

THY NATURE AND THY NAME IS LOVE  
WESLEYAN AND PROCESS THEOLOGIES IN DIALOGUE

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In honor of

John B. Cobb Jr.

and

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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 long-standing 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."<sup>82</sup> 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 clarifying and nuancing process theology can provide adequate answers to questions like these.<sup>83</sup> Others believe that an "adequate" model of a truly temporal God requires more significant revising of classic process metaphysics.<sup>84</sup> And still others are inclined to elaborate and reaffirm mediating positions like those worked out by Watson or Pope.<sup>85</sup> For Wesley, the decision would be made in favor of the approach that best captures the balance of the biblical God—a God that works "strongly and sweetly."

## A TRINITARIAN ALTERNATIVE TO PROCESS THEISM

SAMUEL M. POWELL

At least one motivation behind the present volume arises out of the observation that there are remarkable similarities between Wesleyan theology and process theism, similarities that have not been found between process theism and other members of the Christian family. For example, it is instructive to compare this book with *Process Theology*, edited by Ronald H. Nash.<sup>1</sup> The latter, an anthology of essays by leading evangelicals, is, like this book, an engagement with process theism. Unlike the present volume, however, the essays of *Process Theology* adopt a uniformly negative tone toward process theism, and no representatives of process thought are allotted space in the anthology. The present volume approaches process theism in a different way. Prominent exponents of process theism are represented here; most of the essays in this volume are favorable to, and supportive of, process theism. The assumption is that there is an affinity between the two systems that warrants further exploration. At the very least, it appears that Wesleyan theologians are more amenable to process theism than are theologians of some other traditions.

What is the basis of the ostensible similarities between Wesleyan theology and process theism? I suggest that the basis is John Wesley's own theology as it has been construed in a certain, admittedly long-standing and popular way.<sup>2</sup> This way of construing Wesley's theology focuses on his soteriological concern and regards

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

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

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

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

1. Ronald H. Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987).

2. As is well known, interpreting Wesley can be quite problematic because his thought is eclectic, occasional, and resists easy systematizing. The last two centuries have witnessed a succession of Wesley interpretations: Wesley the evangelist, Wesley the theologian of religious experience, Wesley the Protestant Reformer, Wesley the ecumenical leader, and so on. Obviously, Wesley can be viewed in more than one way. The role of ideological factors cannot be ruled out in any of these interpretations.

it as the center of his thought. This is not a far-fetched interpretation, for John Wesley himself emphasized the importance and centrality of the doctrines related to salvation. A review of the Standard Sermons will confirm this. Not surprisingly, recent books on Wesley's theology have focused on these doctrines.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the basis of these similarities, the use of process theism by Wesleyans brings some debits to the theological account that outweigh the acknowledged credits. I propose that the center of Wesley's theology is broader than just soteriology and, specifically, that it includes the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, I will argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of Wesley's most heartfelt doctrinal commitments and that process theism has not yet produced (and, in fact, cannot produce) a satisfactory account of the Trinity. Consequently, process theism must be judged an inadequate tool for Wesleyan theology.

## ACCOUNTING FOR THE AFFINITY BETWEEN PROCESS THEISM AND WESLEYAN THEOLOGY

One of the greatest obstacles to accepting the thesis that process theism is unsuitable for Wesleyan thought is that many contemporary American Wesleyans are favorably disposed toward certain aspects of process theism. This disposition, however, is readily comprehensible. Wesleyans are attracted to process theism because it offers a metaphysics that supports their interest in the idea of God as person and, in this way, as similar to human beings. Because process theism affirms a fundamental similarity between God and humans and portrays God as a single, personal being, it is natural for Wesleyans to be attracted to it.<sup>4</sup> Of course, neither Wesleyans nor process theists claim that God and humans are

3. See, for example, Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); and Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

4. Of course, process theists would want to extend the range of this judgment so that not only God and humans but also God and all actualities are alike in an important respect. Furthermore, not all Wesleyans would immediately adopt the entire metaphysical apparatus by which process theists understand this essential likeness between God and humans. However, for the sake of convenience, I will restrict myself to similarity between God and humans.

alike in every sense or that there are no important differences between them. Both acknowledge the real and important differences. Nonetheless, both affirm a fundamental analogy between God and humans on the basis of shared characteristics. Wesleyans have historically used the category of person to denote these characteristics.

The theological problem with the use of "person" to describe God and to establish a similarity between God and humanity is that it diminishes the possibility of trinitarian thought. It is difficult to think of God as the Trinity to the extent that God is represented as a person. The Wesleyan tradition exhibits just such an effect. As the concept of person grows in importance, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes increasingly puzzling. Accordingly, it is appropriate to trace the rise of personalist thinking in Wesleyanism.

But where is one to begin in this search? John Wesley himself did not expressly represent God in terms of an essential similarity to humanity or in terms of the concept of person. Sustained Wesleyan interest in God's personality first occurred in the development of Wesleyan theology in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to begin with Wesley himself, since the ultimate cause of Wesleyan interest in personality lies in the soteriological focus of his theology.

The soteriological focus includes those doctrines that pertain to repentance, grace, faith, assurance, justification, sanctification, and related matters. That these doctrines constitute the center of Wesley's theology is the judgment of leading historians. As Albert C. Outler says, "Its heart and center was 'the gospel': a call to repentance, faith, justification, regeneration, and 'holy living' . . . Soteriology is the intense focus of more than half his sermons."<sup>5</sup> In another essay, Outler says that Wesley's "axial theme, which organizes all else in his thought, is grace, and the focus of all his thinking about grace is on the order of *salvation*."<sup>6</sup> And according to Frank Baker, Wesley wanted "to understand the fundamental problems of the human condition, and the finer points of Christian

5. Albert C. Outler, "John Wesley: Folk Theologian," in Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden, eds., *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler* (Grand Rapids: Francis & Taylor, 1991), 115.

6. Albert C. Outler, "A New Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for Phase III," in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, 139-40.

living . . . armed with all the theological sophistication of a specialist in the ways of God with men, and man's way to God—practical divinity. He was content not to understand the mysteries of speculative theology.”<sup>7</sup> Note in these resumes of Wesley's theology the absence of the doctrine of the Trinity. Of course, Wesley would never have thought of denying the doctrine, and one may reasonably assume that, as an Anglican priest, he would have affirmed it. But the point is that the Trinity does not seem to have been a central part of his message. The implication is that it has only a loose or remote relation to soteriology.

What is clear then is that John Wesley's practical divinity, understood in one particular way, steered later Methodist theologians in certain directions but away from others—toward philosophical ideas consistent with Wesley's view of salvation, particularly as it diverged from Calvinist views, but away from doctrines such as the Trinity that seemed to function as mere background to soteriology and were consequently idle. After all, in the polemical situation of American theology in the nineteenth century, there was no sense arguing over a doctrine such as the Trinity that Wesleysans shared with their main competitors, the Calvinists. It was much more efficient to focus on the points of divergence. As a result, Wesleysans came to be nearly obsessed with such anthropological issues as freedom and responsibility. In turn, these anthropological ideas generated an interest in the idea of personality. These were the theological hot topics of the day.

The Wesleyan fascination with freedom is illustrated in Daniel D. Whedon's *The Freedom of the Will*. Here he defined freedom in moral and personalist terms as the ability to do other than what one has done.<sup>8</sup> This definition is in contrast to that of Augustine, for whom freedom not only is the power to choose but also is actually doing what is good. Augustine's definition of freedom is more theological in nature; Whedon's is more philosophical and ethical. The moral and personalist character of Whedon's view is seen in the fact that the arguments he adduced for freedom are taken from humanity's psychological and moral nature: "The doctrine of the

7. Frank Baker, "Practical Divinity—John Wesley's Doctrinal Agenda for Methodism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22.1 (1987): 13.

8. Daniel D. Whedon, *The Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Human Responsibility and a Divine Government* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1864), 25.

freedom of the human Will, therefore, is an axiom of the intellect affirmed by the common consciousness of all mankind. It is an inborn self-knowledge."<sup>9</sup> Far from freedom being something that humans receive by means of grace, freedom, for Whedon, is a necessary component of human nature. He also argued for freedom on the basis of human responsibility: "No agent can be morally obligatory, rewardable, or punishable—unless there be in the agent adequate power for [an] other act than the act in question."<sup>10</sup> Finally, Whedon clearly saw that this emphasis on freedom implied that both God and humanity must be understood to be persons: "The necessary condition to the possible existence of a true Divine Government is the Volitional FREEDOM, both of the infinite and the finite Person."<sup>11</sup> Note that for Whedon, the personality of God is deduced from soteriological demands for freedom. This logic is in keeping with the view that soteriology is the heart of Wesley's theology. In the debate with the Calvinists in which freedom was the disputed concept, the personality of God was invoked to guarantee human freedom. The concept of the Trinity, not able to perform such a feat, fell by the wayside.

Not surprisingly, subsequent Wesleyans followed suit. John Milley defined God as "an eternal personal Being, of absolute knowledge, power, and goodness."<sup>12</sup> But this definition possesses importance for understanding humans as well because "in all the range of being, finite and infinite, personal attributes are the highest."<sup>13</sup> Humans are like God in their common possession of personality. God differs from humanity as the infinite from the finite, a point that Milley underlined in his discussion of the image of God:

The spiritual nature was itself of the original likeness of man to God. Ontologically, spirit is like spirit, though one be finite and the other infinite. . . . Again we are face to face with the profound distinction between the finite and the infinite; but such distinction does not preclude a profound truth of likeness. . . . Personality is the central truth of man's original likeness to God. As a person he was thoroughly differentiated from all lower orders of existence, and in the highest sense lifted up into the image of God.<sup>14</sup>

9. Ibid., 369.

10. Ibid., 377.

11. *Ibid.*, 436.

12. John Milley, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1894) 1:60.

13. *Ibid.*, 1:149.

14. *Ibid.*, 1:407.

Humans are to be regarded as essentially like God because, like God, they are persons. This separates them "thoroughly" from all lower forms of existence. Humans are finite persons; God is the infinite person.

This trend toward the use of moral and personalist categories continued into the twentieth century in the thought of Albert C. Knudson. Knudson took note of the fact that the concept of person had only lately been applied to the being of God, the more traditional use lying in its reference to the trinitarian persons. He attributed this oddity to the fact that, in the early church and under the influence of Platonic thought, being was conceived as essence, not as person.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the eighteenth century, he observed, "God was [conceived as] personal, but he was not personal to the very core of his being." Fortunately, according to Knudson, in more recent times "the expression, the personality of God, is now commonly accepted as a proper formulation of" the doctrine of God.<sup>16</sup> The cause of this happy change was twofold. First, with the impact of science, there came to be an emphasis on "the unity of the world and the consequent unity of its underlying cause." Second, modern philosophy introduced "a new insight into the metaphysics of personality . . . [as being] the key to ultimate reality and identical with it."<sup>17</sup> Knudson also declared that "the body is not an analytically necessary factor of our mental life. . . . Personality as such does not necessarily imply corporeality. In its essence personality is, then, psychical and spiritual."<sup>18</sup> This is an important claim, for it establishes a metaphysical gulf between essentially corporeal beings and personal beings. It seems obvious that in this scheme, humans stand on the same side on which God stands. Knudson could thus consistently assert that "personality and goodness are characteristics that God shares with men, but absoluteness sets him apart from all creaturely existence."<sup>19</sup> As with Milley, there is an affirmation of the thesis that God and humans are significantly alike, differing only as the infinite differs from the finite. The fundamental

meta-physical divide is not between Creator and creation but between the nonpersonal and the personal. Where Knudson advanced beyond Milley was in developing the concept of personality in a more relational direction: "Personality is also social. It implies reciprocal intercourse with other persons. . . . [As personal, God] is a Being who knows us and loves us and whom we can trust. This communion is ethical, not metaphysical."<sup>20</sup>

The effect of this development from Wesley to Knudson was, on the whole, negative for the doctrine of the Trinity. Of course, no one in the Wesleyan tradition denied the doctrine; but the Trinity seems to have played no significant role in Wesleyan thinking. It was effectively relegated to the status of heirloom, something to be admired but not used. The reason for this deleterious effect on the doctrine was that an emphasis on personality, with its psychological overtones, would inevitably result in regarding God as either a single personality or three persons, each with its own subjectivity. The latter was never an option, of course, since it is equivalent to tritheism. The former view became the dominant one. But if God is a single personality, then the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a puzzle about numbers: How can three be one? Although the needs of Christology prevented the doctrine of the Trinity from becoming a mere museum piece, Wesleyans did not try very hard to think in a trinitarian way.<sup>21</sup> Knudson, for one, in spite of asserting the importance of the Trinity, was reduced to regarding the doctrine as something that "dramatiz[es] the divine love in a way that appeals to the imagination and that makes it an effective symbol of the divine grace."<sup>22</sup> Faced with the modern concept of person as a center of subjectivity and with the resulting threat of tritheism, Knudson could only take refuge in the concept of mystery: "In some respects [it] transcends both the limits of reason and the demands of faith. . . . So far as its underlying motives are concerned we affirm them as confidently as ever. . . . [But] we are not convinced that the traditional Trinitarian theory has pointed out the only way in which the highest values in the Christian idea of God can be conserved."<sup>23</sup> God as person had eclipsed God the Trinity.<sup>24</sup>

15. Albert C. Knudson, *The Doctrine of God* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1930), 286-87.

16. *Ibid.*, 289.

17. *Ibid.*, 290-91.

18. *Ibid.*, 293.

19. *Ibid.*, 242.

20. *Ibid.*, 297-98.

21. Cf. Sam Powell, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in 19th Century American Wesleyanism 1850-1900," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18.2 (1983): 33-46.

22. Knudson, *The Doctrine of God*, 428.

23. *Ibid.*, 422-23.

24. That personhood is a central concept for Wesleyans can be seen from the fact that it

In conclusion, by the mid-twentieth century, Wesleyans had progressively moved toward a theology resting on a fundamental analogy between God and humanity and had increasingly defined the relation between them in moral, personal, and relational terms. Consequently, it is not difficult to see why some Wesleyans have come to embrace process theism. Throughout their history, they have consistently adopted philosophical and theological ideas that support the cardinal values of freedom, responsibility, and personhood. Process theism supports these affirmations as well. As a result, process theism has proved attractive to Wesleyans, even if some of its tenets are unacceptable to some Wesleyans on other grounds.<sup>25</sup>

However, even though many Wesleyans are attracted to process theism, the question of whether it is the best conceptually available for Wesleyans must be considered. There is no simple answer. On the one hand, it is obvious that the recent Wesleyan embrace of process theism is consistent with Wesleyan theology when the latter is construed in a certain way, namely, when the center of Wesley's thought is represented as the doctrine of salvation and understood in relational and personalist terms. On the other hand, there may be a way of construing Wesley's theology that differs from the prevailing view, makes better sense of Wesley's theology, and is inconsistent with process theism. If this way does exist, then the task is to show that Wesley's thought may plausibly be regarded as having a center different from the center it is commonly supposed to have and then to show how the resulting picture of Wesleyan theology differs from the way in which Wesleyan theology has been developing in the last two centuries. Since it is impos-

possible to provide the basis not only for the affirmation of process theism, as argued in this essay, but also for a critique of process theism. See Michael L. Peterson, "Orthodox Christianity, Wesleyanism, and Process Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 15.2 (1980), who asserts that within process theology, God cannot be considered either a definite being or a person (50). Further, even human personhood is compromised, as the process view reduces the person to a series of events and thus eliminates any important sense of personal continuity (51).

25. The importance of freedom as a ground for contemporary Wesleyan interest in process theism can be seen in the following essays: John Culp, "A Dialog with the Process Theology of John B. Cobb Jr.," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 15.2 (1980): 38-39; Sheila Greve Davaney, "Feminism, Process Thought, and the Wesleyan Tradition," in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 108; Ignacio Casniera, "Wesley, Process and Liberation Theologies: A Test Case," in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, 100; and Paul A. Mickey, "Process Theology and Wesleyan Thought: An Evangelical Perspective," in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, 81.

sible in the space of an essay to set forth such an alternate center with all its ramifications, I will focus on one aspect—the doctrine of the Trinity. Three issues are relevant to this focus: the fact that John Wesley affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, the reason for his affirmation, and the reason why it forms so little of his actual preaching and writing.

## WESLEY AND THE TRINITY

That Wesley affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity is evident. He regarded the Trinity as a matter of revelation, even if he demurred to proceed beyond the bare fact: "I believe this *fact* . . . that God is Three and One. But the *manner*, *how*, I do not comprehend. . . . I believe just so much as God has revealed and no more. But this, the *manner*, he has not revealed."<sup>26</sup>

Why did Wesley affirm the doctrine? Here it is important to note that he did more than merely believe the doctrine to be true. He also regarded it as a highly significant doctrine:

What God has been pleased to reveal upon this head is far from being a point of indifference, is a truth of the last importance. It enters into the very heart of Christianity. . . . Unless these three are one, how can "all men honour the Son, even as they honour the Father"? . . . But the thing which I here particularly mean is this: the knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith. . . . But I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till . . . "the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God"—that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son—and having this witness he honours the Son and the blessed Spirit "even as he honours the Father."<sup>27</sup>

Note that the importance of this doctrine lies not in the mere fact that it is revealed or that it supports other doctrines but in its place amid the doctrines of salvation that are commonly thought to be the heart of his theology. The doctrine of the Trinity grounds the

26. Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," §15, *Works* 2:384.

27. *Ibid.*, §17, 2:384-85.

fact that Christians worship Jesus. More important, the believer's experience of salvation involves the three trinitarian persons in their interrelatedness. Wesley's doctrine of salvation is a trinitarian doctrine. Of course, he did not capitalize on this point with the thoroughness that may be wished. Nonetheless, Wesley saw the closest connection between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrines to which he devoted his energies.<sup>28</sup>

Further support for the thesis that the doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine of salvation is found in its prominence in the Wesleyan hymns. According to Barry E. Bryant, for the Wesleyans

the hymn had a greater purpose than simply an aesthetic or emotive appeal. From the very beginning . . . their hymns had a didactic character to them. . . . When *A Collection of Hymns for a People Called Methodist* finally appeared in 1780, John ambitiously . . . called it a little body of experimental and practical divinity. It was finally admitted into the "Wesley canon" as one of the standard books on Wesleyan doctrine. . . . The Wesleys' hymns were intended to be metrical theology and should be read as such.<sup>29</sup>

This suggests that in the search for Wesley's doctrine of salvation, hymns as well as sermons should be considered. If so, then the doctrine of the Trinity is not excluded from the doctrines of salvation by the mere fact that only one sermon on the Trinity appears in the Bicentennial Edition of John Wesley's sermons. The considerable number of hymns on the Trinity must also be weighed. This is especially the case in light of the following statement by Wesley: "If anything is wanting [with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity], it is the application, lest it should appear to be a mere speculative doctrine, which has no influence on our hearts or lives; but this is abundantly supplied by my brother's *Hymns*."<sup>30</sup> Taken at face value, this statement suggests that Wesley indeed regarded the doctrine of the Trinity as an intrinsically practical doctrine, with an application to salvation as shown by the hymns of Charles Wesley.

28. For other scholarly testimony to the centrality of the Trinity to Wesley's soteriology, see Geoffrey Wainwright, "Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian," *The Drew Gateway* 59 (1990): 33-36; and Thomas Wright Pillow, "John Wesley's Doctrine of the Trinity," *The Cumberland Semitrian* 24 (1986): 3-7.

29. Barry E. Bryant, "Trinity and Hymnody: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Hymns of Charles Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 25.2 (1990): 64.

30. *A Letter to Mary Bishop* (17 April 1776), *Letters* (Telford) 6:213.

How then can one account for the fact that in the sermons and other public documents Wesley seemingly had so little use for the doctrine? I suggest that the answer lies in grasping Wesley's understanding of his role in eighteenth-century church life. Although Wesley, early in his adult life, considered the academic life and seemed suited to it, he consciously turned away from it in order to pursue his calling as a reformer of Christianity in Britain. His theology, as reflected in the sermons, focused on the doctrine of salvation because that was, in his view, the pressing need of the day. He refrained from extensive comment on the doctrine of the Trinity, not because he regarded it as unimportant, but because his calling lay in the reformation of Christian practice.

Further, given his well-known veneration for the early church's doctrines and customs and for the Church of England, he could presuppose the doctrine's truth as well-established. He could also assume that the definitive defense of the doctrine had already been delivered by patristic and Church of England divines. This strategy of focusing on matters at hand and presupposing the validity of tradition left him free to emphasize the doctrines that had fallen by the wayside—doctrines such as faith, repentance, and assurance.<sup>31</sup> Based on this interpretation, Wesley is regarded as a theologian who eschewed the form of systematic or creedal theology and instead focused on the situations of his day. This explains both the shape of Wesley's theology (its eclectic and occasional character) and its deeply traditional convictions. Doctrines such as the Trinity, for Wesley, were not mere relics of tradition to be venerated because they were traditional; they were instead an integral part of his theology, even though he did not feel required to address them in any depth.

Consequently, it is a mistake to regard soteriology alone as the intrinsic core of Wesley's theology. Its prominence in his writings is due to historical conditions. In different circumstances, he might well have emphasized different doctrines. Accordingly, there is a

31. Bryant argues that part of John and Charles Wesley's purpose in publishing the trinitarian hymns was to resist Arian and Unitarian tendencies of their day ("Trinity and Hymnody," 65-66). See Henry D. Rack, "Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity," *Proceedings of the Wesleyan Historical Society* 46 (1987): 65-67, for a brief review of anti-trinitarian thought in eighteenth-century Britain and its possible influence on Methodist experiences of the Trinity.



distinction between the manifest center (those doctrines that simply occur often in his writings) and the real center (those doctrines that form the core of his thinking, whether frequently expressed in writing or not) of his theology. This is why merely repeating the theology of the Standard Sermons cannot be sufficient today. In doing so, we could easily miss the body of theology that lies presupposed in everything Wesley said and did. As Albert Outler stated, "The Methodist theological complex has never been a stable entity by itself—and was never meant to be. In Wesley's own time, it was contained and sustained by the doctrinal and liturgical context of the Church of England. . . . Outside such an atmosphere Methodism has had perennial problems of theological identity that have encouraged an eclectic drift."<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, the mere fact that process theism shares a number of concerns with Wesleyan theology as it developed does not in itself constitute a Wesleyan recommendation of process theism, for Wesleyan theology in its historical development may well have omitted matters of great importance to both Wesley and the Christian faith. I submit that the doctrine of the Trinity is one such doctrine that both process theism and Wesleyan theology have passed over lightly with regrettable consequences.

## INTERLUDE

At this point a question arises: Are the process and trinitarian views of God really in conflict? Can one not be both a process theist and a trinitarian theologian? If so, then the alternate interpretation of Wesley I have suggested above will not be necessary, and its critique of process theism will have lost its force. In order to answer these questions, a brief engagement with process trinitarian thought is required.

Process trinitarian thought may be divided into two overlapping phases. In the first phase, various process theists attempted to correlate the trinitarian persons with Alfred North Whitehead's description of God. In the second and current phase, process theists

32. Albert C. Outler, "Methodism's Theological Heritage: A Study in Perspective," in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, 207.

have set this task aside and seek to use other aspects of process thought in order to expound the doctrine of the Trinity. I turn first to the earlier phase, selecting for attention only a small sampling of the available efforts.

John B. Cobb Jr.'s *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* attempts a correlation of the trinitarian persons with God's nature as understood by process theists. Briefly put, the Father represents God in all aspects, the Son represents the primordial nature of God, and the Spirit corresponds to the consequent nature of God.<sup>33</sup> Cobb recognized that the basic problem in this attempt at correlation is trying to fit a trinitarian doctrine onto a bipolar metaphysics. Accordingly, he appealed to early Christian liturgy and art to support his claim that the early church thought of Son and Spirit as modes of God's activities.<sup>34</sup> Although imaginatively accomplished and not without some support from the early church, Cobb's attempt here is implausible. He has to step outside the mainstream of trinitarian thought in order to find a Christian warrant for his interpretation. Furthermore, his portrayal implies that the Son and Spirit are aspects of God's nature. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they are merely names for some feature of God or abstractions from the concrete reality of God.

Lewis S. Ford, in *The Lure of God*, agreed with Cobb that the Father refers to God as an actuality and that the Son refers to the primordial nature of God.<sup>35</sup> However, he balked at identifying the Spirit with the consequent nature of God, for this aspect of God is that by which the world is immanent in God. Whereas in trinitarian theology, the Spirit is that by which God is immanent in the world. In Whiteheadian terms, Ford identified the Spirit as associated with "our experience of successive divine aims." Whereas the Son/Logos is the content of the aims, the Spirit pertains to *how* those aims are given. We affirm that God is Spirit because we experience God as responsive to us and as dynamically related to us. Because God is Spirit and not simply Logos, the aims of God for the world are continuously adjusted in light of God's experiences.<sup>36</sup>

33. John B. Cobb Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 261-62.

34. *Ibid.*, 259-60.

35. Lewis S. Ford, *The Lure of God: A Biblical Background for Process Theism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 101-3.

36. *Ibid.*, 103.



Ford's nuanced view of the Spirit is an advance over that of Cobb. However, the apparent suggestion that it is by the Spirit that God is immanent in the world is too simple, for the Son likewise is an avenue of God's immanence in Christian theology. Furthermore, he does not escape the criticism that Son and Spirit are essentially either names for some aspect of God or abstractions from the concrete reality of God.

This sampling of efforts to correlate the doctrine of the Trinity with the Whiteheadian analysis of God reveals a basic problem. It is the problem of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. The common procedure of these efforts is to take the developed doctrine of the Trinity and attempt to state it in a different conceptual scheme in which God is understood as a single entity with a bipolar nature. Inevitably, one or more of the trinitarian persons becomes an abstraction or a mere name.

The limitations of this approach have become evident to process theists. For example, Cobb has recently written that process theism provides a "binity that is real both ontologically in terms of the nature of God and experientially in terms of how God is known by human beings." Furthermore, he asserts that "this binitarian doctrine is more important than trinitarian doctrine."<sup>37</sup> This is because the Trinity "is, emphatically, not the only way to make theologically significant distinctions in God.... We can analyze our doctrine of God into three elements as has been traditionally done, or into two. We could also use a fourfold distinction as one text in Whitehead suggests.... We could... add a fifth name for what unites all these. My point... is only... to relativize the three of God. The absolutization of this threeness is not biblical."<sup>38</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity then is one analysis of God, but has no special claim to truth. It is simply one analysis alongside other possible ways of thinking about God. It should be noted that it is not only process theists who wish to relativize the Trinity. Some Wesleyans have joined the act. Paul A. Mickey, for example, claims that "the theological function of a high doctrine of the Trinity is the best way available in traditional theological categories to express their [i.e., evangelicals] conception of

God as a social and temporal being."<sup>39</sup> In Mickey's view, Wesleyan evangelicals are really trying to express a belief in God's sociality and temporality. In order to do so they draw upon traditional theological categories and thus arrive at the doctrine of the Trinity. The reason they do not simply use words such as sociality and temporality, instead of obfuscating the discussion by using traditional categories, is not stated by Mickey. At any rate, he finds in the doctrine of the Trinity the same affirmation that we find in process theism's view of God as temporal and relational.

The problem here is that Mickey makes the same mistake the process theists make, namely, assuming that the doctrine of the Trinity is a faltering, sputtering attempt to say something about God in vastly inadequate language. Process theists propose to use more adept language to express this content. Perhaps theologians would do better to assume that what the doctrine is trying to say about God is what it does in fact say. At any rate, it is clear from the history of Christian thought that the doctrine of the Trinity is not about God's social and temporal nature. It is about Jesus Christ, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Attempts at fitting a process view of God onto the doctrine of the Trinity remain unconvincing.

Lewis S. Ford has recently abandoned the attempt to correlate the trinitarian persons with the bipolar concept of God for a different reason. He currently believes that the attempt to relate the persons of the Trinity to God's metaphysical and necessary nature is mistaken. Instead, he proposes to discuss the Trinity in terms of God's contingent relation to the world.<sup>40</sup> In this way, justice may be done to the role of the historical Jesus in the Trinity: "Trinitarian formulations that apply to necessary metaphysical conditions cannot help but be too abstract to do justice to the concrete particularity of Christian affirmations concerning Jesus' life, death, and resurrection."<sup>41</sup>

In order to avoid this problem, Ford constructs the doctrine of the Trinity from "the root experiences of the Christian faith,"<sup>42</sup> principal among which is "the way we are reconciled with God through Christ."<sup>43</sup> However, he believes that these root experiences

39. Mickey, "Process Theology and Wesleyan Thought," 83.

40. Lewis S. Ford, "Contingent Trinitarianism," in *Trinity in Process*, 42.

41. *Ibid.*, 51.

42. *Ibid.*, 53.

43. *Ibid.*, 54.

37. John B. Cobb Jr., "The Relativization of the Trinity," in Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, eds., *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 12.

38. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

of the early Christians were immediately misinterpreted because these Christians labored under the notion that God was immutable. In short, what happened was that early Christians experienced salvation by God through Christ. The character of God was changed for them. Previously the savior of Israel, God was now experienced as the savior of the world. However, their assumptions of immutability prevented them from acknowledging such a change in God. Accordingly, they interpreted their experience of salvation by God through Christ as salvation by Christ. Jesus Christ came to be represented as standing alongside God. In this way, the problems of Christology and the Trinity arose.<sup>44</sup>

It is important to note that Ford means that God's own immediate purposes actually did change in some way through the interaction God had with Jesus: "Jesus' filial obedience to God's will could easily have evoked a responsive intensification of divine purposing" in relation to Jesus.<sup>45</sup> Through Jesus, something new became true of God. However, the disciples, with their assumptions of God's immutability, could not conceive of such a change in God. As a result, when on the third day after the crucifixion and "the concerns, aims, and personality traits that had characterized their beloved master were now experienced as characterizing the living God," they had to represent Jesus as a resurrected being distinct from God because they could not conceive of God becoming in some sense like Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Today, however, under the guidance of process theism, it is possible to see the truth: God became "Christ." That is, God took on a certain Jesus-like quality that did not previously characterize God. But this change in God was, so to speak, hypostatized and represented as the resurrected Jesus. In this way, an acceptance of God's contingent and changeable nature allows Christians today to maintain "strict monotheism"<sup>47</sup> by conceiving "the *Personae* as the various images of the invisible God."<sup>48</sup>

This brief review suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be naturally or easily reconciled with process theism. One bit of evidence for this is that process theists have not come to a consent

44. *Ibid.*, 57-58.

45. *Ibid.*, 58.

46. *Ibid.*, 60.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 62.

sus about such a reconciliation. There is no single and obviously correct exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of process metaphysics. The main problem with any such reconciliation is that the doctrine of the Trinity and process theology's view of God were developed for two quite different reasons. The doctrine of the Trinity arose out of Christological and soteriological concerns; process theism arose out of certain needs associated with Whitehead's metaphysics. While attempts may be made in good faith to accommodate the doctrine of the Trinity to process theism, these attempts will always remain somewhat contrived. With good reason, Lewis Ford has recently seen the folly of trying to merge a doctrine of the Trinity rooted in history with a metaphysical view of God.

However, Ford's own attempt at expounding the Trinity by means of the notion of contingency also falls short. He argues that early Christians came to think of the crucified Jesus as resurrected and as a distinct heavenly being alongside God the Father because they presupposed God's immutability. This argument assumes that the Christians were compelled to interpret their experience of God under pressure from their metaphysical presuppositions. They experienced God as changed, but they could not intellectually accept this experience and so came to represent Jesus as resurrected. The resurrection is thus an image of the change in God's character. The implication of this argument is that the Christians would not have represented Jesus as a heavenly being apart from their commitment to immutability, but only that metaphysical commitment could override their Jewish monotheism.

There is a far more plausible way of regarding the matter. As demonstrated by Jewish views about God's wisdom, especially as developed in the Hellenistic period, Jewish monotheism was much more flexible than Ford imagines. Jews seem to have been able to grant the reality of wisdom as both divine and in some sense distinct from God without giving up monotheism. Jewish Christians in this same intellectual milieu would have had no problem in positing a heavenly reality alongside God the Father. What was distinctive about early Christianity was not its positing this heavenly entity alongside God but its identification of this entity with Jesus of Nazareth. In short, we do not need to invoke an alleged allegiance to divine immutability in order to explain how

Christians came to predicate a resurrected and distinct existence for Jesus Christ. Their Jewish milieu already provided them with a conceptuality for regarding the divine as both one and, in some sense, plural. Ford has erred because he has sought to interpret the doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of an unsuitable view of God and contingency.

I argue, therefore, that process theism both lacks an adequate doctrine of the Trinity and, in fact, probably cannot develop one. As the previous quotations from Cobb show, process theism is in the end no more committed to a trinity in God than to a binity or a quaternity. Process theism is committed, first of all, to a theology founded on the distinction between the necessary and contingent aspects of God. Accommodation of a doctrine such as the Trinity will always be a secondary matter. But how then can some persuasively argue that there is a natural affinity between process theism and Wesleyan theology? Because Wesleyan theology, from Daniel D. Whedon and John Milley to the era of Albert Knudson, has become a theology of the single personality of God. Since most process theists also represent God as a single subjective being and since there is agreement with Wesleyan thought on other issues such as freedom, the argument for their essential harmony becomes plausible.

In conclusion, there truly is a conflict between the trinitarian view of God and that of process theism. Of course, this fact in itself does not argue for the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity. But it does frame the pressing question: Which view of God best does justice to all of Wesley's legitimate doctrinal commitments? Keeping in mind that Wesley's doctrinal commitments were not only to the soteriological doctrines that dominate the Standard Sermons but also to the central affirmations of the Christian faith, I believe that the conclusion is inescapable that only a trinitarian view of God is both Wesleyan and Christian.

# TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PROCESS THEISM

More is needed than merely asserting that the doctrine of the Trinity is both Wesleyan and Christian. To their credit, process the-

ists have argued in the public arena for the adequacy and coherence of their views. A trinitarian doctrine of God must do the same.

I agree with Lewis S. Ford and other process theists that the place to begin is with the experience of Jesus' followers, although I recognize that this experience was incorporated into New Testament writings that were thoroughly worked and reworked in the process of tradition. So, the New Testament writings are the actual point of departure. My disagreement with process theists lies not in their starting point but in the metaphysics they use to interpret early Christian experience.

In particular, it seems to me that certain fundamental principles of process theism are problematic for expounding the Christian doctrine of God—in particular the notion of applicability and the related method of generalization. The applicability of a principle means that the principle refers to and elucidates some aspect of experience. By the method of generalization, one seeks to know whether the same principle refers to and can elucidate other aspects of experience as well. The ultimate goal of metaphysics is what Whitehead called a "synoptic vision" of reality.<sup>49</sup> However, the problem with applicability and generalization lies in the supposition that the goal is to discover general truths about reality, metaphysical principles that are universally valid. On the one hand, this is a worthy goal and potentially fruitful. On the other hand, the implication of this view is that there is a set of principles that all reality exhibits. It is this implication that I find troubling. It is one thing to seek coherence of knowledge. As Whitehead stated, "No entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe."<sup>50</sup> It is another thing to suppose that, therefore, "every proposition refers to a universe exhibiting some general systematic metaphysical character."<sup>51</sup> In other words, while it is true that we cannot conceive of things in abstraction from their relations to other things, this truth does not imply that all reality exhibits a "general systematic metaphysical character." The implication is especially tenuous when it is suggested that the (or at least one) general systematic metaphysical principle that characterizes

49. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 4-5.

50. *Ibid.*, 3.

51. *Ibid.*, 11.

all reality is what Whitehead variously called the principle of relativity and the reformed subjectivist principle. According to this principle, every instance of being has reference to some process of becoming.<sup>52</sup> In other words, the process of becoming is the ultimate metaphysical truth of reality.<sup>53</sup>

What is problematic about this metaphysics is that it posits one fundamental form of entity, which Whitehead called the actual entity. To be sure, Whitehead acknowledged a kind of plurality in the universe. He enumerated several categories of existence: actual entities, prehensions, nexus, subjective forms, eternal objects, propositions, multiplicities, and contrasts.<sup>54</sup> But two of these categories, actual entities and eternal objects, are considered "fundamental," the others being "how all entities of the two fundamental types are in community with each other."<sup>55</sup> In fact, according to the "ontological principle," actual entities, with respect to being, are absolutely fundamental.<sup>56</sup> In the words of the reformed subjectivist principle, "Apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing."<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the fundamental stuff of reality is experiential: "Each actual entity is conceived as an act of experience arising out of data. It is a process of 'feeling' the many data."<sup>58</sup>

Like Wesleyan personalism, process theism raises the category of subjectivity to the level of the metaphysical ultimate. Admittedly, process theists extend this subjectivity to all entities, whereas Wesleyan personalists have thought almost exclusively in terms of God and humans. Nonetheless, the similarity is patent. But this understanding of reality does not in my opinion, take into sufficient account the plurality found in reality. Although Whitehead allowed for eight distinct categories of existence, his is still not a pluralistic ontology, for seven of the eight have reality only in actual entities. I suggest that a truly adequate ontology must be based on a firmer sense of the plurality of types of being and must not reduce the plurality to actual entities and ingredients of actual entities.

52. *Ibid.*, 166.

53. *Ibid.*, 21, "'Creativity' is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact."

54. *Ibid.*, 22.

55. *Ibid.*, 25.

56. *Ibid.*, 24.

57. *Ibid.*, 167.

58. *Ibid.*, 40.

But why is it in the interest of a trinitarian theology to argue for such a pluralistic ontology? Because doing so preserves two matters of importance to the Christian tradition. First, it maintains an important insight of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of God. Second, it maintains God's essential difference from all other beings.

As to the first, one of the conclusions that one may draw from the patristic doctrine of the Trinity is that God's sort of being differs dramatically from all others of which we know. This conclusion is derived from the notion that the one essence of God subsists in three persons. Although it is possible to understand this notion as implying that the essence is related to the persons as a species is related to an individual, the mainstream of patristic writers rejected this interpretation. It fails because no member of a species is everything that the species is, whereas, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, each person is the complete divine essence. It also fails because species are abstractions; they are the traits that all members of the species have in common. But in the doctrine of the Trinity, the divine essence is not an abstraction; instead, it *subsists* in the persons. The doctrine of the Trinity compels us to consider God as the being who exists in three ways, contrary to other beings in our experience who exist in only one way. In the Trinity, the one being exists equally and fully in three persons. In other sorts of being, each being exists in only one.

As to the second matter of importance, it is an aspect of the Christian faith that God differs from human beings and from all other sorts of beings. In the past, this difference has been expressed in a variety of ways, from the distinction between time and eternity to the Barthian concept of God as wholly other. However the difference is expressed, the Christian theologian is obligated to suitably expound this difference and not minimize it. But it is just here where not only process theism but also Wesleyan theology falls short, for both regard God as being essentially similar to humans. In Wesleyan thought, both God and humans have been regarded as persons, differing only as the infinite differs from the finite. No doubt this is a substantial difference, but it is essentially a quantitative difference, not a qualitative difference. In this view, God, like humans, is a person; admittedly, God is a greater person,

everlasting, and without human limitations. Nonetheless, it is evident that Wesleysans, in the interests of defending the values of creaturely freedom and responsibility, have developed a doctrine of God that regards God as an enlarged version of the human moral agent. In the same way, process theism regards both God and all other actualities as temporal series of concurring feelings. God differs from other entities because only God is everlasting, because God, through envisaging the eternal objects, has an influence on the universal process that other entities do not have, and because God's experience of the world is universal in a sense in which that of other entities is not. But God's difference from other entities is still represented in quantitative terms. God is like other entities, but more than them. I regard this and the related Wesleyan view as seriously mistaken. God's essential difference must be maintained. Otherwise, Wesleyan theology tends to become a religious humanism in which humanity stands with God on the side of personal beings while separated from the rest of nonpersonal creation.

My argument should not be taken as implying that the Nicene formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is above improvement. Terminology such as essence and person may not be fully suitable today. The modern period has witnessed numerous attempts at conceiving the Trinity in a more adequate way. In particular, a Hegelian mediation on the Trinity may open some promising paths.

According to Hegel, the trinitarian persons are to be thought of as different ways in which Spirit is. Specifically, the Father is Spirit in the realm of thought. Here, Spirit is the object of cognition, or something to be considered rationally. For Hegel, this form of Spirit is enshrined in the creedal doctrine of the Trinity. The Son is Spirit in the mode of sensuous immediacy. Here, Spirit is apprehended by us as something immediately given and visually apparent. For Hegel, this form of Spirit was Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh. Finally, the Holy Spirit is Spirit in the mode of community. Here, Spirit is given to us neither as the content of thought nor as the object of perception, but as certainty of the truth. What Hegel is pointing to is the belief that God has historically been revealed to us in these three ways. Not only has God been revealed to us in

three ways, but also God is in these three ways. Each of these ways is truly God.

Hegel's philosophy is so sufficiently out-of-date that merely taking over his understanding of the Trinity is out of the question. However, if we compare the Nicene doctrine with the general direction of Hegel's trinitarian thought, a potentially fruitful way is opened for thinking about the Trinity. This way starts with a pluralistic ontology. This means allowing that things in the universe may have modes of being that differ from one another. This introduces a Platonic strain into our thought, for it was Plato who held that a complete inventory of reality must include at least three or four basic sorts of being: matter, form, soul, and (perhaps) the receptacle of becoming. Armed with this assumption, we can meditate upon the Christian doctrine of God along the lines indicated by the Nicene Creed and by Hegel; we take as a premise that God has a distinctive sort of being, of which the doctrine of the Trinity is the exposition; and we can conclude that the doctrine of the Trinity is first of all about the man Jesus Christ, the God whom he called Father, and the Holy Spirit given to us as the Spirit of Jesus. It is not a theory about eternal relations in the divine nature or about how three can be one. It is about the three ways in which God is revealed to us: as the historical individual Jesus, as the God whom Jesus obeyed and to whom he prayed, and as the Spirit by which we live eschatologically in a future that is already present. But it is not just about the revelation of God, as though this revelation were different from God's own being, and as though behind this revelation there were a mysterious divine being that is not and cannot be revealed. Instead, the doctrine of the Trinity states that this man Jesus Christ, in his life and death and resurrection, is God and that God's life is enacted in this man's life—not that Jesus had a divine consciousness, as though the Logos had simply appeared in human guise. This very human life is God's life, but in an historical form. This form is one mode of God's existence.

The doctrine of the Trinity also states that God is the Father, a thesis that has never been controversial. But it states that the Father is not simply God, as though the Father exhausts the divine being, but a mode of God's being, no more and no less important than God's mode of being in Jesus. In this view, the Father is not *a* being

who sends Jesus but is instead that form of divine being whereby God is both hidden and revealed, present and absent. God is revealed in the world, revealed by Jesus Christ, revealed through our experiences, but at the same time hidden by all this, concealed by that which is revelatory. In all things, God is present while at the same time distant, unapproachable yet present, light and darkness at once.

The doctrine of the Trinity also states that God is the Holy Spirit. This does not mean simply God, as though we could make a simple equation of God and spirit, so that it would be obvious that God is a spirit and that the Spirit is God. God is not *a* spirit, as though spirit were the sort of thing that could be numerically counted and individualized. Rather, the Spirit is a mode of God's existence, one very different from the mode of being that is Jesus and the other mode of being that is the Father. Of this mode it is difficult to say much, because the Spirit is that mode of God's being by which we are enabled to say anything at all about God. The Spirit is that grace given to us whereby we are lifted into the awful and awesome presence of God and by which we live in God's future already now. It is by the Spirit that we know God, just as it is by light that we see physical things; consequently, we do not know the Spirit, just as we do not see light.

Unlike human being, which has one mode of existence, although admittedly a complex one, God has these three modes. Of course, this brief sketch leaves many questions unanswered: What of the eternal Trinity? How should the incarnation be conceived? In what sense, if at all, are the trinitarian persons to be regarded as personal beings in the modern sense? How can we know that this Trinity actually exists and is not merely a projection of fideistic Christian belief?

These questions, which have never ceased to perplex theologians, cannot be answered in this essay. Nonetheless, the trinitarian theology I am proposing possesses strengths that, I believe, tip the balance toward trinitarian thought and away from process theism. First, this trinitarian theology arises out of the New Testament writings. How well it does so may be debated, but I believe it corresponds to the teachings of the New Testament at least as well as do the tenets of process theism. Second, it preserves Wesley's com-

mitment to the traditional Christian faith, although not without some modern updating. Third, it maintains the distinction between God and other beings and recognizes the uniqueness of the divine being. Finally, it can accommodate the traditional Wesleyan concern for human responsiveness and responsibility at least as well as process theism can. In fact, it may be more adept than process theism at preserving freedom to the extent that it regards freedom not as an intrinsic property of human nature but instead as something attained only in and through the Holy Spirit.

In summary, Wesleyan theology should be a trinitarian theology. Although the movement away from trinitarian thought and toward personalist thought is understandable, that movement must be regarded as a mistake. Consequently, the Wesleyan theological attraction to process theism must also be regarded as a mistake.