

## **“Wesley’s Contribution to Christian Ethics in an Age of Global Capitalism”**

**Richard O. Randolph**  
**Saint Paul School of Theology**  
**Kansas City, Missouri, U.S.A.**

As we embark upon the third Christian millennium, planet earth and all its inhabitants are confronted with a perplexing nexus of inter-connected environmental challenges. These challenges are diverse, ranging from local problems (such as access to potable water or access to sufficient landfill areas for garbage) to global problems (such as the threat of global climate change). While this nexus of environmental challenges is complex and inter-connected, it can be argued that all of these issues share one of two fundamental root causes. The first cause is rapid population growth in the two-thirds world. The second cause is over-consumption by countries in the industrialized West, especially the United States.

There is compelling evidence from the social sciences that over-population in the two-thirds world is directly correlated with poverty, hunger, poor sanitation, lack of educational opportunities, and high unemployment. In other words, over-population occurs in areas where many people cannot obtain the basic necessities of life. There is a tragic irony here: this complex nexus of environmental issues is rooted in under-consumption by the world’s poor and over-consumption by the world’s rich. A profound connection exists between environmental issues and economic justice. Thus, in order to adequately address these inter-connected environmental challenges, serious attention must be given to questions of economic justice. Unfortunately, these economic justice issues, themselves, are exacerbated by global capitalization, which tends to consolidate power and control of economic resources into fewer and fewer hands.

Writing on environmental issues for an American audience, the philosopher Max Oelschlaeger claims: “One reason that amelioration of environmental crisis eludes us is that religion has a fundamental role to play in environmentalism, a function that nothing else can fulfill.”<sup>1</sup> Oelschlaeger’s claim is based on his conviction that the prevailing *Weltanschauung*, or

---

<sup>1</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation*, (New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale

worldview, in the U. S. culture is a consumption-oriented individualism. This perspective may be summarized by a triad of claims:

1. "I consume, therefore I am."
2. "The more I consume, the happier I will be."
3. "What I consume is who I am."

This worldview understands happiness rather narrowly, in individual terms, as the consumption of goods and services. Since the consumption of most goods and services is inevitably transitory, if not ephemeral, to be happy requires constant consumption of goods and services. Further, this worldview assumes that greater happiness may be obtained by increased consumption. Thus, the prevailing vision for the good life centers on obtaining and maintaining an affluent lifestyle of continual and increasing consumption. This vision of happiness and the good life is grounded in particular anthropological assumptions about human nature – or, what it means to be human. In the prevailing anthropology, the essential defining characteristics of who we are as persons becomes our consumption patterns. To be human means fundamentally to consume. Thus, our self-worth becomes defined in terms of what we own and what we consume.

Since over-consumption – either directly or indirectly – lies at the root of these complex, inter-connected environmental challenges, we can hardly begin addressing them without first critiquing and dramatically reducing the consumption levels among the affluent. And, herein lies the great quandary for environmentalists. Given this prevailing vision of the good life and what it means to be human, an argument for the reduction of consumption is tantamount to arguing that the affluent must sacrifice their happiness and self-worth in order to achieve economic justice and a healthy environment. Obviously, this is a zero-sum game; that is, a "win-lose" dilemma.

Conceivably, there could be alternative visions of happiness and the good life that would not lead inexorably to a zero-sum game with the environment. It is here that Oelschlaeger places so much hope in religious communities. Oelschlaeger believes that religious communities –

especially Christian churches – possess important resources for constructing an alternative vision of happiness and the good life.<sup>2</sup> For the remainder of this paper, I would like to explore the resources that John Wesley could offer to such a constructive project.

We should begin by observing that Wesley would adamantly reject the contemporary secular vision of happiness. For Wesley, happiness based only upon the consumption of goods and services is not genuine happiness at all, but, rather, a superficial and false happiness: A glutton, a drunkard, a gamester may be ‘merry’; but he cannot be happy. The beau, the belle, may eat and drink, and rise up to play; but still they feel they are not happy. Men or women may adorn their own dear persons with all the colours of the rainbow. They may dance and sing, and hurry to and fro, and flutter hither and thither. They may roll up and down in their splendid carriages and talk insipidly to each other. They may hasten from one diversion to another; but happiness is not there.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, Wesley’s view of happiness and the good life grows out of his theological anthropology. For Wesley, humans can only be truly happy when we remember who we truly are: men and women created in the image of God, to love and serve God. Indeed, I believe that Wesley’s most important contribution to the constructive project outlined above is his theological anthropology, especially his understanding of the *imago dei*.

Wesley conceived of the *imago dei* in terms of a special relationality between God and humanity. As Ted Runyon observes, Wesley sees the *imago dei* “more relationally, not so much as something humans possess as the way they relate to God and live out that relation in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Runyon continues by noting that the *imago dei* “might best be described as a vocation or calling to which human beings are called, the fulfillment of which constitutes their true destiny.”<sup>5</sup>

The *imago dei* does not differentiate humans from the rest of creation. Rather, the rest of

---

<sup>2</sup> Oelschlaeger’s vision for the role of the church is detailed in *Caring for Creation*, Chapter 5, “The Role of the Church,” pp. 184-215.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 77, “Spiritual Worship,” §III.5, *Works*, 2:99.

<sup>4</sup> Ted Runyon, *The New Creation, John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Runyon, 13-14.

creation also shares the *imago dei* – albeit to a lesser degree than that evident in humans. As Wesley explains, “God regards his meanest creatures much; but he regards man much more. ... Let it suffice that God regards everything that he hath made in its own order, and in proportion to that measure of his own image which he has stamped upon it.”<sup>6</sup> Although the *imago dei* is inclusive of all creation, Wesley distinguishes humans from the rest of creation because humans have the greater capacity for relationship with God. For Wesley, “We have no ground to believe that they [“inferior creatures”] are in any degree capable of knowing, loving, or obeying God. This is the specific difference between man and brute – the great gulf which they cannot pass over.”<sup>7</sup> Since relationality is the interpretive key for understanding the *imago dei*, this is an important distinction between humans and the rest of creation. A further part of fulfilling this image of God requires humans to care for all of creation. As Runyon expresses it, “Thus humanity is the image of God *insofar* as the benevolence of God is reflected in human actions toward the rest of creation. This role as steward and caretaker of creation presupposes a continuing faithfulness to the order of the Creator.”<sup>8</sup>

Stewardship becomes an important category for Wesley’s understanding of humanity. In his sermon, “The Good Steward,” Wesley elaborates at some length on the full scope of human stewardship intended by God. For Wesley, God has entrusted humans to be the stewards of their souls, bodies, worldly goods (including money), as well as other gifts such as talents, time, and even grace.<sup>9</sup> In prefacing his discussion of stewardship, Wesley draws an important distinction between a borrower (debtor) and a steward:

...although a debtor is obliged to return what he has received, yet until the time of payment comes he is at liberty to use it as he pleases. It is not so with a steward: he is not at liberty to use what is lodged in his hands as *he* pleases, but as his master pleases. He has no right to dispose of anything which is in his hands but according to the will of his lord.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” §III.4, *Works*, 2:447-448.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, §I.5, p. 441.

<sup>8</sup> Runyon, 17. His emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 51, “The Good Steward,” §1.3-8, *Works*, 2:284-286.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, §I.1, p. 283. His emphasis.

Wesley's understanding of stewardship correlates with his understanding of the *imago dei* as a special relationality between God and humanity. God entrusts much to the care of humans, but this does not mean that humans can act at their own discretion. Rather, humans are to act as stewards of God, reflecting the love and care that God has for all creation. As an illustration, consider the stewardship of money. Since for Wesley everything ultimately belongs to God, none of our earned income really belongs to us. Instead, God loans money and other resources to us for our care, as well as the care of our dependent family members. If we should earn more income than we need to satisfy these basic necessities, then the surplus should be used for works of charity. To spend our surplus income on "luxuries" for ourselves is tantamount to robbing or defrauding God! As Wesley expresses his position:

Do not you know that God *entrusted* you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind. How can you, how dare you, defraud your Lord by applying it to any other purpose!"<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, environmental stewardship does not mean that humans are free to dispose of nature as they see fit. Rather, genuine stewardship implies caring for creation with the same love as God the Creator has for all of creation.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 131, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," §II.12, *Works*, 4:184. His emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Although the principal focus of my study is the resources that Wesley has to offer Christian ethical reflection on the inter-connected challenges of environmental ethics and economic justice, a brief aside may be in order here, regarding the resources that Wesley could offer Christian environmental ethics, in terms of Christian attitudes towards nature and their implications of those attitudes for the treatment of nature.

Over the years, Christianity has been harshly criticized in some quarters because of the doctrine of the *imago dei* and the claim that humans are entrusted by God as the stewards of creation. Representative of this position is Lynn White Jr.'s essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (*Science*, 155 (10 March 1967):1203-1207). For White, the Christian *imago dei* suggests that humans enjoy a monarchical relationship with the rest of creation, which gives humans permission to treat nature pretty much as they see fit. White argues that this perspective creates an attitude that denigrates the importance of nature, relegating creation to basically the stage on which the human drama of salvation plays out. (Continued on the next page.)

Although Wesley does retain the hierarchical view of nature that lies at the heart of

Although humans carry this profound, relational *imago dei*, it has become fractured and distorted through the fall and human sin. For Wesley, the fall distorts our clarity of judgment and ultimately our affections.<sup>13</sup> However, the image of God can be healed and restored by faith in the salvific work of Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection. Not only is the *imago dei* restored in humans through Christ's salvific work, but all of creation is renewed, as well.<sup>14</sup>

Through faith, the Christian experiences a radical transformation in her life. This transformation is radical in the sense that it encompasses her whole being, including her *Weltanschauung*, or worldview, as well as her understanding of happiness and the good life. As a result of this transformation, the Christian life becomes a teleological project of sanctification that Wesley called Christian perfection. Although Wesley never believed that one could become so perfect as to rise above errors of ignorance or judgment,<sup>15</sup> he did believe that the Christian person could become so filled with love that one acted out of love for God and other persons. In his own words, Wesley describes his understanding of Christian perfection in this manner:

This is the sum of Christian perfection: it is all comprised in that one word, love. The first branch of it is the love of God: and as he that loves God loves his brother also, it is inseparably connected with the second, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. Thou shalt love every man as thy own soul, as Christ loved us. 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets:' these contain the whole of Christian perfection.<sup>16</sup>

---

White's critique, I believe that his theological position creates some important resources for guarding against the concerns raised by White and other critics that Christian thought supports and abusive attitude toward nature. First, Wesley expands the conception of *imago dei* so that it includes all of creation. Further, God's salvific action renews all of creation, not just humans. Wesley also speculates on the positive eschatological destiny of nature in at least two sermons, "The General Deliverance," and "The New Creation". All of these features taken together have the effect of integrating nature as an integral part of the salvation drama, rather than relegating it as the mere stage upon which the drama plays out, as White and others claim. Secondly, Wesley's understanding of stewardship excludes any possible misconception that humans are free to treat nature in whatever manner they choose. As we have seen, Wesley sets rather rigid criteria for judging stewardship, requiring that human actions reflect the love and care of God the Creator for God's creation.

<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 76, "On Perfection," §I.2, *Works*, 3:73.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," *Works*, 2:437-450.

<sup>15</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 76, "On Perfection," §I.1-3, *Works*, 3:72-73.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, §I.4, p. 74.

To reiterate, Wesley adopted a teleological view of the Christian life as a process of sanctification in which the Christian grew in love, eventually becoming perfected in love. This process of sanctification becomes a very intentional way of life. As Ted Runyon describes it, “Neither perfection nor imperfection is a fixed state, but they are just two ways of describing life as a project.”<sup>17</sup> In order to fully appreciate his understanding of sanctification, it is critical to see that the process was not solely individualistic for Wesley. The Christian growing in love cannot be content to simply withdraw and focus on his own spiritual growth. Rather, an important dimension of sanctification was the social component of caring for and loving others, especially the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.

Wesley understood these social components of caring for others as part of the “means of grace,” whereby God helps the Christian grow towards perfection. For Wesley, the “means of grace” were “outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey...preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”<sup>18</sup> In his essay, “The Role of Faith and the Means of Grace in Wesley,” Hal Knight notes that two types of work inform Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace: works of piety and works of mercy. Knight explains:

Works of mercy and piety denote two different sets of means of grace, distinguished by their objects. “Works of mercy” are directed toward persons, while “works of piety” are directed toward God. Neither is complete without the other, although works of mercy are consistently seen as closest to the end of religion. The reason is that works of mercy not only give expression to love for one’s neighbor, but in so doing both obey God’s command and emulate God’s character.<sup>19</sup>

In order to grasp fully Wesley’s understanding of the “works of mercy,” let us return to my earlier illustration concerning the use of money. Recall that, for Wesley, any surplus income

---

<sup>17</sup> Runyon, 88.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §II.1, *Works*, 1:381, quoted in Henry H. Knight III, “The Role of Faith and the Means of Grace in Wesley,” in *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 277-278.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

should be used to care for those who are hungry or otherwise in material need. To frivolously spend money on “luxuries” is bad stewardship; in fact, it is tantamount to robbing God. In contrast, using one’s money to care for those who are hungry, or otherwise in material need, is a “work of mercy”. In his sermon, “On Riches,” Wesley argues that surplus income becomes a hindrance to the love of God and to loving our neighbor as our self.<sup>20</sup> Thus, spending money to care for those in need, rather than on luxuries, becomes a work of mercy that nurtures and strengthens our growth in love.

Much of what counts as “works of mercy” for Wesley appears to be acts of charity, as suggested by the illustration above. Wesley does not appear to encourage the early Methodists to engage in what we would today term, “the work of prophetic ministry for social, political, and economic justice,” as exemplified in the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Archbishop Oscar Romero. Of course, Wesley was a product of his time and it may well be anachronistic to look for a more contemporary understanding of prophetic ministry in his work. Since Wesley wrote, we have learned a great deal about structural and systematic injustice, especially through the social sciences that were just beginning to emerge in Wesley’s day. Nonetheless, it is important to observe that in his personal life Wesley was a strong, outspoken advocate for social justice, particularly in his vehement opposition to slavery.<sup>21</sup> Christians, who live in the twenty- first century and have access to the analytical tools of the social sciences, must legitimately extend Wesley’s understanding of the “works of mercy” to include “the work of prophetic ministry for social, political, and economic justice”. As with the other works of mercy, the particular work for justice grows out of the Christian’s love for neighbor. Just as the Christian charitably feeds the hungry from their surplus income, so also the Christian works for economic justice to overturn those systemic flaws that entrap the person in a life of poverty and hunger. In both cases, the Christian’s “work of mercy” grows out of love for God and neighbor.

---

<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 108, “On Riches,” §I.2-3, *Works*, 3:521-522.

<sup>21</sup> As an example of Wesley’s prophetic position against slavery, see his “Thoughts Upon Slavery” in *Works* (Jackson edition), 11:59-79.



This social and prophetic dimension to Wesley's understanding of individual sanctification resonates well with what Randy Maddox terms his "processive eschatology". Maddox argues that Wesley – especially the mature Wesley – was convinced that "the incipient presence of the Reign of God in our present world is a *growing* reality, spurred on by the expectation of a penultimate fulfillment of that Reign prior to the New Creation."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the Christian, growing in love, must work to establish the Reign of God not only in the private, individual sphere but also in the public, social sphere.

At this point, we can conclude that John Wesley provides a deep reservoir of resources for the construction of an alternative to the prevailing, secular vision of happiness and the good life:

(1) We saw that the prevailing, secular perspective is grounded in an anthropology that conceives of humans as essentially consumption-oriented individuals. By contrast, Wesley's theological anthropology is grounded in his conception of the *imago dei*, understood as a special relationality between God and humanity.

(2) Since the secular perspective conceives of human nature as consumption-oriented individualism, then on this view self-worth is understood as what we own and consume. Although he understood the *imago dei* as flawed by sin, Wesley still understood self-worth in terms of God's deep and abiding love for each of us and, indeed, for all of creation.

(3) In the prevailing secular vision, happiness and the good life are understood as the continual and increasing consumption of goods and services. By contrast, Wesley condemned all consumption of goods and services beyond the acquisition of the basic necessities for one's self and one's dependents. For Wesley, such "luxuries" produced a false happiness, while simultaneously robbing God. Happiness, for Wesley, involves loving and serving God. Likewise, Wesley's vision for the good and happy life is defined in terms of this teleological life-

---

<sup>22</sup> Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace, John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 240. His emphasis.

project of growing toward Christian perfection. For Wesley, the good and happy life would be understood in terms of the works of piety and the works of mercy (understood to include also the work of prophetic ministry in the twenty-first century – as I argued above). All of these works grow out of the Christian’s love for God and neighbor.

A Concluding Postscript. In his essay, “On the Present Scarcity of Provisions,” Wesley sets himself the task of investigating why so many people are hungry at this particular juncture in the history of England.<sup>23</sup> In his examination, Wesley provides a careful and astute economic analysis, especially given the infancy of economic analysis at the time. Wesley concludes with some public policy proposals that he believes will alleviate this scarcity and hunger. While Wesley’s proposals may have been radical from the political perspective of the time, it is very important to observe that Wesley does not challenge the overall justice of the economic system that was then in place in England. Rather than challenging the economic structure, Wesley works within the economic paradigm, relying heavily upon tax proposals to shift the distribution of resources so that more food becomes available to those who are hungry. In his context, Wesley could do no more. As suggested above, it would be anachronistic to expect a systemic or structural critique that exposes economic injustice. However, Christians in the twenty-first century live in a different context.

Neo-classical economics is the academic discipline that has informed and driven the expansion of global capitalism which we have experienced since the fall of Soviet communism. I believe that it is critical to conclude by observing that the Christian theological anthropology developed in this paper, and attributed to Wesley, is diametrically opposed to the anthropological assumptions that currently inform neo-classical economics. Known as *Homo economicus*, this anthropology basically corresponds to the prevailing secular understanding that I detailed at the beginning of my analysis.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> John Wesley, “On the Present Scarcity of Provisions,” *Works* (Jackson edition), 11:53-59.

<sup>24</sup> For a general, non-technical explanation and critique of *Homo economicus*, see Herman Daly and John Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good, Redirecting the Economy Toward Community*,

If the anthropologies of Wesley and neo-classical economics are as different as I have claimed, then monumental questions emerge: Which theory most accurately captures true human nature? Does Wesley's perspective still hold critical insights for Christian discipleship today, or should it be fully supplanted by the prevailing vision? Assuming that we continue to accept the Wesleyan perspective as providing important and authentic insights into human nature, does it make sense to address these inter-connected environmental and economic challenges using the current neo-classical economics paradigm? Or, does the Wesleyan anthropology itself push Christian ethicists to propose and develop an alternative paradigm for economics? If so, what would a Wesleyan economics look like? What would be the implications of a Wesleyan economics for global capitalism?<sup>25</sup>

---

*the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, 1994). For critiques of the anthropological assumptions informing neo-classical economics from within the academic discipline of economics, see the following sources: Amartya Sen (1999 Nobel Laureate in Economics), *On Ethics and Economics* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Robert Costanza et al., *An Introduction to Ecological Economics* (Boca Raton, Florida: St. Lucie Press, 1997); and Marianne A. Ferber and Julie A. Nelson, eds., *Beyond Economic Man, Feminist Theory and Economics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> In this paragraph, I have intentionally used the qualifier, "Wesleyan". However, I believe that the perspectives and questions suggested in this paragraph would resonate with many other Christian perspectives, including some liberation theologies as well as some portions of the Catholic Social Teachings literature.