

A Wesleyan Theology of Missions:

a Re-Reading of John Wesley through his encounters with people of non-Christian faiths

Philip Wingeier-Rayo

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I would like to dedicate this paper to my great grandparents, Rev. Charles S. and Emily Buchanan, Methodist Episcopal Church missionaries among Muslims in Java and District Superintendent of the Malaysia Methodist Church for 30 years beginning in 1895.

Philip Jenkins reports in his book *God's Continent* that the Muslim population is growing in Europe while Christianity is on the decline.¹ He writes that in the United Kingdom alone there are 1500 mosques.² A 2011 Pew report indicated that currently 4.6% of the population in the UK are Muslim and this figure could grow to 8.2% in 30 years.³ In May of this year, the JNN cited a UK census report to predict that Islam would surpass Christianity as the majority religion in the UK in 10 years.⁴ A 2004 survey of British respondents revealed that 44% believed in God, 35% did not and 21% did not know. These figures were even lower for young people ages 18-34 as 45% did not believe in God.⁵ How would John Wesley react to such news of the decline of Christianity in his own country? How would he respond to the growth of Islam in the UK? What insights did his encounters with people of other faiths offer the Wesleyan heritage to deal with the present age? What is a Wesleyan understanding of missions to guide us in our encounters with people of other faiths in the 21st century?

Wesley had some encounters with people of different faiths and cultures. He met and wrote about his experiences with Native Americans, Africans, Jews, Deists, and Roman Catholics. He also read many missionary and travel journals of people who encountered Muslims and Hindus and exchanged letters with people about how to relate to people of others faiths. He also wrote about the Chinese and Buddhists, even though he did not have any direct contact with them. His thoughts, feelings and experiences toward people of other faiths are recorded in his writings and can give us some insights as to how he believed Christianity should relate to people of other faiths. Overall, I would like to suggest that John Wesley's attitudes toward people of other faiths and cultures fall into three main categories: Noble Savage, Natural Man and eschatological hopefulness. Without any smooth evolutionary or logical development to Wesley's thought, generally these three stages that I trace in this paper follow the path of the young, middle-aged and mature Wesley. I will conclude the paper with some more recent

¹ Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent*, Oxford University Press, 116

² *Ibid.*

³ <http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>

⁴ <http://jafrianews.com/2013/05/17/islam-could-be-dominant-uk-religion-in-10-years-census-analysis/>

⁵ YouGov/Daily Telegraph Survey at www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/ST1040101003_2.pdf

scholarship and thought on the theology of religions and attempt a Wesleyan interpretation of a theology of religions.

John Wesley became aware of people of other faiths through reading missionary letters and travel journals that largely gave Wesley the view of other as a noble savage. John Wesley's time in Savannah in the New World was an encounter with Native Americans, Jews and African Americans that challenged his view of the noble savage with real life encounters. He was also exposed to the realities of the British colonial model of other. Here he was stripped of the view of noble savage and replaced it with harsh views toward Jews, Muslims, Native Americans and to a certain extent Roman Catholics. One of the very helpful disciplines that Wesley maintained throughout his life was to be an avid reader and observer of the world in which he lives. As a result he was exposed to new realities and adjusted his beliefs accordingly. As a result, Wesley, entered into a later stage that viewed native peoples as noble and criticized European Christians as the biggest impediment to the conversion of non-Christians.

John Wesley was born into a time of British expansionism in which awareness and contact with people of different faiths and cultures was becoming more readily available. Even before John was born his paternal grandfather, John Westley, wanted to become a missionary to Surinam in the Dutch East Indies, however family circumstances preventing him from going. He also considered missionary service to Maryland, but the door was closed to him. The missions' bug was passed on to the next generation as his son Samuel also offered himself for missionary service. Samuel devised an ambitious plan involving the East India Company to establish missions in 1705 in India, China and Abyssinia. On the other side of the family, his maternal grandfather Dr. Samuel Annesley was a Puritan preacher and evangelist. His daughter, Susanna Wesley, inherited this passion for missions and read the reports from the Danish missionaries Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau from Tranquebar, India. She incorporated these readings into her weekly devotions with her children, in which John Wesley would have participated. In a letter to her husband in 1712 she responded to the readings:

I was never, I think, more affected with anything than with the relation of their travels, and was exceeding pleased with the noble design they were engaged in. Their labours refreshed my soul beyond measure; and I could not forbear spending good part in that evening in praising and adoring the divine goodness for inspiring those good men with such an ardent zeal for his glory, that they were willing to hazard their lives and all that is esteemed dear to men in this world, to advance the honour of their Master Jesus. For several days I could think or speak of little else.

Although John was exposed to these worldwide missionary letters, these experiences seemed very distant and apparently did not have much personal impact on his early years in the isolated town of Epworth.

The first glimpse of Wesley's view of the outside world came in an early letter to his mother on July 29, 1725, when he was twenty-two years old: "the Spaniards daily plunder our merchantmen as fast as they can catch them in the West Indies," which revealed a nationalistic view. This view would not have been uncommon given the histories between England and Spain and the anti-Catholic sentiments of Protestants, however his comment does reveal an ethnocentric attitude.

The flip-side of Wesley's ethnocentrism was also an initial stage of innocence with the "Noble Savage" concept that was prevalent in missionary and travel journals. In an October 10, 1735 letter to Dr. John Burton before embarking for Georgia, Wesley explained his reasons for going and his impressions of the Native Americans whom he was going to convert: "My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen. They have no comments to construe away the text; no vain philosophy to corrupt it; no luxurious, sensual, covetous, ambitious expounders to soften its unpleasing truths, to reconcile earthly-mindedness and faith, the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world. They have no party, no interest to serve, and are therefore fit to receive the gospel in its simplicity. They are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God; and consequently they shall know of every doctrine I preach whether it be of God. By these, therefore, I hope to learn the purity of that faith which was once delivered to the saints; the genuine sense and full extent of those laws which none can understand who mind earthly things."⁶

Wesley was also influenced by travel journals such as that of Captain James Cook.⁷ When he and other European explorers first came into contact with the Pacific islanders in the late 18th century, they naively created an image of peaceful, happy and ignorant peoples: "We must admit," Cook explained, "that the child is happier than the man, and that we are losers by the perfection of our nature, the increase of our knowledge, and the enlargement of our views."⁸

The impressions of Captain Cook and the concept of the noble savage were part of the colonial mindset of essentializing the other.⁹ Some sources state that the myth of the noble savage was introduced in John Dryden's play, "The Conquest of Granada" (1672) and later the term became the idealized view of indigenous people. Later myth became popularized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who argued in his book *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind* that what appeared to be human progress was actually a step backward. The stage of original innocence was preferable to the current conditions of living in cities, having private property, inequality, jealousy because this has led to conflict and warfare. Rousseau argued that the original "pure state of nature" when people lived as hunters and gatherers and were "free, healthy, honest and happy" was preferable to the current state of civilization.¹⁰

Wesley had also been exposed to missionary journals, initially by his mother, and then later under his own accounts.¹¹ Much later in his life, Wesley read and published his own abridged edition of Jonathan Edward's 1765 publication "The Life of David Brainerd," which Wesley lifted up as an example of Christian living. In 1734, the year before going to Georgia, Wesley met Chief Tomochichi of the Creek

⁶ Letters of John Wesley, October 10, 1735 "Letter to Dr. Burton."

⁷ JJW IV 6 December 17, 1773.

⁸ <http://www.lewrockwell.com/2012/02/david-deming/the-noble-savage/>

⁹ Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, University of California Press, 2001, xv.

¹⁰ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*, 1754, p.83.

¹¹ JJW December 9, 1749 Wesley recorded "read the surprising 'Extract of Mr. Brainerd's Journal'."

Trip who Governor Oglethorpe had taken to England to meet the King and Queen.¹² Once in the Savannah port Wesley would again have a conversation with him that would confirm his openness to be taught about Christianity: “I am glad you are come. When I was in England I desired that some would speak the Great Word to me. And my nation then desired to hear it. But now we are all in confusion. Yet I am glad you are come. I will go up and speak to the wise men of our nation. And I hope they will hear. But we would not be made Christians as the Spaniards make Christians. We would be taught before we are baptized.”¹³

Such experiences motivated Wesley to travel to the colonies to convert Native Americans. Coming ashore Wesley sought opportunities to meet with Native Americans and sustained conversations with them about the divine. On July 1st, 1736 he met with Chief Chigilly of the Choctaw tribe and July 20th with five members of the Chickasaw tribe including Chief Paustoobee and Mingo Mattaw came to speak with Wesley.¹⁴ Through an interpreter Wesley was able to appreciate that they did have a belief in the divine, afterlife and wanted to learn more about the Bible and Christianity.

Wesley did not pursue his original goal of evangelizing the Native Americans, however as Governor Oglethorpe was concerned that Wesley’s departures would leave Savannah “destitute of a minister.” Wesley also became quickly disillusioned with the lifestyle and character of Native Americans marking a transition into his second stage of anthropology and one that would impact most of his theological writings. Wesley wrote of the Creeks: “They show no inclination to learn anything, but least of all Christianity, being full as opinionated of their own parts and wisdom as either modern Chinese or ancient Roman.”¹⁵

Wesley became disabused of his innocent views of Native Americans: “Gone was Wesley’s view of the noble savage, innocent in his simplicity and eager to receive the gospel truth. He now saw human nature in a different light—mean, selfish, sinful; ignorant of God, and indifferent to saving truth.”

Wesley used his personal encounters and second-hand stories that he heard from traders to reach his conclusions about Native Americans. In his treatise “Doctrine of Original Sin” Wesley describes his impressions of Native Americans:

They have no laws of any kind, unless a few temporary rules made in and for the time of war. They are likewise utter strangers to the arts of peace, having scarce any such thing as an artificer in a nation. They know nothing of building; having only poor, miserable, ill-contrived huts, far inferior to many English dog-kennels. Their clothing, till of late, was only skins of beasts, commonly of deer, hanging down before and behind them. ...But, in the point of religion, there is a very material difference between the northern and the southern Indians: Those in the north are idolaters of the lowest kind. If they do not worship the devil, appearing in person, (which

¹² Richard Heitzenrater (1995), p.61.

¹³ WW: Vol. XVIII Journal and Diaries I: February 14, 1735

¹⁴ JJW I:24

¹⁵ Journal and Diaries I:18:204

many firmly believe they do, many think incredible,) certainly they worship the most vile and contemporary idols.¹⁶

At this stage of his life Wesley fell into the common colonial belief that Native Americans were savages and that they did not want to learn about Christianity. When reflecting on whether or not to return to England he wrote in his journal: "I consulted my friends whether God did not call me to return to England. The reason for which I left it had now no force, there being no possibility as yet of instructing the Indians; neither had I as yet found or heard of any Indians on the continent of America who had the least desire of being instructed."¹⁷ Although he has personal experience with Native Americans upon returning to England Wesley begins to draw on second hand stories as illustrated in his sermon "Caution Against Bigotry:"

As gross and palpable are the works of the devil among many (if not all) the modern heathens. The natural religion of the Creeks, Cherokees, Chicasaws, and all other Indians bordering on our southern settlements (not of a few single men, but of entire nations) is to torture all their prisoners from morning to night, till at length they roast them to death; and upon the slightest undesigned provocation to come behind and shoot any of their own countrymen. Yea, it is a common thing among them for the son, if he thinks his father lives too long, to knock out his brains; and for a mother, if she is tired of her children, to fasten stones about their necks, and throw three or four of them into the river one after another.¹⁸

Wesley had a similar experience with Jews as he did Native Americans. Wesley had a theological impression of Jews from Scripture. However on April 4, 1737 he began studying Spanish so he could communicate with Jews, who comprised between 15-20% of his parishioners in Savannah. Wesley had begun studying Spanish earlier in order to communicate with the Native Americans who had been in contact with Spaniards. However, now his intent was to aid Oglethorpe as an interpreter with the Spanish authorities.¹⁹ For this purpose he studied between June 24-November 29, 1736 with Dr. Samuel Nunez Ribeiro, a Jewish physician from Portugal. Dr. Nunez was supportive of Wesley and Oglethorpe's political position against the Spanish since he had been imprisoned and forced to convert to Christianity under the Inquisition. Later he would secretly return to Judaism, was circumcised and led others to Judaism. After Governor Oglethorpe returned the England Wesley resumed Spanish classes with Dr. Nunez in April of 1737 but was motivated more by his pastoral duties to visit the Jewish parishioners who spoke Spanish. In addition to Spanish lessons the two apparently had theological discussions. On April 15-16, 1737 Wesley read Richard Kidder's book, *The Demonstration of the Messiah in which the Truth of the Christian Religion is Defended Especially Against the Jews*.²⁰ The two were in obvious disagreement as Dr. Nunez was a convert back to Judaism and had suffered persecution for his beliefs.

¹⁶ *JW Works*, IX 211

¹⁷ Journal: October 7, 1737

¹⁸ Sermons 38: "Caution Against Bigotry," 9

¹⁹ John English, "John Wesley and his 'Jewish Parishioners': Jewish-Christian Relationships in Savannah, Georgia, 1736-1737," *Methodist History*, 36:4 (July 1998), p.223.

²⁰ Richard Kidder, *The Demonstration of the Messiah in which the Truth of the Christian Religion is Defended Especially Against the Jews*, London, published by J. Heptinstall, part I (1684), part II (1699) and part III (1700).

On August 31, 1737 Wesley recorded in his diary: "3:35 Nunez. Spanish. 4 Dispute! 4.40."²¹ In spite of these theological differences, Nunez apparently made quite an impression as Wesley began his sermon "On Charity" on December 16, 1787—50 years later—with a illustration from Dr. Nunez's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:

That Paul of Tarsus was one of the finest writers I have ever read. I wish the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians were wrote in letters of gold. And I wish every Jew were to carry it with him wherever he went.' He judged (and herein he certainly judged right) that this single chapter contained the whole of true religion. It contains 'whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise', it is all contained in this.²²

Wesley continued to have encounters with Jews in Georgia and he counted them as his parishioners. He noted in his journal that some of the Jews were closer to having the mind of Christ than many who call him Lord.²³

After returning to England his writing about Jews became less personal and more theological. In general he refers to the Jews as God's formerly chosen people. In his sermon "on Faith" Wesley describes the four dispensations. Based on John Fletcher's theology and Hebrews 11:6, Wesley argues that a small degree of light is given to those under the heathen dispensation who believe that "there was a God and that he was a rewarder of them that diligently sought him." Then a "far more considerable degree of light" given to the Jews and they were entrusted this light and the "oracles of God." (Romans 3:2) A third dispensation was given to John the Baptist and finally the Christian dispensation is available to "one that has received the Spirit of adoption, that has the Spirit of God witnessing 'with his spirit that he is a child of God.'" (Romans 8:15-16) This is part of Wesley's belief that in order to be saved one must have a faith of assurance and be adopted as a son. He believes that all others who have faith "Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, heathens, deists or materialists" have only the faith of a servant.²⁴

So for Wesley, the Jews belong to the second dispensation, which is considerably more than that of heathens, but clearly failed to leave the old dispensation and enter under the new. Wesley's criticism of Jews is that they live under the law expressing their religion through performance of rituals or ceremonial requirements, but their dispensation does not avail them to the Holy Spirit and the light Christ, which is God's final and unique revelation to humans.

This places Wesley's theology within the definition of fulfillment theology also known as replacement theology.²⁵ This is a supersessionist theology that argues that the Jews failed to

²¹ Wesley, *Journals and Diaries* /, 558.

²² Sermon 91 "On Charity"

²³ JWJ: April 4, 1737

²⁴ Sermon "On Faith" I: 9-10

²⁵ Michael Vlach, "The Various Forms of Replacement Theology," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 20/1, Spring 2009.

acknowledge Jesus Christ as the messiah and thus have been replaced as God's chosen people (Matthew 21:43). Charles Wesley wrote in a 1758 hymn about the Jews:

Outcasts from thee, and scattered wide
Blaspheming who they crucified
Unsaved, unpitied, unforgiven
Branded like Cain, they bear their load
Abhorred of men, and cursed of God.²⁶

Wesley would not have gone so far as punitive supersessionism that argues that the Jews are being punished for denying Christ, he would state that Christians have greater access through the Holy Spirit to the fourth dispensation through Christ's incarnation. Fulfillment theology became very popular during the modern missionary movement and was prevalent at Commission IV of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh "The Christian Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions."²⁷ Replacement theology came under criticism following the Holocaust for its implicit anti-Semitism and Wesley has been accused by Jewish human rights groups for not distancing himself enough from Martin Luther's anti-Semitic remarks.²⁸ The petition to the 2012 General Conference of the United Methodist Church to boycott Catapillar, Hewlett Packer and Motorola renewed these old tensions between Jews and Methodism.

While Wesley did have some personal encounters with Native Americans and Jews, we cannot say the same about Muslims. After returning to England all of Wesley's information about people of other faiths came from secondary sources and travel journals. He himself admits that he "has nothing to do with them" in his sermon "On Faith." In spite of this he is well read and begins his sermon on the "General Spread of the Gospel" by quoting Edward Brerewood's statistics on the percentage of Muslims and Christians in the world stating that if the world were divided into 30 parts, 19 would be heathen, six Christian and five heathen.²⁹ Wesley's perspective was filtered through the Western perspective of the military clashes between the two religions and the apologetic method of defending Christianity against Islam. Wesley responded rather sharply to an attempt by Henri de Boulainvillier to offer Islam as a desirable alternative to Papism and Christianity in general.³⁰ He also used negative examples of Muslim and the Quran to make his case for human depravity in "The Doctrine of Original Sin."³¹ While Wesley at least believes that Islam is a separate religion—an improvement on the attitude of many reformers that

²⁶ Charles Wesley, *Hymns*, 1797, No.831.

²⁷ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Eerdmans, 2009, p.205.

²⁸ *The Jewish Chronicle*: <http://www.thejc.com/blogpost/founder-methodism-the-jew-a-worm>

²⁹ Sermon 62: The General Spread of the Gospel cites Edward Brerewood, *Enquiries touching the diversity of languages and religions, through the chief parts of the world*, published by Robert Brerewood after his death, 1614.

³⁰ Journal (23 Nov. 1767), Journal (Curnock), 5:242-3.

³¹ The Doctrine of Original Sin, Pt. I, §11.6, Works (Jackson), 9:215-16.

it was merely a Christian heresy³², it is telling to see how the lack of any personal encounter with Muslims and his need to depend on secondary sources influenced his opinions.

In his mature years, Wesley developed a greater appreciation of indigenous peoples and non-Christian religions—namely out of criticisms of the un-Christian behavior of the British and its role in slavery and colonialism. He also wrote in his sermon “On Faith” (1788) that:

No more therefore will be expected of them, than the living up to the light they had. But many of them, especially in the civilized nations, we have great reason to hope, although they lived among Heathens, yet were quite of another spirit; being taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion. Yea, and so was that Mahometan, and Arabian, who, a century or two ago, wrote the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdan. The story seems to be feigned; but it contains all the principles of pure religion and undefiled.

Here we see Wesley maturing and nuancing his stance toward Islam when he avoids a blanket condemnation of Muslims and acknowledge their response to the limited revelation they have received while recognizing, at least in one case, a Muslim who lived a life of true religion.³³

Wesley became very critical of Christians in general, especially Methodists.³⁴ John Wesley appropriated the Quaker abolitionist position in his treatise “Thoughts Upon Slavery”:

‘The Mandingos,’ says Monsieur Brue, ‘are rigid Mahometans, drinking neither wine nor brandy. They are industrious and laborious, keeping their ground well cultivated, and breeding a good stock of cattle. Every town has a Governor, and he appoints the labour of the people. The men work the ground designed for corn; the women and girls, the rice-ground. He afterwards divides the corn and rice among them; and decides all quarrels, if any arise...These three nations practise several trades; they have smiths, saddlers, potters, and weavers; and they are very ingenious at their several occupations. Their smiths not only make all the instruments of iron which they have occasion to use, but likewise work many things neatly in gold and silver. It is chiefly the women and children who weave fine cotton cloth, which they dye blue and black.’³⁵

As noted above, these particular Africans are Muslim, but Wesley not only accepts their religion, he is actually quite complementary of their religious and governance practices: “All the Mahometan Negroes constantly go to public prayers thrice a day; there being a Priest in every village, who regularly calls them together; and it is surprising to see the modesty, attention, and reverence which they observe during their worship...Few of them will drink anything stronger than water, being strict Mahometans.”³⁶

³² W.P. Stephens, “Understanding Islam – in the light of Bullinger and Wesley,” EQ 81.1 (2009), 23–37.

³³ Also see Randy Maddox, “Wesley and the Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 27, 1992, p.11.

³⁴ Sermon 69: The Imperfection of Human Knowledge. Also see Theodore Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics*, Abingdon, 1990.

³⁵ WW: “Thoughts Upon Slavery”

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Also the mature Wesley wrote more eschatology and, while not losing his evangelistic zeal, became more hopeful about the triumphant reign of God. His doctrine of prevenient grace posits that God is present and available to all through the Holy Spirit. However the key difference between a non-believer and a Christian is that a believer begins with the recognition of his or her repentance. Wesley writes in the sermon “Original Sin”: “Is ‘every imagination of the thoughts of his heart only evil continually?’ Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but an Heathen still.”³⁷ He even goes so far as to acknowledge that some believers of other religions are a little bit ahead of heathens and Jews a little ahead of Muslims on the path toward salvations.

Wesley observes that Jews can be saved without accepting Jesus Christ. The main impediment for Jews to become saved is not accepting Jesus Christ, rather circumcision.³⁸ Jews have been circumcised on the outside, but have not experienced a circumcision of the heart on the inside. Of course, Christians have a certain advantage to achieve this circumcision of the heart because the Holy Spirit is available after Christ in the Christian dispensation. Wesley believes that Jews do not love God with their heart, soul, strength and love their neighbor as oneself: “Why then you do not love God at all, though you will sometimes condescend to use him. You love the world. This possesses your heart. This, therefore, is your god.”³⁹ However if a Jew would experience of circumcision of the heart then, by definition, they would love God with their heart, mind and soul and be saved.

Moreover, Wesley’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit does leave the possibility open for God’s light to be among people from other faiths. In the classical theological disagreement beginning with Tertullian, who argued for a radical discontinuity between the gospel and the world, natural revelation (through other religions) is not possible because any revelation that is not through incarnation could not be received or perceived because of the distortion of human sin. These cultural and religious representations are idolatrous. The other position represented by Clement of Alexandria and bolstered by Thomism argues that all human religious experience has been a response to God’s universal revelation. John Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace combines these two positions with the universality of the Holy Spirit. At birth every man and woman receives a gift of the Holy Spirit, known as prevenient grace, that is the universal atonement of Christ who died for all to be saved.⁴⁰ The fact that this is a gift creates the possibility for the hidden Christ save a person outside Scriptural salvation.⁴¹

In a concrete example of God’s grace, Wesley is unable to condemn unbaptized children and those who are incapable of understanding the salvific message of Jesus Christ or have not yet been made aware of the gospel message. He rejects the possibility of their damnation as long as they have made use of the grace that they have received—within their means.⁴² This belief of “invincible

³⁷ Sermon 44: “Original Sin”

³⁸ Sermon 17: “Circumcision of the Heart”

³⁹ *Works*: XIII:191-2

⁴⁰ Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr. *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Abingdon, p.151.

⁴¹⁴¹ *Notes on the New Testament*, Romans II:14. See Lycurgus M. Starkey’s conversation about this possibility on p.43.

⁴² WW, VI, p.512 “So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.”

ignorance” was supported by two fundamental Wesleyan beliefs: universal redemption (that Christ died for all and the sins of all) and God’s love and mercy.⁴³ Wesley was clear that all humans had received God’s grace as a gift. Colin Williams makes two points about non-Christians in his book *John Wesley’s Theology Today*:

First, it is his belief that Christ works even in those who do not hear the gospel in this life. Second, he believes that those who do not hear the gospel are judged according to their response to this grace by which Christ works within them in a hidden way.⁴⁴

So as long as prevenient grace has not been willfully neglected or abused, it is available to those who are unaware or unable to respond to Christ’s revelation—including non-Christians.

Lastly Wesley was clear that only God was in a position to judge non-believers and that those who had not yet heard the Gospel were not to be judged by the same standard as those who had. Yet he always maintained a firm faith that God’s love and eternal salvation was available to all and in the sermon “The New Creation” implied that salvation would reach all creation.

Wesley writes in the “General Spread of the Gospel” that The Holy Spirit will come down in even greater power during the grand Pentecost empowering Christians to be filled and proclaim the Gospel: “The grand Pentecost shall fully come...and the grand stumbling-block being thus happily removed out of the way, namely, the lives of the Christians, the Mahometans will look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words.”

As we approach mission and evangelism in the Wesleyan heritage for the 21st century we are aware of the growth of Islam and the decline of Christianity in the United Kingdom. We also see the interreligious violence between Christians and Muslims that is a concern for the safety and stability of the entire human race. Although Wesley would have liked to see Muslims converting to become Christians this has generally not been the case. Western Christians continue to have attitudes and behaviors that make the conversion of Muslims difficult. Wesley would most assuredly be disappointed in this phenomenon. In fact, many Muslims see the liberalism of Western Christianity as immoral and an attack on the Muslim value of modesty. Amazing as it might seem, Wesley, while still being a product of 18th century England with its colonial vestiges and Fulfillment Theology, foresaw these impediments for Western Christianity to share the gospel. This is one of the reasons why he returned from Georgia to England and for years refused to send his best preachers and valuable resources as missionaries abroad.

In this paper we have seen John Wesley mature in his appreciation of indigenous people and members of other religions from an original innocence to harsh critique to a universal grace of hopeful eschatology. One important factor in his maturation was the personal encounters with people, such as Dr. Nunez, that created cognitive dissonance in definitive statements of Christianity superiority. In closing, in the “General Spread of the Gospel” Wesley calls for the Holy Spirit to empower Christians to

⁴³ See further discussion in Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study*, Abingdon, 1972, p.126.

⁴⁴ Colin Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today*, Abingdon, 1960, p.45. Also see *Works* VII, pp.373-4 and p.188.

cease to be stumbling blocks and to witness to Muslims and people of other faiths. This will not be noticeable, rather will come silently and spread “from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another.”⁴⁵ This requires personal encounters, similar to those that Wesley had with Dr. Nunez and his Jewish parishioners in Savannah. Those of us in the Wesleyan tradition would be wise to have this same practice of personal encounters while always looking for God’s prevenient grace in the other and an expectant eschatology of God’s work through the Holy Spirit.

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⁴⁵ Sermon 63: “The General Spread of the Gospel”

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