. (...) V. 9. *Life* – It is in God as in a fountain, and from him is derived to us...”. Randy L. Maddox believes “that Wesley’s defining model for understanding God was more that of a loving parent than a sovereign monarch. (...) The dimensions of God’s work as Creator and Governor are easily appropriated within a defining model of sovereign monarch. (...) A parental model of God is particularly appropriate if, as I am inclined to think, Physician and Provider are the dimensions of God’s work the Wesley valued most” (*Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 63. Cf. also pp. 58-64).

¹⁴ Sermon 56, “God’s Approbation of His Works”, §1, *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Bicentennial Edition of Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985, p. 387.

It is surprising to notice the presence of an ecological sense. In the sequence, Wesley attempts to demonstrate how everything, in the original plan of God, served a purpose or occupied a relevant place in the total order of creation. He gives wings to his imagination and speculates about the perfection of each part in the harmony of reality, starting with the four basic elements – earth, water, air, fire – and including all the rest – vegetables, animals and so forth. Thus he writes a kind of *Diary of Creation* to underline that nothing disturbs the peace that was established by the Lord. Without violence or natural failures, “all the creatures breathed, in their several kinds, the benevolence of their great Creator”:

Such was the state of the creation, according to the scanty ideas which we can now form concerning it, when its great Author, surveying the whole system at one view, pronounced it "very good." It was good in the highest degree whereof it was capable, and without any mixture of evil. Every part was exactly suited to the others, and conducive to the good of the whole. There was "a golden chain" (to use the expression of Plato) "let down from the throne of God;" an exactly connected series of beings, from the highest to the lowest; from dead earth, through fossils, vegetables, animals, to man, created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and enjoy his Creator to all eternity.¹⁵

The general picture displays the immense value of all creatures both in themselves and in their mutual association independent of human beings. They have a remarkable dignity as God’s works, and not because of their utility in attending human necessities. They can reflect the mercy and the munificence of the Creator, and should be accepted and sheltered.

Wesley holds, however, humans in highest esteem. Man and woman were created in the image of God, which includes, in his vision, three main dimensions: the *natural* image – humans are spiritual beings endowed with “understanding, freedom of will, and various affections”; the *political* image – God bestow on them capabilities of governing “this lower world, having ‘dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over all the earth’”; and, most importantly, the *moral* image. The later consists of all the gifts that permit humans to reflect God’s character in the world, such as

¹⁵ Ibidem, §13-14, p. 396. Cf. also *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*. Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers, 1975, v. 1, pp. 2-9 [Notes: Gen. 1].

"righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4: 24), love, justice, mercy, truth, and purity¹⁶. It is significant to stress that John Wesley "sees the image more relationally, not so much as something humans possess as the way they relate to God and live out that relation in the world. [...] Not image as a human capability or inherent possession, but as a living relationship called forth by divine grace"¹⁷.

In agreement with God's will, human beings are called to be stewards of creation. The world does not belong to them. They cannot use everything as they wish to. Humankind, neither individually nor collectively, is the absolute owner or sovereign ruler of the earth. Stewards hold something only in trust for the real proprietor. Thus human relations with other creatures ought to be shaped by an attitude of responsibility toward them. As partners in God's works, we have to defend life in all its manifestations and take care in preserving the integrity of creation.

This idyllic description operates as a counterpoint to the present situation. Wesley clearly recognizes this. He appeals to Christian tradition and explains that the current disorder results from human sin. Its tragic consequences affect the whole of creation and "overspread the face of the earth" (Gen. 3:17, 5:29; Rom. 8.21). By commenting on this fact, his words become a deep grief:

Thus holy, thus happy, were our first parents, in having the image of God upon them. But how art thou fallen, O son of the morning? How is this image of God upon man defaced! How small are the remains of it, and how great the ruins of it!

But immediately Wesley recovers from his desolation: "The Lord renews it upon our souls by his sanctifying grace!"¹⁸. The renewal of the *imago Dei* in humanity is the foundation of the "optimism of grace" and the source of hope in the restoration of all things. We can only perceive the depth of Wesley's understanding of salvation when

¹⁶ Cf. Sermon 45: "The New Birth", §1.1; *Notes*: Gen. 1:26-28.

¹⁷ Runyon, Theodore. *Op. cit.*, p. 13. Maddox is equally emphatic in accentuating the *Wesley's Relational Anthropology* [*op. cit.*, p. 68].

¹⁸ *Notes*: Gen. 1:26-28.

we take very seriously the theology of creation¹⁹.

Re-enchantment of creation: the presence of God in the world

If Harvey Cox and Max Weber, as we have seen, mentioned the disenchantment of nature as part of modern society, from the Wesleyan perspective we have to move in the opposite direction. In Wesley's thought it is more appropriate to refer to the re-enchantment of creation. Contrary to the major tendencies of his times, Wesley did not conceive God the Creator as distant from creation. The deist conception of God denied the continued presence of God within the world. Like a watch or any other machine, the universe functions perfectly without the interference of its maker. As a result, ascendant groups in industrial society and merchants felt liberated to manipulate and exploit nature.

For Wesley, the God *that made heaven and earth* never abandons his creation. He, who is the originator of the world, preserves all things and redeems them, as well as guaranteeing their full realization. Paul expresses this Christian conviction, in an abridged manner, in Romans 11:36: "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to him be glory for ever. Amen". In *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Wesley adds the following comments:

"Of him – As the Creator. Through him – As the Preserver. To him – As the ultimate end, are all things".

This means that creation has a beginning, continuity and purpose. It tends to the new creation. These arguments set in evidence the Trinitarian vision that characterizes the Wesleyan theology of creation (Gen. 1:2; 26; John 1:1-14; Acts 17:24-31; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:2). If we normally regard God the Father as the Author of the universe, in fact, we cannot separate, one from the other, the Persons of the Trinity. Wesley agreed with the Cappadocian Fathers who developed the notion of *perichoresis* (co-inherence). "The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the

¹⁹ Our intention in this section was to choose only some theological aspects of the Wesley's thought that should be recovered today. But one can remark several limitations that Wesley shares with his times. His static perception of the world and the dualism, which he establishes between the living things and the inanimate matter, for instance, are incompatible with the contemporary knowledge. About that, see: Cobb, John B., Jr. *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 51-52; and Maddox, Randy L. op. cit., pp. 58-59.

persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that ‘a community of being’, in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them”²⁰. Love, which is the essence of the Trinitarian relationship, is not exclusivist, but exceeds itself to embrace all creatures. So *the pure in heart* - “they who love God with all their hearts” – *shall see God*“ in all things here; hereafter in glory” (*Notes*: Matt. 5:8). Wesley is still more categorical about this theme in his third discourse a propos of the *Sermon on the Mount*:

But the great lesson which our blessed Lord inculcates here, and which he illustrates by this example, is, that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and 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 universe²¹.

Wesley is convinced that there is no life apart from the Trinitarian God (Acts 17.28). Everything that exists finds its source of being in God who is revealed in Christ and in the power of Holy Spirit. God dwells in all his creatures. In this sense, it is suitable to apply to Wesley’s insights the same expression, which was employed by

²⁰ McGrath, Alister E. *op. cit.*, p. 298. Cf. also Boff, Leonardo, *A Trindade, a Sociedade e a Liberdade*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1986, p. 75-76, 290 and Meeks, M. Douglas. *Economia Global & Economia de Deus*. São Bernardo do Campo: Editeo, 2001, pp. 46-57.

²¹ Sermon 23, “Sermon on the Mount, III”, §I.11, *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Bicentennial Edition of Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, pp. 516-517. Cf. also §I.6, p. 513: “The pure in heart see all things full of God. They see Him in the firmament of heaven; in the moon, walking in brightness; in the sun, when he rejoiceth as a giant to run his course. They see Him ‘making the clouds his chariots, and walking upon the wings of the wind.’ They see Him ‘preparing rain for the earth, and blessing the increase of it; giving grass for the cattle, and green herb for the use of man.’ 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!’”; Sermon 26, “Sermon on the Mount, VI”, §III.7, vol. 1, p. 581; and Sermon 77, “Spiritual Worship”, II.3, vol. 3, p. 95.

Paul Tillich, characterizing Calvin's theology, namely, panentheism²². This should be clearly distinguished from pantheism. While this last term means that all is God, the former is in accordance with affirmations of Wesley such as "God is in all things" and "we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature". Both the ancient tradition of the Church and recent theology, from Jürgen Moltmann to Leonardo Boff, have maintained some sense of the immanence of God within creation²³. The modern society that arose in the eighteenth century, with the exception of Wesley, represented a hiatus in this chain. "Wesley's God, the Soul of the world, who pervades and actuates the whole of creation, and who enlivens, enlightens, and liberates all people, calling them to strive toward personal and social perfection, and empowering their efforts – that is a different matter"²⁴. Such an observation leads us to the next point: the question of anthropocentrism.

Overcoming anthropocentrism

Jewish and Christian traditions have been censured because of the immeasurable emphasis that is given to the human figure, the crown of creation. As God's representative on earth, humankind was destined to dominate all things, putting lower creatures under his feet (Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8). Starting from these principles, it is relatively effortless to justify human interference in all forms of life, since other species should be submitted to human desires and necessities.

But biblical religion is quite ambiguous, and there may be different hermeneutical possibilities. As stewards, human beings must act with responsibility and care for God's works, from the meanest unto the highest one. Some verses from Holy Scripture, for instance, strongly recommend the protection of animals (Cf. Ex. 23:4-5; 23:12; Deut. 22:4; 22:6-7; 25:4). The pious life includes solicitudes for the

²² From the Greek: *pan*, all; *en*, in; *Theos*, God. Cf. Tillich, Paul. *História do Pensamento Cristão* [Portuguese translation of *History of Christian Thought*]. São Paulo: Aste, 2000, pp. 261-262.

²³ See Moltmann, Jürgen. *Deus na Criação: doutrina ecológica da criação* [German original, *Gott in der Schöpfung – Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*]. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1993; Boff, Leonardo. *Ecologia: Grito da Terra, Grito dos Pobres*. São Paulo: Ática, 1995.

²⁴ Coob, John B., Jr., op. cit., p. 51.

welfare of beasts: “A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Prov. 12:10). Therefore, the decisive issue is not whether the Bible defends or not some type of anthropocentrism or offers legitimacy for the egocentric exploitation of nature. It depends on our interpretative key to the biblical message, to how we read the Scriptures.

During Wesley's time, when deep changes were revolutionizing economic and social structures, the anthropocentric exegesis was dominant. Philosophers, such as Descartes (1596-1650), by establishing a distinction between *res extensa* – which is identified with the material world – and *res cogitans* – which is associated with the spiritual world, gave support to dualistic approaches. Vegetal and animal realms, including the human body, belonged to the world of extension and mechanical movements. While beasts were considered as automate machines, humans were utterly different, since they combined matter and mind. Thus, interpreters taught that biblical revelation was addressed only to human delight. According to this logic, the inclusion of ox and ass in the Sabbath precept (Ex. 23:12) was intended to save their keeper from extra work on this day, just as the advise in Proverbs 12.10 was given to avoid violence among people, not in order to preserve the animals themselves. Moreover, allegorical method has almost always been used where creatures other than humans are mentioned (cf. 1 Cor. 9:9-10)²⁵.

What about John Wesley? At first sight, it seems that he follows the dominant trends. But a cautious examination discloses that Wesley is beyond his age. We can observe this in his comments on the surprisingly ecological counsel of Deuteronomy 22:6-7: “If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way, in any tree, or on the ground, *whether they be* young ones, or eggs, and the dam sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young. *But* thou shalt in any wise let the dam go, and take the young to thee; that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong *thy* days”:

v. 7. *Let the dam go* – Partly for the bird's sake, which suffered enough by the loss of its young; for God would not have cruelty exercised toward the brute creatures; and partly for men's sake, to restrain their greediness, that they should not monopolize all to themselves, but leave the hopes of a

²⁵ Cf. Thomas, Keith, op. cit., pp. 21-42, 179-197 et passim.

future seed for others²⁶.

Wesley takes into account the benefits not only for humans at present, but also for future generations and for the birds. His words serve as an alarm for our predatory and self-destructive society. Where disrespect for life prevails, neither nature nor neighbor, mainly children, women and poor people, have a place in our common home. In short, Wesley underlines the salvation of humanity, together with his contemporaries, but he never surrendered to their cruel anthropocentrism. God's love does not exclude anything that lives:

[A Christian] is happy in knowing there is a God, an intelligent Cause and Lord of all, and that he is not the produce either of blind chance or inexorable necessity. He is happy in the full assurance he has that this Creator and End of all things is a Being of boundless wisdom, of infinite power to execute all the designs of His wisdom, and of no less infinite goodness to direct all His power to the advantage of all His creatures²⁷.

God's actions as Creator, Provider, Judge as well as Redeemer, are not restricted to human creatures. They embrace the entire universe. Two sermons put express accent on the cosmic aspect of salvation: "The General Deliverance" (number 60), upon Rom. 8:19-22, and "The New Creation" (number 64), upon Rev. 21:5. By the way, Maddox remarks soundly that

the late Wesley decisively shifted the focus of his ultimate hope from "heaven above" to the future new creation. Indeed, the new creation became one of the most prominent themes of his late sermons. These sermons leave no doubt that the new creation will be a physical place, though each of its basic elements will be dramatically improved over present conditions. Indeed, they will be even better than the paradise that Adam and Eve knew. There is also no doubt that all creatures will partake in the New Creation (...) This emphasis on cosmic redemption found in Wesley's late sermons

²⁶ *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, v. 1, p. 649.

²⁷ Wesley, John. *Letters: "To Dr. Conyers Middleton" apud Burtner, Robert W. and Chiles, Robert E. A Compend of Wesley's Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954, p.55.

was quite unusual for his time²⁸.

In light of future, which is anticipated at present by the Holy Spirit, though not in plenty, even creation acquires a new sense. Descriptions of paradise are not accounts concerning the past, but prophecies toward future. This interpretation of Genesis, which has been suggested by Carlos Mesters²⁹, is reinforced when we compare Wesley's sermons *God's Approbation of His Works* and *The New Creation*. The similarities related to their structure are impressive. So it is correct to say both sermons, plus *The General Deliverance*, portray Wesleyan hope of the renewal of all things, and express commitment to the transformation of current circumstances. God does not wish the destruction of his handiworks (cf. Job 10:3), for "*the creation itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God*" (Rom. 8:21):

Destruction is not deliverance: therefore whatsoever is destroyed, or ceases to be, is not delivered at all. Will then any part of creation be destroyed? *Into the glorious liberty of the children of God* – The excellent state wherein they were created.

Wesley's question, which is formulated in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, is merely rhetorical, and presupposes a negative answer as one can confirm in the sequence of his commentary. Divine purpose is fulfilled in the restoration and perfection of all created things.

To Wesley's theological insight correspond coherent actions. Theology should inspire and reflect ethical engagement. Wesley himself firmly opposed cruelty to animals; insisted on the necessity of educating for benevolence and compassion to *anything that has life*; condemned slavery; sought alternatives to respond to the challenge of poverty, and denounced injustice and social inequalities in the rising industrial society, although he did not note the structural character of the changes in

²⁸ Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 253. The mentioned sermons are respectively in *The Bicentennial Edition of Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, pp. 436-450 and pp. 500-510. Specifically about the Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance", Maddox presents the following opinion: "Andrew Linzey has referred to this sermon as perhaps the best exposition of the view of animal salvation in the Western Christianity tradition!" (op. cit., p. 284, n. 112).

²⁹ Mesters, Carlos. *Paraíso Terrestre: saudade ou esperança*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1979.

process³⁰. Therefore, we have sufficient grounds in Wesley's thought and praxis to develop an ethics of life.

Knowledge from creation and the task of theology

Such issues defy us to rethink how we do theology. Scholars, such as Collin Williams and Albert Outler, have developed, in the context of ecumenical dialogue, the fourfold pattern of religious authority on the basis of Wesley's thought, the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral. Despite the fact that Wesley never utilized the expression "quadrilateral", it is possible to ask how far this idea is grounded in his writings, or if it constitutes a legitimate development of Methodist theology³¹. Maddox briefly explains the main points:

While not directly derived from Wesley, a conjoined consideration of Scripture, reason, experience, and "tradition" (...) as criteria in his theological judgments is not entirely inappropriate. He does appeal to two or three of them jointly. His most common conjunction in certifying a position as authentically Christian is to argue that it is both scriptural and rational. Examples can also be found of joint appeals to Scripture and "tradition", or Scripture and experience. Finally, there are examples of appeals linking Scripture, reason, and "tradition"; or Scripture, reason, and experience³².

I do not intend to discuss this subject, except to ask: why has knowledge from creation been excluded from this approach? Normally this kind of question is misunderstood and dismissed as a claim to natural theology. However we can not ignore the fact that Wesley demonstrated profound interest in natural things, besides

³⁰ See among others Runyon, Theodore. Op. cit., pp. 168-221; and Míguez Bonino, José. "Foi o metodismo um movimento libertador?". In: *Luta pela Vida e Evangelização*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 1985, pp. 22-33.

³¹ About this debate, see: Outler, Albert C. "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley". In: *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991, pp. 21-37; Campbell, Ted A. "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth". In: *Methodist History*, 29:2, January 1991, pp. 87-95; Maddox, Randy L., op. cit., pp. 36-47; Cobb, John B., Jr., op. cit., pp. 155-176; Reily, Duncan Alexander. *Wesley e sua Bíblia*. São Bernardo do Campo: Editeo, 1997.

³² Maddox, Randy L., op. cit., p. 36.

science. As an example of this, one can mention the five volumes of *A Compendium of Natural Philosophy* that he published, also with the title *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*. Wesley's devotion to nature was not mere curiosity or a personal matter, with no theological resonance. Humans can recognize the glory of God and, by analogy, reach some awareness of his purposes through observation of the universe:

The world around us is the mighty volume wherein God hath declared himself. Human languages and characters are different in different nations. And those of one nation are not understood by the rest. But the book of nature is written in a universal character, which every man may read in his own language. It consists not of words, but things which picture out the Divine perfections³³.

In his *Notes upon Psalm 19*, Wesley reaffirms his conviction by describing the heavens as a "legible book" [verse 1], which "gives us a clear knowledge or discovery of God their author" [verse 2]; ... "heavens are such an universal teacher, that they can speak to all people, and be clearly understood by all" [verse 3]. Moreover, as we have seen before, Wesley admits some sense of the immanence of God within world. He believed that "the pure in heart see all things full of God". Also, in some passages of *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Wesley founds his interpretation on natural phenomena. A good example is his larger than usual comment on 2 Pet. 3.18. Similar procedures can be observed in his sermons, such as in his explanations regarding the spiritual senses.

Certainly, Wesley was conscious of the limitations of any knowledge of God from nature. It speaks about the Creator, but does not say a word concerning who he is. So biblical revelation continues to be necessary, and even fundamental. But other theological sources have limitations, mostly if they are considered apart one from one another. Biblicism, traditionalism, rationalism, subjectivism or naturalism occur when we lose the balance. The solution, however, is not to disregard anyone, or any perspective.

This is very important, principally when we take into account that "as time passed, Wesley's estimation of the contribution of restored universal revelation

³³ Wesley, John. *A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*. In: Burtner, Robert W. and Chiles, Robert E., op. cit., p. 36. In this anthology, there are others passages regarding this theme (cf. pp. 36- 39).

appears to have increase”³⁴. Even more, present times urge responsible theology to attentively consider human corporality and the cosmic aspect of salvation, which is only possible when we do not despise creation. Lamentably, as we have seen, these concerns are not only theoretical questions.

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³⁴ Maddox, Randy L., *op. cit.*, p 30.