

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

Schubert M. Ogden,

harbingers of this conversation

consider ourselves fully members of the Body of Christ, the structures of oppression must be abolished. What will make this happen more effectively is the Christian church and theological discourse articulating the gospel of Jesus Christ in a manner that holds spirituality and social transformation in creative tension.

With the Wesleyan notion of sanctification understood dynamically and with the idea that each unit of experience contains both spiritual and social dimensions as found in process thought, the church can foster a new sense of ethical accountability. At each level of soteriology, whether we are speaking of conversion, sanctification, justification, or redemption, the element of social accountability is to be found. We cannot abstract spirituality from its social dimensions as the church has done in the past. For example, during the modern period, slaveholders were perceived as good Christian people. The church elevated spirituality above social accountability. When we perceive them as inseparable, however, salvation is taken out of a privatistic and individualistic focus, and the church is enabled to regain the corporate meaning of faith. In other words, we are not saved until the systemic structures of evil and sin, which perpetuate the increasing gulf between the oppressed and oppressors, are overcome.

The Whiteheadian notion that the kingdom of heaven is with us today, and the Wesleyan notions of sanctification and social holiness help the church to see that we have all the resources necessary to eradicate all forms of systemic oppression.

JOHN WESLEY, PROCESS THEOLOGY, AND CONSUMERISM

JAY MCDANIEL AND JOHN L. FARTHING

We write as college professors who have been teaching at a church-related, liberal arts college for twenty years. Over the decades, it has been obvious to us that an overriding reality in our students' lives—and in ours as well—is consumerism. We also write as Christians. We are struck by the many ways in which consumerism contradicts the ideals of Christ as depicted in the New Testament. If Christianity is to have influence in our time, we believe that it must offer an alternative to the consumer-driven habits that shape so much modern life. Our subject, then, is Christianity in the age of consumerism.

Our thesis is simple. It is that John Wesley in his way, and process theologians in theirs, invite us into postconsumerist ways of living and thinking. We develop our thesis in three sections. In the first, we explain what we mean by consumerism. In the second, we explain how, in his historical context, John Wesley proposed a countercultural way of living that directly contradicted, and still contradicts, the lifestyle and attitudes of consumerism. And in the third, we suggest ways in which process theology can affirm, complement, and contribute to Wesley's counterconsumer insights.

WHAT IS CONSUMERISM?

By consumerism we mean two things: (1) an overconsuming lifestyle practiced by about one-fifth of the world's population, and aspired to by many among the other four-fifths, and (2) a set of attitudes and values that support and reinforce this lifestyle and that can be caricatured as an unofficial, corporate-sponsored world religion. Our analysis of the overconsuming lifestyle comes

from Alan Durning's *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth*.¹

The Lifestyle of Consumerism

According to Durning, the overconsumers of the world live in North America, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore and among the affluent classes of Eastern Europe, Latin America, South Africa, and South Korea. Typically, they—we—drive privately owned automobiles, eat prepackaged foods, depend on throwaway goods, drink from aluminum cans, enjoy temperature controlled climates, thrive on a meat-based diet, fly in airplanes, and release inordinate amounts of waste into the atmosphere. Collectively, we consume approximately 40 percent of the earth's fresh water, 60 percent of its fertilizers, 75 percent of its energy, 75 percent of its timber, 80 percent of its paper, and 85 percent of its aluminum. Our aerosol cans, air conditioners, and factories release almost 90 percent of the chlorofluorocarbons that cause ozone depletion. Our use of fossil fuels causes two-thirds of the emissions of carbon dioxide. If the whole world consumed as we consume and polluted as we pollute, the life-support systems of our planet would quickly collapse.

Of course, many of us say that we are "struggling to make ends meet." And indeed we are, though not because we lack food to eat or the basic necessities of life. We are struggling because we spend much of our time trying to maintain a way of living that we are taught to call the good life, but which often leaves us breathless and frantic. Caught between the demands of work and family, of personal desire and civic responsibility, we fall into a compulsive busyness, always on our way toward a happiness that never quite arrives. We yearn for a simpler life, one that is more spiritual and caring.

Amid our yearning, however, we ought not to romanticize our situation. Instead, we should remember the other four-fifths of the world's population, many of whom might deem our need for "spirituality" somewhat self-indulgent. According to Durning, the other four-fifths of our human family is divided into two groups: the sustainers and the destitute.

The "sustainers" form about three-fifths of the world's population and live mostly in Latin America, the Middle East, China, and among the nonaffluent in East Asia. Typically, they earn between \$700 and \$7500 a year per family member, eat more grains than meats, drink clean water, ride bicycles and buses, and depend more on durable goods than throwaways. They are "sustainers" because they live at levels that could be "sustained" into the indefinite future if global population were stabilized and clean technologies employed.

The "destitute" are the abjectly poor of the world. They are about one-fifth of the world's population and live mostly in rural Africa and rural India. They earn less than \$700 a year per family member, eat insufficient grain, drink unclean water, and travel by walking. Their lives are in no way "sustainable." Their deepest need is to rise to the level of the sustainer class.

What, then, is the best hope for our planet? It is that (1) the population of the world cease growing, (2) nations begin to rely upon clean technologies to feed and furnish their citizens, (3) the truly poor of the world rise from their poverty with some combination of external assistance and local self-development, and (4) the overconsumers learn to live more simply. In short, it is that the overconsumers and underconsumers meet in the middle, where the sustainers live. Durning hopes—and we do, too—that the religions of the world can find inner resources to help realize this hope.

The Religion of Consumerism

If Christians are to contribute to this hope, they—we—will have to recognize that consumerism is also more than a lifestyle. It is a set of attitudes and values that support and reinforce the overconsuming lifestyle and that are now preached twenty-four hours a day throughout the world in advertisements on radio and television, in magazines, and on billboards. In order to explain these attitudes and values, it helps to imagine them as part of an unofficial, corporate-sponsored world religion.

Perhaps the central organizing principle of this religion—and thus its god—is Economic Growth. We borrow this idea from John B. Cobb Jr., who suggests that the past one thousand years of western history can be divided into three periods: the ages of

1. Alan Durning, *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York: Norton, 1992).

Christianism, Nationalism, and Economism.² The age of Christianism was the Middle Ages, in which the central organizing principle of much public life, for good and ill, was the Christian Church. In the seventeenth century, partly in response to the religious wars of the sixteenth century, a new organizing principle emerged that has considerable power today: the nation-state. Slowly but surely, people's needs for security and adventure, for meaning and creativity, came to be satisfied through "service to the nation" as opposed to "service to the church." The age of Nationalism emerged.

In our time, the age of Nationalism is being replaced by an age of Economism, which has itself emerged, not only through the rise of capitalism and science, but also in response to the two world wars and many regional wars fought in the name of nationalism. The central organizing principle of an Economistic Age is not "the church" or "the nation" but "the economy," or more precisely, material prosperity as produced through a growing economy. In the age of Economism, many people's needs for security and adventure are satisfied, not by "service to the nation," much less "service to the church," but by "service to the corporation." The interests of business take priority over the interests of government and church. Corporate headquarters, not the nation's capital or the church, are the symbolic centers of society.

If Cobb is right and we are entering an age of Economism, then economic growth has become a god of sorts, albeit a false one; and "consumerism" names that cultural ethos—that religion, if you will—that serves this god. The priests of this religion are the public policy makers—corporate executives, economists, and politicians—who understand growth and promise us access to it. The evangelists are the advertisers who display the products of growth and convince us that we cannot be happy without them. The laity are the consumers themselves, formerly called "citizens" in the age of Nationalism. The church is the mall. And salvation comes—not by grace through faith, as Christians claim—but by appearance, affluence, and marketable achievement.³

2. John B. Cobb Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 10-25.

3. Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 87. Our caricature of the means of salvation in consumerism borrows directly from Borg's assertion that Jesus challenged the conventional wisdom of his day, in which "achievement, affluence, and appearance" were the dominant values.

We might also imagine consumerism as having its doctrines and creeds. Its doctrine of creation would be that the earth is real estate to be bought and sold in the marketplace and that other living beings—animals, for example—are mere commodities for human use. Its doctrine of human existence would be that we are skin-encapsulated egos cut off from the world by the boundaries of our skin, whose primary purpose is to "have our needs met." And its basic creeds would be "bigger is better," "faster is better," "more is better," and "you can have it all." Admittedly, our caricature is negative and cynical. Still, we think there is truth in it. If we are entering an age of Economism, then there does seem to be an ideology—a set of attitudes and values—that functions like a religion: that is, a way of organizing the whole of life, inner and outer. Thus, a serious question emerges: Can middle-class Christians in high-income countries, who have been so deeply co-opted into the ideology of consumerism, nevertheless find resources within their heritage, past and present, for critical and creative response to this lifestyle and its accompanying religion?

WESLEY AND THE NEW MONASTICISM

In light of this question, we turn to John Wesley. What Wesley offers most deeply is an image—a hope—that life can be lived in a simpler and more frugal way. In what follows, we highlight six overlapping Wesleyan ideals that, taken together, form a radical alternative to consumer-driven living: (1) sharing with others, (2) freedom from inordinate attachments, (3) freedom from affluence, (4) freedom for the poor, (5) freedom for simplicity, and (6) freedom for the present moment. These ideals were challenging in his time, and they are challenging in ours.

The Primacy of Sharing

One key to understanding the spirit of the Methodist movement is to view it as a Protestant analogue to Roman Catholic monasticism. As envisioned by Wesley, the movement looks rather like a lay order within the Church of England.

At points, of course, the analogy breaks down. Wesley never

entertained any thoughts of imposing a vow of celibacy as a precondition for membership in the Methodist societies. Nevertheless, there are many instructive parallels between the spirit of early Methodism and certain distinctive features of Roman Catholic monasticism. Consider the three monastic vows: chastity, obedience, and poverty.

Chastity is an ideal that Wesley found, if not compelling, at least alluring. The radical simplicity of lifestyle that he regarded as the outward expression of inward holiness is clearly more accessible to those who remain unentangled in domestic responsibilities. During the first several generations of Methodism, the rigors of the itinerant ministry involved a lifestyle that was hardly compatible with the more settled routines of home and hearth. While never imposing celibacy as a criterion of discipleship or as a precondition for membership in the Methodist societies, Wesley was himself drawn to the celibate form of discipleship.⁴

Additionally, the authoritarian strand in Wesley's relationship to the Methodist societies recalls the monastic virtue of obedience. The structure of primitive Methodism, like that of monasticism, was not democratic but hierarchical. Wesley managed the affairs of the United Societies with an iron fist; in relation to the Methodist movement he was, in effect, a father superior. The early conferences were not decision-making bodies but rather opportunities to transmit decisions made by Wesley in an utterly top-down fashion. "We are no republicans," he declared, "and never intend to be."⁵

But it is at the point of the monastic ideal of poverty—the rejection of private property in commitment to the lifelong practice of self-denial—that the analogy between monasticism and Methodism is most striking.⁶ Wesley noted that in the earliest centuries of the history of the Church, the more affluent of the churches were the first to fall into corruption, while the pristine integrity of primitive Christianity was retained longest by poorer congregations. Wesley attributed the loss of the church's original simplicity to the pernicious influence of prosperity, with its attendant temp-

tations and distractions. Wesley argued from the apostasy of Ananias and Sapphira that the earliest symptom of the loss of innocence in the New Testament church is seen in the abandonment of the community of goods enjoyed by believers shortly after Pentecost.⁷ Accordingly, Wesley envisioned Methodism as moving toward a restoration of both the spiritual vitality of the primitive Church and its economic concomitant, the community of goods.⁸

It was only with reluctance that Wesley accepted the existence of private property among Methodists, and only as an interim arrangement on the way toward a more perfect *koinonia* in imitation of the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 2:44-45, 4:34-35). The community of goods was not a curious relic from an irretrievable Golden Age for Wesley. It was an ideal for the present and future: an image of the beloved community to which Christians were called.⁹

Here the word "community" needs to be stressed. Wesley was far from embracing the radical individualism of consumerism, with its image of the human self as a skin-encapsulated ego. On the contrary, he articulated a vision in which *love* occupied such a central position in Christian living that the whole of the Christian life was seen as essentially relational. Thus, a Wesleyan spirituality is intensely communitarian, for there can be "no holiness but social holiness."¹⁰

To be sure, the primary function of the qualifier "social" in that phrase was to warn against the religious narcissism to which mystics were sometimes prone; it was a pointed reminder that no one can go to heaven alone.¹¹ But Wesley's fascination with the community of goods—both as an expression of solidarity among Christians and as a liberation from egocentricity—suggested that "social holiness" involves transformation of economic relationships

7. Sermon 61, "The Mystery of Iniquity," §12, *Works* 2:456.

8. Among the Rules of the Select Societies is found the following: "Every member, till we can have all things common, will bring once a week, *bona fide*, all he can spare towards a common stock." Minutes of the First Annual Conference (28 June 1744), *John Wesley*, 144.

9. See John Walsh, "John Wesley and the Community of Goods," in *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America. Essays in Honor of W. R. Ward*, ed. Keith Robbins (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 25-50.

10. *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), "Preface," §5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:321.

11. See *A Letter to Frances Godfrey* (2 August 1789), *Letters* (Telford) 8:158, "It is a blessed thing to have fellow travelers to the New Jerusalem. If you cannot find any, you must make them; for none can travel that road alone."

4. See *Thoughts on a Single Life*, *Works* (Jackson) 11:456-63; and Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1979), 215-31.

5. *A Letter to John Mason* (13 January 1790), *Letters* (Telford) 8:196.

6. See Sermon 48, "Self-denial," *Works* 2:238-50.

among the sanctified here and now. In its pristine state, Wesley argued, Christianity was marked by a mutuality of commitment that expressed itself economically in a socialism of love. He dared to hope that a renewal of primitive Christianity would involve the restoration of an economics of sharing.

This community of goods would not be a matter of discipline or legislation. Instead, it would be a spontaneous reflection of the intimate fellowship and pervasive charity that characterized believers' life together—a foretaste of the perfection of Kingdom living. It was only with reluctance then that Wesley accepted private property, and only as a practical necessity until the Methodists had reached the perfected communion toward which the Spirit was leading them.

It is in this context of sharing that Wesley recommended an economic ethics designed to minimize the spiritual ravages of a capitalist economy. His famous formula was: "Gain all you can," "Save all you can," and "Give all you can."¹² On the one hand, *gaining* and *saving* presuppose the diligence and rigor associated with religious idealism. *Giving*, on the other hand, is a bulwark against the spiritual temptations that are inevitable in the midst of material prosperity. For Wesleyan piety, *giving* becomes virtually a sacrament—a channel of grace, a means of salvation. Wesley's appeal could hardly be more emphatic: "Do you gain all you can, and save all you can? Then you must in the nature of things grow rich. Then if you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, *give* all you can. Otherwise I can have no more hope of your salvation than for that of Judas Iscariot."¹³

Freedom from Inordinate Attachments

Saving and giving (rather than consuming) determine the contours of Wesley's view of the linkage between economics and spirituality. Here emerges another crucial connection between the genius of primitive Methodism and that of Roman Catholic monasticism: At the heart of Wesleyan religion, as of the monastic tradition,

12. See Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," §§1-III, *Works* 2:268-71.

13. Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §18, *Works* 4:96. On Methodist philanthropy, see Walsh, "John Wesley and the Community of Goods," 45, with references to the work of Manfred Marguardt, M. J. Warner, R. F. Wearmouth, and Leon O. Hytson.

lies an *ascetic spirituality*. It is true that the most rigorous of Wesley's ascetic demands are not intended for all members of the Methodist societies. Wesley reverts to the Catholic view (rooted in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius) that the Body of Christ consists of "two orders of Christians," corresponding to the Roman Catholic distinction between the religious (monks and nuns who sought perfection through radical renunciation) and Christians living in the world (who "did not aim at any particular strictness, being in most things like their neighbors"¹⁴). But even for Wesleyans of the less rigorous sort, Wesley recommended an austerity that contemporary Methodists might find shocking.

Especially striking is his indictment of conspicuous consumption.¹⁵ Wesley summoned the people called Methodists to a kind of asceticism that is, in Albert C. Outler's well-crafted phrase, "less a loathing of God's good creation than a declaration of independence from bondages of worldliness and self-indulgence."¹⁶ The ascetic element in Wesleyan spirituality is "rooted in traditions of monasticism, finding its expression in a *contemptus mundi* that raises the human spirit above all inordinate attachments to 'this world.'¹⁷ Wesleyan asceticism sought to counteract the spiritual effect of affluence that Wesley labeled "*dissipation*," defined as "the uncentering the soul from God."¹⁸ Here Wesley's language plays on an analogy of sun and wind:

The original word properly signifies to "disperse" or "scatter." So the sun dissipates, that is, scatters, the clouds; the wind dissipates or scatters the dust. And by an easy metaphor our thoughts are said to be dissipated when they are . . . unhinged from God, their proper centre, and scattered to and fro among the poor, perishing, unsatisfying things of the world.¹⁹

14. Sermon 89, "The More Excellent Way," §5, *Works* 3:265.

15. See especially Sermon 88, "On Dress," §26, *Works* 3:259-60, in which he denounces extravagance in attire: "Let me see, before I die, a Methodist congregation full as plain dressed as a Quaker congregation. Let your dress be *cheap* as well as plain. Otherwise you do but tittle with God and me, and your own souls."

16. Outler, "Introduction," §IV, *Works* 1:61.

17. Ibid. Outler notes that after 1727 Wesley immersed himself in the asceticism of Thomas à Kempis, William Law, Gaston de Renty, and Gregory Lopez, among others. His mature theology and ethics bear the indelible imprint of that encounter.

18. Sermon 79, "On Dissipation," §11, *Works* 3:120.

19. Ibid., §10, *Works* 3:120.

What Wesley had in mind was not just philanthropy but self-denial for the sake of the health of one's own soul. Wesleyans are challenged to give to the needy—not only because the poor need to receive but also because *the affluent need to give*. Wesley sensed that *what I need to do for the poor is precisely what I need to do for myself*: I who have too much to eat must give to the hungry—and not just so that they may survive: for the health of my own soul, I need to eat less in order to make the point that my appetites are not sovereign over me. Even if there were no hunger in the world—even if none of my sisters and brothers were starving—I would still need to declare my independence from the compulsion to consume. By a marvelous symmetry, it turns out that what I need to do *for them* is precisely what I need to do *for myself*.

This was Wesley's context for understanding the importance of fasting as an antidote to the tendency toward self-gratification: "While we were at Oxford the rule of every Methodist was (unless in case of sickness) to *fast* every Wednesday and Friday in the year, in imitation of the primitive church, for which they had the highest reverence."²⁰ Wesley reported that in Methodism's most expansive phase membership in a Methodist society involved a commitment to self-denial through regular abstinence from food. Systematic fasting was observed by the Methodists, Wesley reports—not just by a heroic elite, but

by them all, without any exception. But afterwards some in London carried this to excess, and fasted so as to impair their health. It was not long before others made this a pretence for not fasting at all. And I fear there are now thousands of Methodists, so called . . . who are so far from fasting twice in the week . . . that they do not fast twice in the month. . . . But what excuse can there be for this? I do not say for those that call themselves members of the Church of England, but for any who profess to believe the Scripture to be the Word of God? Since, according to this, the man that never fasts is no more in the way to heaven than the man that never prays.²¹

Fasting belonged to the regimen of systematic self-denial that Wesley considered key to the effectiveness of early Methodism; but

the loss of this ascetic impulse he regarded as a principal reason for the decline of the movement's original vitality. He laments the loss of serious practices of self-denial among the Methodists and found in that development a key to understanding why Christianity—especially among the Methodists—had turned out to be woefully ineffective in its impact on the life of the world.

Freedom from Affluence

If the loss of the practice of self-denial explains the growing impotence of Methodism, what is to explain the decline of asceticism among the Methodists? Wesley's answer was: *affluence*.

Why is self-denial in general so little practised at present among the Methodists? Why is so exceeding little of it to be found even in the oldest and largest societies? The more I observe and consider things, the more clearly it appears what is the cause of this. . . . The Methodists grow more and more self-indulgent, because they *grow rich*. Although many of them are still deplorably poor yet many others, in the space of twenty, thirty, or forty years are twenty, thirty, yea, a hundred times richer than . . . when they first entered the society. And it is an observation, which admits of few exceptions, that nine in ten of these decreased in grace in the same proportion as they increased in wealth. Indeed, according to the natural tendency of riches, we cannot expect it to be otherwise.²²

The ascetic note in Wesleyan spirituality includes a call for simplicity of lifestyle and thus turns definitions of *rich* and *poor* upside down. Wesley pointed to a radical disconnect between prosperity and happiness: "Are the richest men the happiest? Have those the largest share of content that have the largest possessions? Is not the very reverse true?"²³ If we may believe Wesley, the fulfillment and contentment that material wealth promises will always prove to be illusory because the satisfaction of material desires has the ironic effect of stimulating rather than satisfying human appetites: "Who would expend anything in gratifying these desires if he considered that to gratify them is to increase them? Nothing can be more certain than this: daily experience shows, the more they are indulged, they increase the more."²⁴

22. *Ibid.*, §16, *Works* 4:95.

23. Sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches," §11.10, *Works* 3:240.

24. Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," §11.5, *Works* 2:275.

20. Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §14, *Works* 4:94.

21. *Ibid.*

To explain why the conventional view of the relation between possessions and happiness was hopelessly misleading, Wesley resorted to the metaphor of emptiness. Since the gratifications provided by money were lacking in eternal substance, the pursuit of happiness through a strategy of "being-by-possessiveness" was doomed to frustration. To seek contentment on the basis of acquisition and consumption was like trying to fill a bottomless pit: "You know that in seeking happiness from riches you are only striving to drink out of empty cups. And let them be painted and gilded ever so finely, they are empty still."²⁵ At the same time, Wesley says, "A man may be rich that has not a hundred a year, nor even one thousand pounds in cash. Whosoever has food to eat and raiment to put on, with something over, is rich. Whoever has the necessities and conveniences of life for himself and his family, and a little to spare for them that have not, is properly a rich man."²⁶

Wesley does not advocate self-denial to the point of abject destitution or injury to one's health, but his moderation should not be mistaken as a compromise with worldly values or as an indulgence of worldly ambitions. Each Methodist, he argued, should retain "a little to spare"—not to accumulate for oneself but to be able to give to others who are in greater need.

Freedom for the Poor

Wesley had a special empathy with the poor, especially the urban proletariat, in whom he found a greater hunger for salvation and a deeper seriousness about the life of the spirit. The social constituency of early Methodism, after all, was concentrated in the less affluent classes that were less susceptible to the illusion of self-sufficiency: "But 'who hath believed our report?' I fear, *not many rich*."²⁷ A recurrent motif in Wesley's sermons was his withering critique of the plutocracy that dominated British political and economic life. By temperament, he was always more comfortable with rednecks than with bluebloods. Unlike his brother Charles, he had a barely disguised contempt for members of the social aristocracy—"gay triflers," he called them—who were more concerned about

etiquette than about eternity. He was appalled by the "shocking contrast between the Georgian splendours of the newly rich and the grinding misery of the perennial poor (not least, those lately uprooted from ancestral villages and now huddled in and around the cities and pitheads)."²⁸ Perhaps it would be too much to claim that Wesley anticipated the "epistemological privilege of the poor" that has been thematized in recent liberation theologies, or the notion of God's "preferential option for the poor." But his own option is clear: He instinctively identified with people from the lower socioeconomic strata—"Christ's poor"—and always insisted that he was not trying to elaborate a sophisticated theology for the learned but rather to provide "plain truth for plain people." His option for the poor and his misgivings about the spiritual tendencies of affluence combined to inspire his apprehensions about the *embourgeoisement* of Methodism. Wesley's longing for a community of goods among Methodists, his warnings about the dangers of riches, and his insistence on the imperative to "*give all you can*" must all be understood in that context.

Perhaps the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 reinforced the resistance of the Methodist *nouveaux riches* to Wesley's third maxim ("*Give all you can*"). There is abundant evidence suggesting that by the last decade of Wesley's life, many Methodists—perhaps most of them—had fallen into the habit of appropriating his economic ethics with a striking selectivity: *gaining* was far more widely observed than either *saving* or *giving*.²⁹

Warnings about the danger of surplus accumulation became a leitmotif in Wesley's thought throughout the 1780s. From December 1780 until September 1790 (less than six months before his death), Wesley's sermons reflected a growing anxiety—virtually an obsession—about the corrosive impact of affluence on the spiritual integrity of the people called Methodists. His journals include numerous references to the ephemeral nature of the wealth that a capitalist culture encourages us to accumulate, coupled with

25. Sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches," §II.10, *Works* 3:240-41.

26. Sermon 131, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," §I.1, *Works* 4:179.

27. Sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches," §II.9, *Works* 3:240 (emphasis added).

28. Outler, "An Introductory Comment," Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," *Works* 2:263.

29. "Of the three rules . . . You may find many that observe the first rule, namely, 'Gain all you can.' You may find a few that observe the second, 'Save all you can.' But how many have you found that observe the third rule, 'Give all you can?' Have you reason to believe that five hundred of these are to be found among fifty thousand Methodists?" Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §8, *Works* 4:91.

stern warnings against putting trust in the kinds of security that wealth can provide. On Tuesday, 4 July 1786, for instance, Wesley reflected on his visit to Wentworth House, "the splendid seat of the late Marquis of Rockingham. He lately had forty thousand a year in England and fifteen or twenty thousand in Ireland. And what has he now? Six foot of earth."³⁰ On Friday, 15 September of that same year, Wesley identified "the chief besetting sins of Bristol: love of money and love of ease."³¹

Wesley grew ever more insistent in his warnings about the moral and spiritual consequences of surplus accumulation. Wealth brings in its wake, he argued, an inclination toward the sin of idolatry: Affluence sets up the temptation to trust in one's own resources rather than in God.³² But since riches are essentially empty of power and life, to rely on them is not just *sinful* but *foolish* in the extreme: At the point of loss or despair or sickness or death, the material goods to which we look for security are inevitably shown to be false gods that cannot save.³³

Freedom for Simplicity

The lifestyle of a Methodist, then, will be marked by a conscious rejection of the tendency to accumulate; to continue amassing creature comforts is, after all, an overt act of disobedience to the word of Christ:

"Lay not up for thyself treasures upon earth" [Matt. 6.19]. That is a flat, positive command, full as clear as "Thou shalt not commit adultery" [Exod. 20.14]. How then is it possible for a rich man to grow richer without denying the Lord that bought him? Yea, how can any man who has already the necessities of life gain or aim at more, and be guiltless? "Lay not up", saith our Lord, "treasures on earth." If in spite of this you do and will lay up money or good . . . why do you call yourself a Christian?³⁴

30. *Journal* (4 July 1786), *Works* 23:405.

31. *Journal* (15 September 1786), *Works* 23:419.

32. "One thing thou lackest—The love of God, without which all religion is a dead carcase. In order to this, throw away what is to thee the grand hindrance of it. Give up thy great idol, riches." *NT Notes* on Mark 10:21.

33. Sermon 28, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VIII," §§18-21, *Works* 1:623-26.

34. *Ibid.*, §22, *Works* 1:626-27.

Thus, Wesley explicitly rejected the axiological premise of consumerism. He challenged Methodists to repudiate the assumption that the meaning and value of human life are defined in terms of an ever increasing bottom line.

And Wesley practiced what he preached. His own lifestyle exemplified *voluntary renunciation, destitution, and kenosis*. In a letter dated 6 October 1768 (to his sister, Patty Hall), Wesley indicated his attitude toward the riches that came his way: "Money never stays with *me* . . . I throw it out of my hands as soon as possible, lest it should find a way into my heart."³⁵ When the pious Margaret Lewen died and left him a personal bequest of 1000 pounds, he immediately set about devising a system for distributing it to the poor. When he made 200 pounds from sales of his *Concise History of England*, he had given it all away within a week.³⁶

Living in the Now

Reinforcing Wesley's critique of "being-by-possessiveness" is a realized eschatology that views the Kingdom of God not as a distant reality but as a contemporaneous experience. Commenting on Ephesians 2:8 ("For by grace are ye saved through faith"), Wesley argued that the proper orientation of Christian existence is toward immediate experience in the present rather than a deferred fulfillment in the future:

The salvation, which is here spoken of, is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to Paradise. . . . It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death, or (as we usually speak) in the other world. . . . It is not something at a distance; it is a present thing.³⁷

In keeping with this existential orientation toward the present moment, Wesley encouraged believers not to live in the past or in the future but radically in the now.³⁸ If the spiritual life is focused

35. A Letter to Mrs. Hall (6 October 1768), *Letters* (Telford) 5:108-9.

36. Ayling, *John Wesley*, 259.

37. Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," §1.1, *Works* 2:156.

38. See for example Sermon 29, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, IX," §§24-29, *Works* 1:645-49. Wesley advises Methodists to avoid the kind of preoccupation with the future that is implied in the impulse to accumulate worldly possessions: "Enjoy the very, very now" (§28, p. 648).

on authenticity in the present rather than on security in the future, then a major source of the impulse toward acquisition and accumulation melts away. For instance, a major incentive to surplus accumulation is the desire of parents to provide a substantial inheritance for their children. Wesley admitted that he was amazed at "the infatuation of those parents who think they can never leave their children enough."³⁹ Those who live in the present will not feel impelled to accumulate possessions in order to make the future secure for themselves—or for their children. Wesley's censure of personal self-indulgence extended to a critique of the impulse to accumulate possessions for passing on to one's heirs: Parents who themselves live modestly, abstaining from self-indulgent accumulation and consumption, have made little progress if what they decline to spend on themselves they lay up in store for their children. To provide inordinately for one's progeny is but a refined form of self-indulgence—with the added liability that inherited wealth threatens to implicate one's children in all the moral problems associated with increasing affluence: "What! cannot you leave them enough of arrows, firebrands, and death? Not enough of foolish and hurtful desires? Not enough of pride, lust, ambition, vanity? Not enough of everlasting burnings!"⁴⁰

Living in the present is incompatible, finally, with a lifestyle based on indebtedness. It is safe to say that Wesley would be appalled at the excesses of a credit-card culture such as our own. Primary among his objections to a debt-based lifestyle was his assertion that indebtedness restricts the ability to be generous to others. The culture of credit inhibits the philanthropy that Wesley saw as the only refuge from the pernicious effects of affluence:

A person may have more than necessities and conveniences for his family, and yet not be rich. For he may be in debt; and his debts may amount to more than he is worth. But if this be the case he is not a rich man, how much money soever he has in his hands. Yea, a man of business may be afraid that this is the real condition of his affairs, whether it be or no; and then he cannot be so charitable as he would.⁴¹

39. Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," *SIL 7, Works 2:276*.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Sermon 131, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," *SIL 2, Works 4:179*.

From what has been said we hope it is clear that, for contemporary Christians in high-income countries who dwell in relative affluence, Wesley offers a countercultural challenge. He recommends a way of living—a new monasticism, if you will—that is at odds with "the American dream" of bigger is better, more is better, faster is better, and you can have it all. As we listen to him with middle-class ears, we almost feel that he took Jesus too seriously. He was, to put it bluntly, "too Christian."

Nevertheless, there may well be a voice within many of us—however still and small—that resonates with the six ideals just named: (1) the primacy of sharing, (2) freedom from clinging, (3) freedom from having too much, (4) freedom for the poor, (5) freedom for simplicity, and (6) freedom for the present moment. This is where, in a contemporary setting, process theology can be helpful. It can help us in three ways.

First, it can help us interpret the "still small voice" as originating in the very God who dwells with each creature on our planet, who calls the universe into existence, epoch by epoch and moment by moment, and who is at work in each human life relative to the situation at hand. Thus, process theology helps show that as middle-class Christians respond to an inwardly felt call toward simple and compassionate living, we are being faithful, not only to the anti-consumerist teachings of the New Testament and the example of Jesus or Wesley, but also to a deeply creative Calling within the universe. It then adds that this Calling—the creative and healing Lure—is omni-adaptive and thus relative to the needs and situations of each creature. In the life of an overconsumer, for example, the Lure is indeed toward simplification of lifestyle and service to the poor; but in the life of a person who is destitute, the Calling may well be toward an accumulation of more goods and a battle against poverty. In this way, process theology helps contextualize, while affirming, Wesley's insights concerning the workings of the Holy Spirit within human life.

Second, process theology offers a wholesale critique of the "theology of Consumerism" identified earlier, showing that two of its doctrines—its idea that human beings are skin-encapsulated egos

and its doctrine of creation as real estate—are properly replaced by a more relational and life-appreciative way of thinking. Thus it offers a worldview that (1) supports and builds upon Wesley's own insights concerning the social nature of Christian existence and (2) enriches Wesley's seminal but undeveloped insights concerning the value of animal life. In the first instance, process theology shows that what Wesley believed true of Christian existence, namely, that it is profoundly social, is true of all human life. Thus, process theology offers a philosophical anthropology to support the Wesleyan viewpoint, thereby suggesting that there are important ontological insights in Wesley's analysis of Christian existence. In the second instance, process theology widens Wesley's perspective into an ecologically rich point of view, the seeds of which are already found in Wesley.

Third, process theology supports and adds to Wesley's own emphasis on "living in the present" by offering an event-oriented cosmology that displays the universe itself as unfolding, not simply epoch by epoch or even day by day but rather—in a more Buddhist vein—moment by moment. In so doing, process theology opens the door for a creative dialogue with another religious tradition, which can, in its own way, further help Christians transcend the acquisitive and goal-driven ethos of consumer culture. In what follows we want to say a word more about each of these three contributions.

The Lure of God

Let us assume that in many middle-class Christians there is a hidden yearning—a still small voice—that transcends the acquisitive nature of consumerism and that calls toward a simpler and more frugal way of living. From a process perspective, this inwardly felt Lure—this Holy Spirit—is already within all over-consuming persons on our planet, even prior to their asking for it and quite apart from whether they are self-identified Christians. This is an example of what Wesley would mean by preventent grace.

As process theologians understand this grace, it is (1) the presence of fresh possibilities for healing and wholeness relative to the situation at hand and (2) the presence of a divine desire—a divine eros—within those individuals and communities that these possi-

bilities be actualized. What Wesley shows so clearly is that, for the overconsumer of our world, there are fresh possibilities for sharing and simplicity, for solidarity with the poor and freedom from affluence, for relinquishment from inordinate attachment and living in the present moment. Process theologians would then add that our desire to actualize these possibilities—to make them real in our lives—is itself God's prayer within our lives. It is not simply that God calls us into simpler living; it is that God needs us to live more simply so that others (the poor and the other creatures) might simply live. Our task as humans is not simply to pray to God; it is also to hear and respond to God's prayer within our own lives.

This hearing and responding is what Christians call "discernment." It consists of listening to the various voices within us and deciding which are neutral, which are from the enemy of our better self (sometimes called "the devil"), and which are from God. Wesley felt deeply that the voices of consumerism were from the enemy, and that those toward simplicity and frugality were from God. Process theologians agree and then invite us to listen deeply to these positive voices, with the help of scripture, tradition, reason, experience, and also with the help of spiritual disciplines such as Wesley emphasized, including fasting. What process theologians will add is that such fasting rightly includes not only fasting from food but also fasting from television, radio, computers, and other "modern conveniences," to which many of us are so deeply addicted. In a contemporary context, one of the deepest fasts may be a fasting from electricity.

Process theologians will further add that this life of discernment, as enriched by fasting and other disciplines, is not so much a decisive and dramatic act but rather an ongoing process that, in time and with the help of God, becomes a habit of the heart, partly conscious but largely unconscious. The hope then is that, with divine guidance, Christians and others can come to respond to the divine Lure toward simplicity in a more spontaneous and instinctive way.

Additionally, process theologians will emphasize that this divine prayer—this divine Lure within human life—is also found throughout the cosmos and within other creatures. Birds respond to the Lure by flying, fish by swimming, dogs by barking, and cats by purring. We humans respond by becoming wise, compassionate,

and free in our daily lives. In so doing, we do not leave the world behind; rather, as Wesley emphasized, we leave our inordinate attachments behind, so that we can live more lovingly with others.

It follows then that the "sharing" to which we are called, by Wesley and of course by Jesus, consists of not only sharing money, time, and resources with other humans but also sharing space with other creatures such that they, no less than humans, can obey the divine command to be fruitful and multiply.⁴² And it follows that the relinquishment of inordinate attachments includes a "letting go" of the idea that humans, and humans alone, have a right to inherit the earth. This takes us to the second way in which process theology can build upon Wesley: namely, its doctrine of creation and its doctrine of human existence.

Earth as Alive

The tendency within consumerism is to reduce the earth and its creatures to commodities for exchange in the marketplace. The phrase used in process theology to explain this reductionism is "instrumental value." The idea is that the theology of consumerism wrongly reduces the whole of nonhuman life to its instrumental value to human beings, forgetful of (1) the "intrinsic value" that each living being has in and for itself, (2) the value that each living being has for God, and (3) the unique value that all of the creatures, humans included, have as a diverse whole in God's ongoing life. It is tempting to speak of the second value just named as a creature's "instrumental value" for God, but this way of speaking would go against one of the deeper intuitions of process theology, which is that God values each creature "in and for itself." Thus we can speak of a creature's "intrinsic value" in and for itself and also its "intrinsic value" for God.

In process theology, this appreciation of intrinsic value is central to love, both human and divine love. We humans "love our neighbors as ourselves" when we approach them as ends in themselves, not simply means to our ends and when we empathize with their own inner states, as best we can. Such empathy lies in "feeling the feelings" of other humans and other creatures in vague, intuitive,

⁴² See Sermon 64, "The New Creation," §17, *Works* 2:508-9; Sermon 67, "On Divine Providence," §§9-12, *Works* 2:538-39.

and meaningful ways. Process theologians believe that what we feel indistinctly, God feels more fully. Thus, God is not only the Iure within each creature toward healing and wholeness relative to the situation at hand but also the Great Empathy—the divine Companion—who shares in the sufferings and joys of all creatures, each on its own terms and for its own sake.

A process theology of creation thus emphasizes that we humans can share in the divine Empathy in limited but meaningful ways, feeling the very presence of the earth as a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects, and understanding ourselves as parts of this very communion.⁴³

Accordingly, a process theology of human existence emphasizes that we humans become fully human when we awaken to the communal nature of our own existence, understanding that we ourselves are not individuated substances with self-contained walls but are open spaces—fields of feeling and awareness—whose very natures include, rather than exclude, the feelings of others. We awaken to the truth about ourselves in acts of love, which have epistemological value in their own right. When we let go of our defenses and allow the feelings of others to move us, sharing in their joys and sufferings, we discover who we truly are: empathizers made in the image of that deeper Empathy that is God.

Moment-by-Moment

Finally, a process theology emphasizes that this life of sharing in the joys and sufferings of others requires a willingness to slow down, be patient, and attend mindfully to what is happening in each present moment. This attention does not involve forgetting the past or neglecting the future. From a process perspective, we are inevitably and deeply shaped by all that has happened in the past and by the presence of the future as pure potentiality. We are individualized fields of awareness, constituted not only by what we see, hear, touch, and taste, but also by what we remember and anticipate, consciously and unconsciously. Nevertheless, it remains the case that, from a process point of view, we are never in the past

⁴³ The phrase "communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" is often used by the ecological author Thomas Berry. We borrow the phrase from several of his oral presentations.

gazing at the future, and we are never in the future gazing at the past. Rather, at any and every moment of our lives, we are living in the present, shaped by what has been and by what can be. If we are to meet God anywhere at all, it will have to be in the present moment, right where we are standing or sitting, laughing or crying, living or dying.

While Wesley points us in the direction of such "living in the present moment," Buddhists take us still more deeply into it.⁴⁴ They suggest that if we truly awaken to the reality of the present moment, we will realize that it is a coming together of the entire universe—all its joys and sufferings, all its beauties and horrors—and that we ourselves are made of all these things. This means that we cannot separate ourselves from others: the suffering ones, to be sure, but also those who cause their suffering. Each present moment is a communion of subjects, not just a collection of objects. Buddhists further suggest that we cannot objectify the present moment as an object among objects because we ourselves are the present moment. As the moment comes into existence and then perishes to be succeeded by another moment, which does the same, we ourselves are this coming into existence and perishing, and then rising up again.

As process theologians appropriate this insight, they—we—learn to see that the traditional Christian idea that we should "live and die daily with Christ" has a deep meaning. It means that the whole of an individual's life, understood most deeply, is an ongoing process of death and resurrection, of living by dying, at ever deepening levels, with no two moments the same. As we awaken to this truth, we then realize that we cannot and need not "hold on" to life or to ourselves, as if objects for permanent possession. We cannot live by acquisition, by owning things, by possessing things. We can only live-by-letting-go into a deeper grace that can never be owned, as if it were a commodity among commodities, but can always be trusted. Wesley's name for this deeper grace was "God."

44. Sermon 67, "On Divine Providence," §17, *Works* 2:542-43; see also Sermon 91, "On Charity," §11.3, *Works* 3:296, where Wesley explicitly renounces Christian exclusivism by saying, "But this we know, that he is not the God of the Christians only, but the God of the heathens also; that he is 'rich in mercy to all that call upon him,' 'according to the light they have'; and that 'in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him.'"

He saw this grace revealed uniquely, but not exclusively in Jesus Christ. We do, too.

What consumerism most obstructs is a capacity to live from this grace. It encourages Christians and others to live willfully, not willingly: to utilize their creative energies to "get things" and "achieve recognition" rather than to love and let go of things when they pass away. We hope that this essay has shown that both Wesley in his way and process theology in its way offer a challenge to lifestyle, attitudes, and values of consumerism.

CONCLUSION

The question remains as to whether contemporary Christians, including us, can learn from this challenge and enter into that "still most excellent way" that Paul called life in Christ. This is the urgent challenge of our time, upon which the well-being of life on earth sorely depends. For process theologians, it is not fully known—even to God—whether we will respond to this challenge. Our decisions partly determine the outcome of what, at present, are two possibilities: a continuation of the ways of overconsumption, in which case so many others will suffer, or a learning to live more simply so that others might simply live. But one thing is clear, at least for process theologians and for Wesley. There lies within each of us a divine prayer that we will choose the second option: that we choose life over money, community over commodity, love over greed. Given the presence of this prayer within each of us, everything does not depend on us. We need not willfully engineer a destiny of our design. Our only need is to listen and respond to a healing and creative Spirit at work in the world, who steadfastly seeks the well-being of life.