

# The Trinity in the Teaching of Charles Wesley

## A Study in Eighteenth-Century Orthodoxy?

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The question of the “orthodoxy” of Charles Wesley’s teaching is of course affected by the meaning we ascribe to that many-sided and slippery word. If we take it in a modern secular sense to mean the dominant thought-form of the day, as we might have said in contemporary England until recently, the Thatcherite orthodoxy of the free-market economy, then we should have to say that both Charles and John Wesley were, in eighteenth-century terms, highly unorthodox, unconventional thinkers. The prevailing orthodoxy of the eighteenth century in Britain and throughout western Europe, the dominant tendency both spiritual and intellectual, was one which promoted a moralistic, human-centered, Unitarian religion. This religion revered Jesus as a good man long since dead, many of whose moral teachings were still highly esteemed, but it could have little real understanding of the intensely God-centered religion of the Bible and Christian tradition. This all-pervasive tendency, the orthodoxy of its time, had a devastating effect on the English Christianity of the eighteenth century. The great majority of Presbyterian and Independent congregations passed over into Unitarianism during this period. Its influence was also considerable in the teaching of the Church of England. Many have held that it was only the retention of a fixed liturgy of an ineradicably Trinitarian character which preserved the established church from going in a similar direction.

It will, of course, be clear that in this article we are not using the word “orthodoxy” in this sense. In speaking of the orthodoxy of John and Charles Wesley we speak in the first place of the degree to which their teaching stood in the mainstream of the Christian tradition of doctrinal affirmation. How far did they maintain the tradition of Trinitarian and incarnational faith which was articulated in the first five centuries of Christian history, and which was continued largely unaltered by the three major streams of the sixteenth-century Reformation, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican? It is not, I believe, difficult to show that John and Charles were entirely orthodox in this more general sense of the word. Indeed as we shall suggest, the anti-incarnational and anti-Trinitarian tendencies of their time made them particularly conscious of the vital importance of these structures of Christian teaching. They not only maintained the general seventeenth-century Anglican pattern of doctrine; they reaffirmed it with particular urgency.

Is there a sense in which we may speak of them as “Orthodox” in a more specific sense? Here we spell the word with a capital “O” instead of a small one and refer directly to the tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. The direct contacts which the

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Wesleys had with Orthodoxy in the eighteenth century were very few, though we remember John Wesley's appeal in the 1750s to Bishop Erasmus, a man whom he believed to be a Greek Orthodox bishop, to ordain men for the Methodist societies. But there can be no doubt that seventeenth-century Anglicanism was strongly influenced by the Fathers and by the Eastern Fathers in particular, and we know that neither John nor Charles Wesley was impervious to this influence. Should we use this Eastern Orthodox perspective as a key to understanding the whole Wesleyan synthesis, as Albert Outler suggested?

There are, I believe, strong arguments in favor of this view though it is far too soon to say that the matter is settled. It is an avenue which needs further and more detailed exploration. But I am greatly impressed by the way in which a scholar like Melvin Dieter sees in Wesleyan theology a dynamic statement not only of the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation but also of the doctrine of theosis.

A Christ-centered trinitarian pneumatology becomes the heart-beat of Wesley's understanding of a believer's relationship with God . . . . For God had implanted and nourished within the believer God's own life, a life always on the move from grace to grace, stamped with the Spirit's seal of divine integrity at every point, yet always reaching out to a richer and deeper experience of God, a *scala santa* of grace, which finally leads to the ultimate perfection, an eternity of love in unbounded enlargement upon enlargement of fellowship with the triune God. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

If John Wesley exercises some restraint in using the language of deification, of our partaking in the divine nature, Charles Wesley certainly does not. The complex knot of doctrines—Trinity, Incarnation, deification—which one finds in the teaching of characteristic seventeenth-century Anglican theologians is clearly present in the teachings of the Wesleys.

On the question as to how far seventeenth-century theology was directly indebted to the Fathers of the Christian East, a very significant contribution is provided by Nicholas Lossky's masterly study, *Lancelot Andrewes, the Preacher*.<sup>2</sup> Here is a writer who is deeply rooted in the Orthodox tradition, a choirmaster as well as an historian, who has sung many of the vital texts of Byzantine theology Sunday by Sunday over the years, and who knows them in his bones as an old-fashioned Wesleyan knew the hymns of Charles Wesley. Here for the first time is a detailed analytical study of one of the most influential seventeenth-century Anglican theologians as seen from the Christian East. We are left in no doubt about Lossky's judgment on Andrewes' theology. He finds it profoundly Orthodox, with a large "O" as well as with a small "o."

One of the crucial points in Lossky's study is his exposition of Andrewes' teaching about the person and work of the Holy Spirit, which he finds exceptionally full. I cannot help wondering whether we have here one of the remoter his-

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<sup>1</sup>Melvin Dieter, "Wesleyan Theology," in *John Wesley, Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. John Stacey (London: Epworth Press, 1988), 166.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Lossky, *Lancelot Andrewes, the Preacher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

torical roots of the twentieth-century Pentecostal movement. Pentecostalism, if I understand it aright, grew out of Holiness Methodism, and Holiness Methodism grew from the Wesleys' teaching on Christian perfection, and on the role of the Holy Spirit in it. The Wesleys' view of the question developed out of the strong teaching on the person and the work of the Holy Spirit to be found in characteristic seventeenth-century Anglican theologians. Whether or not the Wesleys were directly influenced by Lancelot Andrewes is not clear, but that question is to some extent secondary. Insofar as Andrewes was one of the founding fathers of seventeenth-century Anglican theology his teaching would have been mediated to the Wesleys through the whole doctrinal ethos of the church in which they grew up, not least in the writing of John Pearson, Bishop of Chester, for whom, as we know, John Wesley had the highest regard.

We have spoken earlier of the influence of Arian ideas in the eighteenth-century English-speaking world. There were those who did their best to counteract them. One of the most notable theological replies to this tendency in England came in a book published in 1757 by William Jones of Neyland. William Jones is one of that small group of men to whom the leaders of the Oxford Movement looked back as bridging the gap between the non-juring scholars at the beginning of the eighteenth century and themselves in the middle of the nineteenth. Newman speaks of his work with admiration in his *Apologia*. The book which William Jones published in 1757 has as its full title, *The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity proved by a hundred short and clear arguments in the terms of the Holy Scripture, compared after a manner entirely new and digested under the four following titles, (1) The Divinity of Christ, (2) The Divinity of the Holy Ghost, (3) The Plurality of Persons, (4) The Trinity in Unity with a few reflections occasionally interspersed on some of the Arian writers, particularly Dr. S. Clarke*. In fact, in its title as well as in its substance the book can be seen as a reply to Samuel Clarke's famous work called the *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity*, which was first published in 1712. If one turned to Jones' book supposing to find a study of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early Christian centuries, one would be disappointed. Development of doctrine was not an idea to be found in eighteenth-century English theology. Rather it can be seen as an example of the old high-church saying, "The Church to teach, the Bible to prove," since it consists of a brief discussion of a great many verses of Scripture both from the Old Testament and the New, which Jones uses as proof-texts for the doctrine of the Trinity. It depends for its power of conviction on a wholly pre-critical and non-historical use of the Scriptures.

In its own day, Jones' book had great influence. In his preface he makes its purpose very clear:

Arianism is now no longer a pestilence that walketh in darkness, but that brazens it out against the sun's light and destroyeth in the noonday. It is a canker which if it be encouraged much longer will certainly eat out the vitals of Christianity in this

kingdom; and when the faith is gone the church in all probability will soon follow after, for if the holy oil is wasted and spilt, the lamp that was made to hold it will be of no further use.<sup>3</sup>

For William Jones, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity lies at the very heart of Christian faith. Without it there can be no *saving* faith in a God who is active in the life and experience of nations and individuals.

For though it is and must be one God who doth all these things, yet it is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who give us our being, instruct and illuminate us, lead us, speak to us, and are present with us; who give authority to the church, raise the dead, sanctify the elect, and perform every divine and spiritual action.

This is the God revealed to us in the Holy Scripture; very different from the deity so much talked of in our systematical schemes of natural divinity; which with all its wisdom never thought of a Christ or a Holy Spirit, by whom nature now fallen and blinded is to be reformed, exalted and saved. The Bible we know to be the infallible word of God, the rule of our faith and obedience, I find this doctrine revealed in it, therefore I firmly believe and submit to it. And as the Liturgy of the Church of England hath affirmed the same in all its offices, and contains nothing contradictory thereto, I believe that also; and hope that the true God whom we serve will defend it against all attempts towards reforming Christianity out of it; that the Church militant here on earth, may continue to agree in this fundamental doctrine with the Church triumphant in heaven. For there the angels rest not day and night praising the Thrice Holy, Blessed, and Glorious Trinity. They have neither time nor inclination to dispute against that glory which they cannot steadfastly behold, and had we a little more humility and devotion we should not abound so much in disputation.<sup>4</sup>

William Jones arrives here at the point of worship, at the triple cry of the angels, "Holy, holy, holy," which he sees as one of the great Trinitarian affirmations of the Old and New Testament alike. Unexpectedly, at the end of this paragraph, he leads us up above the level of controversy, to the level of doxology and praise, where our disputes fall silent before the unapproachable majesty of the Triune God.

William Jones does not often touch on the poetic in his work, but at this moment we can see perhaps more why his book had a strong attraction for the two greatest hymn-writers of his time. In Wales, William Williams had it on his shelves in the farmhouse at Pantycelyn, and his son John translated and published it in Welsh. In England Charles Wesley wrote an entire volume of hymns to express the teaching it contained. So far as I know, there is only one other occasion when Charles Wesley deliberately set himself to base a collection of hymns on a particular work of theology; that is, his better-known *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* of 1745, which refers back to the writings of Daniel Brevint. It was twenty years later, in 1767, that he published in Bristol this volume of *Hymns on the Trinity*. It consists of two parts, the first directly based on William Jones'

<sup>3</sup>William Jones, *The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity* . . . (London, 1757), 50.

<sup>4</sup>Jones, 81.

work, entitled "Hymns on the Trinity," the second a kind of appendix to it, entitled "Hymns and Prayers to the Trinity."

No one could pretend that these two volumes of hymns contain the greatest of Charles Wesley's work, but their almost total neglect is perhaps significant. It is an aspect of that general neglect of hymnody which is part of our academic tradition as a whole. Neither in departments of theology nor in departments of English literature have hymns been thought worthy of serious and sustained attention. Donald Davie in his study of *The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700–1930*, called *A Gathered Church*,<sup>5</sup> has a notable passage of polemic where he castigates his fellow literary scholars for their neglect of this particular kind of writing. At a time when many literary scholars have felt guilty about the extent to which classical forms of literature have been the preserve of a small and often exclusive elite, when they have sought more popular forms of literature to study, one might have expected a turn of interest toward the history of the hymn. But this has not been the case.

That even as we bend our energies more than ever before to the ramifying traditions of the Child ballads, to the recovery and printing of anonymous broadsides and street ballads, of threshers' songs and weavers' songs and children's songs to the skipping rope (not to speak of barrow-boy poets and Merseyside poets and country-rock poets à la Bob Dylan), the attention we pay to a poem like "O God our help in ages past" is precisely what it was fifty years ago—which is to say, no attention at all, unless we happen to be either hymnologists or else, (less probably) historians of the Nonconformist Churches. The reasons we may find for this—mere bad faith, mere sloth, incurious inertia, are true so far as they go; but there are other more specific, historically conditioned reasons—and these may emerge in due course. For the moment it seems we must say that if "O God our help in ages past" represents a very ancient kind of poem, that kind is a great deal too ancient for our self-applaudingly "modern" criticism to be able to deal with it.<sup>6</sup>

What is said here about the blindness of the literary scholars is surely not altogether inapplicable to the theologians and church historians. Whatever the cause may be, whether "mere bad faith, mere sloth," or "incurious inertia," it is a fact that one element in the practice of public worship in this country which shows a continuing and astonishing resilience to the pressures of secularization, popular hymn-singing, still attracts remarkably little attention either from the historians of Christian worship or the historians of Christian doctrine. Hymns, as Donald Davie says, are "a very ancient kind of poem," a kind of poem deeply rooted in the biblical tradition, which has attracted some of the greatest Christian thinkers, Ephraim the Syrian, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, not to mention more recent writers. These are works which seek to articulate and sometimes succeed in articulating that sense of the holy which is at the heart of all religion and which

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<sup>5</sup>Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>Davie, 21–22.

is quite specifically at the heart of Christian worship in the form of the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity.

I have said that the 1767 collection of Charles Wesley does not contain his best material. That is true, but even here at times he is able to amaze us.

1.           While the Army above  
              Overwhelm'd by his love  
              The Trinity sings,  
With their faces inwrapt in their shadowing wings;  
              Holy Father, we cry,  
              Holy Son we reply!  
              Holy Spirit of grace!  
And extol the Three-One in a rapture of praise!
  
2.           Many gods we disclaim  
              For the Three are the same  
              In a *manner* unknown  
Three Persons Divine inexpressibly One;  
              Who all homage demands  
              From the work of his hands,  
              Re-created to know,  
And resemble his God manifested below.<sup>7</sup>

Humanity is joined with the angelic army in the worship of the Triune God. This theme comes time and time again in these hymns as it does throughout the history of Christian worship and particularly in the wealth of hymnody which marks the offices of the Byzantine rite. And this worship which the majesty and glory of God demands and draws out from his creatures below, the work of his hands, is at once the result and the cause of their re-creation in his image and likeness, so that they too may share in the manifestation of his glory through the whole creation. Trinity and Incarnation go inseparably together, and Incarnation implies the incorporation of humanity into the movement of the manifestation of the divine love.

These hymns of adoration are particularly to be found in the second section of the 1767 collection. Charles Wesley seems to delight in using less familiar meters which seem to dance along in a kind of ecstasy of delight. One would love to know what tunes they were originally sung to.

1.           Lord of hosts, we bow before Thee  
              God made known, Three in One  
              One in Three, adore Thee:  
Far above our comprehending,  
              God of grace, Take the praise,  
              Never, never ending.

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<sup>7</sup>Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Trinity* (Bristol: William Pine, 1767), No. 3, p. 90, stanzas 1 and 2 of three.

2.       Thee the bright harmonious Quire  
          Three in One, On thy Throne  
          Joyfully admire [Thee];  
With triumphant acclamation  
          Night and day Thee we pay  
          Threefold adoration.
  
3.       Glorious God, like them we bless Thee  
          God most high magnify  
          Lord of all confess Thee;  
'Till we mount thro' Jesus' Merit  
          There to gaze, there to praise,  
          Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

As in all hymns to the Trinity, these verses look up to the heavenly realm and associate the church on earth with the worship of the heavenly hosts, so vividly portrayed in the book of Revelation. They also look forward, as in the hymn just quoted above, to the moment when we shall be called to ascend through Christ into that eternal rejoicing.

But already here and now something of that eternity is made known on earth below. It is the theme of some of the most powerful of Wesley's hymns for the Lord's Supper, this thought of the Eucharist as the presence, already now, of a fullness which shall be revealed hereafter. This same thought is to be found in some of the hymns of this collection. One in particular deserves to be quoted.

1. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit  
      Sav'd by Thee  
      Happy we  
      Shall thy throne inherit:  
Here our heavenly banquet tasting.  
      In thy love  
      Joy we prove  
      Ever, ever lasting.
  
2. Rapturous anticipation!  
      Who believe  
      We receive  
      Sensible salvation;  
Silent bliss and full of glory,  
      In thine eye  
      While we lie  
      Prostrated before Thee.

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<sup>8</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 2 (in section five of the volume), pp. 89–90.

3. Manna spiritual and hidden,  
 Perfect peace  
 We possess,  
 Our recover'd Eden:  
 'Till we find the Fulness given  
 In that sight  
 Mercy's height,  
 Love's sublimest heaven!<sup>9</sup>

Love's sublimest height will come in the fullness and knowledge of God, in the beatific vision, the highest revelation of God's mercy and lovingkindness. Here already we possess in the hidden manna the perfect peace which is the content of our recovery of Eden. The heavenly banquet which we now taste is that same banquet of which St. Isaac the Syrian spoke when he said, "Blessed is he who consumes the bread of love, which is Jesus."<sup>10</sup> That is a banquet which can in no sense be confined to the Eucharist. It can be found in many places, but certainly the Eucharist is its focal point.

In the vision of heaven we are to be advanced to something further, something beyond the innocence of our first creation. As Wesley says in another hymn in this collection:

The sacred Three conspire  
 In love to fallen man,  
 T'exalt the creature higher,  
 And turn his loss to gain.<sup>11</sup>

Out of the fall a great gift is to come, the great and exceeding promise of which the second epistle to Peter speaks, that we are to become partakers of the divine nature. This verse (1:4) of 2 Peter had been with John Wesley on the momentous day in May 1738, generally recognized as a turning in his career. It was not a verse which was peripheral to the faith of his brother Charles either. In the hymn in the first section of this collection which comments on William Jones' use of this passage, Charles Wesley writes:

1. All who partake of Christ, partake  
 The nature properly Divine  
 Of Him, who humbled for our sake  
 Us with himself vouchsaf'd to join;  
 And in his single Person shew'd  
 The substance both of man and God.

<sup>9</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 37, pp. 121–22.

<sup>10</sup>St. Isaac the Syrian, *The Essential Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), 224.

<sup>11</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 42, p. 124; the first four lines of stanza 1.

2. The precious promises in Him  
    Are all contain'd and verified;  
    And fashion'd like the God supreme  
    Whoe'er in Christ by faith abide,  
    Th'essential Holiness they share,  
    The image of the Heavenly bear.
3. Jesus the Lord, thy nature pure  
    To us, as capable, impart,  
    And thus our hallow'd hearts assure  
    That thou, the true Jehovah art,  
    And wilt thro' death our Leader be  
    Our God thro' all eternity.<sup>12</sup>

So, from the very first revelation of God's name as Jehovah, at the moment when he is about to lead his people out of the death of slavery in Egypt, on to the moment when Jesus is raised from the dead, a resurrection which carries in it implicitly the resurrection of all humankind, it is one God, one Lord, one Saviour, who is at work, sharing his life, his very nature, with the people he calls to be his own.

We thought at the beginning of this essay of the way in which the eighteenth century was the century of reason in which a purely rational religion, often of a Deist kind, was particularly attractive to progressive and thinking people. As sometimes happens, a strong movement in one direction theologically gives rise to a movement of reaction which yet shares more than it is aware with the tendency it attacks. So in the eighteenth century it was very possible for those who for one motive or another adopted a conservative stance in doctrinal issues to be as dryly rational in their approach to doctrine as those who thought of themselves as radicals. This is the origin of a kind of "high and dry" doctrinal orthodoxy which had as little of the Spirit in it as the religion of nature which it opposed. Jones of Neyland was aware of this possibility. For the Wesleys it was an acute problem. The brothers found themselves fighting on two fronts, against Deists on the one side, against the "high and dry" on the other. As Charles writes,

Right notions have their slender use  
But cannot a sound faith produce  
Or vital piety. . . .

and again

Faith, tho' rational, is founded  
Not on man but God alone. . . .

The thought that our faith must have its foundation in God rather than in human learning or human testimony is developed at length in a hymn in which Wesley

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<sup>12</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 50, pp. 33–34.

prays that he might not just proclaim right doctrines but may also live them, discovering the life of God dwelling in his own life.

1. Thee, great tremendous Deity  
With Three in One, and One in Three  
I to the world proclaim,  
Inspire with purity and peace,  
And add me to thy witnesses  
By telling me thy name.
2. Fixt on the *Athanasian* mound,  
I still require a firmer ground  
My sinking faith to bear:  
I want to feel my soul renew'd  
In the similitude of God  
Jehovah's character.
3. My notions true are notions vain;  
By them I cannot grace obtain  
Or sav'd from sin arise:  
Knowledge acquir'd by books or creeds  
My learned self-righteous pride it feeds;  
'Tis love that edifies.
4. The truth I seemingly possess,  
But hold it in unrighteousness  
Without experience sure:  
Whoe'er the holy God contains,  
He must be purged from all his stains,  
A vessel clean and pure.
5. Furnish'd with intellectual light,  
In vain I speak of Thee aright,  
While unreveal'd Thou art:  
Thou only can suffice for me,  
The whole mysterious Trinity  
Inhabiting my heart.
6. Come then, Thou Tri-une God unknown,  
Take full possession of thine own,  
And keep me ever thine,  
An heir of bliss, for glory seal'd  
A temple of the Lord, and fill'd  
With all the life Divine.<sup>13</sup>

Amongst the most interesting points in these verses, we may notice first that it is one of the many places where Wesley follows the thought of William Jones

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<sup>13</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 19 (in section five of the volume), pp. 102–3.

very closely. He too speaks of the danger of a purely intellectual assent to doctrines and of the necessity of an inner purification.

The mystery of faith is an invaluable treasure, but the vessel which contains it must be clean and undefiled; it must be held in a pure conscience as the manna, that glorious symbol of the word of faith preached to us in the Gospel, was confined in the tabernacle and preserved in a vessel of gold.<sup>14</sup>

Both men seem to be struggling to express realities which in their age, perhaps in any age, are particularly difficult to express. Both are clear that it is only the presence of the living God at the heart of human life which enables us to speak in any fitting way of the glory of the Triune God, and to proclaim it to the world.

It is interesting to notice here that John and Charles Wesley are wrestling with a problem which had clearly made itself felt at the very beginning of the development of scholastic theology in the medieval west. In his polemic against Abelard, William of St. Thierry, surely one of the greatest mystical theologians in the whole of Christian history, had seen clearly that all true knowledge of God must of necessity be Trinitarian.

All positive knowledge of God has a necessarily trinitarian character; just as is the case with our spiritual life which makes us *fili in Filio* and which arrives at its fullness in spiritual union with God. The demands of the dialectical method lead finally to the dilemma; either our knowledge of the divine mystery is trinitarian or it does not exist.<sup>15</sup>

Despite all the differences of attitude between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, on this point the Methodists and the Cistercians are perfectly at one. Furthermore, according to William, we can only know God in a knowledge which has become love, a love which conforms us to the One whom we love. *Amor ipse intellectus est* is his famous formula: love itself is understanding. The Cistercians could not admit a purely intellectual approach to theology any more than the Wesleys. "For them, theology could not be other than religion, an existential relationship. They remained wholly in the Gospel and in a lived spirituality."<sup>16</sup>

For William of St. Thierry it was in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that the resolution of the problem was to be found. In the life of faith and prayer the believer becomes "one spirit" with God, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the bond of unity with the Trinity, as well as between the Trinity and all creation. William Jones and the Wesleys do not develop their doctrine of the Trinity with the same clarity and depth, but they move in the same direction. The dichotomy between head-knowledge and heart-knowledge which troubled them so much was overcome in their reappropriation of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. As we shall

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<sup>14</sup>Jones, 82.

<sup>15</sup>Paul Verdeyen, *La Théologie Mystique de Guillaume de St. Thierry* (Paris: FAC-Éditions, 1990), 38–39.

<sup>16</sup>Verdeyen, 31.

expect, the verses in the section on the divinity of the Holy Spirit are among the most interesting in the collection. In one, for instance, Wesley affirms the necessity for the present action of the Holy Spirit in order that we may understand aright the Scriptures, which were written under the same Spirit's guidance.

1. Spirit of truth, essential God,  
     Who didst thine antient saints inspire,  
     Shed in their hearts thy love abroad,  
     And touch their hallow'd lips with fire,  
     Our God from all eternity,  
     World without end, we worship thee.
2. Still we believe, Almighty Lord  
     Whose presence fills both earth and heaven,  
     The meaning of the written word  
     Is still by inspiration given,  
     Thou only dost thyself explain  
     The secret mind of God to man.
3. Come then, Divine Interpreter,  
     The scriptures to our hearts apply,  
     And taught by thee we God revere,  
     Him in Three Persons magnify  
     In each the Tri-une God adore  
     Who was, and is forevermore.<sup>17</sup>

In another hymn Wesley speaks as though each one of us is to know our own particular day of Pentecost when we shall fully and freely confess the love of the Father, revealed by the Son, imparted in the Spirit. In that day the name Orthodox will cease to describe a rigid literalist adherence to formulas, a sense which it commonly had in eighteenth-century usage; it will come to possess a more living meaning. Indeed, it will recover its original meaning of right worship or right glorification. In this hymn we have one of those places where Charles Wesley seems to reach out his hands to the eastern Christian tradition on the one side, and to the contemporary Pentecostal movement on the other.

1. Whene'er our day of Pentecost  
     Is fully come, we surely know  
     The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost  
     Our God, is manifest below:  
     The Son doth in the Father dwell,  
     The Father in his Son imparts,  
     His Spirit of joy unspeakable  
     And lives for ever in our hearts.

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<sup>17</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 64, pp. 42–43.

2. Our hearts are then convinc'd indeed  
That Christ is with the Father one;  
The Spirit that doth from Both proceed  
Attests the Co-eternal Son;  
The Spirit of truth and holiness  
Attests his own Divinity,  
And then the Orthodox confess  
One glorious God in Persons Three.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable of these hymns is one which meditates on John 6:45 (“It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me”). In this hymn the somewhat individualistic sense of the indwelling of the Spirit which we find in most of the hymns is complemented by a sense of the corporate presence of the Spirit in the church at large. This presence unites the church on earth with the heavenly church in a single act of praise and thanksgiving. In this unity of earth and heaven the Spirit teaches us to love God perfectly and grants us “to have and know all things,” in other words, to become partakers in the fullness of the life of God. It is God himself who teaches us and leads us into the knowledge and love of God. In doing this he uses many means, many instruments. But he himself is greater than all of them and transcends them all.

1. Fulfil'd in us, we daily own  
The antient Gospel prophecy,  
Taught by the Holy Ghost alone,  
We all are taught by God most high;  
'Tis he instructs us thro' his grace,  
Whate'er the instruments employ'd,  
God only claims his people's praise:  
Our teacher is indwelling God.
2. Come, Holy Ghost, thy self reveal,  
Spirit of Grace and wisdom come,  
Thy own divine instructions seal,  
And make our hearts thy constant home:  
When thou art in thy saints below,  
We serve thee as the church above,  
And all things have, and all things know,  
Divinely taught our God to love.<sup>19</sup>

God himself is our teacher and guide. As Wesley says in another hymn:

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<sup>18</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 63, p. 42.

<sup>19</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 65, pp. 43–44.

The Spirit is sent, pour'd out, and given,  
 Both by the Father and the Son,  
 And God come down from God in heaven  
 Prepares, and lifts us to his throne.<sup>20</sup>

In the coming of the Holy Spirit, who is God, the worship of the Church below is united with the Church in heaven. The kingdom is made known at least in anticipation, even here and now, and we ourselves are lifted up to God, made to share in the heavenly kingdom.

While we have acknowledged that this collection of hymns does not contain Charles Wesley's finest work, I hope from what has been quoted to have shown that it is worthy of more attention than it has usually been given. The very fact that Wesley should have felt impelled to complete this work at a time when for whatever reason his inspiration seems to have been less abundant is in itself a witness to his sense of its importance. If we ask why it is that in this volume Charles Wesley does not touch the height of his art, there are two considerations which at once suggest themselves. The first is simply that the verses in the first half of the volume which comment on Jones' *Hundred Short and Clear Arguments* are necessarily of a strongly didactic nature which inhibits the free development of the poet's gifts. The second consideration is one which I make more tentatively. It reflects on the whole way that the doctrine of the Trinity was expressed and taught in the west at this time. Despite their reading of the Fathers, John and Charles Wesley were heirs to a very long tradition of western Trinitarian theology in which the unity of the divine nature had been stressed at the expense of the Trinity of the Persons. These hymns reflect that tradition. The unity is too tightly drawn together to allow a full development of the Trinitarian mystery. It is true that in one hymn Charles Wesley prays,

1. Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
 Whom One all-perfect God we own,  
 Restorer of thine image lost,  
 Thy various offices make known,  
 Display, our fallen souls to raise,  
 The whole œconomy of grace.<sup>21</sup>

But even in this hymn the different offices of the three Persons are very closely held together.

In a very interesting and somewhat paradoxical way it is in hymns which come from other strands of his writing that the doctrine of the Trinity seems to be most perfectly set out. When he is not trying to write a specifically Trinitarian hymn, he manages to make a wonderfully full and free statement of Trinitarian doctrine. Here, as an example, is one of the greatest of his hymns, even though

<sup>20</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 86, p. 57, lines 5–8.

<sup>21</sup>*Hymns on the Trinity*, No. 14 (in section five of the volume), p. 98, stanza 1 of 4.

it is one which as yet is not widely known beyond the boundaries of Methodism. It is a work in which doctrine and devotion are perfectly reconciled, fused together into one. In it Charles Wesley sees our human life wholly caught up in the circulation of life and love which moves among the Persons of the Trinity.

1. Since the Son hath made me free,  
Let me taste my liberty;  
Thee behold with open face,  
Triumph in Thy saving grace,  
Thy great will delight to prove,  
Glory in Thy perfect love.
2. Abba, Father, hear Thy child,  
Late in Jesus reconciled;  
Hear, and all the graces shower,  
All the joy, and peace, and power,  
All my Saviour asks above,  
All the life and heaven of love.
3. Heavenly Adam, Life divine,  
Change my nature into Thine;  
Move and spread throughout my soul,  
Actuate and fill the whole;  
Be it I no longer now  
Living in the flesh, but Thou.
4. Holy Ghost, no more delay;  
Come, and in Thy temple stay;  
Now Thine inward witness bear,  
Strong, and permanent, and clear;  
Spring of life, Thyself impart,  
Rise eternal in my heart.<sup>22</sup>

In his study of religion in England in the eighteenth century, Gordon Rupp concludes that the reader of Charles Wesley's hymns

will not be surprised to find in them, on almost every page, evidence of a writer in almost all respects conditioned by the culture in which he thought and wrote. . . . What will astonish him, and may well move him, will be to discover again and again, divine songs which seem to escape such limitations altogether, a Christian devotion which is beyond the centuries, full of beauty, grace and truth.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>*The Methodist Hymn Book* (London: Epworth, 1933), No. 568. *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1739), 220–221, stanzas 6, 8, 11, and 12 of original; *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. George Osborn, 13 vols. (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868–72), 1:193–94.

<sup>23</sup>Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 415–16.

It is a conclusion which we may well wish to endorse, and in endorsing it to stress that these hymns have an ecumenical significance for Christians who worship in the English language which has as yet been scarcely appreciated. Perhaps when they are more widely used by Lutherans, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox, as well as Methodists, we shall come to understand more of the fully fledged orthodoxy which they embody.