

On the 250th Anniversary of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection: A Historical Review of Wesleyan Theological Hybridity and its Implications for Contemporary Discourses on Christian Humanism*

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in discourses of secular and Christian humanism. This interest engages the question of what it means to be truly human, and what the implications of true humanity are for individuals and society. The genesis of theological and secular humanisms stems from the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*—God in Christ becomes human so that human persons may become more truly like the God whose image and likeness they bear. John Wesley was deeply influenced by Eastern Orthodox theologians. Without grasping this hermeneutic position, one cannot understand either the content or intent of John Wesley's theology adequately. This paper expounds this aspect of Wesley's theology by means of a historical theological exploration of the influences of Eastern Orthodoxy in Wesleyan soteriology. It is argued that when Wesley's theology is understood as a hybrid of Eastern and Western theological influences and approaches, Christian perfection in the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) supersedes the traditional Protestant emphasis on justification. In particular, this approach holds promise for making a unique and valuable contribution to contemporary discourses around Christian humanism.

Keywords: Methodist; soteriology; *theosis*; Orthodox; historical theology; Christian humanism; Christian perfection



Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>
Volume 44 | Number 1 | 2018 | #3147 | 19 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/3147>
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)
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Introduction

2016 marked the 250th anniversary of John Wesley's publication, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.¹ It is a fitting opportunity to revisit this seminal document since it represents a central emphasis in John Wesley's theology, namely Christian perfection. In this paper, we shall revisit the historical theological development of this important Wesleyan doctrine to see what contribution it may make to contemporary discourses on Christian humanism. The author has written on Christian humanism elsewhere and so shall not reintroduce that discourse in expansive depth here. We shall only consider those aspects and elements that are necessary for the purposes of the argument in this paper.²

First, this paper shall consider the hermeneutic perspective from which Wesley's theology, and particularly his understanding of Christian perfection, might be approached. It is the argument of this paper that Wesleyan theology, understood through the doctrine of Christian perfection, and read through the hybrid hermeneutic lens of Western Protestantism and Eastern Orthodox *theosis*, has a contribution to make in the re-emergence of interest in Christian humanism in contemporary theological discourse.

To make this point it will be necessary to offer some insights into the theological arguments centring on the most appropriate hermeneutic key to understanding Wesley's soteriology (particularly the *ordo salutis*). Is his theology best understood from the vantage point of historically Western Protestant thinking, or does he operate from a more complex, hybrid, hermeneutic framework? Having established this, we shall explicate three specific areas of Wesleyan soteriology (anthropology, the order of salvation, and Christian perfection) that uncover a deeper and more textured meaning when read from this hybrid hermeneutic perspective. Finally, we shall facilitate a historical theological conversation between Wesley's appropriation of this theological concept, as well as his approach to it, to show what

1 John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Annotated*, edited by Randy L. Maddox and Paul W. Chilcote (Beacon Hill Press, 2015).

2 In 2009 John de Gruchy delivered a plenary address, entitled *Transforming Traditions: Doing Theology in South Africa Today* at the Joint Conferences on Religion and Theology at Stellenbosch University. In his address he highlighted six affirmations towards what he calls the new "Christian humanism": John W. De Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2006), 30–32; John W. De Gruchy, "Transforming Traditions: Doing Theology in South Africa Today," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 7, no. 17 (July 1, 2009): 139–41. Each of the affirmations will be presented below and some links will be drawn between them and a Wesleyan understanding of Christian perfection: 1) *Christian humanism is inclusive. Our identity is derived from the fact that we are human and share a common humanity.* 2) *Christian humanism affirms the dignity of all persons as bearers of the image of God, and as such it emphasises shared responsibility for all humanity. To deny the dignity of another person is to deny one's own dignity, since we share in a common humanity.* 3) *Christian humanism is open to learning about what it means to be human from a wide variety of sources, some of which may not ordinarily be considered as primary sources in Christian theology.* 4) *Christian humanism understands that one cannot truly love God without loving all human beings (including the self) since all persons are created by God.* 5) *Christian humanism subscribes to, and presents, a notion of justice that transcends mere physical or material well-being.* 6) *Christian humanism understands that goodness is closely linked to truth and beauty.*

value it may hold for the further development of understandings of Christian humanism in contemporary theological discourse.

John Wesley's Western and Eastern theological hybridity

The first part of the argument of this paper is that John Wesley's theology cannot be properly understood unless one takes account of the hybridity of theological sources that he drew upon in constructing his textured soteriology.

The term *hybrid* is chosen to describe John Wesley's Western and Eastern theological hermeneutics. The previously suggested terminology of "complementarity" to describe Wesley's theological sources and approaches is problematic in the author's opinion, since as Maddox explains, "complementarity ... assumes that there are equally legitimate alternative ways of explaining the same phenomena, which neither conflict with nor overlap each other because they function on different levels."³

In the section that follows it will be argued that John Wesley employed a hybrid⁴ approach, in the sense that *hybridity* is understood to be a context in which diverse and different notions of theological truth are brought together in a synthesis where the concepts overlap and mutually enrich one another, thereby creating a more nuanced and textured understanding as a result of the difference in mutuality.

The primary question that this section of the paper addresses is: How is John Wesley's theology to be understood? Some have suggested that Wesley is to be approached as a Protestant thinker whose soteriology synthesised a "Protestant ethic of grace and the Roman Catholic ethic of holiness."⁵ Cell (1935) argued that the Church of England in Wesley's time had been influenced by the theology of John Chrysostom and incorporated this into its own soteriology, "the extremes of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism."⁶ That Wesley was influenced by aspects of Eastern Orthodoxy is seldom contested by contemporary Methodist

3 Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences," *The Asbury Journal* 45, no. 2 (1990): 42.

4 hybrid |'hī,brid| noun, a thing made by combining two different elements; a mixture: *the final text is a hybrid of the stage play and the film*. A word formed from elements taken from different languages, for example *television* (*tele-* from Greek, *vision* from Latin).

5 cf., George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (Lanham, MD.: Henry Holt, 1935); K. S. McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley: An Eastern Paradigm of Faith and Love," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 26, no. 1 (1991): 40.

6 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 40.

theologians.⁷ However, what is debated is how he employed these influences in his own work.

Cell, for example, argued that Wesley's theology should be understood from an exclusively Western perspective in which the synthesis of faith and works is "unequivocally monergistic."⁸ By conjoining the Protestant ethic of grace in justification with the Catholic ethic of holiness in sanctification, Cell inadvertently creates an unequal monergistic tension between the notion of God's grace at the expense of any possible "divine-human interchange."⁹ Any theologian who approaches Wesley in this manner inadvertently places the emphasis upon justification as the central point of the Wesleyan *ordo salutis*. This would seem to go against what Wesley himself had to say about Christian perfection (entire sanctification) being the goal of salvation. Outler rightly notes that in Wesley's sermon "The Marks of New Birth" he had inadvertently opened up the possibility for a misinterpretation of "sinless perfection." Hence, he went on to write the sermon "The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God" in which he makes a clearer distinction between "voluntary and involuntary sins."¹⁰ We shall return to this later. However, at this stage it can simply be noted that a purely Western theological reading of Wesley's theology would be inadequate.

Williams managed to resolve an aspect of Cell's dialectic, yet still fell short since he too did not fully recognise the importance of Eastern Orthodox influences on Wesley's theology. He suggested that the Catholic ethic of holiness cannot be seamlessly grafted to the Protestant ethic of grace.¹¹ His solution was to read Wesley exclusively as if he were a Western Protestant theological thinker—namely, Williams rejected the notion that a synthesis between "faith and works, justification and sanctification, grace and freedom" is possible.¹² For Williams, the solution to this unresolvable synthesis is a Protestant one. He argued that not only is justification realised by grace, so too is sanctification—*sola gratia*. Where Williams falls short is that he did not fully recognise that for Wesley the synthesis between justification and sanctification in the order of salvation was not only a matter of divine grace, but also a matter of human participation in divine grace—as we shall see. Thus, one could conclude that

7 cf., David R. Walls, "The Influence of the Greek Fathers' Doctrine of Theosis on John Wesley's Doctrine of Perfection" (Toronto School of Theology, *The Influence of the Greek Fathers' Doctrine of Theosis on John Wesley's Doctrine of Perfection*, 2015); Albert Cook Outler and Thomas C. Oden, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler* (Zondervan, 1991); Campbell, Theodore, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: A Study of Religious Vision and Culture Change*, 1991; Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy"; Michael J. Christensen, "Theosis and Sanctification: John Wesley's Reformulation of a Patristic Doctrine," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 2 (1996): 71–92; John G. Merritt, "'Dialogue' within a Tradition: John Wesley and Gregory of Nyssa Discuss Christian Perfection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22, no. 2 (1987): 92–116; Michael L. Peterson, "Orthodox Christianity, Wesleyanism, and Process Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 15, no. 2 (1980); Stephen Plant and Marcus Plested, "Macarius, St Gregory of Nyssa, and the Wesleys," *Epworth Review* 33, no. 1 (2006): 22.

8 Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, 270.

9 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 41.

10 Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 183.

11 Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 175.

12 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 41.

Williams's approach to salvation remained monergistic, yet it included sanctification with justification as acts of divine grace. McCormick argues, however, that Wesley's view was synergistic, i.e. "faith filled with the energy of love" (based on the phrase in Wesley's 34th Sermon, "Catholic Spirit").¹³

The work of John L. Peters represents a step further than Williams in that he argued for an approach that gives credence to the importance of the Catholic tradition's emphasis on the importance of "works" in Wesley's order of salvation, yet placing the notion of "works" within the Protestant dynamic of grace and faith alone (*sola gratia* and *sola fidei*). He does this by rejecting the notion that Wesley would have suggested that human merit ("works of righteousness") would factor into the salvific process in any way.¹⁴ This approach synthesises justification by grace alone, with human effort (or "works"), by placing both within the ambit of divine grace. Thus, as in Western Protestantism, one is saved by grace alone (justification), but then lives within a state of free will towards the goal of good works (which can be equated with a form of the Catholic understanding of sanctification). However, this view is problematic since it is sequential, i.e. it is first Protestant (justification), then Catholic (sanctification); whereas Wesley's synthesis of grace and free will is rather to be understood as one divine human engagement, i.e. a life "of faith filled with the energy of love" as argued by McCormick.¹⁵

William R Cannon takes this line of reasoning further when he argues that Wesley's position is not merely "an apportionment of justifying grace to man [sic] by God, nor simply an appropriation of that same grace by man from God, but *both* divine apportionment and human appropriation standing together in a single process."¹⁶ This approach seems to deal with the problem of Peters's sequential approach, where divine grace is degraded or qualified in light of a human response. Nonetheless, the shortfall of Cannon's approach is that he too remains locked within the mono-perspective of Western theology and so misses out on the textured and nuanced possibilities of seeing justification within the all-important Wesleyan theological framework of prevenient grace. If one understands justifying grace in the Wesleyan continuum of the order of salvation, only from within the Western theological context, it could be considered a form of pelagianism where "free grace" becomes "free will" as Chiles points out.¹⁷ Again, this would constitute another denial of an important focus of Wesley's theology, i.e. the insistence that soteriology is the focal point of his thought would need to be replaced with a theological anthropology. In such a case the prevenient grace of God is eclipsed by the importance of human responsiveness (freedom of will).

13 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 42.

14 John Leland Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Abingdon Press, 1956), 21.

15 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 42.

16 William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), 116.

17 Robert Eugene Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790–1935* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 935.

This brings us to the point of understanding that a theological hermeneutic that is locked in Western theological categories (whether Protestant, Catholic, or a combination of the two) is insufficient to adequately engage John Wesley's theology. Maddox goes so far as to say that it "is generally recognised that the first four centuries of Christian tradition played a significant role in Wesley's theology. What is not as often noted is that he tended to value the Greek representatives over the Latin."¹⁸ Ted Campbell offers several helpful historical insights that explain why Eastern Orthodox influences would have been so important to Wesley in his book *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (1991). Maddox notes that an appreciation of the Eastern Orthodox theologians was fairly common among Anglicans at the time of John Wesley, since that tradition predated the divisions between Protestants and Catholics and so mediated the positions of both the East and the West.¹⁹ Of course, there is also evidence that Wesley studied the newly available versions of the patristic writings with his Oxford, Methodist counterpart, John Clayton. However, the most important reason is perhaps not only historical or pragmatic, but rather theological.

McCormick points out that it is only when one understands Wesley's insistence upon *theosis* (an Eastern theological paradigm sometimes called "divinisation" or "deification") that the theological puzzle of the *ordo salutis* falls into place. From this perspective, faith can rightly be linked with love both in substance and in their aims.²⁰ McCormick states:

Of course, Wesley's synthesis does contain western as well as eastern emphases, but his *predominant* question was not Luther's ... "How can I be pardoned?" Wesley asked, "How can I be healed?"²¹

In this regard, Wesley places himself firmly alongside the Reformers and the Western understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith that emphasises grace at every point of the salvation process. However, his own understanding of justification is nuanced and accented by his insistence upon the "fullness of faith" (sanctification) as the highpoint or goal of the *ordo salutis*. In this way "free human responsiveness is the vehicle by which sovereign grace, still preeminent, enables the human to participate with and in the Great Physician and be healed and be restored to the *imago Dei*."²² Chilcote and Maddox state it as follows:

The ultimate goal in life ... was the fullest possible love of God and neighbor—the restoration of the image of Christ in the life of every believer. This restoration is a journey birthed by grace, nurtured by grace, and reaching its ultimate goal through grace: Christian perfection.²³

Thus, as we can see, such an approach is not entirely Western or Eastern. Moreover, it is not sequential (first Western and then Catholic), rather it is hybrid in nature. Wesley drew upon both Western and Eastern theological categories in the formulation of his theological

18 Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy," 30.

19 Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy," 30.

20 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 43.

21 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 43.

22 McCormick, "Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley," 43.

23 Chilcote and Maddox, in Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Annotated, 13.

positions, and particularly so in relation to what he viewed as the goal of salvation and Christian life (i.e. Christian perfection). Thus, to more adequately understand Wesley's theology in general, and his notion of Christian perfection in particular, it is contended that one should not bracket his theology in exclusively Western or Eastern theological categories or approaches. Rather, what is required is a hybridist hermeneutic approach that accounts for both Eastern and Western theological informants that operate at simultaneously, and in different ways, in Wesley's theology. Maddox sums it up as follows: "Thus, it would appear that Wesley's understanding of the nature of theology and the style of his own theological activity had strong resemblances to those of Eastern Orthodoxy—with corresponding contrasts to the dominant Western model. This obviously raises the question whether the resemblance carried over into specific doctrinal commitments."²⁴

In the section that follows we shall give particular attention to the central theme of Christian perfection from this hybrid theological vantage point.

Western and Eastern Orthodox Hybrid Hermeneutics and John Wesley's Soteriology (the order of Salvation)

Most Methodist scholars agree that the order of salvation was the central focus, and high point, of John Wesley's theology.²⁵ The following quote from 1746 shows what Wesley himself understood in relation to the *ordo salutis*:

Our main doctrines, which include all the rest are three: that of repentance, of faith and holiness. The first of these we account, as were the porch of religion, the next the door; the third religion itself.²⁶

As has already been discussed, Wesley regarded one element in this order as more important than the others—namely, Christian perfection (expressed in the quote above as “holiness”). He believed that Christian perfection was a peculiar emphasis and heritage that had been given to the Methodist movement by God. As was argued previously, this can be related to the influences of Eastern orthodox thinking on his soteriology—in particular the concept of *theosis* influenced by Chrysostom²⁷ and the notion of the interaction between divine and human agency in Wesleyan soteriology (see *The Character of a Methodist* with strong influences of Clement of Alexandria and *Homilies* with quotations and references to Macarius).²⁸ In 1789, just two years before his death, Wesley writes in defence of his emphasis on Christian perfection:

24 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 33.

25 Ted A. Campbell, “The ‘Way of Salvation’ and the Methodist Ethos Beyond John Wesley: A Study in Formal Consensus and Popular Reception,” *The Asbury Journal* 63, no. 1 (2008): 5.

26 Wesley, in *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, edited by Henry D. Rack (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 286.

27 McCormick, “Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley,” 38–44.

28 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 30–31; Campbell, Theodore, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: A Study of Religious Vision and Culture Change*, footnote 260.

This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.²⁹

Wesley brought together several of the central themes of his other work in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. It gave expression to Wesley's emphasis upon a restored life of love and holiness, which became "one of the most important distinguishing marks of Methodist movement."³⁰ Chilcote and Maddox go on to say that this was certainly one of the most distinctive and misunderstood aspects of Wesley's theology.³¹ As has been argued, Wesley's notion of Christian perfection should be seen within the broader scheme of Wesleyan soteriology. For Wesley the goal of the *ordo salutis* (way of salvation) was a "holiness of heart and life."³² From this we can see that Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection had both doctrinal (soteriology) and ethical implications. Kärkkäinen explains Wesley's approach as follows:

Themes such as the goal of the Christian life as perfected love, the role of the Holy Spirit in the entire sanctification of the Christian life and the emphasis on Christian virtue resonate directly with Eastern Orthodox emphases. They are indications of the general orientation of the Wesleyan doctrine of salvation; not the "pardoning" but "participation" is the key to the Christian life and salvation, in other words, union with God in perfect love and holiness. Thus, Wesley urges a divine-human communion, a coinhering communion which extends far beyond the moment of conversion.³³

It was Wesley's emphasis on holiness as perfection, and the practical expression of the gospel in everyday life, that first led to him and his colleagues to being labelled "Methodists" and it is this same concern that lies at the very heart of Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection.³⁴

For Wesley, then, the Spirit's work of sanctification was not merely a forensic declaration of how God will treat us ... Neither was it a matter of directly infusing virtues in Christian lives. It was a process of character-formation that is made possible by a restored participation of fallen humanity in the Divine life and power. This understanding of sanctification has significant parallels with the Eastern Orthodox theme of deification [*theosis*] ...³⁵

Thus, Wesley understood that the purpose of "religion" was to bring a person towards Christian perfection—this was not only a state of spiritual rightness with God, but also a state

29 cf., Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Annotated*, 14; Wesley in Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, 238.

30 Chilcote and Maddox in Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Annotated*, 14.

31 Chilcote and Maddox in Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Annotated*, 14.

32 John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume XII, Scholar's Choice Edition* (BiblioLife, 2015), 14; *The Character of a Methodist*, §4, *Works*, 9:35; and *Advice to the People called Methodists*, §2, *Works*, 9:123.

33 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Liturgical Press, 2004), 73.

34 For a thorough and insightful discussion of the broader elements of this argument, see Frank Baker, "Practical Divinity—John Wesley's Doctrinal Agenda for Methodism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22, no. 1 (1987): 7–16.

35 Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Kingswood Books, 1994), 122.

personal wholeness and of public rightness before God with all persons and creation. In the introduction to the 2015 annotated edition of *A Plain Account of Christian perfection*, Chilcotte and Maddox state that:

The ultimate goal in life ... was the fullest possible love of God and neighbor—the restoration of the image of Christ in the life of every believer. This restoration is a journey birthed by grace, nurtured by grace, and reaching its ultimate goal through grace: Christian perfection.³⁶

In the context of this paper, three aspects of John Wesley’s theology need to be touched on briefly to understand the importance of Eastern Western theological hybridity for Wesley’s soteriology, and its contribution to contemporary discourses in Christian humanism.

Anthropology

Wesley’s phrase “The grace or love of God whence cometh our salvation, is FREE IN ALL, and FREE FOR ALL [capitalisation in original]”³⁷ expresses the complexity of a Wesleyan theological anthropology in relation to his *ordo salutis*. Here we see, once again, the textured understanding of “faith filled with the energy of love” operating in the salvation of the human person (based on the phrase in Wesley’s 34th Sermon, “Catholic Spirit”).³⁸

What Wesley’s theological anthropology illustrates is that Western and Eastern Christians dealt with the notions of the human person, and God’s desire for humanity, and humanity’s sin, very differently. This will have some implications for contemporary discourses on Christian humanism, since at present the contemporary discourse is framed largely within Western Protestant theological categories.³⁹

Western Christians believe that humans were created in a perfect and complete state and that in this created state they epitomised all that God wanted humanity to be—their task was simply to remain in that state of perfection.⁴⁰ Yet, since they bear the image of God they were self-determined. According to certain understandings of the biblical narrative, the first humans, Adam and Eve, used this self determination to sin. The result was that the only thing humans now have the freedom to do, is to sin, and they are filled with guilt as a result of their

36 Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Annotated*, 13.

37 John Benjamin Wesley and Thomas Jackson, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (Mason, 1829), V: 509.

38 McCormick, “Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley,” 42.

39 c.f. De Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*; J. W. De Gruchy, “John Calvin, Karl Barth and Christian Humanism: Calvin 500,” *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal/Nederduitse Gereformeerde Theologiese Tydskrif: Supplement* 1 51 (2010): 370–378; John W. De Gruchy, *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* (African Sun Media, 2011); John W. De Gruchy, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christian Humanist,” in *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, edited by Jens Zimmermann and Brian Gregor (Philadelphia, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2012), 3–24; John W. De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture: A Review,” *Modern Theology* 31, no. 1 (January 2015): 195–200, doi:10.1111/moth.12143; Jens Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism: A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

40 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 34.

sinfulness (in original sin). In Western theological anthropology since Augustine, this has become the “natural state” of humanity from which they need to be redeemed.

Eastern Christians, however, see things quite differently. First, Eastern theologians assumed that humanity was generally created innocent, but incomplete. Humans are created with a progressive nature that is “destined to progress in communion with God.”⁴¹ This is *theosis*, “(lit. ‘ingodded,’ ‘becoming god,’ deification) [which] in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is a vision of human potential for perfection.”⁴² To understand this notion, it is helpful to remember that Orthodox theologians tend to make a distinction between persons bearing the “image of God” and persons growing in the “likeness of God.” Maddox explains: “The ‘Image of God’ denoted the universal human potentiality for life in God. The ‘Likeness of God’ was the realisation of that potentiality. Such realisation (often called deification) is only possible by participation in divine life and grace.”⁴³ Moreover, this growth is neither automatic nor inevitable. The “image of God” includes the capacity for human freedom, but it is centred upon the exercise of communion with God.

Thus, in simple terms, both Eastern and Western theologians see “the fall” as an attempt among humans to selfishly compete with God as equals. However, the results of this “fall” are different for the two theological traditions. The Eastern theological tradition does not see humanity as bearing the guilt of original sin from birth. Rather, one only becomes “guilty” when one imitates Adam’s sin. Second, the primary consequence of sin was the introduction of mortality and corruption into life, and this now dominates humanity. Third, “while Orthodoxy clearly believes that the death and disease thus introduced have so weakened the human intellect and will that we can no longer hope to attain the Likeness of God, they do not hold that the Fall deprived us of all grace, or of the responsibility for responding to God’s offer of restored communion in Christ.”⁴⁴ In other words, the Orthodox emphasis on a divine-human cooperation remains—even after the fall. Maddox thus concludes that Orthodox theologians base their anthropology more on the doctrine of creation, than they do on “the fall.”

Wesley, as usual, has a blended, or hybrid, position. He agrees with the Western position that humanity was originally in a state of perfection. Yet, as many scholars have argued, he also clearly held the view that humans are in process: “God does not implant holiness in us instantaneously.” Rather, this is what Wesley called “growth in holiness”; it was the slow, gradual, life-long journey. Christensen explains the process in this way: “The idea of *theosis* is that God and humanity progressively achieve a union in Christ which in the end both blurs and preserves the distinction between Creator and creation, as in a mirror perfectly reflecting the source of its image.”⁴⁵

41 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 34.

42 Christensen, “Theosis and Sanctification,” 72.

43 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 34.

44 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 34.

45 Christensen, “Theosis and Sanctification,” 72.

One can clearly see the influences of the Orthodox theological tradition in this notion. In this regard, Wesley also developed his notion on the image of God from Orthodox theological influences. He distinguished between *natural image of God* (which is linked to the “Image of God”) and the *moral image of God* (which he linked to the “likeness of God”). Thus, Maddox explains, that the “... natural Image of God is essentially the capacity for knowing, loving and obeying God. Those who do so love and obey God express the true holiness characteristic of the moral Image.”⁴⁶

Wesley’s understanding of the consequences of the “fall” is one of the clearer examples of the hybridity of his theology position. Wesley thus viewed humanity as corrupt, and guilty in our “natural state” (a Western perspective), yet he adds that no one lives in “mere nature” unless they have quenched the Spirit—this is by virtue of God’s prevenient grace to all humanity.

This grace removes the guilt inherited from Adam and re-empowers the human capacity to respond freely to God’s offer of forgiving and transforming grace. Importantly, Wesley’s actual sources for this idea lay more in early Greek theology (especially Macarius) than in Arminius. This distinctive wedding of the doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace allowed Wesley to emphasise the former as strongly as anyone in the West, yet hold an overall estimation of the human condition much like that of Eastern Orthodoxy.⁴⁷

For a detailed discussion of this theological concept in John Wesley’s theology, see, *John Wesley’s Understanding of Man*⁴⁸ and *John Wesley’s Theological Anthropology: A Dialectic Tension between the Latin Western Patristic Tradition (Augustine) and the Greek Eastern Patristic Tradition (Gregory of Nyssa)*.⁴⁹

The Order of Salvation

The person and work of Christ are central to Wesleyan soteriology. First, let us briefly sketch the Western (Protestant) and Orthodox views on the saving work of Christ. The Western position is juridical, i.e. humanity bears guilt for sin and cannot atone for it themselves. In the Orthodox tradition, however, the position of the work of Christ is recapitulatory. The mission of Christ, from the Western perspective, is thus to become incarnate in order to be the human who can deal with our sin (i.e. atone for our sin). In the Orthodox perspective, the focus is more on the incarnation of Christ. Humanity needs to develop in the likeness of God (from the image of God) in their lives, and we cannot do this without God’s assistance. Thus, “God

46 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 35.

47 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 35.

48 Hiroaki Matsumoto, “John Wesley’s Understanding of Man,” *Wesleyan Quarterly Review* 4, 1967, 83–102.

49 Seung An Im, “John Wesley’s Theological Anthropology: A Dialectic Tension between the Latin Western Patristic Tradition (Augustine) and the Greek Eastern Patristic Tradition (Gregory of Nyssa)” (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Drew University, 1994).

became like us so that we might become like God.”⁵⁰ Christ thus recapitulates the human state or condition through the incarnation, thereby redeeming it, so that deification becomes possible for the human person.

Here again, we see that Wesley’s Christology contains a mixture of Western and Orthodox theological influences. Both John and Charles Wesley have a clear and dominant understanding that the atonement of Christ satisfies divine justice. However, there are also clear elements of the notion of recapitulation through the incarnation of Christ, which delivers humanity from the corruption of sin and so enables the possibility of God likeness.⁵¹

This relates directly to John Wesley’s soteriology where we once again see the hybridity of Wesley’s theological development. In 1738 Wesley writes in *A Farther Appeal*:

By salvation, I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.⁵²

From the above it is clear to see that within Wesley’s soteriology there is in operation, what Maddox terms, a “therapeutic interest” which ultimately leads Wesley to centre his soteriology on sanctification, rather than justification—which is the norm in Western Protestantism. However, he does not abandon justification. Rather, he shows that it was necessary to be pardoned from the power of sin before we can be delivered from its guilt. This leads us to the final important aspect of Wesley’s soteriology that has relevance to our discussion, namely Christian perfection.

Christian Perfection

This is the area where the hybridity of Wesley’s Western and Eastern theological convictions are most evident—the influence of *theosis* on Wesley’s understanding of sanctification. First, it is important to address the common misunderstanding of the doctrine of *theosis* in the West. Maddox writes that *theosis* “is not an affirmation of pantheistic identity between God and humanity, but of a participation—through grace—in the divine life.”⁵³ The participation of humanity in divine communion renews humanity and transforms us into the image of Christ. Maddox explains that in the context of “faith filled with the energy of love” (based on the phrase in Wesley’s 34th Sermon, “Catholic Spirit”)⁵⁴ “Wesley’s affirmation of entire sanctification is not a claim that humans can embody the faultless perfection of God in this life, but a confidence that God’s grace can progressively deliver us from the power of sin.”⁵⁵

50 Athanasius in, Christensen, “Theosis and Sanctification,” 72.

51 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 35.

52 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 39.

53 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 39.

54 McCormick, “Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley,” 42.

55 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 39.

This is not a growth in conformity to the law, rather it is growth in love—love of God and love of others.

In this regard, Wesley affirmed that all humanity bears the image of God, but that growing in the likeness of Christ is not something that happens instantaneously—it is developed through a responsible appropriation of the grace that God provides, thus spiritual disciplines and the means of grace are important. The above does not deny that there are other Western theological voices that have said similar things, or influenced Wesley. However, what is important here is that we see in Wesley’s hybrid approach to sanctification a dialectic tension between God’s work in the human person, and the human person’s participation in God’s growing them to holiness, which had social and moral implications for the person and society.

The Implications of John Wesley’s Hybrid Western and Eastern Theological Hermeneutics for Contemporary Discourses on Christian Humanism

In this section, we shall tie together the previous discussion on John Wesley’s hybrid theological perspective with some aspects of the contemporary discourse around Christian humanism. First, we shall briefly situate the current resurgence of interest in Christian humanism and its ties to Orthodox theology.

Christian Humanism and its Links to *Theosis*

John de Gruchy notes that there has been a “critical retrieval of religious, theological and specifically Christian humanism ... during the past decade.”⁵⁶ Jens Zimmermann’s two important works, *Humanism and Religion*⁵⁷ which is addressed to secular humanists, and *Incarnational Humanism*⁵⁸ which is more theological and so addressed to the church and a Christian audience, have captured something of the importance of the rediscovery of humanism in general, and Christian humanism in particular.

Zimmermann’s research suggests that the crisis of trust in the ideals of Western secular culture is a major factor in the resurgence of interest in humanism in general, and religious (and Christian) humanism in particular.⁵⁹ The vacuum that was left by the exhaustion of Western secularism, particularly the loss of transcendent and deeper meaning, has created an opening for the resurgence of frameworks of meaning, some of which are positive and life giving, others which are challenging and even destructive (such as forms of religious fundamentalism).⁶⁰ In such contexts persons of faith have sought a more just and constructive religious and theological position through the retrieval of “... an ancient [form of] Christian

56 De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture,” 195.

57 Jens Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion: A Call for the Renewal of Western Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

58 Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*.

59 Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion*, 1.

60 De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture,” 196.

humanism for our time in response to the general demand for a common humanity beyond religious, denominational and secular divides.”⁶¹

As part of his exploration of the history of Western humanism, Zimmermann reminds the reader that its roots are deeply embedded in Patristic Christology and the biblical conviction that human persons are bearers of the *imago Dei*. De Gruchy notes:

The claim that God becomes fully human in Christ in order that humans may become truly like God (divinisation) and therefore truly human (humanisation) is foundational for Christianity and finds embodiment in a new humanity in which human solidarity is expressed in Eucharistic community.⁶²

De Gruchy and Zimmermann have both written about the emergence of Christian humanism in relation to movements and persons in Western Protestant theology—these include Erasmus, John Calvin, and most recently Dietrich Bonhoeffer.⁶³

A Wesleyan Contribution to the Contemporary Discourses on Christian Humanism

Why Christian humanism in relation to Wesley’s hybrid theology? It is the contention of this paper that John Wesley’s theology is particularly important in contributing to the contemporary discourse of Christian humanism. There are many possibilities that could be explored in such a dialogue—that is not possible within the scope of this paper. Rather, what we shall do is relate the three aspects of Wesley’s soteriology (discussed above) to aspects of the contemporary Christian humanist discourse (mainly as identified by two of the best known contemporary contributors to that field, John de Gruchy and Jens Zimmermann) to illustrate the rich possibilities of future research in this regard.

This dialogue will thus focus on: anthropology; the order of salvation; and Christian perfection, in relation to the contemporary discourses on Christian humanism.

Anthropology

Zimmermann and De Gruchy have both pointed out that the resurgence of interest in Christian humanism has come because of the dehumanising effects of modernity on contemporary society.⁶⁴ These include a loss of confidence in the narratives of secularism, religious and cultural pluralism because of globalisation and migrating populations, the loss of confidence in power because of wars and political abuse, the search for meaning beyond

61 Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 9–10.

62 De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture,” 196.

63 c.f. De Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*; De Gruchy, “John Calvin, Karl Barth and Christian Humanism”; De Gruchy, *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*; De Gruchy, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christian Humanist”; De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture”; Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*.

64 De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture,” 196; Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 9–10.

capitalism, and the list goes on. This has been a deeply theological search for meaning. What they highlight is that there is a basic question being asked in the midst of all of these challenges: What does it mean to be truly and fully human?

In light of this, Zimmerman comments that it is not that we have “to invent something new but rather ... retrieve an ancient Christian humanism for our time in response to the general demand for a common humanity ...”⁶⁵ Of course, this important question was central to Wesley’s own theology. True humanity, and the re-humanisation of persons and society, means first a recognition that all persons are bearers of the “image of God.” This theological concept is familiar and commonly discussed in contemporary discourses on Christian humanism where the primacy of a shared humanity, thus a shared human dignity with certain human rights, has a strong focus. The question is, of course, how do we conceive of the ontological nature of humanity? What does it mean to bear the image of God, but also to consider what this requires of us as we live with one another as human persons in the likeness of God?

It is in this regard that Wesleyan hybrid theological anthropology offers something more than the predominantly Western protestant anthropologies, i.e. that God’s grace in Christ, together with God’s work through the Holy Spirit, enables human persons—and even communities and societies—to grow in the “likeness of Christ,” not just to bear the “image of God.” This is what Stanley Hauerwas extrapolates as the core of a Wesleyan theological ethics—the “practical divinity” of Wesley, expressing belief in worship, community and life.⁶⁶ Wesley himself sums up this anthropological aim as “... a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.”⁶⁷ The theological image of the restoration of “primitive health” (i.e. a growth towards matching being in the “likeness of Christ” to bearing “the image of God”) is an expression of the recapitulation of the human person, and human persons, through and in, and with Christ and all those whom Christ loves.

The Order of Salvation

The next area of contribution that a Wesleyan hybrid theology can offer to contemporary discourses of Christian humanism is in relation to the work of salvation. One of the complexities in contemporary discourses around secular humanism and Christian humanism in particular arises from Martin Heidegger’s challenging injunction to find a “hyper-humanism” that can “critically retrieve tradition in order to transform the world.”⁶⁸ The challenge we currently experience is that there is a global competition for dominating traditions—be they political, economic, or religious. Whereas the previous contribution

65 Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 9–10.

66 Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 256–59.

67 Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 39.

68 De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture,” 197.

hoped to contribute to the question “What does it mean to be human?” in an anthropological sense, this section asks that question within a broader cultural sense. In a religiously plural context, and in an ecumenical Christian context, there are serious questions about what it may mean to become truly and fully human without having to fit into a narrow and dominating cultural narrative that includes some and excludes others. One of the challenges with a Western Protestant contribution to contemporary discourses of Christian humanism is that it centres upon the doctrine of justification which, as recent fundamentalist tendencies have shown, has the danger of advocating a return to a form of Christendom. What Wesley brings to the conversation is his focus on the order of salvation (rather than just justification), in which the incarnation of Christ recapitulates humanity and society, and in so doing restores divine justice. What this proposes is not a humanism of the self (i.e. personal salvation, or a narrow focus on justification), but rather a “humanism of the Other” to use the language of Emmanuel Levinas.⁶⁹ Wesley’s understanding on the purpose and intention of the incarnation of Christ in the order of salvation is perfect love—a love for God and a love for neighbour. This is inherently social and communal. Rather than beginning with the individual human person, it finds its genesis in a shared humanity. This is echoed in the work of more contemporary theologians such as the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Catholic theologian Blondel.⁷⁰ In Bonhoeffer, as in Wesley, we see an anti-dote to Heidegger’s “hyper-humanism” that seeks a single cultural narrative for the restoration of humanity. Attempts at such a narrative have proven to be particularly problematic in contemporary society, where religion and identity seem to contribute so significantly to dehumanisation and suffering around the world. What Wesley’s contribution offers is an opportunity to work together in grace for a common humanity that is not tied to one specific narrative. Rather, since it is framed within the order of salvation and the therapeutic restoration of humanity, it can operate collectively for the common good.

With regards to the way in which De Gruchy and Zimmerman view contemporary Christian humanism, Lowery points out that Wesley’s approach to communal virtue ethics was deeply informed by an adapted form of the Patristic doctrine of *theosis*. “Wesley was particularly drawn to the Greek fathers who saw the goal of the Christian life as the restoration of the lost image of God.”⁷¹ It was previously argued that Wesley believed that the doctrine of Christian perfection, which he saw as the “grand depositum” of Methodism,⁷² was intended to restore the true nature of humanity in perfect love to God and the rest of the world—in other words, a communal virtue ethics.⁷³

69 In, Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 261; De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture,” 198.

70 De Gruchy, “Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture,” 198.

71 Kevin Twain Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley’s Agenda: A New Paradigm for Wesleyan Virtue Ethics* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 125.

72 Outler and Oden, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, 311.

73 Dion A. Forster, *An Introduction to Wesleyan Spirituality* (Wesley Society of South Africa) (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2001), 5–6.

Christian Perfection

Wesley wrote that the essence of Methodism “is holiness of heart and life.”⁷⁴ The result of this theological conviction is the unique and significant emphasis on the human person as the bearer of the divine image that has a responsibility towards both God and God’s creation. Lowery comments in this regard, that Wesley saw “... Christian perfection as the means to fulfilling the moral demands of the gospel. Love for God and for others not only qualifies our acts by making them truly moral, it also provides the motivation that is necessary for keeping the moral law.”⁷⁵ This resonates with what De Gruchy writes when he says the “biblical insistence that humans are ‘in the image of God’ is not a description of substance but of relation, responsibility, freedom and significance.”⁷⁶ Zimmermann concludes that the concept of religious or Christian humanism leads to “a profound sense of human dignity, solidarity, and freedom based on a reasonable faith.”⁷⁷ The growth in love for God and one’s neighbour is an important theological resource to shape and inform the contemporary Christian humanist discourse. What Wesley’s focus on Christian perfection (read from a hybrid Western/Eastern theological perspective) does, is that it not only deals with the nature of the problem (sin which requires justification), but also with the social and historical consequences of this problem (debilitating guilt, structural sin, etc., all within the *telos* of a new humanity and the fullness of life in Christ). Sovereign grace remains pre-eminent, but the human person is freed to participate with God and humanity in the work of healing the world and restoring the *imago Dei* among people.

Many other points could be developed or considered in discussing the contribution of a Wesleyan hybridic theology in relation to Christian humanism. These three points simply serve to illustrate that Wesley’s unique theological approach has great potential to offer a novel and fresh contribution to contemporary discourses on Christian humanism, which to date has been largely informed by either exclusively Western or Orthodox perspectives.

Conclusion

There is a resurgence of interest in humanism in general, and Christian humanism in particular, because of the observed need for transcendent meaning and the recapturing of shared moral values that express human solidarity for the common good. This paper sought to illustrate the possibility of deepening the discourse by adding another voice to the conversation. It was argued that a Wesleyan hybrid theology of Western and Orthodox theological perspectives can be identified and traced in the historical development of Wesley’s soteriology. On the 250th anniversary of *A Plain Account of Christian perfection*, Wesleyan and Methodist theologians and Christians are encouraged to reconsider the unique value of this theological tradition in order to texture and enrich this important contemporary theological conversation.

74 John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, Volume XII, Scholar’s Choice Edition (BiblioLife, 2015), 260.

75 Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley’s Agenda*, 17.

76 De Gruchy, *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, 63.

77 Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 87.

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