

Following Wesley

by [Philip R. Meadows](#) in the [February 17, 1999](#) issue

*By Theodore Runyon, The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today. (Abingdon, 270 pp.)*

*Edited by Randy L. Maddox, Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism. (Abingdon, 256 pp.)*

Can the thought and practice of an 18th-century Anglican divine help Methodists today? Doesn't John Wesley's location in his own time and culture make the expression "Wesley's theology today" an oxymoron? Is the "back to Wesley" movement which has burgeoned in North America more than a sign of devotion to a respected founder? Theodore Runyon and Randy Maddox help answer these and other important questions. Their books are important not only for Methodists but for any theologians seeking to draw on the resources of historical theology.

The "Wesley for today" project goes back at least as far as Colin Williams's *John Wesley's Theology Today: A Study of the Wesleyan Tradition in the Light of Current Theological Dialogue* (1960). Williams set the standard for the retrieval of Wesley and put Wesley in dialogue with contemporary theologians and issues. Recently, this project has been advanced by John Cobb's *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (1995). Cobb followed Williams's model of retrieval and reflection, but his book is more theologically rich, philosophically sophisticated and methodologically astute than anything that had gone before. Cobb expands the range of current concerns to include ecology, religious pluralism, sexuality, and the role of law in society, demonstrating how Wesley can be brought into relation to issues beyond the horizon of his own thought.

The subtitle of Runyon's book is misleading, since most of the volume offers a detailed, insightful exposition of Wesley without much explicit dialogue with the contemporary context. Indeed, only the final chapter provides any sustained engagement with current issues--though it does make up about one-fifth of the book. Runyon himself says in his preface that "readers primarily interested in the implications of Wesley's thought for current issues such as the problems of human

rights, poverty, women's rights, and the environment, as well as developments in the life of the church such as ecumenism and the challenge of today's religious pluralism," should begin with that section. His approach suggests that we must first encounter Wesley in his own theological and historical-cultural context.

This method yields some potentially significant insights for current dialogue: the significance of ecumenical influences on Wesley's thought, a fresh look at the importance of experience for faith and theology, and the idea of "orthopathy" as a corrective to the competing polarities of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. An unfortunate consequence of Runyon's method, however, is that many of the valuable insights and contributions he makes to Wesley studies in the earlier part of the book do not directly bear upon his latter dialogical efforts. Indeed, the final chapter could stand alone, since new material on Wesley is brought in at every point.

Runyon sets out to retrieve the idea of "new creation" as a controlling category or root metaphor of Wesley's thought. He rightly identifies the renewal of the divine image in humankind as central for Wesley, but he also claims for the idea of "new creation" a wider context of cosmic renewal. This context broadens the concept of sanctification so as to engage questions of evangelical, social, political and ecological renewal. That this broader aspect is only weakly present in Wesley's own works may account for the fact that it remains a weak and underdeveloped theme throughout Runyon's book and is noticeably absent from the last chapter. Where Runyon succeeds in bringing together the theme of new creation with illuminating insights into Wesley's context and message, he offers a much-needed new direction for contemporary theological reflection.

Randy Maddox's volume, which is dedicated to Runyon, is a collection of essays by Wesleyan theologians from five continents. The essays provide a representative sampling of "the Wesley for today" project. For me, however, the primary significance of the book lies in the way it addresses the basic methodological question, "In what sense can Wesley be claimed as a source of theology for today?" Maddox's own essay goes a long way toward providing an answer by examining how Wesleyan theologians have understood their relationship to the founder.

Maddox traces the recovery of Wesley as a theologian, from his neglect and marginalization during the 19th century to the proliferation of interest in Wesley studies today, and identifies the two broad approaches to Wesley which have predominated in the 20th century. First came a pre-'60s liberal reappropriation of

Wesley as a theological hero by those who (according to Maddox) inappropriately claimed "Wesleyan warrant for their particular revisionist theological agenda(s)." Second came Williams's work, which took Wesley as theological mentor (an approach first recommended by Albert Outler). Those following this method, which Maddox implies is more honest than the earlier approach, find "tentative suggestions and affinities" in Wesley's theology.

One wonders why this important analysis is placed at the end of the book, since it presents the question that should have been leveled at the foregoing essays: "Do the contributors consider themselves to have Wesley as their theological mentor?" This question is difficult to answer, partly because Maddox's own essay does not tease out what it means to have Wesley as a mentor, but mostly because the volume's other essays are not always explicit about their chosen method.

The diverse material in this book presents a complex and highly nuanced set of approaches to Wesley. One can identify different emphases, though they exist in some measure in each essay. Any or all of these approaches may be part of a student-mentor relationship.

- *Wesley as theologically constitutive.* This approach treats Wesley either as a model theologian or as one who established specific orienting concerns and priorities. Bishop Kenneth Carder opens the book with a question: "What difference does knowing Wesley make?" For him, Wesley can be an example for Methodists in his concern for the poor, his positive valuation of the laity and his theologically reflective pastoring.

Thomas Langford holds up Wesley's "practical theology" as a holistic or balanced strategy in which doctrine and experience, gospel and life, grow together as mutually informing dimensions of the theological enterprise. Langford criticizes Wesley's immediate successors for failing to continue this tradition. They forced apart message and method by abstracting theology from the context of their hearers. He praises Schubert Ogden (who drew upon process theology) and Robert Cushman (informed by Platonic philosophy) as examples of modern theologians who have continued Wesley's methodological tradition. But Langford makes no further reference to Wesley as he discusses these theologians. His example reveals the danger of so emphasizing Wesley's method that his particular message (which may not sit happily with some of Ogden's and Cushman's presuppositions) receives insufficient attention.

- *Wesley as theologically instructive.* James Logan turns to Wesley for "help in determining the proper means of evangelism in our changed setting." This is a matter not of replicating Wesley's own message and method, but of discerning "central trajectories of his approach" which can be recast for our very different times. Such trajectories include the need for theological integrity, personal accountability and a social conscience. From a different perspective, Marjorie Suchocki's takes instruction from Wesley by using a series of passages from his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* as keys for exploring a Wesleyan theology of prayer.
- *Wesley as theologically supportive.* This strategy attempts to mine the substance of Wesley's message for theological insights to illuminate present concerns. Douglas Meeks, for instance, draws upon Wesley's concept of stewardship in reformulating a Christian response to the logic of market economics. Meeks's contribution is a model of creative hermeneutics: a conversation between the tradition, biblical scholarship and contemporary experience aimed at providing guidelines for living in and responding to the issues of today. José Miguez-Bonino also adopts this kind of strategy in reflecting upon the significance of Wesleyan theology for the Latin American situation. Bonino begins by critiquing the theologically (actually christologically) limited revivalist readings of Wesley imported from North America. He argues that Wesley's more holistic trinitarian approach to the Christian life as synergistic love is more applicable to Latin America.

Mary Moore searches for an alternative to the persistent but unhelpful dichotomies that shape current Methodist approaches to church and ministry: clergy and laity, elder and deacon, black and white, Asian American and Native American, women and men. She goes back to Wesley's emphasis on Trinity and covenant to ground a more holistic approach to ministry for today. This "back-and-forth" movement, which begins and ends with the present context, avoids the anachronisms of simply restating or celebrating a glorious past or correlating present questions with Wesley's answers.

- *Wesley as theologically suggestive.* This approach connects Wesley's thought with issues beyond the horizon of his own concerns. It typically begins by pointing out the inadequacy of Wesley's thought and practice for our situation, but goes on to develop the incipient or apparently premonitory themes in

Wesley that are relevant to the contemporary context.

One direction this method might take is to proceed in a manner consistent with Wesley's own original logic and intention. For example, Peter Grassow criticizes Wesley's captivity to the sociostructural causes of injustice in his time, but finds in his approach to the American Revolution a helpful parallel to the struggle in South Africa. Wesley's logic of geographically relocating leadership and administrative functions in areas where the poor live, and Wesley's subordination of all human power to God's sovereign purpose of justice and freedom, suggest to Grassow a new perspective for the South African church.

Yet another approach uses Wesley as a launching pad for a line of argument that is finally discontinuous with his own thinking. Thus Brian Beck turns the missiological expedient of "connexion" into an ecclesiological concept. He acknowledges that "no one would have been more surprised than John Wesley himself" at such a theological maneuver. It is not difficult, however, to see why such a theological agenda might be attractive to the institutional church on both sides of the Atlantic. Hoo-Jung Lee uncovers Wesley's indebtedness to the work of Macarius, but goes too far in giving theological priority to this Eastern father. The question of Wesley's possible reasons for selectively appropriating Macarius's theology is not considered.

Finally, some contributors left me wondering, "Whatever happened to Wesley?" Manfred Marquardt's discussion of the meaning of Christian conversion contains hardly a mention of Wesley other than the comment that Wesley used the expression infrequently. Using a liberation theologian's hermeneutic, Theodore Jennings argues that the very being of God is constituted in relationship with the violated and humiliated. His "theo-philosophical reflection" enlists the support of Karl Barth and Emmanuel Levinas rather than the Wesleyan tradition. Wesley's helpful reconceptualization of divine sovereignty in terms of justice and mercy is but thinly represented. In these essays Wesley is used as theological hero/warrant in a way that Maddox himself has criticized as inadequate.

Overall, these two books affirm the need to continually reexamine one's tradition. To do so is necessary to prevent misinterpreting our origins and to help guide our deliberations. Doing theology well requires attention to the lessons of the past and to the challenges of the present. Theology that draws critically but creatively upon all available resources is using a method Wesley himself adopted to great effect. Now Wesley has become one of those sources, though in what sense he is

authoritative remains unclear. Perhaps simply to think of Wesley as a theological partner best enables us to be both open to contemporary needs and faithful to Methodist tradition.