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## **Wesleyan Theology and Moral Psychology: Precedents for Continuing Engagement**

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The last two decades have witnessed vigorous growth in study of the interchange between science and religion. An important dimension of this recent work is historical scholarship discrediting some popular caricatures (dating from the late nineteenth century) of Christianity as anti-science. This scholarship has dispelled many myths and demonstrated that there has been regular, typically constructive, interaction between theology and study of the natural world through the history of the church.<sup>1</sup>

In a book focused on the nexus of Wesleyan theology and the social sciences, it is fitting to begin with a reminder that John Wesley is an example of such engagement with current studies of the natural world.<sup>2</sup> His five-volume *Survey of the Wisdom of God* covered the range of the natural sciences. Part of Wesley's interest was his commitment to providing medical advice to the poor.<sup>3</sup> Another clear interest was to highlight the integral connection of humanity with the larger creation, and our accountability for that connection.<sup>4</sup> But no area of current study of human nature interested Wesley more than efforts to explain the dynamics of choice and action—what is often called “moral psychology.” Central to this area of concern are questions like: What impels or inclines a person to initiate and sustain certain actions? Could that person have chosen to act differently? What might enable a person to cease undesirable behavior, or “free” that person to engage in more desirable behavior?

Alternative possible answers to such questions have clear implications for any model of Christian life. The first section of this essay will trace Wesley's dialogue with alternatives being championed in his day,

highlighting how he drew on moral psychology to articulate and defend his convictions about “holiness of heart and life,” nurtured in the “means of grace.” The second section will consider how shifting assumptions about moral psychology among Wesley’s nineteenth-century heirs made it difficult to maintain Wesley’s convictions. The final section will sketch Wesleyan interaction with developments in psychology in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Centrality of Wesley’s “Affectional” Moral Psychology to his Model of Christian Life**

The question which framed the whole of John Wesley’s spiritual journey was: “How can I be the kind of person that God created me to be, and that I long to be, a person holy in heart and life?” In his early years, a morally earnest Wesley focused on our responsibility to *strive* for holiness of heart and life. In his spiritual renewal around 1738 Wesley appropriated more deeply a recognition of the priority of God’s gracious acceptance to any response on our part in the Christian life. This initially stood in some tension with his emphasis on our moral rectitude. However, Wesley eventually wove his deepened conviction of the graciousness of salvation into his long-standing conviction of the importance of holiness in heart and life. Significantly, he drew upon a recent alternative emphasis in moral psychology to form this mature perspective.

The leading Anglican voices at the beginning of the eighteenth century assumed a moral psychology with roots running back to Plato. Plato’s central emphases were appropriated early in Christian spirituality. The resulting model emphasized our ability to reason as what provides humans with some capacity for self-determination. By contrast, it identified the greatest obstacle to moral rectitude as the passional dimension of human life—those emotional reactions, instincts, and the like that are not a product of rational initiative or under fully conscious control. The normative corollary was that moral choice and action required bringing this passional dimension under rational control. This is admittedly not an easy task, but the central stream of this Christian tradition has assumed that, through regular practice (empowered by grace), we can habituate an increased aptitude at maintaining moral rectitude. Wesley was nurtured in this *habituated rational control* model of moral psychology and it is reflected in his early prescriptions for the spiritual life.

While this Platonic model was widely valued in eighteenth-century Anglicanism (in significant part because of its defense of self-determination), there were alternative voices that branded its stress on

duty, rational control, and habit formation as “Pelagian.” This judgment echoed the challenge that St. Augustine had raised to appropriations of Plato in the early church. In his spiritual pilgrimage Augustine had struggled and failed to gain habituated rational control over his passions. He drew two conclusions from this failure: 1) that such attempts trust in ineffective human efforts rather than in divine gracious intervention; and 2) that reason is more the slave than the master of the passions. The alternative moral psychology that he developed remains one of the clearest examples of deterministic moral psychology in Christian thought. Augustine argued that moral choices and actions flow from our ruling affections; reason cannot thwart this flow, and there is no other source of volition. As a result of the fall, all humans are born with bent affections that give rise to sinful actions. Nothing we attempt in our own power can successfully suppress or remove these bent affections. However, in regeneration God graciously implants—in the elect—new affections that naturally manifest themselves in holy living (to the degree allowed within the constraints of our present conflicted situation).

Wesley’s deeper encounter with this Augustinian stream of Christian spirituality (via the English Moravians) in 1738, at the climax of a period of his own spiritual struggle, sensitized him to the subtle tendency of preoccupation with human habit formation to eclipse the conviction of God’s gracious prevenience in salvation. The encounter also reenforced his growing doubts about the ability of rational conviction alone to effectuate human action. But Wesley could not accept Augustine’s deterministic conclusions, and he quickly became suspicious of the quietist tendencies in Moravian spirituality.

Wesley’s way forward proved to be paved by his embrace of the empiricist swing in eighteenth-century British philosophy. Wesley was exposed to the growing stream of empiricist moral thought during his Oxford years. In contrast to the Platonic model which had dominated prior Anglican theology, this stream argued that while reason can clarify the conditions and consequences of a proposed course of action it was not capable of effecting our engagement in that action. On analogy with empiricist claims in epistemology, they insisted that humans are *moved* to action only as we are experientially *affected*. To put it in a practical example: rational persuasion of the rightness of loving others is not sufficient of itself to move us to do so; we are ultimately inclined and enabled to love others only as we experience being loved ourselves. To drive this point home, empiricist moral thought redefined the human “will.” They criticized prior moral psychologies for either reducing the will to being a mere cipher for intellectual conviction, or assuming it was

an innate store of power for spontaneous acts of volition. They argued that the will is instead properly equated with the set of *affections* that all humans possess, and that these affections are best understood as *responsive* in nature. The affections are not self-generating springs of motive power, they incite us to action only when they are first affected.

Wesley's writings after 1738 embrace this *affectional* moral psychology. This is evident in his typical list of the faculties that constitute the Image of God in humanity: understanding, will, liberty, and conscience. Wesley stressed that "will" in this list was an inclusive term for the various affections. These affections are not simply feelings, they are the indispensable motivating inclinations behind human action. In ideal expression they integrate the rational and emotional dimensions of human life into holistic inclinations toward action (like love). While provocative of human action, the affections have a crucial receptive dimension as well. They are not self-causative, but are awakened and thrive *in response* to experience of external reality. In what Wesley now held as the crucial instance, it is only in response to our experience of God's gracious love for us, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that our affection of love for God and others is awakened and grows.

This grounding of moral volition in responsive holistic affections shares similarities with Augustine. It also calls to mind empiricists like David Hume who presented the influence of our passions upon our actions as invincible, thereby undermining human freedom. Wesley could not accept such deterministic implications. He judged them to be contrary to our experience, reason, the Christian tradition, and the teachings of Scripture. This led him to distinguish carefully among our human capacities between the "will" and "liberty." While the will responsively *inclines* us to various actions, liberty is our—limited, but real—capacity to *allow or refuse* the enactment of any particular inclination. Though we cannot self-generate love, we do have the liberty to stifle responsive loving or let it flow! This insistence distanced Wesley's mature moral psychology from both philosophical and theological forms of strong determinism.

But how did Wesley's mature view differ from the quietistic tendencies of the Moravians (who rejected all attempts to "coax" proper dispositions, favoring "spontaneous" expression)? On this point we need to appreciate Wesley's language of moral "tempers." He drew on a common eighteenth-century sense of this word to affirm that our affections need not be simply transitory, they can be focused and strengthened into enduring dispositions. The capacity for simple responsive love is an affection; an enduring disposition to love is a (holy) temper. The crucial point is that, for the mature Wesley, God does not typically infuse holy tempers instantaneously.

Rather, God's regenerating grace awakens in believers the "seeds" of such virtues. These seeds then strengthen and take shape as we "grow in grace." Given liberty, this growth involves our responsible cooperation, for we could instead neglect or stifle God's gracious empowerment.

With this sketch of Wesley's mature *affectional* moral psychology in mind we can consider how integral it was to his endorsement of Christian perfection and his emphasis on the means of grace in the pursuit of this goal. This is signaled by the centrality of the tempers to his understanding of both sin and holiness. In the case of sin, he insisted that the issue was more than individual actions. He frequently discussed sin in terms of a threefold division: sinful nature or tempers, sinful words, and sinful actions. The point of this division was that sinful actions and words *flow from* corrupted tempers, so the problem of sin must ultimately be addressed at this affectional level. Correspondingly, Wesley's typical definition of Christian life placed primary emphasis on this inward dimension, or the renewal of our "heart." This renewal involves both the enlivening of our affections in response to the affect of God's graciously communicated loving Presence and the tempering of these affections into holy dispositions. Since holiness of thought, word, and action would flow from such renewal, Wesley could identify the essential goal of all true religion as the recovery of holy tempers.

This makes the means of grace central to true religion as well, since Wesley frequently warned his followers of the folly of seeking the end of holy tempers apart from the means that God has graciously provided. Wesley valued the means of grace both as avenues through which God conveys the gracious Presence that enables our responsive growth in holiness and as exercises by which we responsibly nurture that holiness.

How close did Wesley hope we could come, through responsive participation in the means of grace, to the end of recovered holy tempers in this life? He is well-known for the claim that *entire* sanctification is a present possibility for Christians. The place to begin unpacking this claim is to stress that entire sanctification (or Christian Perfection) is not an isolated reality for Wesley. It is a dynamic level of maturity within the larger process of sanctification, the level characteristic of *adult* Christian life. Since he considered love to be the essence of Christian life, he could define Christian Perfection as "the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions."<sup>6</sup> God's love is shed abroad in the lives of all Christians, awakening their responsive love for God and others. But this love is often weak, sporadic, and contested by contrary affections in new believers. In the lives of the entirely sanctified it is strengthened and patterned to the point that it provides stable

character.

Such character would express itself in actions. For example, acts of love would typically flow from a temper of love. Yet, Wesley also recognized that ignorance, mistakes, and other human frailties often distort the passage from tempers (formed affections) to action. It was in this sense that he tired of the debate over whether Christian Perfection was “sinless.” He did indeed believe that it consisted in holy tempers, but not that it was characterized by infallible expression of those tempers in actions.

Perhaps the best way to capture Wesley’s affectional view of entire sanctification is to say he was convinced that the Christian life did not have to remain a life of perpetual struggle. He believed that Christians should aspire to take on the disposition of Christ, and live out that disposition within the constraints of our human infirmities. To deny this possibility would be to deny the sufficiency of God’s empowering—making the power of sin greater than that of grace.

### **Nineteenth-Century Methodist Shift in Moral Psychology, and Its Impact**

The more one appreciates how Wesley’s conception of holiness of heart and life was framed by his mature moral psychology, the easier it is to understand how difficult it might be to maintain this conception if one modified his psychological model. This is exactly the situation in which Wesley’s theological descendants rapidly placed themselves, particularly in North America. By the beginning of the nineteenth century an affectional moral psychology had come to be equated in popular culture with determinism, due to the broad influence of the forms of this psychology championed by Hume and Jonathan Edwards. As a result, Wesley’s heirs found it hard to recognize his moral psychology, let alone defend it. The aversion to determinism that they inherited from him ironically led them to rally instead behind those who were defending our capacity for rational choice as what “frees” us to rise above and control all influences that would otherwise determine human choice and action.

Many of Wesley’s nineteenth-century heirs were drawn to a *decisionistic* reframing of rational-control emphases (via Thomas Reid and Immanuel Kant) that was rapidly pervading North Atlantic culture. On this model, the “will” becomes our innate ability at any given point to assert rational control over various motivating dynamics, thereby freeing ourselves to make moral choices. Emotional or affectional motivating dynamics are assumed to be blind (arational), hence technically amoral.<sup>7</sup> Likewise habits and inclinations are judged to have moral status only when voluntarily

embraced, and often considered to be more an obstacle to than a facilitator of *intentional* moral decisions to act.

Adopting such differing emphases from Wesley's moral psychology was bound to impact the reception of his correlated conviction that true holiness of heart and life is achievable in this life through the nurture of a holistic set of means of grace. Indeed, it set off a debate among nineteenth-century Methodists in which revisions of Wesley's precedent crept in on all sides.

The greatest revisions were by those who stressed most the *decisionistic* aspect of the dominant modern moral psychology. Within decisionistic models a "virtuous" person is not one who has nurtured inclinations towards desired moral behavior but one who heroically rises above all inclinations in an autonomous moral act. Moreover, this validation applies only to that act and must be won anew with each subsequent decision. On such terms, it is no wonder that prominent voices in nineteenth-century Methodism characterized "perfect" holiness as simply an *ideal to be endlessly pursued*—being achieved, at best, on sporadic and fleeting occasions.

Understandably, other Methodists judged this a betrayal of Wesley and sought a way to affirm enduring Christian Perfection within the dynamics of their revised moral psychology. Some simply insisted that expectation of a consistent series of autonomous virtuous decisions is not so unrealistic, given our regeneration by the Spirit. But this alternative tended to consolidate God's gracious transforming work of regeneration to a single event (the New Birth), setting aside Wesley's conception of sanctification as the progressive transformation of unholy inclinations (tempers) into holy ones. While they recognized that new believers continue to struggle with inclinations to sinful acts, they accepted the notion that these inclinations have little moral status. Indeed, such inclinations were considered a necessary expression of our probationary situation. The true locus of moral concern, therefore, was not their amelioration but simply the consistent *decisionistic* exercise over them of the *rational control* that was made possible by our New Birth.

This first way of defending Christian Perfection struck many Methodists as overly moralistic. While they shared the conviction that mature Christians should evidence consistency in their moral lives, they did not believe that it was a realistic expectation of new believers. Rather such consistency must be *developed* within the Christian life. This emphasis moved them closer to Wesley's model of habituated tempers, but differences reflecting the rationalist tone of their preferred moral psychology remained. They tended to conceive of Christian Perfection as

the *habituated rational control* over our lower (affectional) nature that is developed by repeated practice. The holism of Wesley's tempers is missing here, as is the empowering dimension of the means of grace that correlates to his emphasis on the responsive nature of affections. This is most evident in their tendency to restrict emphasis on the means of grace to those means aimed mainly at exhorting our intellect: sermon, bible study, and prayer.

There was a third major possible way of conceiving Christian Perfection within the broad rational-control camp of moral psychology—affirming that Christians can enjoy an enduring *spontaneous* rational control over our passions and affections. Since most Christians do not enter such an enduring state at the New Birth, this option required clarifying what obstructions still blocked its expression and how they could be removed. Some nineteenth-century Methodists invoked John Fletcher's notion of a post-regeneration "baptism of the Holy Spirit" as this pivotal event. Like a river bursting its dam, rational control was anticipated to flow *immediately* and *naturally* after this baptism. This stirred up a vigorous debate over such a "second work of grace." Many of the other defenders of the possibility of Christian Perfection charged that this created a spiritual elitism and lowered the expectation of holy living for "average" Christians. They also pushed for a specific explanation of what it was that rendered holiness impossible for the merely regenerate Christian, and how the baptism of the Holy Spirit resolved this situation.

The explanation that came to define this third way of conceiving Christian Perfection in nineteenth-century Methodism focused upon Original Sin. While Wesley most typically called the unholy tempers remaining in believers "inward sin" or "inbeing sin," he also used the traditional language of "Original Sin." The latter term became standard for Wesley's heirs, in designating the distorted inclinations of believers' affections. But this forced a confrontation with the decisionistic assumption that inclinations of our affections are morally relevant only to the degree that they represent the cumulative impact of our individual deliberate choices (thereby specifically excluding any *innate* inclinations). A predictable result of this confrontation was the growing number of Methodists who abandoned the notion of Original Sin. The more significant result, for present interests, was the manner in which some chose to defend the notion. They specifically differentiated Original Sin from any inclination of our affections; it became a deeper lying inborn "evil principle," with distortions in our affections being among its secondary effects.

The Methodists who pushed this distinction were those most concerned



to champion a model of Christian Perfection as something achieved instantaneously, subsequent to the New Birth, at the time one receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They made their case by using this revised conception of Original Sin to account for the spiritual struggles of new believers. They argued that the true obstacle to holy living is not wrong inclinations, which might be defused or reshaped, but this deeper lying evil principle (which they described with such additional names as the “Old Man” and the “carnal mind”). The clear implication was that neither heroic volitional resolve nor thorough habituation can bring true freedom for obedience. The only thing that will suffice is for this principle to be removed from the believer’s life. And how is this possible? The core of the final revision was the claim that the baptism of the Holy Spirit—and it *alone*—effects this removal. New believers struggling with unholy inclinations should be encouraged to move on rapidly to receiving this additional gift of God, not frustrated by counsel about nurturing holy character. Those who receive this baptism will find *rational control* over their passionate nature flowing *spontaneously* (though not irresistibly) from that point.

This final model became the “classic” understanding of the holiness wing of Methodism by the end of the nineteenth century. For all of its differences from the other revisions, it suffered the same fate—those growing up in mainline Methodist and holiness churches under these various models increasingly found them inadequate. The models called for a level of Christian maturity that they did little to empower and nurture, rendering their call unrealistic. *In retrospect it has become clear that their antipathy to determinism had pushed Wesley’s heirs to conceive of the “freedom” of the will in a way that failed to value sufficiently the responsive and formative dimensions of human willing.*

### **Reactions to the Emergence of Modern Psychotherapy & Experimental Psychology**

As doubts about the realism of their (revised) models of Christian Perfection were piling up in the early twentieth century one might have expected members of the various Wesleyan traditions to question the adequacy of their assumed moral psychologies and to search for alternatives, but developments in the discipline of psychology forestalled such reconsideration for some time. At the heart of these developments was the move to transform psychology into a modern science. The first steps in this direction came with Enlightenment figures like John Locke, who began to shift attention from debates about what faculties might

account for our experience to simple consideration of our states of consciousness themselves as empirical data to be analyzed and categorized. This shift carried within it a recasting of the nature of psychology, moving from a consciously metaphysical and normative discipline to a purportedly *descriptive* and *explanatory* discipline. This casting was formalized with Wilhelm Wundt's opening of the first psychology laboratory in Leipzig in 1879.

Like most other Christian traditions, Methodists were slow to expect aid from the new scientific approach to psychology in training persons for "care of souls," assigning textbooks in psychology that operated out of the earlier philosophical model well into the 1920s. Meanwhile, those Methodists who did engage the new approach quickly recognized that the initial wave of descriptive psychology retained many of the assumptions that underlay the current reigning moral psychology. Prominent representatives like John Dewey continued to take at face value the human sense of a capacity for self-determination and to identify as the mark of mature character the presence of rational/moral control over the passions, a control that is developed by an intentional series of decisions. Most of the revised models of Christian life in nineteenth-century Methodism found little to object to here. The one clear area of debate focused on the apparent dismissal of the possible efficacy of a single decisive act of the will.

The typical response of writers in the holiness movement at this juncture to emphasis by academic psychologists on the scientific evidence of the positive benefits of habituation was to charge them with offering a false alternative to the true instantaneous means of establishing the control of our will over our passions. By contrast, the work of Dewey and other psychologists was frequently invoked in the broader Wesleyan movement as scientific warrant to criticize privileging of dramatic conversion experiences as the normative pattern for "becoming" a Christian. In a few cases this critique hardened into suspicion of (or disdain for) all dramatic conversions. Most moved instead toward the implicit normative conclusion that William James advanced via his psychological "description" of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)—namely, that we should avoid standardizing any single way of experiencing religious conversion, because differing ways will be appropriate to the naturally occurring variety of human temperaments.

Meanwhile things were changing rapidly in the discipline of psychology. Major theorists were pushing the discipline beyond mere description of psychological states, focusing it on the ultimate scientific goal of *explaining* human experience and behavior. And in these

explanations they now refused to take at face value our sense of being autonomous rational masters of our behavior. In particular, Sigmund Freud's "hermeneutic of suspicion" stressed the role of the unconscious with its collection of irrational drives and suppressed experiences in explaining behavior that previous psychologists had usually attributed to conscious human choice. This marked a reentry into modern psychology of emphasis on the passional element in human willing, though as formulated by Freud it carried heavy overtones of determinism. Freud was followed by a series of deterministic accounts of human action in experimental psychology that put primary stress on factors other than conscious rational choice—starting with B. F. Skinner's behaviorism and continuing into recent sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.

Paralleling the larger religious community again, the initial reaction of most Wesleyans to these changing emphases in psychotherapy and experimental psychology was negative. The dominant philosophical movement at this time in mainline Methodism was Boston Personalism, which had defended personal freedom and responsibility against the deterministic implications of various modern metaphysics. The similar implications in Freudianism and behaviorism rendered them objectionable to those influenced by personalism who were helping form the new field of the psychology of religion. Leading voices like Francis Strickland and Gordon Allport argued for psychological models that preserved a role for authentic choice and responsibility.

The initial reaction in the holiness wing of Wesleyanism to suggestions of the role of the unconscious in human action was also typically negative, worrying that this was simply an attempt to "explain away" sinning. But continuing dialogue with modern psychology and its emphasis on the nonrational dimensions of human motivation encouraged moves in this wing to qualify the "spontaneous rational control" emphasis of their model of Christian Perfection. The most common way of doing this has been to invoke a distinction between purity and maturity that separates the "carnal nature" that is instantaneously cleansed in entire sanctification from repressed complexes and other psychological issues that must be dealt with through long-term counseling. Whatever else one makes of this distinction, it equates Christian Perfection with something quite different from Wesley's model of mature holy tempers formed by responsive participation in the full range of the means of grace.

With their reductionist and determinist tendencies, Freudian psychotherapy and experimental psychology pushed many of the traditional issues of moral psychology out of bounds for psychological study, at least in professional settings. The championing in the latter part of the twentieth

century of alternative “humanistic” schools of psychotherapy—with their emphasis on restoring authentic freedom by healing distorted self-perceptions—was a move to recover the central concern of moral psychology. Many in the Wesleyan camp initially welcomed these humanistic models as compatible with (if not an improvement upon!) Christian and Wesleyan commitments. But further reflection has led them to join other Christian interpreters in judging some of these models to be unduly optimistic about primal human nature. Equally problematic for Wesleyans is the recognition that the humanistic conception of therapy tends to terminate at the juncture *accepting* one’s character flaws, lacking Wesley’s emphasis on the possibility (through God’s gracious empowering) of truly *recovering* holy character.

### **Transition to the Current Engagement**

Anyone who works in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy will know that the last couple of decades have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of models and a number of moves to address inadequacies of earlier trends. As in earlier generations, specialists observing these developments with Wesleyan eyes have begun probing these new models and emphases. Along with the expressions of concern, there have been suggestions of some significant new areas of resonance.<sup>8</sup> Many of these suggestions are developed in the essays which follow.

## Notes

1. See in particular Ronald L. Numbers (ed.), *Galileo Goes to Jail: And Other Myths About Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and David C. Lindberg & Ronald L. Numbers (eds.), *When Science and Christianity Meet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

2. See Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley's Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences," in Thomas J. Oord (ed.), *Divine Grace and Emerging Creation: Wesleyan Forays in Science and Creation* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), 1–36; and other essays in the volume.

3. See Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing," *Methodist History* 46 (2007): 4–33; and Deborah Madden (ed.), "Inward and Outward Health": *John Wesley's Holistic Concept of Medical Science, the Environment, and Holy Living* (London: Epworth, 2008).

4. See the Lodahl essay in this volume.

5. The following discussion condenses Randy L. Maddox, "Psychology and Wesleyan Theology: Precedents and Prospects for a Renewed Engagement," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23 (2004): 101–9. Readers can refer to this earlier essay for more documentation.

6. "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection," *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 11:446.

7. See the recent discussion of this move among early Scottish psychologists like Thomas Brown in Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98–134.

8. A sense of this most recent interaction can be gained from Maxine Walker (ed.), *Between Nature and Grace: Mapping the Interface of Wesleyan Theology and Psychology* (San Diego: Point Loma Press, 2000); and *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23 (2004): 101–199.