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Wesleyan Hymns, the Icons of the Wesleyan Tradition

S T Kimbrough, Jr.

Introduction

Are not the worlds of literary art and graphic art so radically different in their depiction of images, that it is futile to think of mixing them in this discussion? Can the hymnic poetry of Charles Wesley be likened to the icons of Orthodoxy? Does one venerate written art in the same way one venerates the image of an icon?

The icon invites the worshiper through a tangible, visual art form to share in the vision of God, a vision enabled by the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Christ, who took on tangible form in the flesh, through the tangible form of the icon is venerated, but it is not the form of the icon that is venerated, rather the image of Christ.

How does this, however, relate to the world of sacred, poetical art, particularly that of Charles Wesley? There is an interesting passage from “The Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts” by St. Theodore the Studite, which assists in the understanding of such a relationship. He is addressing the question of the portrayal of Christ and speaking of the relationship of *sight* and *hearing*.

Sight precedes hearing both in the location of its organ and in the perception by the senses. For one first sees something and then transmits the sight to the sense of hearing. For example, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on the throne of glory, surrounded and praised by the six-winged seraphim. Likewise Ezekiel gazed upon the chariot of God, the cherubim. Moreover, the divine-voiced disciple first saw the Lord and later wrote out the message. If, therefore, this is how it is, and however far you go back, you would find the written word originating in observation, then it is undoubtedly necessary that if the sight of Christ is removed, the word about Him must be removed first; and if the second is sketched out, the first must be sketched beforehand.¹

In another place, namely, the “First Refutation of the Iconoclasts,” St. Theodore the Studite says, “hearing is equal to sight and it is necessary to use both senses.”²

Clearly St. Theodore is speaking of *sight* and *hearing* in relationship to Holy Scripture. (This author is not so certain about the political correctness of his view in terms of a twenty-first century understanding of physically challenged persons. But he was not wrestling with that in the eighth century in his refutation of the iconoclasts.) One tends to think of *sight* in reference to icons, for there is a vast world of *visual icons* to which one’s attention may be drawn and they remain at the center of the Orthodox worship experience. St. Theodore, however, emphasizes the engagement of the sense of hearing as well.

¹St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. By Catherine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981, 1993, 2001), 78.

²*Ibid.*, 37.

In his book, *The Orthodox Way*, Bishop Kallistos Ware gives three examples of what he calls *verbal icons*.³ With them he illustrates the personal love that prevails between believers and the Subject of their faith, namely God. The first and second *verbal icons* are specific visions of human experience, the first being the arrest of Bishop Polycarp and the second being St. Symeon the New Theologian's description of Christ's revelation to him in a vision of light. Both passages give the reader a vivid picture of human experience in loving response to God. The third verbal icon cited by Ware is a prayer of the seventeenth-century Russian bishop, St. Dimitri of Rostov.

Come, my Light, and illumine my darkness.
 Come, my Life, and revive me from death.
 Come, my Physician, and heal my wounds.
 Come, Flame of divine love, and burn up the thorns of my sins,
 kindling my heart with the flame of thy love.
 Come, my King, sit upon the throne of my heart and reign there.
 For thou alone art my King and my Lord.⁴

There are numerous Wesley hymns that read like metrical versions of St. Dimitri of Rostov's prayer. The language, imagery, metaphors, are typical of Wesley. The sense of God as a Light, Life, Physician, and the Flame of divine love which kindles the heart—all are typical expressions of Wesley.

(a) "Come, my Light, and illumine my darkness." Of the Light that illumines darkness Wesley says:

Light of those whose dreary Dwelling
 Borders on the Shades of Death,
 Come, and by thy Love's revealing
 Dissipate the Clouds beneath:
 The new Heaven and Earth's Creator,
 In our deepest Darkness rise,
 Scattering all the Night of Nature,
 Pouring Eye-sight on our Eyes.⁵

(b) "Come, my Life, and revive me from death." Of God as Life who overcomes death Wesley writes:

Life of the World, our Souls to feed
 Thyself descend from high!
 Grant us of Thee the Living Bread
 To eat, and never die!⁶

³(Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 17.

⁴*Ibid.*, 18.

⁵*Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1745), No. 11, stanza 1.

⁶*Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: William Strahan, 1739), p. 216.

(c) "Come, my Physician, and heal my wounds." In the following excerpts from three different sacred poems Wesley prays to the Divine Physician:

Saviour of men, Physician good,
 The medicine to my soul apply,
 Apply thine efficacious blood
 To purge, and save, and sanctify:
 The true, substantial holiness
 O might I in thy nature prove!
 Thy Spirit breathe, thy name impress,
 And fill my heart with humble love.⁷

Physician of the sin-sick soul,
 thou heal'st us when thou dost forgive,
 thy mercy makes, and keeps us whole,
 in perfect health it bids us live,
 in perfect holiness renewed,
 and filled with all the life of God.⁸

Thou canst with equal ease make whole
 The body, and the sinsick soul,
 Physician of mankind;
 Thy patient, Lord, at once restore,
 Fill'd with the spirit of love and power,
 And of a healthful mind.⁹

(d) "Come, Flame of divine love, and burn up the thorns of my sins, kindling my heart with the flame of thy love." For the flame of divine love which is to burn within to consume all sins, Wesley prayerfully pleads:

4. Jesus, Thy all-victorious Love
 Shed in my Heart abroad;
 Then shall my Feet no longer rove,
 Rooted and fixed in God.
7. O! that in me the Sacred Fire
 Might now begin to glow,
 Burn up the Dross of base Desire,
 And make the Mountains flow!

⁷S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds., *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood, 1988, 1990, 1992), 2:202; based on Luke 23:33; henceforth cited as *Unpub. Poetry*, followed by volume and page number(s).

⁸*Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1762), 1:47; henceforth cited as *Short Hymns* followed by volume and page number.

⁹MS Misc. Hymns, pp. 210–211. Stanza 3 of a four-stanza poem which is found in *Unpub. Poetry* 3:286; see also *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (London: The Methodist Conference, 1868–1872), 8:422.

8. O that it now from Heaven might fall
And all my Sins consume!
Come, Holy Ghost, for Thee I call,
Spirit of Burning come!
9. Refining Fire, go through my heart,
Illuminate my Soul,
Scatter Thy Life through every Part
And sanctify the Whole.¹⁰

(e) “Come, my King, sit upon the throne of my heart and reign there.” Of the Divine Ruler who reigns in human hearts, Wesley writes:

2. Born thy People to deliver,
Born a Child and yet a King;
Born to reign in Us for ever,
Now thy gracious Kingdom bring;
By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our Hearts alone,
By thine all-sufficient Merit,
Raise us to thy glorious Throne.¹¹

These passages may also be referred to as *verbal icons* in the sense of the illustrations offered by Bishop Kallistos Ware, particular his third illustration, and they affirm the need for a more careful consideration of holy icons and sacred literature.

Consider the depiction or portrayal of Christ both in holy icons and sacred literature in the light of St. Theodore’s perspective. Unquestionably one finds innumerable portrayals of Christ in the hymns of Charles Wesley. While the hymns are not objects of veneration, they offer portrayals of Christ which are authentic and worthy of veneration. Like the icon, they are vehicles of worship through which Christ is worshipped and glorified. But is what St. Theodore says about *sight* and *hearing* applicable to Wesley hymnic texts? Yes, indeed. Like the creator of the icon, Charles Wesley has caught a glimpse of the incarnate Child of God, Jesus Christ, and it is this vision which drives his literary art. It is this vision that he paints in various hues and colors with pen upon paper. The written hymn is not the goal. A vision of God is on its way to the heart of the worshipper and “on its way it passes a desk in England a couple of hundred years ago.”¹²

In the following hymn Wesley paints a picture of the death of Christ.

¹⁰*Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), 156–158.

¹¹*Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* (London: William Strahan, 1745), No. 10.

¹²Tomas Boström, “To Translate a Heartbeat,” *Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society*, 7 (2001): 9–12.

1. O Love Divine, what hast Thou done!
 Th'immortal God hath died for Me!
 The Father's Co-eternal Son
 Bore all my Sins upon the Tree;
 Th'immortal God for Me hath died!
 My Lord, my Love is Crucified!
2. Behold Him All ye that pass by,
 The Bleeding Prince of Life and Peace,
 Come see, ye worms, your Maker die,
 And say, Was ever Grief like His!
 Come feel with me his Blood applied:
 My Lord, my Love is Crucified!
3. Is Crucified for Me and You,
 To bring us Rebels near to God;
 Believe, believe the Record true:
 We All are bought with Jesu's Blood;
 Pardon for All flows from his Side,
 My Lord, my Love is Crucified!¹³

Charles Wesley has seen with the inward eyes of faith the crucified Christ, and as an artist paints the icon, he paints with words a picture of Christ upon the cross, whom he anticipates will be venerated by the worshipping singer. Notice the words which anticipate the reception of the vision. “Behold him, all ye that pass by.” Behold whom? “The bleeding Prince of life and peace.” Again anticipating that the worshipping singer will share in the vision, he shapes the picture in words with the imperative verbs “come” and “see”: “Come, sinners, see your Maker die.”

The vision, however, is more than merely a vision, just as the icon is more than the material substance that transmits it. One is invited into a transforming spiritual experience: “Come, feel with me his blood applied.” It is the bleeding, suffering Christ upon the cross whom Wesley venerates in word pictures, and whom he invites all to venerate in worship and in their daily lives. The inner sight has become the vision painted in words on the page.

Icons and Hymns as Spiritual Art

“Jesus Christ is the true image or icon (in Greek, *eikon*) of the unseen God (Col. 1:15).”¹⁴ What then does one think of the creation of icons? Are they merely a human art? No, they are a deeply spiritual art embedded in fasting, prayer, and sacrament. Hence, it is not surprising that icons are understood as a means of grace and there is a ceremony for the blessing of an icon.

¹³*Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1742), 26–27. The original of stanza 2, line 3 is: Come see, ye Worms, your Maker die.

¹⁴George A. Maloney, *Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), 137–138.

Certainly the Wesleyan tradition has no ritual for the blessing of a hymn, but the creativity of Charles Wesley also issued from a life of fasting, prayer, and sacrament as with creators of icons. For him fasting and prayer were indeed the preparation for regular reception of the sacrament of Holy Communion, which was his weekly, if not daily, practice. This may also be said of his hymn writing, which spanned some fifty years of his ministry.

John the Damascene's statement in his treatise on icons and devotion to them in the Eastern Church may also be appropriated to the hymns of the Wesleys. "What is seen sanctifies our thoughts and so they fly towards the unseen of God."¹⁵ For his word "seen" one may substitute "sung or heard." "What is [sung or heard] sanctifies our thoughts and so they fly towards the unseen majesty of God."

Just as art and theology go together in Eastern Christianity, so it is in the Wesleyan tradition. Both express, *i.e.*, art and theology, the innermost emotions of the heart. As art and theology interact, they become the media of God's living revelation. In both the Orthodox and Wesleyan traditions art is a visible medium for such revelation. Icons are pictures of sacred subjects that are painted on panels of wood, the surface of which is prepared with powdered alabaster and glue. Sometimes linen is stretched over the panel and glued in place.

The world of the icon is made possible because Jesus Christ, as the divine child of God, has divinized humankind and the Holy Spirit can restore in the followers of Christ, his likeness. The icon expresses God's enlivening of matter through Christ's presence.

In an icon, all the elements of nature are represented and transformed into a vision of God. The mineral world is represented by chalk and alabaster, which is covered by paint and by jewels and precious metals which adorn the icon. The plant world is represented by the wood on which the icon is painted. The animal world is represented by the relics of the saints which are added to the paint. This amalgamation of all the elements of creation in the icon is an assertion of, and emphasis upon, the indwelling holiness of the entire created world which participates and shares in the redemption of Christ.¹⁶

Clearly the icon in Orthodoxy is not merely a picture. It may teach truths of the faith, but its significance is more than didactic. It is a means of moving more deeply into the mysteries of faith. Standing before an icon in humility allows one to be open to the presence of the divine reality therein.

In the Wesleyan tradition there are many similarities between the world of icons and the world of hymns or sacred poems. Both are visible art forms, though the latter is a literary and an aural art form. While the former is graphic art and the latter written or literary art, both are many layered. Just as the icon is prepared in layers of wood, glue, alabaster powder, egg yolks, paints, and at times relics of the saints, the Wesleyan hymn is also multi-layered. Its tiers of language

¹⁵St. John Damascene, *On Holy Images*, trans. Mary H. Allie (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), 22.

¹⁶Archbishop Joseph Raya, *The Face of God* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976), 153.

require the visual elements of paper and ink and a multifaceted structure of language, *e.g.*, assonance, alliteration, rhyme. These visual layers of ink, paper, and language to which in worship is added an aural layer, namely, music, both vocal and instrumental, are the means whereby the participant is drawn more deeply into the inner life of the Spirit and the mysteries of God and faith. Hence, as with the icon, God re-enlivens matter and language, imbuing both with the divine presence. As with the icon, the elements of the hymn are transformed into a vision of God.

Icons have subjects; they are not abstract art. The Wesley hymn also brings one in touch with a subject or subjects. Charles Wesley did not write simply “fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la” for the congregation’s singing and reflection. Rather, he writes with such depth and comprehension of the Incarnation that through the Wesleyan hymn the community of faith encounters Christ on its pilgrimage. Through the inclusion of the hymn in the worship experience, not merely in its reading but in its singing, the human mind, senses, and the feelings of the heart are engaged as one meets Christ and the saints.

One might think that the encounter with the saints is an element in iconography that one does not find in Wesleyan hymnody. To the contrary, there are a large number of sacred poems in which Charles Wesley celebrates the lives of “Methodist saints.” They are often common folk, not those whom society or the church regards as extraordinary, and hence, qualify for “church-sanctioned” sainthood. Rather they are those who simply model for the community of faith how to live faithfully as servants of Christ. Clearly Wesley may not have intended these poems for singing, as many are quite lengthy. Here, however, is portion of the poem entitled “On the Death of Mary Naylor, March 21st, 1757,” which has been set to music for the faith community that it may celebrate and encounter the Christ-like dimensions of her life.

The golden rule she has pursued,
and did to others as she would
others should do to her:
justice composed her upright soul,
justice did all her thoughts control,
and formed her character.

Affliction, poverty, disease,
drew out her soul in soft distress,
the wretched to relieve:
in all the works of love employed,
her sympathizing soul enjoyed
the blessedness to give.

Her Savior in his members seen,
 a stranger she received him in,
 an hungry Jesus fed,
 tended her sick, imprisoned Lord,
 and flew in all his wants to afford
 her ministerial aid.

A nursing-mother to the poor,
 for them she husbanded her store,
 her life, her all, bestowed;
 for them she labored day and night,
 in doing good her whole delight,
 in copying after God.

Away, my tears and selfish sighs!
 The happy saint in paradise
 requires us not to mourn;
 but rather keep her life in view,
 and still her shining steps pursue,
 till all to God return.¹⁷

Here we have the hymnic icon of the saint, Mary Naylor. What picture does Wesley paint for the worshiper? It is that of a woman who faithfully serves the afflicted, the poor, and the sick. She feeds the hungry, tends the sick and imprisoned, and is a nursing-mother to the poor. This is the saint celebrated in song. She bears in her full demeanor the posture and lifestyle of her Lord, Jesus Christ, and the worshiper is called “to keep her life in view.” Like the icon, which gives one a “vision of the mystery of faith and life with God,” here Wesley’s vision of the faithful servant of justice and love is that of the “saint” Mary Naylor. Just as the icon, the faith community is to “keep her in view.”

Not only does Wesley celebrate the lives of saints in his poetry, one finds an emphasis on fellowship with the saints who have gone before, also an emphasis of the spiritual relationship through icons. Note Wesley’s text, “Come let us join our friends above” (#709), which is currently found in the section “Communion of Saints” in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989).

1. Come, let us join our Friends above
 That have obtain’d the prize,
 And on the eagle-wings of love
 To joy celestial rise;

¹⁷The poem was published in Charles Wesley’s *Journal* 2:338, 339, 341; stanza 1 from Part II (stanza 3); stanzas 2–4 from Part III (stanzas 2–4); stanza 5 from Part I (stanza 2). The version published here is from *Songs for the Poor: Singer’s Edition*, ed. by S T Kimbrough, Jr., Carlton R. Young, and Timothy E. Kimbrough (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 1997), hymn No. 12.

- Let all the saints terrestrial sing
 With those to glory gone,
 For all the servants of our King
 In earth and heaven are one.
2. One family we dwell in Him,
 One Church above, beneath,
 Tho' now divided by the stream,
 The narrow stream of death:
 One Army of the living God,
 To his command we bow;
 Part of his host have cross'd the flood,
 And part are crossing *now*.
3. Ten thousand to their endless home
This solemn moment fly,
 And we are to the margin come,
 And we expect to die:
 E'en now by faith we join our hands
 With those that went before,
 And greet the blood-besprinkled bands
 On the eternal shore.
5. Our spirits too shall quickly join,
 Like theirs, with glory crowned,
 And shout to see our Captain's sign,
 To hear his trumpet sound:
 O that we now might grasp our guide,
 O that the word were given!
 Come Lord of Hosts the waves divide,
 And land us all in heaven.¹⁸

In stanza 1, Wesley affirms the communion of saints on earth and in heaven. Those of earth unite their voices with those who have gone before affirming the unity of their relationship.

Let all the saints terrestrial sing
 With those to glory gone,
 For all the servants of our King
 In earth and heaven are one.

These saints are eternally bound in “one family” and “one church above, beneath.”

Stanza 3 paints a fascinating picture. What do we see? Ten thousand who are flying to their endless home. Those who sing these words are among those who, however, have come “to the margin” of life and they expect to die. As if a video

¹⁸*Funeral Hymns* (London: William Strahan, 1759), [Second Series], No. 1. Stanza 3 here consists of original stanza 3:1–4 and original stanza 4:5–8.

camera moves before our eyes projecting the scene, those who have not yet crossed the stream into eternity by faith join hands with the thousands who have already flown to their eternal home. There is an encounter, a greeting, a fellowship between the hosts of earth and the hosts of heaven.

The above illustrations make clear that like the icons of Orthodoxy the Wesleyan hymns are a spiritual art which enlarges the vision of faith, life, and practice.

It is here that I am of a different opinion than Ouspensky in volume 1 of his *Theology of the Icon*, when he says that in “a theology that has removed the veneration of saints (Protestantism), the sacred image no longer exists; and where the concept of holiness differs from that of Orthodoxy, the image moves away from Tradition.”¹⁹ Indeed, Protestantism has tended to move away from the veneration of saints, particular as expressed in graphic art. A careful examination, however, of the Wesleyan tradition’s emphasis on the transfigured holiness of all humankind, indeed all creation, reveals that its theology does not allow for the removal of the veneration of saints. It is precisely through the art of the sacred poem and hymn, hymnic iconography, that Charles Wesley, in particular, calls the community of faith to venerate the lives of the those who have personified holiness and justice, as has already been indicated in this paper.

The Wesley hymns express the spiritual experience of holiness and call the community of faith to participation in the divine life. Verbal icons they are indeed!

The Importance of the Artist

There is a dimension of iconography emphasized by George A. Maloney in his volume *Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh* which has an interesting parallel in Wesleyan hymnody. Maloney maintains:

The value of an icon lies, not in the art itself, but in the artist, the iconographer.

The reason lies in the fact that he or she must be a holy, prayerful ‘theologian,’ in vital, living touch with the orthodox teachings of the Church, discovered through fasting, ascetical purity of heart, and prayer that is ‘incessant’ in the heart.²⁰

There is a dimension of Wesleyan hymnody which was overtly apparent during the lifetime of the Wesleys. Namely, they were holy, prayerful theologians who were in living touch with the foundational teachings of the church and their way of discovery embodied fasting, the way of purity of heart or holiness, prayer, and the sacraments of the church. These are unquestionably the wellspring from which the Wesley hymns emerged. Can one say then with George Maloney that “the value of the [hymn] lies, not in the art, but in the artist, [the hymnwriter]”? This author believes that the answer to that question is, “Yes.”

¹⁹(Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), 166.

²⁰*Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh*, 132.

It is not coincidental that *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*,²¹ which was published in 1780 and consisted mainly of Wesley hymns (over 500 of them), was shaped along the lines of the *ordo salutis*, the order of salvation. The artist/theologians, John and Charles Wesley, lived a life quite similar to that of an iconographer, though it must be observed that Charles was more inclined to the ascetical life than John. Nevertheless, both understood the entire life of the Christian to be a pilgrimage toward holiness. Hence, it is the ongoing vision of the pilgrimage toward holiness that the Wesleys wish to hold before the worshipping community through the hymns of the 1780 *Collection*.

In contemporary Wesleyan traditions, however, one is in grave danger of losing the icons of Wesleyan spirituality, namely the Wesleyan hymns, for one has tended to forget that the spirituality of the hymn writers is where the value of their art lies, not in the art itself. As icons are windows of spirituality, so are Wesleyan hymns for Methodism, and those branches of the Christian faith community that choose to place them at the center of the spiritual pilgrimage.

Charles Wesley gave the hymns he wrote a sacred character. Just as the Holy Spirit radiated from the transfigured Christ at Mount Tabor, the human language of Wesley's sacred poetry beams forth a divine awareness through biblical language, metaphors, similes, word pictures, and the simple turn of a phrase. But let us be clear, it is not mere poetic genius that accomplishes the task. Charles Wesley has been subjected to the working of the Holy Spirit. It is the gift of the Spirit that allows him to write in incarnational language. This is why, when singing a Wesleyan hymn, you can be swept into the presence of the divine, into the way of holiness.

a. The way of holiness

In volume 1 of his *Theology of the Icon* Leonid Ouspensky makes clear that "The icon indicates holiness." It is "the image of the sanctification of man."²² One may say unequivocally of Wesley sacred hymns and poems that they are also indicators of holiness. What is the aim of the Wesley sacred lyrical corpus? To lead the community of faith into the way of holiness. As in the case of the icon, their purpose "is not to provoke or glorify in us a natural human feeling." Just as Ouspensky avers of the icon, their "intention is to attune us to the transfiguration of all our feelings, our intelligence, and all other aspects of our nature, by stripping these of all exaltation which could be harmful or unhealthy."²³

Charles Wesley yearns for nothing more than that one be totally consumed by the flame of sacred love so that one's sole desire is to "work and speak and think for thee."

²¹London: J. Paramore, 1780.

²²Ouspensky, 162.

²³*Ibid.*, 181.

1. O Thou who camest from above,
 The pure, celestial fire to impart,
 Kindle a flame of sacred love
 On the mean altar of my heart;
 There let it for thy glory burn
 With inextinguishable blaze,
 And trembling to its Source return,
 In humble prayer, and fervent praise.

2. Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
 To work, and speak, and think for thee,
 Still let me guard the holy fire,
 And still stir up thy gift in me,
 Ready for all thy perfect will,
 My acts of faith and love repeat,
 'Till death thy endless mercies seal,
 And make my sacrifice compleat.²⁴

It is this quality of the Wesley poetry which distinguishes it from secular poetry, from the lyrics of someone simply writing poetry about human experience. Wesley hymns and poems are the poems of a person and persons united to God. They are not merely the result of simple, poetic imagination. Their content is spiritual and reveals spiritual reality. The most vital spiritual reality conveyed therein is that all human beings may be holy because of the Incarnation.

b. Interpreter of faith and practice

The Wesley hymns are not only a window to divine presence and holiness, they are a window to the world of Holy Scripture and the practice of faith. So often Wesley accomplishes in the turn of a phrase what exegetes and other interpreters are not able to do in volumes of prose or other means of expression and interpretation. In elucidating two passages in Exodus 8 and 9, having to do with Pharaoh's hardened heart, Wesley illustrates this special interpretive gift.

Exodus reads, "When Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart." Yet, Exodus 9:12 says, "The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh." Through the centuries rabbis and Christian exegetes have sought to resolve the matter of a heart which the person hardens out of personal action and the same heart hardened by God. The former seems quite understandable and the latter is more difficult to comprehend. One may ask, "How can God harden the heart of one of the creatures of divine creation?" Hence, volumes of interpretation on these two passages have multiplied. In his interpretation of Exodus 9:12, Wesley writes:

²⁴*Short Hymns*, 1:57.

There needed, Lord, no act of thine,
 If *Pharaoh* had a heart like mine:
 One moment leave me but alone,
 And mine, alas, is turned to stone!

Thus if the blessing thou restrain,
 The earth is harden'd by the rain
 With-held: and thus, if God depart,
Jehovah hardens *Pharaoh's* heart!²⁵

Wesley brilliantly internalizes the potential of Pharaoh's hardened heart within himself. It is his poetical art and spiritual perception that allow Wesley to see deep within himself, just as the world of iconographical art allows the believer to look deep within. Such vision makes the age-old interpretative problem of Exodus 9:12 seem minuscule.

God as Mystery

Even with all the visual concreteness of the icon and the finality of words affixed to the page in hymn texts, it remains a mystery as to how God is to be communicated and experienced through any art form. There can be no question that for Charles Wesley God and God's ways were a marvelous mystery. Here he shares in the ethos of the world of the icon, which is willing to let the mystery be the mystery. "'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies," writes Wesley in one of his most famous hymns. There is an enduring tension between the unrevealed mystery and the revealed mystery of God, the God who is so far removed from us that we cannot fully know all dimensions of the divine life, and the God who is so near that we may be indwelled by the divine, resurrected Son of God, Jesus Christ.

In the eloquent English translation of the Gerhard Tersteegen hymn, John Wesley writes:

Thou hidden love of God whose height,
 Whose depth unfathomed knows,
 I see from far thy beauteous light
 And inly sigh for thy repose;
 My heart is pained, nor can it be
 At rest till it find rest in thee.²⁶

In the hymn "With glorious clouds encompassed round" Charles Wesley summons worshipers to a vision of the "Unsearchable," precisely the summons of the icon to the worshipper in the Eastern Church.

²⁵*Short Hymns*, 1:39-40.

²⁶Gerhard Tersteegen, 1729; trans. by John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Bristol: William Pine, 1766).

1. With glorious clouds incompast round
Whom angels dimly *see*,
Will the Unsearchable be found,
Or God *appear* to me?
 2. Will He forsake his throne above,
Himself to worms impart?
Answer, thou Man of grief and love,
And speak it to my heart.
 3. In manifested love explain
Thy wonderful design,
What meant the suffering Son of Man,
The streaming blood divine?
 4. Didst thou not in our flesh *appear*,
And live and die below,
That I may now *perceive* thee near,
And my Redeemer know?
 5. Come then, and to my soul *reveal*
The heights and depths of grace,
Those wounds which all my sorrows heal,
That dear disfigur'd face.
- . . .
8. I *view* the Lamb in his own light,
Whom angels dimly *see*,
And *gaze* transported at the sight,
Thro' all eternity.²⁷

Notice the verbs of vision: stanza 1: *see, appear*; stanza 2: *appear, perceive*; stanza 3: *reveal, view, gaze*, (this author's italics). Again, this is a prayer for an enlarged vision of the revelation of "the heights and depths of grace." The last four lines are a fascinating description of the worshiper's vision received in the process of singing this hymn within the community of faith. Such a vision makes clear that the hymns of Charles Wesley are moved by the mystery of God's presence. This they share in common with visions received through the stimuli of icons.

Contact with God

Much has been written about how through the icons one comes in touch with God. How does one, however, come into contact with God through the Wesley hymns? Are there parallels, similarities? Through images, metaphors, similes, diverse facets of diction and language, and poetry one discerns and comprehends

²⁷*Hymns for the Use of Families, and on Various Occasions* (Bristol: William Pine, 1767), No. 161. The original of stanza 2:2 = Himself to worms impart.

the mystery of God, the reality which transcends all humankind but is present through the power of the Holy Spirit. Note Wesley's prayer to the Holy Spirit in the following hymn.

1. Come, Holy Ghost, our Hearts inspire,
Let us Thy Influence prove;
Source of the old Prophetick Fire,
Fountain of Life, and Love.
2. Come, Holy Ghost, (for, mov'd by Thee
Thy Prophets wrote and spoke:)
Unlock the Truth, Thyself the Key,
Unseal the Sacred Book.
3. Expand Thy Wings Prolific Dove,
Brood o'er our Nature's Night;
On our disordered Spirits move,
And let there now be Light.
4. God thro' Himself we then shall know,
If Thou *within us* shine,
And sound, with all Thy Saints below,
The Depths of Love Divine.²⁸

Here the worshiper's prayer is for the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the reading of Holy Scripture. There are a number of pictures painted by Wesley in this text:

- (1) that of the sealed and locked sacred book, and the Holy Spirit alone is the key which opens it;
- (2) the dove, often the symbol of the Holy Spirit, brooding over creation and the disordered spirits of humankind, as it broods over its own nest;
- (3) light initiated by the Holy Spirit which will shine within us and lead to the knowledge of God.

Through the language of this hymn and its articulation in the liturgy, worshipers participate in the mystery of God, the mystery of the coming of the Holy Spirit by which Christ is ever present with and in the church, giving it life, healing, and hope.

In addition to the visual pictures created in the text "Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire" Wesley's poetical art provides one of the most incredible descriptions of the ongoing creative process of interpreting Holy Scripture.

We are the inheritors of scores of approaches to biblical interpretation (historical criticism, *Formgeschichte*, structural criticism, to name but a few) and each newly developed hermeneutical method is often thought to be by its protagonists,

²⁸*Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: William Strahan, 1740), 42–43.

if not *the* key, at least a vital key to “unlock the truth” of Holy Scripture. Wesley reminds us, however, that biblical interpretation is an ongoing creative process, for God is the key.

Unlock the Truth, *Thyself the Key*,
Unseal the Sacred Book.

Any approach to the sacred book, and hope for knowledge and light from it, involves the reality that it is through God’s own self-revelation that the divine light helps us to “sound with all the saints below / the depths of love divine.” This is not a passive creativity but one through which the human (mind, senses, emotions) and the divine are mutually engaged.

In the hymns of Charles Wesley, as in the realm of icons, one is engaged directly with the divine, for example, one prays directly to Christ. Note, for example, the first stanza of the well known hymn, “Love divine, all loves excelling.”

Love Divine, all Loves excelling,
Joy of Heaven to Earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble Dwelling,
All thy faithful Mercies crown;
Jesu, Thou art all Compassion,
Pure unbounded Love Thou art,
Visit us with thy Salvation,
Enter every trembling Heart.²⁹

Here the believer opens his/her heart in prayer to Divine Love, and pleads to become its humble dwelling, namely of Christ himself, and to be crowned with all of God’s faithful mercies. One prays directly to Jesus, who is all compassion and pure, unbounded love, to be visited with salvation and for his entrance into every “trembling heart.” Here the literary icon of Wesley poetry calls one to prayer—to be filled with the unbounded love of Jesus.

Conclusion

One must be careful not to overstate the case as regards the similarities of icons and Wesley hymns. Parallels and similarities and dissimilarities do exist. Of the latter the most obvious is: icons are a graphic art form and Wesley hymns are a written and aural art form. The *iconostasis*, the large screen which stands between the altar, representing the Holy of Holies, the people, and all of God’s creation, is central to the worship life of Orthodoxy. It is important to emphasize that the *iconostasis* invites the worshipers to participate in the life of God and its ritual function is not merely to display beautiful art and add color to the space of

²⁹Hymns for those that seek and those that have Redemption in the blood of Jesus Christ (London: William Strahan, 1747), stz. 1, p. 11, No. 9.

worship. It has a spiritual function and has important symbolical meaning for the faith community at prayer.

The *iconostasis* has no direct parallel in Wesleyan spirituality and worship. There is no *hymnostasis*, no visual display of Wesleyan hymnody separating the altar from the people. There is, however, a visual display of the hymns in the hymn book that is central to worship. This is unquestionably a different kind of visual display, since the icon at the *iconostasis* has an enduring presence throughout the worship experience and, hence, is an ever-present invitation to prayer and to participate in the life of God and the saints. Yet, there is a sense in which many Wesley hymns are so imbued in the memory of the worshipping community that there is a constancy to their spiritual nurture of the vision of God. Nevertheless Wesleyan hymns function only partially as a visual display. They are a visual *and* aural experience, but as they become a part of the liturgical and devotional memory of the faith community, their function as an invitation to prayer and participation in the mysteries of God becomes more constant. In this regard they are a wedding of *sight* and *hearing*, and may indeed justifiably be called the *icons* of Methodism.

As has been shown in this article the similarities between *visual icons* and *verbal icons*, in this instance Wesley hymns, are many. Both are visible art forms, have subjects, invite the worshipper to encounter and fellowship with the saints, and create visions that enrich spirituality. In both spheres the life of the artist is engrossed in prayer, devotion, and sacrament. Though the icons of Orthodoxy and the hymns of Charles Wesley emphasize God as mystery, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit the worshiper is brought into contact with God. Though the Mystery remains mystery, the Mystery is experienced because of the Incarnation, which through the insight of the Holy Spirit gives the icons and the hymns their vitality in Christian experience.