

Seeking a Response-able God: The Wesleyan Tradition and Process Theology

Randy L. Maddox

While its roots run back into the nineteenth century, process theology found its distinct identity and garnered significant influence during the second half of the twentieth century. One of the notable characteristics of this formative generation is the high percentage of advocates drawn from a Wesleyan background, including such major voices as Schubert Ogden, John B. Cobb Jr., Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, and David Pailin.¹

This prominence might appear to be accidental. There is little concern about Wesleyan precedents for process convictions reflected in any of their programmatic works. But this pattern must be put in context. Through a variety of influences Wesley had been widely dismissed as a theological mentor among his ecclesiastical descendants by the beginning of the twentieth century. This dismissal has been significantly reversed only in the last couple of decades, as theologians in the broad Wesleyan tradition have begun to reconsider both his model of theological activity and his central theological convictions.² One result is that some of the process theologians noted above have recently reflected on the possible congruence of their distinctive commitments with their Wesleyan roots.³

¹Cf. Schubert Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper, 1963); John B. Cobb Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965); Cobb, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); John B. Cobb, Jr. & David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Suchocki, *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1988); and David Pailin, *God and the Processes of Reality* (London: Routledge, 1989).

²See Randy L. Maddox, "Reclaiming an Inheritance: Wesley as Theologian in the History of Methodist Theology," in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, edited by R. L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 213–26.

³E.g., Schubert Ogden, "Process Theology and the Wesleyan Witness," *Perkins School of Theology Journal* 37.3 (1984): 18–33; Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Coming Home: Wesley, Whitehead, and Women," *Drew Gateway* 57.3 (1987): 31–43; and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace & Responsibility: A*

These Wesleyan process theologians have consistently identified the most relevant congruence to lie in convictions about the nature of God and of God's interaction with humanity. This is significant because these issues are central to the emphases of process theology. As one standard introduction frames it, the defining goal of process theology has been to articulate a compelling model of God as Creative-Responsive Love, as a preferable alternative to such longstanding models as Cosmic Moralist, Unchanging and Passionless Absolute, Controlling Power, and the like.⁴ The purpose of this essay is to trace an analogous theological project running through the Wesleyan tradition, as one way to explain the number of formative advocates of process theology nurtured in this tradition.

Wesley's Theological Advocacy of a Response-able God

While Wesley's theological concern had a soteriological focus, this did not restrict its doctrinal sweep. Through the course of his ministry he came to recognize the formative impact of a broadening range of Christian teaching.⁵ One area that drew more attention over the years was the various aspects of the doctrine of God.⁶ Wesley grew increasingly sensitive to how differences in this area were integral to some of the issues that he faced among his people. A good example is the debate over predestination. Wesley became convinced that it was not primarily a disagreement over how much freedom humans possess, or over how to interpret particular verses of Scripture. It was instead—at its core—a disagreement over the nature of God.

Wesleyan Theology for Today (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995). [Note: Ogden and Suchocki are reprinted in this volume].

⁴See Cobb & Griffin, *Process Theology*, 8–9, 41.

⁵For a survey of the range of his doctrinal concern, see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994).

⁶While his early sermons focus on soteriology, themes about the divine nature become common later; e.g., Sermon 54, "On Eternity," *Works* 2:358–72; Sermon 67, "On Divine Providence," *Works* 2:535–50; Sermon 68, "The Wisdom of the Divine Counsels," *Works* 2:552–66; Sermon 118, "On the Omnipresence of God," *Works* 4:40–47; and Sermon 120, "The Unity of the Divine Being," *Works* 4:61–71.

As in many other cases, Wesley's deepest concern about the Calvinist affirmation of unconditional election/reprobation was articulated strikingly in verse by his brother Charles (which John endorsed by publication in the *Arminian Magazine*):

'Tis thus, O God, they picture Thee,
Thy Justice and Sincerity;
Thy Truth which never can remove,
Thy bowels of unbounded Love:
Thy freedom of Redeeming Grace,
'With-held from almost all the Race,
Made for Apollyon to devour,
In honour of thy Sovereign Power!⁷

Note that the objection offered here is to the way that the Calvinists "picture" God. In their predestinarian opponents the Wesley brothers saw a defining model of a *sovereign monarch* (in the heat of controversy John put it less graciously: an omnipresent almighty tyrant!⁸). By contrast, their more characteristic model of God was that of a *loving parent*.⁹

This difference in fundamental models or analogies for God was reflected in assumptions about divine/human interaction in salvation. In contrast with the Calvinist emphasis on protecting God's sovereign freedom in all interaction with humanity, Wesley was concerned throughout his ministry with articulating what I have termed a model of "responsible grace."¹⁰ He strove to preserve the vital tension between two biblical truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God's grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God's grace *will not* save. The God whose prevenient gracious empowerment makes us *response-able* is like a truly loving parent in also finally respecting the integrity of our *responsible* appropriation of that grace.

⁷"Address to the Calvinists," stanza 3, *Arminian Magazine* 3 (1778): 383–84.

⁸Sermon 110, "Free Grace," §28, *Works* 3:557.

⁹Note John's claim that wise persons are those who recognizes God as their Father, their friend, and the parent of all good (Sermon 33, "Sermon on the Mount XIII," §II.2, *Works* 1:692); and his suggestion of how to explain God to a child (Sermon 94, "On Family Religion," §III.7, *Works* 3:341).

¹⁰See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 19.

There are obviously strong implications of Wesley's favored analogy of God and its related emphasis on "responsible grace" for doctrines detailing the human dimensions of salvation. The implications for doctrinal debates concerning the nature of God are no less strong. Wesley's increased engagement with standard topics in the doctrine of God in his later years reflects some attempt to think through these implications, in dialogue with alternative stances championed in his time. Implications for understanding God's moral attributes emerged most immediately—with Wesley stringently rejecting any conception of Divine justice and mercy, or God's universal love and goodness, that rendered these compatible with unconditional reprobation.¹¹ The point most relevant to our present concern is that he also became uneasy with some conceptions of God's natural attributes that were commonly defended in Protestant and Roman Catholic scholastic theologies, sensing that these conceptions did not do justice to the way that God actually relates to us in responsible grace. The general trajectory of his reaction to these conceptions was to lay greater stress on the genuinely *response-able* nature of God.

Immutability and Response-ability

A good place to begin in getting a sense of this trajectory in Wesley's thought is with the Christian confession that God is immutable or unchanging. The biblical roots of this confession primarily stress God's faithfulness to covenant commitments. Over time further implications were connected with the notion of immutability, partly through the influence of Platonic and Aristotelian assumptions about perfection and change. It came to be broadly assumed that there could be *no* type of change in God since change would either be for the worse, or (if for the better) would indicate that God had not been as perfect previously as God could be. It was emphasized in particular that God could not "suffer" change—in the sense of being subjected to undesired change by an external agent. Given that several emotions are "suffered" in precisely this sense, many came to argue that the immutable God had no emotions, or at least no "passions" as they called those emo-

¹¹Cf. Sermon 110, "Free Grace," §§24–25, *Works* 3:552–56; and *Predestination Calmly Considered*, esp. §§36–43, *John Wesley*, 441–45.

tions that are suffered in response to things beyond our initiative and full control. Even those who allowed that God had affections or emotions per se tended to argue that God experienced no fluctuation or change of these in response to creaturely events. While God might timelessly grieve over the loss of innocent victims, they urged that we should not think of God uniquely grieving at the time of and in response to the loss of any particular innocent victim.

While conclusions like this might seem to run counter to Christian sensibilities, they have been considered by many to be essential to protecting God's perfection and sovereignty.¹² Wesley was sensitive to these concerns, but he was also convinced that Scripture portrayed a God who took individual interest in us. This conviction is hinted at in his argument that the scriptural claim that God experiences joy at a person's conversion is an appropriate "representation."¹³ It is more evident in his defense of the possibility of persons culpably falling from grace, against the charge that this made God changeable. His basic argument was that a God who did not take into account the changing response of humanity would cease to be unchangeably just and gracious!¹⁴ A God of truly responsible grace must respond to each of us in our unique situations.

This emphasis raises the question of whether Wesley shared the hesitance found in many scholastic theologies to assign emotions to God. The evidence is a little mixed. He could affirm Article I of his Anglican tradition which maintained that as a spirit the living God had no "body, parts, or passions."¹⁵ Yet he also defended the scriptural ascription of passions to God, as long as this was understood analogically.¹⁶ Most importantly, he identified the affections as one of those analogues of God's being that we share as creatures graciously created in the Image of God.¹⁷ "Affections" was Wesley's common term for those positive emotions that are the

¹²For a very thoughtful presentation of this case, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2000). A helpful articulation of the alternative is Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

¹³*NT Notes*, Luke 15:7.

¹⁴*Serious Thoughts on the Perseverance of the Saints*, §14, *Works* (Jackson) 10:289–90.

¹⁵He quotes this article in Sermon 120, "The Unity of the Divine Being," §8, *Works* 4:63.

¹⁶See *NT Notes*, Rom. 5:9; and *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law* (6 January 1756), §II.2, *Letters* (Telford) 3:346.

¹⁷Cf. Sermon 45, "The New Birth," §I.1, *Works* 2:188.

empowering and inclining source of our actions, with love being the prime example. Thus, when he described love as God's "reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all [God's] other perfections," he was making emotion central to his conception of God.¹⁸ This helps to explain why someone deleted the phrase denying passions to God from Article I of the edited version of the Anglican Articles that Wesley prepared for the newly independent American Methodists when they organized into a church.¹⁹ Far from being "above" responsive emotions, Wesley affirmed a God who epitomized the proper response-ability of the emotions.

Omnipotence and Response-ability

How did Wesley square this affirmation of God's responsiveness with the notion of God's omnipotence or sovereign power? He could define God's omnipotence in fairly traditional terms, as the exclusion of any bounds to God's power. Whenever he developed this point however, it became clear that his distinctive concern was that God's power not be defined in any way that would undercut the integrity of responsible grace.

Wesley discerned such a mistaken conception of Divine power in the claims of his predestinarian opponents that they preserved the glory of God better than he did. Their obvious assumption was that one could ascribe the full glory of salvation to God only if God effected salvation unilaterally, rather than seeking responsively some human concurrence. Wesley countered that affirming a place for God awaiting our uncoerced response to the divine initiative did not detract from God's glory, provided that it was God's grace which enabled us to respond. Moreover, he contended that the biblical notion of the "glory of God" does not refer primarily to God's power, it refers to the manifestation of all God's attributes, especially justice and love.²⁰

Wesley also stressed the relationship of God's power with God's

¹⁸*NT Notes*, 1 John 4:8; and *Predestination Calmly Considered*, §43, *John Wesley*, 445.

¹⁹It appears that Wesley left the phrase in when editing Anglican Article I, but it was gone by the time the Articles were circulated in America. It is not clear who removed it, but perhaps it was Thomas Coke. Cf. Ted A. Campbell, "The Mystery of the First Article of Religion, and the Mystery of Divine Passibility," *OXFORDnotes* 4.1 (24 May 1996): 5.

²⁰*Predestination Calmly Considered*, §§47–50, *John Wesley*, 447–49.

wisdom. As he once put it, were God to abolish sin and evil by overriding human freedom, “it would imply no wisdom at all, but barely a stroke of omnipotence. Whereas all the manifold wisdom of God (as well as all his power and goodness) is displayed in governing [humans] as [human]; not as a stock or a stone, but as an intelligent and free spirit.”²¹ It was as important for Wesley that God be response-able in dealing with humanity as it was that God be omnipotent!

Indeed he reshaped the very conception of God’s omnipotence in light of this conviction. A distinction between God’s work as Creator and as Governor was central to his case. Wesley allowed that it may be permissible to speak of God working alone and irresistibly when creating and sustaining nonpersonal nature, but not when governing human life—for this would eliminate human responsibility.²² As Governor, God enables human obedience, but will not force it. As Wesley reminded his followers,

You know how God wrought in *your own* soul when he first enabled you to say, ‘The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.’ He did not take away your understanding, but enlightened and strengthened it. He did not destroy any of your affections; rather they were more vigorous than before. Least of all did he take away your liberty, your power of choosing good or evil; he did not *force* you; but being *assisted* by his grace you... *chose* the better part.²³

Perhaps the best way to capture Wesley’s conviction here is to say that he construed God’s power or sovereignty fundamentally in terms of *empowerment*, rather than control or *overpowerment*. This is not to weaken God’s power but to determine its character! As Wesley was fond of saying, God works “strongly and sweetly” in matters of human life and salvation.²⁴ But this means that God also works responsively. Thus Wesley would insist that while God’s empowering grace is always prevenient to any action on our part, “God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts

²¹Sermon 67, “On Divine Providence,” §14, *Works* 2:540.

²²*Thoughts Upon God’s Sovereignty*, *Works* (Jackson) 10:361–63.

²³Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” §11, *Works* 2:489.

²⁴E.g., *NT Notes*, Rom. 8:28; Sermon 66, “The Signs of the Times,” §II.9, *Works* 2:530; and Sermon 118, “On the Omnipresence of God,” §II.1, *Works* 4:43.

upon God. ...He will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again.”²⁵

Temporality and Response-ability

However attractive it sounds, the type of responsive interaction with individuals that Wesley was ascribing to God in this 1748 sermon must eventually explain how this is possible for God—since God’s relationship to time differs from that of humanity. But how does it differ? What do we mean when we identify eternity as one of the distinctive attributes of the divine nature? This question has been the focus of longstanding dispute. The dispute grows out of the mingling of two different streams of reflection upon God’s nature in early Christian tradition. The biblical roots of our tradition tend to describe eternity as “unending duration,” reflecting a relative comfort with analogical use of human experience (such as our experience of duration) to portray God. The Greco-Roman roots of our tradition tend to equate eternity with “atemporality,” reflecting a tendency to see the divine nature as the opposite of everything that we experience in creaturely existence as limitations (such as some aspects of being temporal).

Early Christian theologians were broadly drawn to the emphasis on atemporality. In its strongest form this meant adopting Plato’s model of eternal realities, portraying God’s existence as the antithesis of temporal succession—a tenseless unchanging Now (*nunc stans* in Latin). On these terms, God embraces and knows all of time in a unity that dissolves the succession of temporal events. Despite the difficulty of squaring this with biblical accounts of God’s activity, influential theologians like Augustine adopted the *nunc stans* model of eternity, leading it to become dominant in scholastic theologies. A subtle but significant variant of this model is evident in some of these theologies. On this variant God exists “above” time, still embracing and knowing all of time, but in a way that (proponents of this view believe) preserves the succession of temporal reality.²⁶ In other words, the biblical notion of duration is introduced, but the atemporal emphasis is retained as most funda-

²⁵Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God,” §III.3, *Works* 1:442.

²⁶See the analysis and recommendation of this variant in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 1:403–9.

mental.²⁷ Almost no one prior to the eighteenth century ventured to go further and champion a model of God as fundamentally *temporal*—that is, as existing in the ongoing passage of time as we do, though without beginning or end. The clearest advocate was Socinius, and this was included among the teachings for which he was condemned by both Protestant and Catholic scholastics.

Where did Wesley's convictions about God's responsive interaction lead him in assessing these three alternative models? There is little evidence of initial reticence about the *nunc stans* model that he would have imbibed in his Anglican training. Indeed, when controversy broke out between Wesleyan and Calvinist Methodists over predestination in the 1750s, he readily appealed to the notion of God existing in the Eternal Now to explain how our eternal election was based not on divine decree but on God's timeless knowledge of our actual response to the gracious offer of salvation.²⁸ At least indirect endorsements of this model can be found into the mid-1780s.²⁹

But there is also evidence that in his later years Wesley began to sense that the classic *nunc stans* model did not fit well his emphasis on God's response-ability: If all "moments" of time are experienced by God as simultaneously *now*, how could God sense and respond to specific transitions in our lives? Concern to address this lack of fit would explain the increasing use in Wesley's later sermons of language to describe God's relation to time that resonates more with the "above time" variation of the typical scholastic model. An early example is a 1773 sermon that distilled the main themes of his prior controversial writings on predestination. In this sermon Wesley again invoked the notion of an Eternal Now, but his extended description of how God relates to time picks up some duration themes. While God sees all things in one view, Wesley

²⁷See the critique of the coherence of this view as traditionally formulated and a proposed refinement (drawing on John Duns Scotus) of conceiving God instead as "relatively timeless" in Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); or Padgett, "God the Lord of Time," in *God and Time: Four Views*, edited by Greg Ganssle (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2001).

²⁸Cf. *Predestination Calmly Considered*, §18, *John Wesley*, 433. See also from the same time period Wesley's comments on Rom. 1:28 and 1 Peter 1:2 in *NT Notes*.

²⁹See particularly two articles he extracted and reprinted in the *Arminian Magazine*: [Author not given], "On the Eternity of God," *AM* 3 (1780): 33–41; and Extracted from a late Author, "Of God's Immensity," *AM* 9 (1786): 22–25, p. 23.

stresses that what God sees runs “from everlasting to everlasting,” presenting the full span of “whatever was, is, or will be to the end of time.”³⁰ This emphasis is even stronger in sermons after 1785, as the elder Wesley chooses to define God’s eternal existence not with reference to an Eternal Now, but with more classically biblical language of “everlastingness” or “boundless duration.”³¹ He was clearly seeking a theological account that did justice to his conviction that God interacts responsively with humanity in our temporal setting.

Prescience and Response-ability?

One of the shared aspects of the *nunc stans* model and the model emphasizing God as “above time” was the assumption that God eternally knows not only what stands to us as past and present, but also what stands to us as future. The classic way of affirming this was to say that God—as omniscient—has *prescience* or *foreknowledge* of all future events, though it was immediately added that this is at best an analogical expression (since nothing is truly “future” to God). Whatever the precision of the claim, there is a deeper question about its implications. Those in the Christian family who affirm unconditional election have often appealed to God’s infallible foreknowledge as demonstrating the eternal *certainty* of our final states, and argued that this means our choices concerning salvation could have been no different than they actually were. This implication would obviously have been unacceptable to Wesley, with his concern to maintain the integrity of our response to God’s interactive gracious work.

If one agreed that foreknowledge of our future choices truly undercuts their contingency, the most obvious way to preserve the integrity of moral choices would be to deny (as Socinius did) that God can have foreknowledge. Somewhat more modest is the proposal advanced by one of Wesley’s prominent contemporaries (Andrew Ramsay) that while God exists “above time” and is thus able to know the future, God vol-

³⁰Sermon 58, “On Predestination,” §5, *Works* 2:417. See also §15 (2:420) which contains the reference to the Eternal Now.

³¹See Sermon 54, “On Eternity,” §1, *Works* 2:358; Sermon 118, “On the Omnipresence of God,” §I.2. *Works* 4:42; and Sermon 120, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” §2, *Works* 4:61.

untarily chooses not to exercise this ability in order to preserve human freedom. When Wesley first encountered this proposal in the 1750s he rejected it summarily. While he showed some possible openness to Ramsay's proposal late in his life, Wesley generally assumed that the biblical claim that God's works are known unto God from eternity (Acts 15:18) requires affirming divine prescience of all future events, even if there are difficulties in understanding how this is consistent with human freedom.³²

Actually, Wesley had long been aware of a model for explaining the consistency of divine foreknowledge with human freedom. It had been recommended by his mother early in his student years. This model holds that the certainty of divine prescience is one of *recognition* (like in human perception), not one of causation. As Susanna put it, there is no more reason to suppose "that the prescience of God is the cause that so many finally perish, than that our knowing the sun will rise tomorrow is the cause of its rise."³³ As William Wollaston put it in a book that Wesley read a little later at Oxford: "The truth is, God foresees, or rather sees the actions of free agents, because they *will be*; not that they will be, because He *foresees* them."³⁴

Wesley invoked this model (sometimes called "simple foreknowledge") in his famous 1739 sermon "Free Grace," the opening volley of his debate with George Whitefield and the Calvinist Methodists. He argued that biblical claims about eternal election simply reflect God's ability as one "above time" to see from the beginning each individual's final response to the gracious—but resistible—offer of salvation.³⁵ While Whitefield was not convinced, others found this argument persuasive.³⁶ Thus it recurred

³²Cf. Andrew Michael Ramsay, *The Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion* (Glasgow: Robert Foulis, 1748), 142–74. Wesley's initial reaction is evident in Letter to Dr. John Robertson (24 September 1753), *Works* 26:517. Related responses can be found in *NT Notes* Acts 15:8; and Letter to Richard Locke (14 September 1770), *Letters* (Telford) 5:199. But these must be balanced by the fact that the elder Wesley published an excerpt of pages 161–74 of Ramsay as "Of the Foreknowledge of God, extracted from a late author," *AM* 8 (1785): 27–29, 88–90, 146–48.

³³See Letter from Susanna Wesley (18 August 1725), *Works* 25:180.

³⁴William Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (London: Samuel Palmer, 1724), 102. Wesley read Wollaston in 1733.

³⁵See Sermon 110, "Free Grace," §§20, 29, *Works* 3:552–53, 558.

³⁶Whitefield responded with a 1740 public letter titled *Free Grace Indeed?* that can be found

in every major subsequent work where Wesley challenged the notion of unconditional election.³⁷ It was also utilized by John Fletcher, Wesley's close associate who offered an extended apologetic for the Wesleyan position in debates with the Calvinists.³⁸ On the weight of such warrant it was established as the standard Wesleyan/Methodist position on divine foreknowledge by Wesley's death in 1791. Although we will find some of his nineteenth century heirs debating the point, Wesley clearly judged this "simple foreknowledge" model to be consistent with both the integrity of our human choices and the response-able nature of God.

Defending and Extending Wesley's Trajectory in Nineteenth Century Methodism

Wesley's mature pastoral/theological reflections on the divine attributes just considered are sufficient for demonstrating his willingness to revise certain scholastic conceptions in order to nurture among his people a sense of God's responsive gracious interaction with humanity. One might expect that his immediate heirs would push such revisions and nuances even further, citing Wesley's

in *George Whitefield's Journals*, ed. Iain Murray (London: Banner of Truth, 1960), 571–88 (see p. 586). For an immediate defense of Wesley against Whitefield by an Anglican in the North American colonies see John Checkley, *Dialogues between a minister and an honest country-man To which is annexed, Divine prescience consistent with human liberty; or Mr. Wesley's opinion of election and reprobation, prov'd to be not so absurd as represented in a late letter ...* (Philadelphia: Andrew Bradford, Jacob Duche, William Parsons, and Evan Morgan, 1741), 29–39.

³⁷*Predestination Calmly Considered*, §18, *John Wesley*, 433; Sermon 58, "On Predestination," §5, *Works* 2:417; and Sermon 59, "God's Love to Fallen Man," §3, *Works* 2:424. It is also found in works he reprinted in the *Arminian Magazine*: Thomas Goad, "A Discourse concerning the Necessity and Contingency of Events in the World, in Respect of God's Eternal Decrees," *AM* 1 (1778): 250–64, 289–302 (see pp. 262, 301); and "Treatise on Election and Reprobation, extracted from a Late Author," *AM* 2 (1779): 161ff. I do not see Wesley showing reticence about this position as possibly compatibilist, as suggested in Walter Lamoyne Parr Jr., "John Wesley's *Thoughts upon Necessity* in his Search for the Middle Verity" (University of Aberdeen Ph.D. thesis, 1994), 255–60, 276–79.

³⁸It is surprising how little Fletcher deals with the specific topic of foreknowledge, but when he does he insists that foreknowledge does not have a causative effect. Cf. *Third Part of an Equal Check*, Section VI, in *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher. Late Vicar of Madeley* (New York: Waugh & Mason, 1835) 2:176–83; and *An Answer to the Rev. Mr. Todlady's "Vindication of the Decree,"* Section VIII, *Works* 2:462–67.

precedent as warrant. Instead their energies were almost immediately consumed in resisting the pressure to return to reigning scholastic conceptions.

Part of the reason that Wesley felt free to differ from Roman Catholic and Protestant scholastic theologies was his self-conscious Anglican identity. While there are lines of inheritance from both Protestant and Roman Catholic scholastic theologies in the Anglican standards of doctrine, one of the significant ways these standards differed from the continental model was in form. The Anglican church returned to the early church model of relying on first-order forms like liturgy, creed, and catechetical sermons as standards of doctrine. The closer connection of these forms to the daily worship and life of the church served to nuance and enrich some of the abstract conceptions of the divine attributes that had made their way into scholastic theological debate.

It is against this background that we can appreciate the theological impact of the rapid “de-Anglicanization” of Methodism. This process began when American Methodists formed the The Methodist Episcopal Church following the Revolutionary War. After Wesley’s death British Methodists quickly formalized their own independent existence, and worked to define themselves overagainst their Anglican mother. This threw Methodists in both settings into primary dialogue with churches rooted in continental Protestantism, and they soon realized that their inherited (Anglican) forms of theological expression were not considered “real” theology in these circles. Their response was not to question the primacy of the continental forms, but to focus their energies on developing the scholastic theology for Methodism that Wesley had lamentably failed to provide.³⁹ In the process they inevitably had to explain places where Wesley had diverged from scholastic conceptions of the nature of God. And to the degree that they were concerned to defend their status as orthodox Protestants, there was pressure to reconsider these divergences.

³⁹For a detailed discussion of this transition, focusing on the American Methodists, see Randy L. Maddox, “An Untapped Inheritance: American Methodism and Wesley’s Practical Theology,” in *Doctrines and Disciplines: Methodist Theology and Practice*, edited by Dennis Campbell, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 19–52, 292–309.

Conservative Precedent of Nineteenth Century British Methodism

The growing impact of such pressure is evident in nineteenth century British Methodism. The generation that overlapped Wesley's death continued to rely on forms of theological expression aimed at instructing the entire community, particularly sermon collections and general Bible commentaries. The most widely recognized of this generation was Adam Clarke, but Clarke was also the center of much controversy in Methodist circles precisely because he challenged some traditional theological conceptions in his multi-volume commentary.⁴⁰ Most relevant to our investigation was a controversy sparked by Clarke's comment on the reference to God's "fore-ordained knowledge" in Acts 2. True to his Wesleyan roots, Clarke sought a way to understand this phrase that did not equate it with unconditional election. His main strategy was to invoke the now standard model of God existing above time and thereby observing (rather than causing) our future choices and actions. But then Clarke ventured a step further—on analogy with Wesley's argument that omnipotence did not require that God actually control all that God could control, Clarke proposed that "God, though omniscient, is not obliged, in consequence of this to know all that he can know."⁴¹

In other words, Clarke embraced more overtly than the elder Wesley the proposal of Andrew Ramsay that we should understand God as *voluntarily* renouncing prescience of at least some future events, in order to preserve human responsibility. But when Clarke "extended" Wesley's trajectory on this point, official British Methodism was not willing to follow. The initial draft of his commentary was refused by the Book Committee in 1799, citing in part the publication underway of Thomas Coke's six-volume commentary. When Conference then issued Joseph's Benson's commentary in 1809 as a second official work, the ignored Clarke reluctantly agreed

⁴⁰For a detailed account of the actions described in this paragraph, see Ian Sellers, *Adam Clarke, Controversialist: Wesleyanism and the Historic Faith in the Age of Bunting* (St. Columb Major: Wesley Historical Society, 1976). This work was drawn to my attention by Martin Astell.

⁴¹See Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible...with a Commentary and Critical Notes* (London: J. & T. Clarke, 1810), comment on Acts 2:47. See also his description of God as above time in his comment on Luke 1:34.

to move ahead with an independent press. As he prepared to issue a revised version in 1830, Clarke checked once more with the Book Steward; told that he would have to remove all “objectionable” passages, he again settled for an independent press. Even Samuel Dunn’s compendium of excerpts on various doctrinal topics from Clarke’s writings (prepared shortly after his death) was released outside Conference auspices, despite the fact that Dunn had carefully omitted the controversial proposals.⁴²

The effort to distance themselves from Clarke reflects a key agenda of British Methodist leaders in these early decades, which was to gain the theological respect of their dialogue partners in the other dissenting traditions. They soon sensed that a prerequisite to this goal was having a comprehensive and carefully organized survey of Methodist belief and practice that engaged the long tradition of Christian theological debate, defended any controverted Methodist claims, and provided rational grounding for the whole—that is, a Methodist “scholastic theology.” Richard Watson published his *Theological Institutes* as the pioneering work in this genre in 1823, and it remained the standard British Methodist theology text for over half a century.⁴³ It has frequently been noted that Watson seldom quotes Wesley in this work. While this is true, it is largely because of Watson’s recognition that his non-Methodist critics would not consider Wesley to serve as a significant warrant, since he was not a “serious” theologian. Careful reading reveals Watson’s actual concern to articulate and defend Wesley’s stance on several debated issues, including those related to the doctrine of God that we have been considering.

For example, in his discussion of immutability (1:435–37) Watson echoed Wesley’s defense of the biblical claim of God “repenting,” arguing that a God who fails to take into account the changing response of humanity would not be truly unchangeable in righteousness and love. He likewise faithfully affirmed the ascription of passions or affections to God. Concerning the topic of omnipotence, Watson reiterated the claim that God’s power is self-limited

⁴²Cf. *Christian Theology: By Adam Clarke, LL.D., F.A.S.; selected from his published and unpublished writings*, by Samuel Dunn (London: Tegg, 1835), 69–70, 74.

⁴³Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes; or, A View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity*, 3 vols. (London: Mason, 1823). Page references in the following two paragraphs refer to this edition.

by God's nature, particularly by God's wisdom and goodness in wanting to deal with humans as responsible agents (1:403, 3:174–77). Reflecting his more scholastic sensitivities, when Watson took up the question of God's relationship to time he enlarged upon the hints in Wesley's late sermons (1:395–99). He spelled out the objections to the *nunc stans* model and then defended at some length the biblical language of God's "eternal duration." He clearly took this language to imply a model of God as "above time," able to recognize succession in events without being confined to the present.

Watson's discussion of foreknowledge is particularly interesting (1:416–27). He joined Wesley in defending the simple foreknowledge model, insisting that God's foreknowledge has "no influence upon either the freedom or the certainty of actions, for this plain reason, that it is *knowledge* and not *influence*" (422). But the main opponents against which Watson directed his argument were not the predestinarians, they were those who were ready to deny divine prescience in order to protect human freedom! Watson considered first Andrew Ramsay's suggestion that God voluntarily renounces prescience (he tactfully did not mention Clarke's similar proposal). He rejected this possibility as contradictory, contending that the phrase "knowledge of God" refers not just to God's capacity to acquire knowledge but to God actually comprehending all things that are and that can be (418). He then turned to the stronger claim of Socinius that knowledge of future contingent events is metaphysically impossible even for the omniscient (temporal) God, since these events do not yet exist as something to be known. Watson's immediate rejoinder to this claim was to cite biblical prophecies that he assumed involved God's certain knowledge of future contingent events (418–20). But he added that "the great fallacy of this argument is its assumption that certain prescience of a moral action destroys its contingent nature, for this supposes that contingency and certainty are the opposites of each other when the real opposite of contingent is not certainty but necessity" (421). In other words, he saw in Socinius the mirror position of the predestinarians, both based on the same mistaken assumption.

On balance, while Watson adopted the form and tone of scholastic theology, he used these tools to clarify and defend places where

Wesley had challenged or revised scholastic conceptions of God's nature. But the longer that British Methodist theologians worked within the scholastic genre the more pressure there was to minimize the ways that Wesley had pushed the edges!

This can be illustrated by the most thoroughgoing scholastic theology produced in British Methodism: William Burt Pope's *Compendium of Christian Theology*, published in 1875.⁴⁴ Pope consistently affirmed as much of the traditional conception of the divine attributes as he could, without conceding the crucial Wesleyan conviction. His discussion of immutability for example focused on denying any development in God; there is little mention of the debated topic of whether God has passions, though Pope finally insisted that we must understand the attribute in a way that allows God to interact with us "personally" (1:302–4). Likewise Pope adopted the traditional framing of omnipotence as an application of divine freedom, but then used this to defend God's "freedom" to self-limit omnipotence in order to allow a measure of freedom to humans (1:311–13). And he directed discussion of omniscience with somewhat greater ease to the simple foreknowledge model, stressing how this avoids unconditional election (1:315–19).

Pope's discussion of God's relation to time is the most interesting. Without listing Watson by name (or discussing Wesley's later sermons), he criticized those who dismiss the model of the Eternal Now in favor of assigning duration to God. He endorsed the scholastic claim that the Divine essence in itself must be absolutely unconditioned, thus it can experience no succession of time. But then he argued that in dealing with creation God must behold, direct, and control all things as under the law to time (1:297–99). As he summarized this balance a little later: "Instead of saying with the schoolmen that to God there is only an eternal now, it were better to say that to God as absolute essence there is the eternal now, and also to God as related to the creature there is the process of succession" (1:317). Anticipating the question of how both claims can be true, he appealed to mystery.⁴⁵ What remains no

⁴⁴Page references in this and the next paragraphs are to William Burt Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, 2nd edition (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1879).

⁴⁵Pope, *Compendium*, 1:299. Actually, the position that Pope is groping for seems much like the notion of God as "relatively timeless" developed by Alan Padgett (see note 27 above).

mystery is the fact that the basic Wesleyan conviction of God's response-able nature served as the limit of Pope's concessions to scholastic tradition.

The Tentative Independence of Early American Methodist Theology

The "primitivist" strain in American Methodism allowed, in theory, greater independence from both Wesley and scholastic theology than is evident in the British precedent. This strain reflected the optimistic assumption that pilgrimage to the New World had provided freedom from the tyranny of *all* past tradition and the opportunity to reinstitute the beliefs and practice of the New Testament church. Thus we get a methodology like that affirmed by Asa Shinn in *An Essay on the Plan of Salvation*, one of the first theological monographs by an American Methodist:

Each one is bound under a sacred obligation, to go to the Bible for [one's] system of divinity, and so far as any is governed by a regard to any human creed, in the formation of [one's] religious opinions, so far [one] is deficient in the very principle of Christian faith; and pays that homage to human authority that is due only to the Divine.⁴⁶

In retrospect, the naivete of this mandate is palpable; American Methodists constantly drew upon traditional theological proposals in their interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, they were somewhat less reticent about championing marginal or non-majority proposals. In particular, it appears that a number of early American preachers embraced Adam Clarke's notion of God voluntarily laying aside prescience.⁴⁷ The most striking case was Billy Hibbard Sr., an early circuit rider who published in his *Memoirs* an extended argument that God does not foreknow future contingent events.⁴⁸ Hibbard had long puzzled over how to relate Divine prescience to human freedom and said he found no help

⁴⁶Shinn, *An Essay on the Plan of Salvation* (Baltimore: Neal, Wills & Cole, 1813), 230.

⁴⁷Cf. the examples cited censoriously in James Anderson, *Strictures on Arminian Methodism* (Lancaster, OH: J.R. Dixon, 1844), 18–19.

⁴⁸Page references in the next three paragraphs refer to Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard*, 2nd edition (New York: for the author, 1843), 369–414. Note that this section was not present in Hibbard's 1825 first edition of *Memoirs*.

in the authors he had read on the topic until he came across an extract on foreknowledge with which he fully agreed in “Mr. Wesley’s American (*sic*) Magazine, ninth volume.” Fortunately, Hibbard reprints (an abridgement of) the extract before commenting on it. Thereby it can be verified that he was actually reading the extract of Ramsay that Wesley published in volume eight of the *Arminian Magazine*.⁴⁹

The stated goal of the extract is to find a medium between the extremes of fatalism (God’s prescience renders all future events necessary) and Socinianism (God is not able to foresee or foretell any of the actions of free agents). But it does not present the “simple foreknowledge” alternative that had become standard in Methodism. Instead it asserts that God knows everything past and present (as well as all logical truths) with certainty, but perceives future events only as *possible*. Over against the fatalists it emphasizes that this requires God to know *all* of the possible future combinations of physical and moral causes, and to prepare for all contingencies, which it argues is “far more perfect than to foresee infallibly only one sort of events, and exclude all the others, by an omnipotent, irresistible power” (374). Over against the Socinians it insists that God is theoretically *able* to foresee, foreordain, and execute whatever God pleases, but God “neither foresees nor foreordains as infallibly future, what he leaves to the free choice of intellectual agents, because this is repugnant and contradictory” (376). In other words, it develops the model of a voluntary surrender of prescience like that tentatively advanced by Clarke.

Hibbard appended to this first extract another of unidentified origin that argued that any notion of prescience—even a notion with God “above time”—leads necessarily to unconditional predestination (376–86). Taking his own voice, Hibbard offered an extended endorsement of this necessary connection (405–12). On that basis he argued that affirming divine prescience made God the author of sinning, contradicting both the divine perfection and human moral agency (387–90). This led him to charge (with reference to Richard Watson) that “the advocates of eternal prescience apart from predestination are far more inconsistent than

⁴⁹Compare Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 373–76 to *AM* 8 (1785): 27–29, 88–90, 146–48 (cf. note 32 above).

their predestinarian brethren ... and I call upon them as ingenious and honest men, either to reject their notion of a certain prescience of a contingent event, or to renounce the doctrine of human liberty.”⁵⁰ The alternative that Hibbard recommended paralleled the first extract. As he put it colloquially, “God knows just what he has a mind to know, and what he has not a mind to know, he lets alone” (413).

The most striking thing about Hibbard’s discussion is the extensiveness (particularly in comparison with Clarke) with which he developed this model of self-limited foreknowledge. For example, in its defense he cited scriptural claims about God being grieved by human decisions to sin (395). And responding to the use of biblical prophecies as proof of prescience, he argued that prophecies are just expressions of God’s intention to accomplish in the future something that is within God’s power and nature to do—which would not include determining future contingent actions (404). Despite the vigor of his argument, Hibbard did not succeed in convincing leading voices in contemporary American Methodism of the superiority of his model.

The reality is that—whatever their independence in other areas—through most of the nineteenth century formal teaching on the doctrine of God among American Methodists echoed that of their British counterpart. Across the range of the splintering American family they readily assigned Watson’s *Institutes* as the main theology text on the course of study for prospective elders.⁵¹ Discussion of the topics we have been considering in their denominational journals defended the stance that Watson had expounded, particularly the “simple foreknowledge” model of God as a rebuttal to predestination.⁵²

⁵⁰Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 412. The references to Watson are on pp. 400–3. Ironically, Hibbard also targets Clarke in this critique (see 405), even though he is actually defending a position like that which Clarke had tentatively suggested. Perhaps Hibbard had only read the collection of excerpts from Clarke’s writings, which omit this suggestion.

⁵¹Watson was on the course of study for The Methodist Episcopal Church from 1833–92; The Methodist Protestant Church, 1830–1920; The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1844–92; The African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion, 1872–1900; The Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1878–1906; and The Colored (Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church, 1872–1920.

⁵²E.g., Anonymous [Joshua Soule?], “Thoughts on the Foreknowledge of God,” *MQR* 3 (1820): 11–14, 49–53; La Roy Sunderland, “Unoriginated Decrees,” *MQR* 16 (1833): 322–40; S [Abel Stephens?], “God’s Determinant Counsel and Foreknowledge,” *MQR* 21 (1839): 39–61, esp. 41; and Henry Bidleman Bascom, “The Divine Prescience not Inconsistent with Free Agency of Man,” *MQRS* 1 (1847) 161–75.

And when American authors began producing their own survey texts the early generations drew their discussion of the divine attributes direct from Watson.⁵³ Even on the conservative side, someone as concerned to demonstrate continuity with classical Christian tradition as Thomas Summers retained the major points about God's response-able nature that had been made by Wesley and passed along in slightly refined form in Watson.⁵⁴

Solidifying the Progressive Strand in American Methodist Theology, 1875–1900

Throughout the nineteenth century those who exercised the teaching office in American Methodism steadfastly rejected any equation of official Methodist teaching with the occasional suggestion of individual Methodists that the only way to avoid predestination was to deny that God has foreknowledge of future contingent events.⁵⁵ For most of the century this rejection required little elaboration, because the suggestions were either tentative (like Clarke) or from persons of marginal theological influence (like Hibbard). Near the end of the century this situation changed dramatically, owing largely to the impact of one writer—Lorenzo Dow McCabe.

McCabe taught philosophy for more than thirty years at Ohio Wesleyan University. Like his namesake (Lorenzo Dow, the flamboyant circuit rider), McCabe was not afraid to challenge conventional Methodist stances when convinced that this was what truth required. In 1878 he published through the MEC publishing house a vigorous philosophical and theological critique of the “simple foreknowledge” model of God.⁵⁶ In this work he

⁵³E.g., Amos Binney, *Theological Compend* (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1840), 53; Thomas Neely Ralston, *Elements of Divinity* (Louisville: Martin & Griswold, 1847), 23–26; and Samuel Wakefield, *A Complete System of Christian Theology* (Pittsburgh: J. L. Read and Son, 1869; original, 1862), 145–59.

⁵⁴See Thomas O. Summers, *Systematic Theology*, 2 Volumes (Nashville: Publishing House of the MECS, 1888), on eternity (1:75–80), immutability (1:80–82), omnipotence (1:84), and omniscience (1:85–90).

⁵⁵See for example Daniel Whedon, *The Freedom of the Will* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1864), 273–74; and Thomas Summers' rejection of the suggestion that Clarke speaks for all Methodists (*Systematic Theology* 1:88). On the status of editors like Whedon and Summers as exercising the teaching office see Russell E. Richey, “The Legacy of Francis Asbury: The Teaching Office in Episcopal Methodism,” *Quarterly Review* 15 (1995): 145–74.

⁵⁶Lorenzo Dow McCabe, *The Foreknowledge of God, and Cognate Themes in Theology and Philosophy* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1878). Page references in this and the following three paragraphs are to this book.

specifically rejected the contentions of Wesley, Watson, and Whedon that this model provides a logically defensible way of allowing divine prescience while preserving human accountability (cf. 21, 161, 310–15). Moreover, he argued that the basic assumption of Clarke’s alternative model—that God *could* foreknow future contingent actions, but chooses not to do so—was also fallacious (218–19). What both models fail to realize, McCabe insisted, is that there can be certain knowledge only of past facts, logical necessities, and future actions that are totally determined by present causal factors. Truly contingent future actions can only be anticipated as possibilities, not *foreknown* as existing facts.

The conventional Methodist response to McCabe would be to allow that this is true for human knowledge, since we are temporal creatures, but to deny that God exists “in the present” like we do. However, this is where McCabe disagreed most fundamentally with earlier Wesleyan tradition. He charged that Wesley should have gone further in reversing the scholastic emphasis on God’s atemporal nature, an emphasis that Wesley recognized was hard to align with the biblical accounts of God engaging temporal human beings in a truly responsive manner (223–24). McCabe was convinced that the only way to achieve Wesley’s underlying concern of affirming God’s response-able nature was to affirm that God experiences succession in a way that is not fundamentally different from how we experience it. As he put it rhetorically: “has God no attraction for what is new? Has he no capability of the delightful experiences of wonder and surprise and variety? We ought never to lose sight of what God has explicitly revealed of himself when he declares that we were made in his own image and likeness” (174).

This quotation makes clear that McCabe assumed the God revealed in Scripture and Christian life is more appropriately conceived in terms of the model of a “person” than that of an “Unmoved Mover.” To speak of God as a “person,” related meaningfully to a contingent world, demanded in McCabe’s view that temporality itself be a primary, not a secondary experience of God (259ff). But how does God’s experience of temporality differ from our own? McCabe is a little ambiguous on this point. In one setting he describes God’s eternal existence as simply duration with-

out beginning or end (382–83). Elsewhere he seems to suggest that God was atemporal before creation, and freely adopted the self-limitation of entering into temporality as part of the decision to create a universe with true temporality, novelty, and freedom (cf. 204–5, 387).⁵⁷

However McCabe’s account of divine eternity is sorted out, it is clear that he viewed his temporal conception of God as particularly appropriate to the biblical accounts of a God who experiences states of feeling and is open to change (see 272ff, 313). But how did it fit with the notion of God as omniscient? Anticipating charges that he unduly limited God’s knowledge, McCabe emphasized that God would know all the interrelated contingent possibilities of the future—which is infinitely more than knowing only the possibilities that will be realized (250). This anticipatory knowledge would allow God to be prepared for providential action. Moreover, since God would be able to discern relative probabilities it would account for some of the biblical prophecies (153ff). Yet McCabe agreed that other prophecies, like that of Peter’s triple denial, seemed too specific to account for in this way. He assumed that in these few cases God must override human liberty to fulfill the prophecy, but added that as a result the persons involved would not be morally accountable for their acts (88–92)!

As this last proposal suggests, McCabe was still thinking through many dimensions of his overall model of God and foreknowledge. In 1882 he published a second book titled *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies A Necessity*, which he described as an introduction to the first work.⁵⁸ In this follow-up he identified his main target as “the Augustinian conception of God that has captured most theology to present which so far elevates the conception of God to a universal infinite that it logically annihilates him in his concrete personality.” McCabe’s alternative goal was an account of God rooted in facts of religious experience and scriptural testimony that portrayed God as capable of relating fully to the contingencies of personal life and historical change (17–18). At

⁵⁷This suggestion would come close to the position defended by William Craig in Ganssle, ed., *God and Time*.

⁵⁸Lorenzo Dow McCabe, *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies A Necessity, Being an Introduction to “The Foreknowledge of God, and Cognate Themes”* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1882). (Note: Nescience is the opposite of prescience).

the heart of this account was the argument that divine prescience of future contingent actions is logically and metaphysically impossible. While there is considerable overlap with the first book, a few items of interest emerge in this study. For example, McCabe devoted more attention to practical implications of his model for such central religious issues as prayer and theodicy. He developed the logical point that if future contingents do not yet exist, it is not a restriction of omniscience to deny God's knowledge of them (191). And he returned to the issue of prophecy, this time highlighting how the numerous conditional prophecies in scripture fit his model (76).

As one would expect, McCabe's ambitious revisionary proposal generated significant response. Much of the initial response was negative. Two concerns came up repeatedly. One was the charge that McCabe was playing into the hands of those Calvinists who reject the Methodist affirmation of human freedom, because McCabe granted their assumption that divine prescience necessarily eliminates authentic human freedom.⁵⁹ In response McCabe argued that predestinarian Calvinism would have been discredited long ago if misguided Arminians had not continued to defend the doctrine of divine prescience.⁶⁰ The second common claim advanced against McCabe's proposal was that the many scriptural prophecies of specific future contingent events compel us to affirm divine prescience, whatever the theological quandaries this might pose. It was not hard for those stressing this concern to demonstrate the inadequacy of McCabe's scattered attempts to account for the range of apparent prophetic material in scripture.⁶¹ Unfortunately, they did not engage the more extended discussion of this topic in Joel Hayes' *The Foreknowledge of God*, a book published through the Southern Methodist publishing house about a decade

⁵⁹See particularly the first published review of *Foreknowledge of God* by "GH" [likely Gilbert Haven] in *MQR* 61 (1879): 162–66. Other short negative evaluations of McCabe in this influential journal include George Steele, "Dr. McCabe on the Divine Prescience," *MQR* 74 (1892): 963–65; W.W.W. Wilson, "Prescience or Nescience—Which?" *MQR* 76 (1894): 639; and Austin H. Herrick, "An Objection to Divine Nescience," *MQR* 76 (1894): 639.

⁶⁰See Lorenzo Dow McCabe, "Prescience of Future Contingencies Impossible," *MQR* 74 (1892): 760–73, esp. p. 773.

⁶¹Note how central this issue is to the evaluations of McCabe in Loring C. Webster, *The End from the Beginning; or, Divine Prescience vs. Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Curts, 1895), esp. 308–30; and Randolph S. Foster, *God: Nature and Attributes* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1897), 200ff.

after those of McCabe that argues for the same basic model of God's temporal nature and knowledge.⁶²

Given how the "simple foreknowledge" model of God had dominated official teaching for nearly a century, the most interesting aspect of the reaction to McCabe's revisionist proposal was the emerging openness it encountered among influential voices in Northern Methodism. John F. Hurst (president of Drew Theological Seminary and soon to be elected an MEC bishop) provided the cautiously supportive introduction to McCabe's first volume.⁶³ Daniel Whedon (prominent editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*) protested any suggestion that McCabe verged on heresy, arguing that while he did not believe McCabe's proposed revision was necessary, it deserved a tolerant hearing.⁶⁴ Even Randolph Foster (a MEC bishop), who offered an extended defense of William Pope's model of foreknowledge over that of McCabe, prefaced his arguments with a description of McCabe as an "orthodox of the orthodox of Arminian faith" whose books deserved careful reading. Significantly, Foster allowed to McCabe that prescience of contingent events was not absolutely necessary for God's just and perfect administration of the universe.⁶⁵

In retrospect the most significant nineteenth-century engagement with McCabe's proposal was that of John Miley (longtime professor of theology at Drew) in his *Systematic Theology*, published in 1892.⁶⁶ Miley's discussion of omniscience included a direct dialogue with McCabe (1:180–85). In this dialogue Miley argued in favor of prescience, based mainly on the apparent evidence of

⁶²Joel S. Hayes, *The Foreknowledge of God; or, the Omniscience of God Consistent with His own Holiness and Man's Free Agency* (Nashville: MECS Publishing House, 1890). Over half of the book (187–397) is devoted to discussing both those scriptures that Hayes believes support his model and those that appear to undercut it. Among his contributions to points made by McCabe are a recognition that many supposed specific prophecies are evident only by selective hindsight (272), and an insistence that God can promise future providential action without implying that God rigidly controls all the variables leading up to that action (218).

⁶³J. F. Hurst, "Introduction," in McCabe, *Foreknowledge of God*, 7–15.

⁶⁴See Whedon's review of *Divine Nescience* in *MQR* 65 (1883): 176–77; and McCabe's claim that Whedon only reluctantly published "GH's" earlier negative review of *Foreknowledge* (*Divine Nescience*, 290). Remember that Whedon accepted the "simple foreknowledge" model, which held there was no necessary conflict between foreknowledge and freedom.

⁶⁵See Foster, *God*, 181 & 187 (on Foster's preference for Pope see 18–20). Cf. McCabe's report of Foster's compliments on his first book, in *Divine Nescience*, 290.

⁶⁶John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 Vols. (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892–94).

biblical prophecy, but he added that accepting divine nescience would not undermine any vital Methodist doctrines. Rather, “the chief perceivable result would be to free the system from the perplexity for freedom which arises with the divine prescience” (1:185). Turning his focus from human freedom to the biblical accounts of God experiencing changing feelings and acting providentially in our world, Miley conceded that both types of accounts are more comprehensible to us if we reject divine prescience than if we assume it (1:189–92). Going further, he insisted that “if the ministries of providence in the free agency of God, with all the emotional activities of such ministries, be not consistent or possible with his foreknowledge, then foreknowledge cannot be true” (1:192). But he stopped just short of actually embracing this conclusion, suggesting that such inconsistency had not yet been decisively proven.

It might not be surprising that some readers sensed an implicit endorsement of McCabe behind Miley’s carefully stated qualifications.⁶⁷ At the very least Miley clearly placed McCabe’s position within the boundaries of legitimate alternative theological “opinions” for Methodists. This placement was significant because Miley’s *Systematic Theology* served as the assigned text in the course of study for pastoral ministry in the MEC from 1892–1908. Thereby it provided more impetus than had existed previously for those being trained to consider moving beyond simply *defending* the revisions that Wesley himself had made in certain scholastic assumptions about God; they could join McCabe in *extending* the trajectory of these revisions by affirming God’s fully “temporal” nature. One evidence that it was having this effect can be seen in the 1899 volume of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. In an early issue Milton Terry (theologian at Garrett Theological Seminary) published an editorial essay criticizing Clarke and McCabe for rejecting prescience and opening the door to the notion that God can “grow.” This essay quickly drew two rejoinders from MEC pastors who defended McCabe and quizzed Terry about why the notion of God having new experiences was objectionable.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Note for example the defense of McCabe by appeal to Miley in H.C. Buss, “Prescience of Future Contingencies,” *MQR* 75 (1893):968.

⁶⁸See Milton Terry, “Nescience and God,” *MQR* 81 (1899): 112–13; J. Wallace Webb, “Nescience of God,” *MQR* 81 (1899): 464–65; J. S. Breckinridge, “Nescience of God,” *MQR* 81 (1899): 622–25; and Milton Terry, “Nescience of God,” *MQR* 81 (1899): 628–29

The Progressive Wesleyan Trajectory through the mid-Twentieth Century

There have been many Methodists/Wesleyans from Terry's time to the present who would echo his objection to the notion of a God who has truly new experiences or "grows" in any sense. By contrast, process theologians champion this notion. Given the role that Lorenzo Dow McCabe played in creating room in American Methodist circles for serious consideration of a model of God as truly temporal, contemporary Wesleyan process theologians can very appropriately look back to him as one of the significant forerunners of their stance.⁶⁹ The task that remains for our consideration is to trace briefly how this type of progressive *extension* of Wesley's original trajectory found a growing place through the mid-twentieth century in Methodism, creating a receptiveness to explicit process theology as it emerged.

The Progressive Spirit in British Methodist Theology

British Methodist theology maintained a fairly uniform conservative stance through the nineteenth century, ignoring or resisting most of the emerging intellectual challenges in biblical and historical studies as well as in the natural sciences. With the turn of the century came a striking new spirit and approach, a willingness to question old certainties and become more forward-looking. This new spirit was particularly evident in the British Methodists who emerged as prominent biblical scholars, as they strove to engage the canonical materials more on their own terms than through ill-fitting traditional assumptions. While fewer in number, there were British Methodist doctrinal theologians who embodied a similar concern.

J. Scott Lidgett was the pioneer of this group, and can serve as representative. He is most noted for his advocacy of reclaiming the doctrine of *The Fatherhood of God in Christian Truth and Life*.⁷⁰ In Lidgett's framing this doctrine had

⁶⁹Cf. the appreciative study of McCabe in William McGuire King, "Future Contingents: A Nineteenth-Century Theory," *Process Studies* 9 (Fall 1979): 105–15.

⁷⁰See J. Scott Lidgett *The Fatherhood of God in Christian Truth and Life* (London: Charles Kelly, 1902). Page numbers in this paragraph refer to this book.

nothing to do with God's gender, it was an affirmation that we must conceive of the creation of humankind as

the calling into existence by God, *out of His own life*, of beings at once kindred with Himself, and having a distinct individuality of their own. ... [this creation] is motivated by the love of God; introduces them into a world, a home, of love, which environs their whole life; and has, at its end, that fellowship of mutual giving and receiving, that most intimate communion, which can only be between those who are spiritually akin (288).

Lidgett contended that this sense of the Fatherhood of God, while clearly taught in scripture, was obscured in later Christian tradition by an alternative emphasis on the abstract ideal of Divine Sovereignty. He traced this alternative emphasis back to the influence of Platonism on Christian reflection (164–66), and stressed Augustine's role in helping this model of God as Sovereign become dominant in medieval theology (180–200). He then lauded how this dominant model had been called into question in recent years, specifically praising early Methodism for its contribution to recovering the stress on Divine Fatherhood (267–70).

The conception of God as existing in the Eternal Now was one aspect of the previously dominant model that Lidgett identified as needing revision, but his 1902 book provides little sense of his alternative. For this we must turn to a series of essays published in *Contemporary Review* in the 1930s.⁷¹ The most relevant is a 1938 essay where Lidgett affirms that time must have reality for God, "because it is the condition of His progressive self-giving to and through the process of His world" (109). Lidgett was interacting with Alfred North Whitehead's new book *Modes of Thought* in this essay, and specifically praised Whitehead for his interpretation of reality in terms of universal process (112)! He clearly felt some sympathy with the emerging process model of a temporal God. It could allow a more response-able God, as long as God was actually *able* to respond. In this latter connection, Lidgett had reservations about Whitehead's insistence that God always interacts with us in the mode of persuasion, never more actively. Lidgett considered

⁷¹These essays collected in J. Scott Lidgett, *God and the World* (London: Epworth, 1943).

this to be an overreaction to the distorted emphasis on God's coercive sovereignty that developed in Christianity with the displacement of the biblical theme of Divine Fatherhood. This led him to argue that the new Reformation which Whitehead desired should be brought about, "not by dismissing God from Creative Sovereignty over the world, but by exploring more deeply and setting forth more fully His fatherhood" (19).

Although there was admittedly some distance yet to cover, the sympathy expressed for themes in Whitehead by a person of Lidgett's stature in the 1930s solidified the trajectory within which explicit process theology could emerge in the 1980s.⁷² This emergence was delayed mainly by the priority British Methodists gave to biblical and social/political theologies over philosophical theology. It is one thing to identify problems with models of God on exegetical or other grounds; it is another to construct detailed alternatives. The only ones likely to invest time in the second activity are those who consider the metaphysical enterprise central to the theological task.

Developments in American Methodist Theology

This reality is reflected as well in a branching within progressive (or "liberal") American Methodist theology in the first half of the twentieth century. One branch of this stream limited itself in principle to *descriptive accounts* of Christian experience.⁷³ These accounts rarely address (one way or the other) such traditional debates as God's relation to time.⁷⁴ The other branch characterized such empirical work as merely preliminary to the rational task of constructing a metaphysical account of Christian belief. This branch was dominated by Boston Personalism, the most influential "school" in American Methodist theology during this period, and it is in this school that most accounts locate the immediate precedents to process theology in Methodism.

The founder of Boston Personalism was Borden Parker Bowne.

⁷²E.g., David Pailin, *Groundwork of Philosophy of Religion*. London: Epworth, 1986; and Pailin, *God and the Processes of Reality*.

⁷³This would be the "empirical theology" epitomized by Harris Franklin Rall. For his method see Rall, "Theology, Empirical and Christian," in *Contemporary American Theology*, edited by Vergilius Ferm (New York: Round Table, 1933) 2:245–73.

⁷⁴Cf. Harris Franklin Rall, *The Meaning of God* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1925); Rall, *What Can I Believe* (Chicago: Commission on Men's Work, Board of Education, MEC, 1933); and Rall, *A Faith for Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1936), 88ff.

Bowne championed a type of neo-Kantian idealism (which he named “personalism”) as the metaphysic most appropriate to Christian faith and most adequate by modern standards.⁷⁵ He gave particular prominence to elaborating the conception of God as the ultimate “person,” as an alternative to the scholastic model. One might assume that this led him to share McCabe’s stress on God’s temporality, but Bowne’s Kantian commitments pushed instead for God’s transcendence of the particularities of the temporal order. The most he was willing to propose was a position like that of William Pope, where God is atemporal in essential nature but able to engage the created order temporally.⁷⁶

It was Francis John McConnell who introduced a stress on God’s truly temporal nature into the typical themes of Boston Personalism. His 1924 book titled *Is God Limited?* repeatedly charged the scholastic tradition with limiting God inappropriately by imposing on God abstract metaphysical principles. A model of God accepting such “self-limits” as restricting omnipotence and omniscience—in the interest of responsive interaction with humanity—was championed in contrast as providing a greater richness and fullness in the divine life. In the midst of his argument McConnell revealed that he had been a student of McCabe in college and was sympathetic with McCabe’s philosophical critique of divine prescience.⁷⁷ However he based his own arguments more on the importance of defining the divine attributes in a way that is faithful to the revelation of God given in Christ.⁷⁸ In keeping with this emphasis he strongly defended the legitimacy of assigning “feelings” to God, including the ability for God to “suffer.” He even showed some willingness to talk of God as open to growth or development, as long as it was clear that this is in areas other than God’s basic moral nature.⁷⁹

⁷⁵Bowne’s major philosophical works include: *Metaphysics* (New York: Harper, 1882), *Philosophy of Theism* (New York: Harper, 1887; revised as *Theism* [New York: American Book Co., 1902]), and *Personalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908).

⁷⁶Compare Bowne, *Theism*, 184–85; to Bowne, *Metaphysics*, 190. See also the discussion of Bowne’s ambivalence on this topic in E. S. Brightman, “A Temporalist View of God,” *Journal of Religion* 12 (1932): 545–55, esp. 551–52; and Rufus Burrow Jr., *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 142–48.

⁷⁷See Francis John McConnell, *Is God Limited?* (New York: Abingdon, 1924), 123–24.

⁷⁸This is central to his followup book: McConnell, *The Christlike God: A Survey of the Divine Attributes from the Christian Point of View* (New York: Abingdon, 1927).

⁷⁹See respectively McConnell, *Is God Limited?*, 283–93; and *Christlike God*, 73–86.

The advocacy of a limited God was taken up by Edgar Sheffield Brightman, probably the most prominent of the Boston Personalists. While the theme was the same, Brightman's focal agenda differed significantly from McConnell. What challenged the traditional conception of God for him were the findings of modern science and the problem of suffering (such as his wife's painful death from cancer), not its lack of fit with scripture or spirituality.⁸⁰ He was ultimately less concerned with defending God's response-ability in relating to humanity than with insulating God from responsibility for natural evil. This led him to propose that God is actually finite—being eternally confronted by a “Given” which is not self-imposed (God did not create it), and which can never be wholly eliminated even if it can be increasingly subdued. It is this Given which is responsible for evils; God is responsible for challenging them and enabling us to do so as well.⁸¹

While most of his colleagues and students were less than comfortable with his notion of the Given, Brightman ensconced firmly within Boston Personalism an appreciation for a God who is truly temporal, and can “grow” in some sense. Brightman was aware of parallels between these themes and the emerging metaphysical system of Whitehead. Others would soon turn to this system as a preferred metaphysical framework for their Methodist-honed convictions.

Conclusion: A Characteristically Wesleyan Concern about Classic Process Theology?

This essay has focused on one trajectory in the Wesleyan theological tradition that cultivated a receptivity to the themes and concerns of process theology. There are surely others that played a role. Likewise, there are several areas where one could identify points of

⁸⁰See the evaluation of the influences on and agenda of Brightman's works in Rufus Burrow Jr., *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 160–64; and John H. Lavelly, “Edgar Sheffield Brightman: Good-and-Evil and the Finite-Infinite God,” in *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, edited by Paul Deats and Carol Robb (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 121–46.

⁸¹See the progressive development of this notion in Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *The Problem of God* (New York: Abingdon, 1930); *The Finding of God* (New York: Abingdon, 1931), esp. 115–93; *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1940), 305–41; and *Person and Reality: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), 323–42.

tension between characteristically Wesleyan theological emphases and the emphases of classic process theology. I will close by noting the area most continuous with the history we have been tracing.

While the longstanding Wesleyan commitment to God's *response-ability* resonates strongly with the process emphasis on God's temporal, creative, and persuasive nature, it should be no surprise that this same commitment renders many Wesleyans less happy with the apparent restriction of God's role in the ongoing process of the whole of reality to only that of "lure."⁸² Is such a God still truly *response-able*? Where is the basis for solid eschatological hope within this restriction? Is there not a place for the wise God to engage us more actively than this, without resorting to coercion?

Some contemporary Wesleyans are convinced that adequate answers to questions like these can be provided by clarifying and nuancing process theology.⁸³ Others believe that an "adequate" model of a truly temporal God requires more significant revising of classic process metaphysics.⁸⁴ And still others are inclined to elaborate and reaffirm mediating positions like those worked out by Watson or Pope.⁸⁵ For Wesley, the deciding criterion would be which approach best captures the balance of the biblical God—a God who works "strongly and sweetly."

⁸²See, for example, Michael L. Peterson, "Orthodox Christianity, Wesleyanism, and Process Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 15.2 (1980): 45–58.

⁸³E.g., Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

⁸⁴Cf. *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free will Theists*, edited by John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁸⁵A good example is Alan Padgett (see note 45 above).