

DISCOVERING OUR SELF

Initial Reflections on the Challenge of Wesleyan Theology Today

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As the three hundredth anniversary of John Wesley's birth approaches, Wesleyan theology seems to be feeling its way toward a new chapter in its history. Speaking to the theological quandary of Wesleyanism in the twentieth century, Frederick Norwood has remarked that from the time of their first involvement in the ecumenical movement the Wesleyans "felt that they had something of their own to offer, but were not quite sure what it was."¹ But now after better than three generations of intensive research into the rise and development of its tradition, Wesleyan theology is slowly recovering from its amnesia and rediscovering its 'own.' What we are discovering is what might be called the 'Wesleyan self' and the role it played at the inception of our tradition, i.e., that Wesleyanism was from the beginning a form of discourse concerned with construing and disciplining the self as a new creation by God's grace through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. What makes that discovery pertinent and opens up the possibility of a new chapter in our history, is that we are discovering our self precisely at a moment in history in which western culture is suffering a crisis of its 'self.'

For we live in a time in which the optimism and certainty of modern humanism has passed, and with it the assurance that contemporary men and women know who or what we are as human beings. Instead of the enlightened, rational self, the benevolent individual of self-conscious good will, many in the west have come to suspect that the human is a problematic construct, a matter of profoundly conflicted unconscious and irrational drives, of social discourses concealing power-seeking and power-justification, and of related strategies of manipulation, delusion, and deceit—and not just of others but of our self as well. "Who am I

¹ Frederick A. Norwood, "Methodist Historical Studies 1930-1959," *Church History* 28 (1959) 391-417, 391.

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then?,” many have begun to ask in anger and despair, and, “How does my ‘self’ relate to the human community of selves of which I am a part—a community that is itself marked even in its best by exploitation, collusion, and lies?” Is there any point or purpose to human existence? Or are we simply a violent accident in the cosmos, a random result of chance and a vast amount of time in a universe defined by nothing else, a nasty ‘little bang’ whose report soon dies without echo? What is the human self? It is in the context of this ‘selflessness’ that Wesleyan theology is discovering its ‘self,’ discovering what is its ‘own’ and what it has to offer. It is the conjunction of that crisis and that discovery, I suggest, that constitutes the challenge of Wesleyan theology today.

In the following I want to offer some initial reflections on this challenge. I will begin with a survey of the two ‘final quests’ that have defined the human in the western tradition and that together constitute the background to the contemporary crisis of the self. Following a brief depiction of that crisis, I will then describe what we Wesleyans are discovering about our self and the challenge that this discovery places before us today. In conclusion I will suggest how we might proceed from that discovery and respond to that challenge by turning to a theology of ‘God’s first question’ in the face of the crisis of all our final quests.

The Two Final Quests of the Western Tradition

I will begin with the background to the contemporary crisis of the self. For if we would understand the character of that crisis we must see it for what it is: the loss of a long-assumed identity of the human, and see that now-lost identity in the context of the western tradition. The west has defined the person in terms of what might be called two ‘final quests.’ The first was a metaphysical quest that answered the question of the human ontologically, and the second was an historical quest that defined the self with reference to epistemology. Each of these final quests with their attendant definitions of human being has in turn come to grief. The consequence is the contemporary crisis of the self.

The metaphysical quest has deep roots in the western philosophical tradition, and from the beginning its point of departure for speaking of the human was the specter of death. Indeed, the oldest surviving philosophical text in the western tradition, a fragment of a lost work by the Ionian philosopher, Anaximander (c. 610-546 BC), bewails the passibility, the mortality, of all that lives.² Thus, in the face of death the ancients posed the question that would dominate western discourse for better than two thousand years: What is real and unchanging in a world constantly coming into being, undergoing change, and passing away? What does not suffer death? And how is the individual related—or how can the individual be related—to such deathlessness? Classical philosophy, accordingly, took as its task the answering of the question of human life posed by death, and defined the self in the course of doing so. This was what Cicero meant when he declared that, “the entirety of the philosophical life is a commentary on death.”³

Cicero was referring above all, of course, to the most famous example of philosophical life in the classical world, that of Socrates, for the ancients commonly defined life with reference to his death. Drawing on earlier Greek traditions, Socrates had taught a dualistic anthropology in which the human was made up of body and soul. The soul was the essential self, the immortal aspect of the human that by its very nature was driven to seek knowledge of that to which it was akin, the eternal and impassible. The body, on the other hand, was the non-essential, the passible and mortal aspect of the self, which represented a hindrance to the fulfillment of the soul’s striving for the eternal. This anthropology came to clear expression in Plato’s account of the death of Socrates in the *Phaedo*. There we find the classic platonic definition of death as the “separation of the soul from the body” (67,d), by which Socrates and Plato meant the liberation of that which is immortal in a human being from slavery to the impure and passible body. “Only

² H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Bd. I, 6. Aufl., (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1951), p. 90ff.

³ Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, I,74.

then,” explains Plato’s master, “will we come into possession of that for which we strive, that which we truly love, knowledge of the eternal; only then when we die, for it remains hidden to the living.” (66, d.e) The soul, therefore, that which is the essence of the human identity, has nothing to fear from death, for death cannot touch that which is truly the self; indeed, only after death does the individual attain its fulfillment. Thus, Cicero, to cite him once again, neatly sums up the classical tradition in this matter when he quotes the ancient inscription on the temple at Delphi, ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτὸν γινώσκου, and comments: “When Apollo says, ‘Know yourself,’ he is saying, ‘Know your soul.’”⁴ For the true self in the classical tradition was the immortal soul, and the realization of one’s self was attained through the metaphysical quest of turning from the temporal and the bodily to the contemplation of the eternal and the impassible

This metaphysical quest both formed the background for, and was integrated into, the two forms of theology that have dominated the western tradition, the Scholastic theology of the Medieval period and the Reformation theology that protested against it. Scholasticism built on the rhetorical claim by the Apologists in the Patristic period that classical wisdom was in divine providence a *praeparatio evangelium*, and integrated the classical understanding of the self into its account of the Christian faith according to the schema of ‘nature fulfilled by grace.’ The definitive representative of the Patristic period for the Scholastics was, of course, the fifth-century Bishop of Hippo, Augustine. In his writings, Augustine had repeatedly framed his central theological concern in terms of a rhetorical question, “What do you wish to know?,” and had just as repeatedly responded: “God and the Soul...that is all.”⁵ The reason, as he declared in the *Confessions*, was quite simply that, “Through my soul I will ascend to [God].”⁶ Scholasticism followed Augustine’s lead even as it reinterpreted him in light of Aristotle, making what it understood as the teleological character of created human nature its point of departure,

4 Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, I,xxii.52.

5 See *Sol.* I,ii,7; *Conf.* V,iv,7; and *De civ. dei* XXII,xxix.

6 *Conf.* X,vii,11.

and depicting salvation as the soul's ascent to the knowledge of God the Creator. A certain amount of tension between that anthropology and the notion of the resurrection of the body is often observable. Thus, even when a classic representative of Scholasticism like Aquinas sought to follow Aristotle in *De Anima* by insisting that the human person is both body and soul, he is clearly swimming against the current of the dominate assumptions of the tradition—and having a hard time of it.⁷ This is discernable, for instance, not only in his *Summa*, where he discusses how we are to think of the passible body become impassible—which is akin to discussing how we are to think of circles as squares—but in his commentary on I Corinthians 15, where his emphatic declaration, “anima mea non est ego,” cannot alter the fact that the platonic doctrine of the soul still plays a definite and decisive roll in his explication of the Apostle's argument⁸ For the soul was central to this tradition as that which was significant about the self. As part of its created nature, the Scholastics insisted, the soul possesses an innate capacity for God, a teleological drive to ascend to the fulfillment of its nature in union with its eternal Creator. And while that yearning was for that to which human nature cannot of itself attain, it could be fulfilled through the infusion of grace mediated by the church through the sacraments. Thus the classical metaphysical quest was reinterpreted in terms of an account of the Christian Gospel—and reinterpreted the Gospel in turn.

The Protestant Reformation did not change that. For while the protest of the Reformers against Scholastic theology went to the root of its claim that nature was fulfilled by grace, repudiating the ‘works’ inherent in the claim of a teleological human nature in the name of the ‘grace’ of divine sovereignty, it never really challenged the notion that the soul was the essential self of the human. The contradiction between nature and grace that the Reformation formulated

⁷ See Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 209ff.

⁸ See Peter Geach, *God and the Soul*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 22. Cp. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 75ff.

in the categories of law and gospel simply meant that the soul was denied any intrinsic drive toward God. Thus, Luther declared in his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* of 1517: “On the part of man however nothing precedes grace except ill will and even rebellion against grace”⁹. Continuing in that vein, Calvin argued that all that is good in the human soul was from God. “Nothing is ours,” he maintained, “but sin.”¹⁰ The tale of the soul was therefore told in terms of the descent of God in Jesus Christ to the sinful human state, and the world was seen as the stage (Luther’s *theatrum mundi*, Calvin’s *theatrum gloriae dei*) upon which the drama of God and the soul was played out. From the Patristic to the Medieval to the Reformation era, therefore, the ontological concern of the metaphysical quest shaped the accounts of the human self as different yet similar as those of Augustine, the Capodocians, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin.

The second way in which the western tradition has defined the self is in terms of the modern historical quest and the epistemology that was central to it. Whereas the ontological quest was concerned with the issue of death, the historical quest turned away from death and concentrated its attention solely on life. The Catholic philosopher, Charles Taylor, has remarked that with the Reformation western society turned from an emphasis on what he calls ‘extraordinary life’ as the human ideal—the martyr or the saint, for instance, whose existence is wholly devoted to otherworldly pursuits—to a new appreciation of ‘ordinary life’ as the human good; and ordinary life is human existence determined by the ‘ordinary’ activities of family, civil society, and work.¹¹ His point is well taken, and is exemplified by the lives of Luther and Calvin and a host of others who came after. Yet the turn to ordinary life that began with the Reformation—as Taylor well knows—only came to full expression with the emergence of the modern world. We can witness what is perhaps the best illustration of that development not in

⁹ LW 31, 11.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, II, iii, 27.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 211ff.

the theology but in the art of the sixteenth century. In the 1530s Michelangelo sculpted a set of figures that were to have adorned the tomb of Pope Julius II. For reasons not entirely clear they were never delivered, and they now line the gallery in Florence's *Accademia de Beli Arti* leading to the rotunda where Michelangelo's statue of David stands. The figures are called the 'Awakening Captives,' and they depict human beings emerging out of blocks of stone into the light of day. We can see in these forms ripping themselves out of the rock a graphic depiction of what is perhaps the deepest concern of the Renaissance—and of Modernity as well: the escape of the individual from the givenness of nature and nature's God. Previously the self had been assumed to be an expression of a divinely created and determined nature: defined through a hierarchy of being, divine decrees, orders of creation, ecclesiastical hierarchy, the divine right of kings, and the immortal soul's intrinsic drive to strive toward the source of its being in its eternal Creator. But with the advent of the modern, humanity would assert its own definition of its self, and it would do so in the pursuit of 'ordinary life' in human history.

The key to that transition in the definition of the self was a shift in what is sometimes referred to as 'first philosophy', i.e., the fundamental question that is asked in a tradition of philosophical inquiry. From the classical era to the Reformation, the west had asked the ontological question in the face of death, 'What is real?', i.e., 'What does not suffer change or pass away?', and pursued an understanding of the self accordingly. With the Enlightenment, however, the 'first philosophy' of the west underwent a profound change: now the question was not '*What is real?*,' but rather '*How can we know what is real (in the pursuit of ordinary life)?*' The emphasis in that question is not just on the verb, 'to know,' but perhaps even more so on the pronoun, 'we,' or, more characteristic of the modern: 'I.' For with the birth of modernity there is a Copernican shift of perspective with regard to our conception of the human self. René Descartes is of course the representative figure here. He argued that the individual as *res cogitans* (the 'thinking thing') was to be understood as the autonomous subject in the act of

coming to know the world as object, the *res extensa* as he called it, the ‘thing extended in space and time.’¹² As such, the individual human subject gained mastery over the object of knowledge, the object became a thing to be bent to the subject’s will, and with that mastery came the ability to turn that object to the service of what was perceived as the human good, the ultimate expression of which was the realization of human freedom. The self is thus no longer viewed as embedded in the givenness of nature and determined by nature’s God. Rather, the self asserts its self as the subject of knowledge, and therefore as the subject of progressive control over the natural world, and therefore as the subject of its own history. Thus, the modern self is the self that stands as the knowing and willing subject over and against the object of the world of nature, and as such is that which defines itself—and that means fulfills itself—in the course of what it makes of its self and its world in its history. This notion of a self-defining and thereby self-fulfilling subject is nicely illustrated by a passage concerning free will found in Descartes’ well-known letter of 1647 written to Christina of Sweden:

Now freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it make us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects; and its rightful use is the greatest of all the goods we possess, and further there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us. From all this it follows that nothing but freewill can produce our greatest contentments.¹³

Thus, if the metaphysical quest defined the self as the soul and sought its end in the soul’s ascent to the eternal, then the historical quest defined the self as subject and declared the subject’s end to be self-realization (i.e., in producing its ‘contentments’ through reason and will) in ordinary life in time.

¹² For this argument and terminology, see René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy” (1641), in: E. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (trans.), *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

¹³ *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, Anthony Kenny (trans.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.228.

The historical quest in its turn came to form the general background for the theology of its era, and therefore the historical quest and its conception of the self was integrated into all genuinely modern forms of theology. Epistemological and thus methodological issues came to the fore in theology, taking the form of claims about innate ‘God-consciousness’ or ‘religious intuition’ or ‘self-transcendence,’ on the one hand, and divine revelation (with God now conceived not as *esse* but as subject) and the authority of scripture or the papal see, on the other. The account of the self followed accordingly, either as the subject of religious knowledge or the object of divine self-revelation. Moreover, temporal life became central and thus history became paramount: western civilization was declared to be on the way to the realization of the kingdom of God in history, or time was depicted as ‘godless’ and ‘god-forsaken’, or humanity was castigated as descending into a new paganism that could only end with the apocalypse. Thus, the accounts of the self from Schleiermacher and Hegel in the nineteenth century to Barth, Rahner, Tillich, and Pannenberg in the twentieth century are all marked by the epistemological concern of the historical quest.

The Contemporary Crisis of the Self

That now brings us to the contemporary crisis of the self which has emerged in recent decades as the enchantment modernity cast upon the western world some three hundred years ago has slowly dissipated. That disenchantment currently has two sources: the bad conscience and the sad conclusion of modernity.

First, the bad conscience of modernity. This, I would suggest, is the best way to understand much of what is now called ‘postmodernity.’ The modern era jettisoned the medieval notion of God as the all-determinative source of nature for the enlightened claim that nature comes to its meaning in the history of humanity’s rise to mastery over the world through the increase of knowledge. *Sapere aude!*, “Dare to know!”, exhorted Kant. But now that history itself has been called into question—indeed, that history has itself called itself into question—for it

is a story of good will giving way ever and again to bad faith, of knowledge all too often in service to brutish violence and oppression, and of hope in ordinary life ending in the futility of an era of extraordinary death and destruction. The result is the unsettled, discontented state of our contemporary social world, a state of being which might be referred to as the ‘postmodern condition.’ For just as modernity was as much a cultural process and a social condition as a period of time, so postmodernity is a social and cultural state in which the failures of the modern era and its ideologies have become the primary focus of attention. Revulsion at the uses to which we have put our newly-won knowledge and fear as to what horrors that knowledge might allow us to perpetrate next, social resentment at continuing—even exacerbated—divisions and inequities, political frustration at the limited achievements of public policy as expressions of enlightened reason and will, cultural disappointment at the fecklessness of optimistic humanism, as well as a disconcerting personal dissatisfaction with the fulfillment promised by consumerism have produced a social world of frustration and incipient despair that has turned increasingly to entertaining diversions to ameliorate its discontent. And in that discontent, the self of the historical quest has been called into question. For intellectually, that postmodern condition has expressed itself in a series of attacks upon the epistemological foundations of modernity—and thus upon the modern self as well.

The postmodern critiques of the modern self are many and complex, but if we are to consider the contribution that Wesleyan theology might yet make, then I have time today to mention only a few, and those in a very cursory fashion.¹⁴ The first that must be noted is the psychological critique of the modern conception of the self. Here figures such as Freud, Lacan, and Foucault have called into question the modern claim that the self is a transparent, rational

¹⁴ For a general introduction to postmodernity and its critiques of the self, see Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), and Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory. Critical Interrogations*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991).

subject, and have pointed to the deeper and darker drives that form the human ego, the irrational and a-rational factors that render the self ultimately opaque, and thus make a mockery of the enlightened, reasonable self of modernity. Feminists like Luce Irigaray and—in a very different manner—Julia Kristeva have taken that a step further and protested that the assumptions about the gender of the self both repudiated and proposed in such postmodern discourse—a distinctly male self, they contend—results only in compounding the questionableness of the entire discussion of the self for women. A second type of criticism of the modern self is the philosophical critique generated in the course of the past century. Thinkers such as Althusser, Barthes, Levi-Strauss, and Lacan—as well as MacIntyre and Rorty in their own ways—have dismantled the notions of modern humanism and the autonomous subject, and have repudiated thereby what Rorty refers to as “mind as the mirror of nature” in favor of a socially constructed self and world that sees language, not individual consciousness, as that which constitutes the human identity. A third example of postmodern criticism of the modern self is the kind of economic/cultural critique offered by scholars like Frederic Jameson and David Harvey. They argue that postmodernism is nothing more than the cultural logic of ‘late capitalism,’ a social world in which everything, even the cultural conceptions of the human self are routinely commodified, producing a profound alienation of the self with regard both to its self and to other selves.

But the critique of the modern self is not just a function of the bad conscience of modernity, it is also implicit in the sad conclusion of modernity as well. For we should never forget the impact that the discourse of the natural sciences have had—and continue to have—in our social world. Whereas science was once modernity’s boast, the very instrumentality by which all nature was to be known and thereby mastered, in the twentieth century science has come to be the self’s despair. For science itself has come to a kind of conclusion concerning the human beyond which it cannot proceed. As one natural scientist recently commented in a seminar on science and religion conducted at Harvard and broadcast across the nation:

Probably the most interesting outcome of the science of the 20th century is the fact that science has identified its own limits from within science itself: Goedel's meta-mathematical theorem, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the existence of phenomena which are not predictable, or the fundamental limits of astronomical observations are examples of the horizons of our scientific knowledge. It is not just a transient stage that will be overcome in the future. We now know that science cannot explore and monitor the whole of reality.¹⁵

And just as science cannot give a final account of the whole of reality, so it is finally unable to give a meaningful account of the self as well. Instead, despite its initial promise to liberate the human from a divinely-determined nature, it has finally succeeded only in embedding humanity in a nature devoid of any meaning at all. For the history of modern accounts of the self is the story of the dethroning of Descartes' transcendent self and the embedding of the human species in a nature with no referent and no meaning beyond itself. The mapping of the human genome, for instance, has revealed that we share the vast majority of our genetic material with the fruit fly, emphasizing yet again the place of humanity in the context of the on-going process of nature. Aren't human beings, this discourse implicitly suggests, best understood as simply one instance of complex chemical process within the field of the unspeakably larger and more complex processes of the physical universe? And even if the human is a chemical process that for this instant dominates this ecosystem, can't the same be said of the trilobites in their day and the dinosaurs in theirs and who knows what that will come after?

Thus all the central claims of the modern historical quest and its definition of the self have been challenged by the bad conscience and sad conclusion of modernity itself. Modernity's talk of fulfillment of the self in the history of human progress is dismissed as a meta-narrative that justifies the power of the victors and masks the injustice and violence to the victims that is

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intrinsic to it. Its claim of a centered, self-evident identity of the self as the subject of knowledge and will is denied, and the self is de-centered as it is immersed in a field of confused linguistic construals and conflicted social discourses that seek to construct and discipline the self in a host of contradictory ways. Indeed, the human identity is depicted as not intrinsic to the self at all, but merely as a product culturally manufactured and literally ‘store-bought,’ to be replaced serially by future identities yet to be marketed. And finally, the ephemeral, fruitless, even inconsequential nature of human life is highlighted. For in a universe that is conceived of as an event beginning with a big bang and ending with a dim glow and distant echo, humanity—let alone any single instance of that collective—is an insignificant instant that passes on the cosmic clock virtually before it occurs. Thus, just as surely as Copernicus at the beginning of modernity ‘de-centered’ humanity and the planet upon which it roamed from the middle to the midst of the solar system, so even contemporary science ‘de-centers’ the self yet again, depicting the human person not as the transcendent subject but as an object embedded for the briefest and most trivial of moments in the unbroken chemical processes of nature on the obscure rock on which it is found.

The consequences of this contemporary crisis of the self are there for all to see. Quite simply: At the beginning of the 21st century our social world no longer has a meaningful common account of either what the self is, or how we could possibly come to know what that might be. As a society, therefore, we have no common idea of who we are or what would constitute a good human life. We’ve gained the world, but we’ve lost our souls and our status as subjects—and our selves as well. And, as our public discourse since September 11th has amply demonstrated, we lack any helpful public language to speak of that loss or to lay claim to our identity once again. Instead, we sit by the waters, like Narcissus of the ancient myth, and stare into the vast ocean of images of the human with which the media inundates us daily as it seeks to sell us this produce or that. But as Christopher Lasch has reminded us, today this kind of

narcissism is an expression of self-loss, not self-love, in that unlike the Narcissus of old, we stare into the waters now not to recognize and revel in our beauty, but rather in a desperate attempt to identify and lay claim to our humanity.¹⁶ For today we are become truly ‘selfless:’ not as those who think only of others, but as those who don’t know what to think of our selves.

Discovering Our Self

It is in the midst of this cultural crisis of the self that we Wesleyans are discovering our self and facing the challenge that this discovery brings forth. That challenge is caused first of all not by the cultural crisis but by what we are learning about our tradition, what Norwood called “our own.” To begin with, it is clear that the Wesleyan tradition is not a stranger to the crisis of the self, indeed, it was born in the midst of just such a crisis. Wesleyanism in the English-speaking world has long been a well-established, middle-class affair with a conventional understanding of human life, and the temptation for our tradition is to forget that such was not always the case. But the truth is that the 18th century England in which Wesleyanism was born was a world in the midst of profound social change. The onset of the Industrial Revolution had brought about a vast migration of people from the countryside to the cities to provide labor for the factories and all that supported them. The result was a kind of early modern crisis of the self as men and women struggled to come to grips with their new lives lived in an urban rather than a rural context. Who were they, now that their lives were no longer embedded in the unchanging cycle of nature: the springtime planting, the tending of the fields in the summer, the harvest come fall, and the round of chores throughout the long winter in preparation for the cycle to begin again? What were their identities in the new, modern, rapidly- changing society into which they were being integrated, a society driven not by the turn of the seasons but by the turning of the steam engine, an industrial society manufacturing not just goods and services but also individual identities defined increasingly by choice rather than necessity? It was in that social world in

¹⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, (New York: Warner Books, 1979).

transition and to those men and women experiencing that crisis of the self that John Wesley proclaimed and practiced the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And from the beginning, that proclamation and practice had to do not just with God but also with the human.

This concern for the self in the context of an early modern crisis of the self helps us to better appreciate the character of early Wesleyan discourse. First, it illuminates the change in the fundamental question that Wesley asked in comparison to the basic concerns of earlier theologies. Since diverging from the east, the western tradition has been dominated by two models of theologizing: medieval Scholasticism and the sixteenth century protest of the Reformation. Each is a response to the fundamental soteriological question that was central to western theology ever since Augustine: the question of *how* God's grace is mediated to humanity. According to medieval Scholasticism the answer to this question is that God's grace is mediated through a divinely established and authorized ecclesiastical hierarchy by means of the sacraments; and that answer forms the focus of their theologizing. The answer of the representatives of the sixteenth century Reformation protest is that Jesus Christ is the sole mediator of God's sovereign grace and that this mediation takes place through the proclamation of the Word and the hearing of faith; and that in turn serves as the focus of their theologizing. But with Wesley the soteriological question took a different form. His concern was not first of all the question of '*How?*', but rather the question of '*What?*': *What* is the life that the grace of God brings about?, and therefore *What* is the grace of God in Christ all about?, and indeed, *What* is the Gospel of Jesus Christ? In other words, Wesley's soteriology was not controlled by an overriding concern about the method, the *How?*, that God employs in redeeming what God has created, but rather by a concern for the substance of *what* is being redeemed and *what* that redemption will result in.

Secondly, viewing Wesleyanism in the context of the early modern crisis of the self leads to a clearer understanding of the focus of Wesley's theology: the transformation of human life by

the grace of God. In his book , *Responsible Grace*, Randy Maddox argues that Wesley's theology is not to be interpreted as an example of either the Catholic or the Protestant theological impulse, but rather as a new appropriation of Patristic and Eastern theological traditions. The Western tradition, Maddox explains, has interpreted the human condition in forensic categories according to which each individual is defined by the debilitating effects of sin upon the human capacities in the face of the legal debt of sin owed to God, a 'debt' that was then the object of God's act of redemption through the grace of Christ. But the Eastern tradition has emphasized the provisional nature of human life as created in grace—rather than emphasize the sin and fall of humanity—and has stressed that human life is created for its 'perfection' or 'divinization' in grace through Christ and in the Spirit. Maddox interprets Wesley's theology as reflecting that Eastern understanding and thus as characterized by a dynamic and positive anthropology by virtue of the grace of God in creation; a theology that takes human sin with real seriousness but God's redemptive grace with even greater seriousness still¹⁷. That means that the 'Wesleyan self' is defined neither in terms of essential being nor of a capacity for knowing but rather in terms of relationship to God in grace in the entirety of the lived life of the person. For Wesley understood the human to be defined not first by divinely created capacities nor by human sin and death but by transformation in the grace of God. The transformation, the 'perfection' of that positive anthropology in the grace of creation by God's grace in redemption is, therefore, the focus of Wesley's theologizing. The human self is thus central for Wesley, but not in the modern sense of the turn to the subject and its capacities for self-transcendence; and grace is central for Wesley, but not in the Protestant sense of contradicting sinful human nature in an act of divine fiat; and nature is central for Wesley, but not in the Catholic sense as that which innately seeks its own perfection. Rather, the self is central to Wesley's theology in the sense that it is the focus

¹⁷ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 66f.

of God's redemptive grace taking up and transforming in new creation that which God has first brought forth in the grace of creation.

And finally, this helps us understand the form of Wesley's theologizing. In pursuing a theology that could speak of both the human and the divine in the event of the transformation of the self, Wesley turned to a form of discourse that he discovered in Patristic Pneumatology. He declared in the preface to his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* that, "Divinity is nothing but a grammar of the language of the Holy Ghost,"¹⁸ for he understood theology not as a speculative discipline, but as an account of the transformation of the entire person by the Spirit of God—from the fundamental dispositions of the human heart to the whole of the social and embodied life of the Christian community. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, Wesley's theological development is marked by a threefold movement.¹⁹ He started with a form of Scholastic theologizing that begins with God the Father, the "Creator of heaven and earth," and describes salvation as the fulfillment of our created nature through grace, the ascent of the soul in return to its source. He then moved to a form of Reformation theologizing that concentrates its discourse on the second article of the creed and depicts salvation as occurring in and through God the Son, who "for us and for our salvation...came down from heaven and was incarnate," and emphasizes the contradiction between 'God's grace' and the pretensions of the 'works' of our sinful human nature. And finally, he turned to a theology of the third article that begins with the Spirit of God, the "Lord and Giver of Life," and understands God's salvation as an event of new creation: new creation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through the Christ, new creation through the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming our lives lived in

¹⁸ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, (London: The Epworth Press, 1950), 9.

¹⁹ See my article, "Unfinished Business: Wesley and Schleiermacher on the Spirit," *Wesleyan Studies Journal* 1 (1999); and the lectures I delivered in Australia in 1999 and the responses to them in Stephen Pickard & Gordon Preece (eds.), *Task of Theology Today II: Starting with the Spirit*, (Hindmarsh, Australia: Australian Theological Forum, 2001).

Christian community with God and God's world. And corresponding to that turn to a theology of the third article, a theology of the Holy Spirit, he developed practices of community formation and discipline in bands, classes, societies, and conferences in which that transformation of the self was informed, facilitated, and sustained.

The challenge of Wesleyan theology today, I suggested above, is constituted by the discovery of our self—precisely in a moment in which our culture is experiencing the death of its self. The history of the Wesleyan tradition describes an arc: it arises with the beginning of the modern period and the emergence of the modern self as subject, it flourishes throughout modernity as it follows the changes and developments in the conventional account of the human, and it comes to grief with the crisis of the cultural world in which it had thrived. We find ourselves now in circumstances that parallel our beginning. And while we cannot simply say now what Wesley said then, we must do now what he did then. We must address the crisis of the self today, for its not just our culture's crisis, it is ours as well.

How do we do that? I would suggest that we can begin the task of giving a contemporary account of a Wesleyan understanding of the self by turning from all the final quests of the west and turning to God's first question—and discovering there the focus for our discourse today. The first question that God is depicted as asking in the biblical narrative is uttered in the garden as God comes seeking Adam and Eve in the "cool of the evening breeze." "Where are you?" God calls in the twilight of that day (Gen 3:9). And now in the twilight of the age that is our own day we must attend to that question anew, we must again become a living discourse that construes and disciplines the self as a new creation of God's grace through Christ and in the Spirit. For it is not only we who live in this social world who are searching for our selves, God searches as well. Thus we must now take that search seriously—and undertake an encounter with our age that asks the question of the human anew as an explicitly theological question. Just as the generation of theologians that immediately preceded us took up the challenge of the 'death of God,' so we must now respond to the 'death of the human.' And in speaking to our culture's loss of self in light of our discovery of our self we may very well discover the life of the Wesleyan tradition in a new way, or—as Norwood would have it—we might discover "something of [our] own to offer."